

Constructing a Life After Death: Writing My Younger Experiences of Grief and Loss

by

Carys Margaret Cragg  
B.A., University of Victoria, 2005

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

In a series of performative and narrative pieces, readers of this autoethnographic text are invited into the story of a young girl experiencing grief and loss, as expressed through her journals, poetry, and letters, and their corresponding events, written between the ages of 11-18 years. From present day, back through time, and forward again, encircled with clinical practice accounts, an alternative perspective of younger people's experience of grief and loss is taken up, emphasizing one young girl's construction of a life after her father's sudden death.

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for younger voices

## PROLOGUE

### SETTING THE STAGE

#### Clinical Supervision

I sit patiently as my wireless laptop finds its Internet connection. Clicking on the Safari icon with one hand, I drum my fingers on the desktop with the other. I enter my Webmail I.D. and password anticipating what is to arrive in my inbox. Immediately sending the unknown messages to my junk mail folder, skipping over the university library's automatic book return reminder, I notice an email from a supervisor at work who has sent me a message dated this morning, just over an hour ago. I click on the message and it reads:

*Hi Carys,*

*During our meeting at the end of the week I'd like to have a discussion regarding your theoretical orientation to grief and loss counselling practice in addition to your regular client case reviews. I've made sure we'll have enough time to cover both.*

*See you then,*

*Clinical supervisor<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Over the past few years I had the opportunity to work as a youth counsellor at many different centres: health centres, school districts, and non-profit agencies. In order to keep the identity of this particular past clinical supervisor anonymous, I do not reveal

*Great!* I think, noting that I have been counselling at this centre for quite some time and have yet to discuss the topic with my supervisor. *She's busy.* I think to myself. *But doesn't she want to know what I think with regard to how I am interpreting my clients' experiences of grief and loss?* I remember when I first began counselling young people at this particular centre. I requested to have young people dealing with grief and loss referred to me. I knew my own thesis study was coming up and I wanted to have the opportunity to not only have a theoretical understanding of grief and loss but also to have an understanding of grief and loss in practice, not that the two are completely inseparable.

I note my mind racing, thinking of all of the possible tangents we could take. *How will we ever have the time? I wonder what she has to say on the topic. I've been trying to discuss the many ideas that I have about grief and loss counselling with the young people I'm seeing but she has yet to engage me in the topic. I'd better get to reviewing some of the literature that I've been looking at so I'm prepared for all of the possible tangents we might go on.* I momentarily stare at the piles of photocopied articles in stacks on my desk, sorted by general meta-epistemological themes with which the researchers frame their studies. Noting my shelves are almost

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this person's identity, the time in which this conversation took place, or the location in which it took place. I use the female gender throughout this narrative to reference my clinical supervisor, but would like to make note that this clinical supervisor could be male. Additionally, while I have taken some word for word quotes from multiple conversations had with this particular clinical supervisor, the narrative that I write takes inspiration from this event and does not claim at any point that this is an accurate and exact event that took place.

completely taken over by grief and loss texts, I read over the titles. *Children and Grief. Handbook of Bereavement. The loss that is forever. Dying, Death, and Bereavement. On Grief and Grieving. Young People's Experience of Loss and Bereavement.* The list goes on. *I'm sure if anyone entered this office they'd do a double take. No room for anything but theories of grief and loss. Once I finish my thesis, maybe then I'll be able to send these books back to their home and begin to surround myself with more diverse literature. Oh well, for now, this is my life.* Giving myself the afternoon to review material that might prepare me for such a conversation, I begin to look a bit closer at the texts.

The next day, I arrive at the centre. While walking through the hallways, I open my bag and find my notebook with the points I wish to cover in the meeting. I knock on my supervisor's slightly opened door. She invites me in and I sit down in my regular chair. She is finishing up something on the computer. An email or a client case summary, I cannot tell. *She looks busy. I wonder if a client has called and requested to see her at an earlier time.*

She gets up from her seat and as she walks out her office door she mentions, "Just one moment, I have to go and talk to the psychiatrist about this particular case. I'll be right back."

Five minutes go by, and another five minutes, and another five minutes. I worry that we won't have enough time to have a detailed discussion *and* discuss my current client caseload. *Our meetings are always rushed,* I think to myself. Just then

she emerges into the office and takes a seat. Almost simultaneously, we take the caps off of our pens and position ourselves to take notes.

After reviewing the typical administrative points, figuring out office space and a good time for our next meeting, our conversation commences.

“So, you got my email regarding wanting to discuss your theoretical orientation to your grief and loss counselling practice here at the centre. We haven’t had the opportunity as of yet to discuss this topic in great detail so I’m looking forward to hearing what you have to say.” She begins.

“Yes, in preparation for our meeting today, I had an interesting time re-reading over some of the literature I reviewed before beginning my time here at the centre as well as searching for more. What has been particularly interesting is being able to see so many clients here, who are in the midst of dealing with issues related to grief and loss. It’s made me understand the literature in new lights.” I respond.

“Maybe we could begin with you giving me a general idea of how you approach your work and then we could connect that to your current client case load.” She requests.

“Well, my goal as a counsellor is to bring an eclectic approach to understanding young people’s experience of grief and loss. I try to get a big picture of what their lives are like and I consider the multiple meanings they make of their loss. Furthermore, I keep in mind the multiple losses they might be experiencing, or have experienced, as a result of the loss. Changes in family roles, moving cities and/or schools, the futures they have imagined, to name a few. I tend to take a strengths-based perspective, in that I believe the young people sitting across from me

are trying their best to live their lives and are struggling, which is why they, or someone close to them, have asked to see me. Generally, in the conversations I have with them, I seek out the stories that they wish to tell of their lives and of the person who died. I try to get a sense of how they define what a good life means in their lives and hope to facilitate that definition.” I begin.

“I’ll have to stop you there. What about the stages of grief and loss? Do you tell them about that?” She remarks.

I notice her abruptness in tone. “I definitely consider the stages of grief and loss in my theoretical understanding of grief and loss but in no way do I tell them that it is the only way to grieve.”

“But people *will* go through these stages. They may not be linear but eventually they’ll come to acceptance.” She continues.

“First I seek out their stories, how they have grieved in whatever way makes sense to them and if I sense that there is a theory out there that might give linguistic organization to their experiences, I let them know. Valuing and recognizing the multiplicity of ways people experience and understand their lives, I tend to bring multiple theories into my own theoretical orientation and ask them if any of these theories speak to their own experience. For some, they do. For others, they don’t.” I respond.

“It’s your job to tell them the stages. People like to be normalized.” She argues.

I sense she knows I won’t back down from my eclectic position. *What should I do? Here I am alone in an office with her, trying to have an informed, detailed, and*

*creative discussion and all I'm getting is her abrupt, controlling, no-questions-asked theoretical orientation.* She clearly has no interest in what informs my work, as long as it coincides with her own framework. I have disappointed her. And yet, I have no interest in conforming to her theoretical orientation and in fact I feel insulted that I am not trusted to create my own. Rather, her words and tone clearly send the message that I am to use the stages of grief and loss to control and normalize young people's experiences.

"For my thesis, I've been researching the many theories of grief and loss that are in the existing literature and I'm excited by some of the new and emerging ones that add to my repertoire of ideas of grief and loss. There are so many ideas out there to help practitioners and researchers understand people's experiences."

"I remember you saying something about your thesis being about written expressions of grief and loss." She says.

"Yes, I will be exploring diaries, journals, and letters as a source of expression of young people's experiences of grief and loss." I state, hoping that she'll stay off track.

"So when you're with your clients, particularly the young girls, you *must* recommend writing, don't you?" She asks, but it seems more like a statement to me.

"Actually, I tend to inquire about what forms of expression they already take part in. Often I'll hear stories of young people continuing the activities that they used to do with their loved one. Or they take part in other forms of artistic expression such as painting. I often ask if writing is something they like to do, sometimes it is and

sometimes its not. I don't assume that writing is the best or only way to express grief and loss." I claim.

"Oh." She responds. "Well, we'd better get to your client case summaries as we're coming up to time."

Our conversation ends and I leave the centre heading for my car. I open the door, throw my bags on the passenger seat and sit down. I notice a wave of emotion take over my body. Firmly gripping my hands on the steering wheel, I scrunch up my face in confusion. *Did anyone hear that conversation? I felt so alone. I can't help but notice the parallel between our typically rushed meetings and the rushing of young people through experiences so that they no longer are at risk for pathology. Does everyone think this way? Is that what everyone thinks counsellors are for, to control and normalize young people in a time where there's so much potential for growth and strength in their lives? Am I wrong to have had the conversations that I've engaged in with the many young people I'm seeing? My supervisor sees many young people in the community. I wonder what their experiences are of her telling them how to behave? I'm so overwhelmed by confusion, anger, and sadness. How can my views be welcome in a place that clearly doesn't have room for them?* I take a few minutes to breath deeply, trying my best to calm myself down.

I get back home and I take a look around my office. While the conversation with my supervisor was difficult, I am glad that I have the opportunity to do my thesis on young people's experience of grief and loss. If I am going to emerge from my

studies in some kind of helping role, hopefully working with young people experiencing grief and loss, I had better look more closely at my own experiences and my own theoretical orientation that I have developed over the years.

## Introduction

In the following text, I present my autoethnographic journey exploring my younger experiences of grief and loss of the death of my father as expressed through my personal writings, from the ages of 11 to 18 years. I have constructed my autoethnographic journey in the form of a story that draws on the storyline metaphor. To accomplish this, I present a series of performative pieces that take readers into my lived experience.

Beginning with a presentation, to introduce, locate, and position the story I tell, I construct a conversation about my methodology and literature review process, between my thesis supervisor and me, for an audience of undergraduate students, using a performative dialogue to bring readers into the experience. Next, in the present day, I create a narrative of a pivotal point in my autoethnographic process, an emotional response to reading the literature on grief and loss and the subsequent phone call to my thesis supervisor, which outlines the personal connection I have with how grief and loss theories are applied in practice. I then go back in time to when I was 11 years old when my dad died. From there, subsequent narratives are told, taking readers into my lived experience of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings and the events that surrounded them. A series of connected narratives are presented, interspersed with the personal writings I wrote between the ages of 11 and 18 years. In choosing these narratives, I draw upon a storyline structure to take readers from the beginning to end, from exposition, to rising action,

to climax, and finally to resolution<sup>2</sup>. Next, I come back to present day and describe a pivotal point where I have a decision to make regarding the language and theoretical orientation I use when in a counselling session with a young girl who is experiencing grief and loss. To finish my story, I end with another presentation, about the interpretations and implications of this study, where I construct another conversation, between my thesis supervisor and me, for a group of undergraduate students. I conclude this study with a letter to the readers of this text, reflecting on the thesis itself as well as the complex meaning of ending.

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<sup>2</sup> Dethridge (2003) outlines the familiar three-act structure and I use this format as a guiding organizational tool when it came time to choose narratives and their associated personal writing pieces (p. 130). There were many narratives and personal writing pieces to choose and I found it helpful to use the storyline metaphor to organize these pieces. See Figure 2 for a visual example of how I fit each narrative within the three-act, storyline structure.

## CHAPTER ONE

## GETTING STARTED

## A Methodology and Literature Presented

*Setting: Present day, early afternoon. A small university classroom. A poster on the door states, 'What's Up Doc – Constructing a Life (Part One): Methodology and Literature Presented.' Carys and her thesis supervisor (referred to as 'Prof' below) sit at the front of the room while 10 students sit scattered in the chairs. Having just come back from a short break, the presentation continues.<sup>3</sup>*

*Introduction*

Prof: Thank you everyone for coming today and taking the time out of your busy schedules. As you know, as a part of the 'What's up Doc' series here in the School of Child and Youth Care, PhD professors from the School

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I follow the presentation dialogue format set out by performative writer Bava (2005). Early on in the beginning stages of planning this study, my thesis supervisor invited me to present my ideas on how I was deciding to construct my thesis study to a group of undergraduate students within my school. The 'What's up Doc' presentation is a regular event within the School of Child and Youth Care, organized by its student council. While the complete presentation does not represent the exact word for word conversation that took place, I have taken some of the questions we used to create a format for presenting my methodology, literature review, interpretations, and implications in a performative format. Later on, I follow the works of Ellis (2004) and Tillman-Healy (1996), using their narrative form to construct a story of my younger experiences of grief and loss.

are invited to present to the students on their current research projects. Before the break, I presented on the research I've been conducting for the past year or so. What we thought we'd do for the rest of our time with you is go on a tangent from the regular type of presentation and give you a glimpse into a graduate student's world of writing a thesis, that graduate student being Carys.

Carys: In the next hour or so, my supervisor and I will have a dialogue about the process I've been a part of when choosing and implementing a methodology for my thesis. Following a short break, we will review some of the literature about young people's experience of grief and loss along with personal writing. In sum, we'll be giving you a brief introduction to the methodology that I am using for my thesis study, an overview of my study, the reasons I chose to use this methodology, an overview of how the methodology has taken shape in this particular study, some of the ethical issues that have emerged, and how this kind of methodology is evaluated. We hope that in doing so we'll be able to give you a personalized example of how one particular graduate student researcher comes to making methodological decisions. Throughout the presentation, please feel free to ask questions. We'd like to keep this presentation as informal as possible. To begin, how many of you are in a research methods course right now?

Student 1: Almost all of us are in the required undergraduate research methods course right now.

Carys: I know that when I was taking those courses in my undergraduate and now graduate degree I always appreciated understanding the different methodologies and methods through personalized experiences. I remember reading the texts, but it wasn't until I understood the material through my own or someone else's experience that did I really learn what each methodology was about. I'm assuming you're all familiar with the term Ethnography? I see some nodding in the crowd. Can anyone give me a brief definition of the term?

### *Ethnography*

Student 2: In our class right now, we've been taught that ethnography is when a researcher immerses herself/himself in a particular culture and studies their language, customs, and general way of being. They use methods including field notes and participant observation trying to get an idea of how that culture works. Originally I thought it was only used in the field of anthropology, like I learned in my introduction to anthropology course a few years ago, but we're learning how ethnography is applied in the field of child and youth care.

Carys: You bring up a good point. Many methodologies, including ethnography can be traced back to a particular field; however, various fields including child and youth care borrow different methodologies from each other for their own particular needs.

### *Autoethnography*

Carys: Next question. Has anyone ever heard of the term Autoethnography?

Student 3: No. I don't think so.

Student 2: You mean like how auto means self?

Carys: Yes, exactly. Chase (2005) locates autoethnography within narrative inquiry “where researchers also turn the analytic lens on themselves and their interactions with others, but here researchers write, interpret, and/or perform their own narratives about culturally significant experiences” (p. 660). Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that, “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural

interpretations” (p. 739). They list multiple related terms including personal narratives, personal essays, writing-stories, complete-member research, evocative narratives, personal writing, narrative ethnography, and the list goes on (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). You can see how each term situates itself in a particular scholarship but all are connected to each other in some way or another.

*My Thesis Topic*

Prof: Could you briefly describe your thesis study for the group and then we'll get into more detail as we continue this discussion?

Carys: I am using my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through personal writings from that time as a site of inquiry to learn more about young people's experiences of grief and loss. As I review the literature, I notice that few and far between are young people's voices heard. Instead, young people are asked to convert their highly personalized and individualized experiences into checkpoints and circles on questionnaires, or adults in young people's lives are asked to fill out forms regarding their behaviours. While these are useful ways for accessing particular kinds of information, much information is overlooked and becomes silenced by the dominant discourses on young people's experiences of grief and loss. By exploring my own personal writings I hope to access aspects of grief and loss that are not yet known and/or voiced within the existing literature.

*How I Came to this Research*

Prof: Why have you chosen autoethnographic methodology as compared to choosing, say, recruiting and interviewing a number of women who wrote as young girls who also connect their personal writings to their own experiences of grief and loss?

Carys: Well, the answer to that starts a few years ago. You invited several of your female students from a child and youth spirituality course to a meeting where we were asked to explore adolescent girls' spirituality. Within the first meeting, all of us disclosed that we all wrote personal writings, including diaries, journals, and poetry, as young girls. We thought this was interesting and so we decided to run with it. We've now been presenting and publishing on the topic. The group became known as the Girls' Diary Project and we describe ourselves as a qualitative, participatory research group exploring the spiritual aspects of adolescent girls' diary writing. All throughout my involvement with the group I always connected my own personal writings to my grief and loss process. So, when it came time to writing my thesis, I originally thought I would attempt to mimic the process the Girls' Diary Project engaged in. I would recruit a few participants and would also include myself in the research.

Prof: Could you tell the audience why you choose to include yourself?

Carys: Other than thinking I would mimic the process of the Girls' Diary Project, I thought it was important to include myself because the topic was so close to my own personal experience. I often read articles where researchers report their studies and hardly ever do they include why they themselves are brought to this research.

### *Reflexivity*

Carys: Researcher's inability to be reflexive throughout the research process is becoming more and more of a topic of critique of traditional research methods (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Reinhartz, 1997). Hertz (1997) discusses reflexivity stating it "implies a shift in our understanding of data and its collection – something that is accomplished through detachment, internal dialogue, and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of "what I know" and "how I know it." To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (pp. vii-viii). Seldom do readers find out that the researcher who, for example, studies families impacted by alcohol misuse has personally gone through similar experiences.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) note that, "many feminist writers have advocated starting research from one's own experience" stating that "researchers incorporate their personal experiences and standpoints in their research by

starting with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connection to the project” (pp. 740-741). I think it is important for researchers to at least acknowledge their personal connection to the research, because at least then readers have an understanding of the their position in relation to the research. Locating myself in the study makes me able to be transparent and reflexive with my readers with how I came to the decisions I made and why I made them. Because my thesis study is connected to my personal life, I believe it would be unethical not to include my own experiences and it would be dishonest with future readers of my research.

Prof: But then you took a slight turn regarding methodology.

Carys: I was writing my research proposal for you and one day I realized something didn't feel right. Call it an epistemological or methodological change of heart. That morning, while brainstorming a list of questions I would ask my participants to answer, in a questionnaire and/or interview, I realized: how could I expect my participants to respond to these questions if I had not yet explored them with myself? I was asking some pretty personal questions, ones that required a heightened sense of reflexive capabilities. I immediately found some literature on autoethnographic studies and rewrote my research proposal in a day and sent it off to you.

Prof: Yes, I remember that email. Your writing seemed to be more relaxed, as if your own voice came through in a clearer sense, as compared to what you had submitted before.

Carys: Yes, that's how I felt. It wasn't necessarily an easier way to write but it felt like I was being me, as opposed to another person's voice.

### *Congruency*

Carys: That's when I realized that doing an autoethnographic study would be congruent with the original personal writings. As a young girl I was unintentionally writing my own autoethnography, only it was in personal writing form. Here, writing my thesis, I would be able to align these two voices: my younger self and my current self.

Prof: So congruency is important to you.

Carys: Yes, when approaching this research in the beginning it was important for me to make choices that were congruent. I felt it would be disrespectful of my younger voice to study my younger personal writings in any other way. Autoethnographies, the way I understood them to be, privilege up close and personal experiences as a way to connect those experiences to the sociopolitical culture that they are a part of.

*Objectivity/Subjectivity*

Student 4: We've been reviewing the ideas of objectivity, subjectivity and researcher bias. Doesn't studying your own experience make you biased and subjective?

Carys: Great question. And the answer to it depends on how you define knowledge and what you claim with the study's findings. It's a big question, but accesses perhaps the core difference between traditionally positivistic, modernist ideas about knowledge and more postmodern ideas about knowledge. What is particularly interesting is that the point of the research here is to understand the subjective world. In autoethnographic research, there is no claim of objectivity and in fact researchers working from this standpoint do not believe there is such a thing. Objectivity is perceived as another subjective experience hidden behind the mask of post enlightenment truth claims. The idea that there is one objective perspective with which a researcher can assume takes away the possibility of the multiple truths and meanings that researchers can learn through studying people's lives. So then, researcher bias, or rather researcher subjectivity, is actually sought out in this kind of research methodology. Not many other research methodologies can access those up close and personal experiences. From sociological introspection to emotional recall, autoethnographic research and its associated methodologies gain access to a world that would otherwise be overlooked, taken for granted, assumed,

or, perhaps worse, silenced. Stories of breast cancer, disordered eating, abortion, sexual abuse, illness, death, and loss are given voices in a literature that often pathologizes, obscures, and categorizes instead of listens (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 1993; Ellis, 1995; Fox, 1996; Gray, 2003; Lemelin, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 1996). With our Western society so often keeping the experience of grief and loss silent, space created for these stories to emerge takes a stand against silenced stories and corresponding oppressive social practices. I hope my study will contribute to the literature that voices younger people's experiences of grief and loss.

*Social Constructionism, Narrative Inquiry, and Autoethnography*

Prof: Perhaps it will be useful to overview some of the assumptions of autoethnography methodology, particularly in comparison with other traditional methodologies.

Carys: Within qualitative inquiry, there are many philosophies and epistemological positions that guide its various forms of research methodologies. Beginning with social constructionist epistemology, I agree with Schwandt (2000) when he says "we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge" (p. 197) and that "we are self interpreting beings and that language constitutes this being" (p. 198). Social constructionists' share the belief that "holds that human knowledge is socially and personally constructed, with no single

view laying claim to universal validity and absolute truth” where “social realities are inherently multiplistic rather than singular, and the goal of research is less to generate incontestable “facts” than to discover and explore the unique and common perspectives of the individuals being studied” (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001, p. 105). In her review of autoethnographic methodology, Ellis (2004) extensively contrasts realist ethnography with interpretive ethnography, outlining the epistemological and subsequent theoretical and practical differences between the two. In interpretive ethnography, where she situates autoethnography, the emphasis is on expressive communication, creative interpretation, and creating something interesting and useful (Ellis, 2004). In realist ethnography, the emphasis is on testing hypotheses, causation, prediction and control, systematization, and finding what is there (Ellis, 2004). Where interpretive ethnography holds stories, dialogue, seeking the specific example, and the personal voice as paramount, realist ethnography holds theory, monologue, seeking the typical example, and the institutional voice as paramount.

Focused more specifically on narrative and autoethnographic inquiry grief and loss studies, Neimeyer and Hogan (2001) conclude that “because of their special congruence with constructivist orientation, such approaches are ideally suited to reveal the unique meanings that inform the reactions of individuals or culture groups to death and loss, thereby both broadening

and deepening the scholarly study of bereavement” (p. 110). They critique bereavement investigators stating that they rely too heavily “on generic measures of psychiatric symptomatology”, “they systematically preclude assessment of psychosocial responses that are unique to loss”, and that “one can question whether grief, defined as a *normal* response to profound loss, is most appropriately assessed by measures designed to quantify degree of *psychopathology*” (italics original, Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001, p. 91). They go on to say that “at minimum, exclusive reliance on scales of psychiatric symptomatology precludes assessment of theoretically and practically important outcomes, such as processes of “meaning reconstruction” following loss... or the “posttraumatic growth” evidenced by many bereaved individuals as a result of their encounter with personal tragedy” (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001, pp. 91-92). Ellis (1998) calls for autoethnographic stories of death, illness, and loss experiences as she claims the methodological process brings forth the emotional lived experiences of the researcher, which are overlooked in the existing literature.

Prof: Looking at your thesis study in more detail, let’s discuss some of the methods you used.

Carys: Okay.

Prof: First off, what are you defining as grief and loss?

*Defining Grief and Loss*

Carys: What seemingly looks like such a simple question was, I have to admit, difficult for me to define. I could use some typically agreed upon definitions. Stroebe, Stroebe, and Hansson (1993) distinguish three common terms in the literature stating that, “*Bereavement* is the objective situation of having lost someone significant; *grief* is the emotional response to one’s loss; and *mourning* denotes the actions and manner of expressing grief, which often reflect the mourning practices of one’s culture” (italics original, p. 5). In his study of young people’s experience of a parental death, Worden (1996) defines ““bereavement” as the adaptation to the loss, and “mourning” as the process children go through on their way through adaptation. [He] use[s] the term “grief” to describe the child’s personal experience, thoughts, and feelings associated with the death” (p. 11). While I wanted to use consistent definitions that reflected those existing in the literature, and appreciated and include these definitions in my own personal understanding of grief and loss, I thought these were limited, particularly for what I was going to explore, that being my younger personal writings. Newbury (2007) discusses her process of defining grief and loss deciding to privilege her participants’ definition, stating grief and loss as “encompass[ing] the feelings they have been left with as a result of their many losses (not only of bereavement)” (p. 3).

While I focus on loss as the death of my dad, I do not overlook the impact of accompanying losses including moving cities, changing schools, financial changes, and other deaths throughout the time accompanying his death. Finally, grief, as defined above as the emotional response to loss, typically includes only painful and sorrowful emotions. Furthermore, grief and loss experiences are inextricably linked to the context in which the grieving person exists; therefore, I cannot separate my grief and loss experience from other experiences. To do so would fundamentally go against the beliefs I hold regarding the complexity of human experience. As well, I do not wish to exclude other possible emotions or categorize some emotions as negative and some as positive. I express a variety of emotions within my personal writings all of which I connect to my experience of grief, including sadness, anger, pain, and loneliness, along with love, fun, strength, and joy.

I wanted to keep an open mind rather than exclude experiences at the outset. I recall sitting on the floor of my office having read some of my personal writings thinking that very question: which personal writing pieces do I include and exclude based on what I consider to be grief and loss? Do I include information that describes the losses associated with my dad's death? For example, after he died, we moved cities. I consider the change of schools, cities, homes, and associated loss of friends and familiar environment a loss that was a part of my particular experience of

grief. Do I include the changed relationships with, say, my mother? While many young people argue with their parents, the particular things I was arguing about with my mother I connected to my dad's death. Eventually, I decided to settle on everything. Nothing would be excluded. The easy choices of what to include were my passages on my theory of grief and loss and how much I missed my dad. But how could I not include a letter to my mom that describes the frustration I felt with the fact that our family did not function the same way without my dad? How could I not include the excerpt of a journal entry that asks my dad to tell me what he thinks of a boy I liked? How could I not include an entry that describes how different I felt as compared to my peers because they weren't thinking about their dads every moment of the day?

Prof: You're beginning to answer my next question. What did you consider data and how did you access the data?

### *The Data*

Carys: I wanted to explore my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings from the time after my dad's death until I finished high school. I use the term personal writing to group together the journal entries, poetry, and letters I wrote. Diaries, journals, personal chronicles, private writings, pillow books and other terms all have slightly different definitions and meanings (Bunkers & Huff, 1996; Cooper, 1987;

Spender, 1987) but for the purposes of my study, I use the term personal writings to incorporate all three forms of writing that I used. I borrow the term personal writings as described by DeVault (1997) where she discusses the multiple meanings of the term. Not only are the personal writings from my younger life but also are the writings I'm engaged in currently. While I differentiate the research journal I write in to track the process of this study, this whole study is a form of personal writing and has multiple layers of writing that I engage in and produce as a part of the autoethnographic process.

Interviews seem to be the method of choice when it comes to inquiring about a young person's life. I always wondered why researchers limit themselves to this method. Alaszewski (2006) reviews using diaries as a social research method, highlighting their ability to be a useful tool in collecting data. Journals are typically used as a method of gathering information, asking a participant to track her/his behaviour (i.e. drug & alcohol misuse and disordered eating) so that the researcher can analyze and interpret it to come to particular conclusions regarding deviant behaviour. More popular are published diary texts, including Nin (1978), Frank (1952), and Lau (1989). Seldom, are personal writings explored in an academic context and thus are not able to enter into academic literature on young girls' experiences. Exploring such texts could lead to learning about experiences that cannot be accessed any other way. Exploring the

spiritual lives of adolescent girls, Sinats, Scott, McFerran, Hittos, Cragg, Leblanc and Brooks (2005a, 2005b) look at their own younger personal writings highlighting themes including creating solitude, transforming to calm, preserving sensitivity, nurturing voice, and connecting beyond the self with an overall theme of the personal writings as a tool for self-care. For the purposes of this study, I include all journal entries, poetry, and letters to my mom that I currently have in my possession from the ages 11 to 18. About 6 years or so ago, my mom gave me the letters I had written to her over the years. I do not assume that this is all of the personal writing that I ever wrote. I do recall writing before my dad died and there must be scraps of paper that I wrote on that are now in some landfill somewhere. There was one situation this past year where my mom and I were cleaning up her basement and she gave me a folder with some of my old drawings and report cards from when I was young. I took the folder home and went through it. In it, I found the earliest journal I ever remember writing in. I added this to the collection of personal writings that I included in this study.

*Young People, a Term of Choice*

Student 5: Why ages 11 to 18?

Carys: I made this decision for a couple of reasons. First off, my dad died when I was 11 years old. As this is a study on my experience of grief and loss as

expressed through my personal writings, I decided to begin at this point. What was more difficult was where to stop. I keep writing to this day so it's not as though there was an easy cut off point. First, I wanted to keep my study consistent with the literature as to what a young person's age is. Now, even though the term young person is creeping up and up, with some organizations defining a young person up to 29 years of age, I chose 18 as the ages of 11-18 align with what is typically understood to be the ages of youth, adolescence, etc. Additionally, at the age of 18, my circumstances changed dramatically, that being because I moved cities to begin university. I no longer lived at home with my family and was in a completely different environment. Furthermore, I needed to review the literature on young people's experience of grief and loss. The ages of 11-18 aligned with the existing literature.

Relational concepts of youth and young people are emerging in the literature, which challenge typical ways we categorize and label people of this age (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Wyn & White, 1997). I choose to refer to the group of people ages 11-18 as *young people* instead of adolescents or youth in order to refrain from supporting the notion that they are not fully capable human beings, that they are dependent, irresponsible, and in a constant state of becoming as opposed to the independent, responsible, knowledgeable, grown up adult. In using the term young people I hope to support emerging ways to reconceptualize

people of this age. More problematic conceptually for me was choosing the age 18 because ending there could possibly be interpreted as my grief and loss process had ended. By no means do I believe that the process of grief and loss ended there and this is a recurrent issue that emerged throughout this study.

### *Analyzing the Data*

Prof: What did you do with the data?

Carys: First, I constructed a timeline of personal writings. As I outline on the overhead above (see Figure 1), you can see the points where I wrote each kind of writing, for how long, what age I wrote them, and so on. Next, I created a research journal set of guidelines. It was important for me to have a structure of how I would attempt to understand the personal writings, how I would respond to them, and how I would track the research process. Autoethnographies tend to be an iterative process, where I was not able to define a step-by-step process at the outset of the research. The research journal provided a concrete tool for me to explore issues that came up, track the methodological process, and complexify the personal writings from the time. As you can see on the overhead (see Appendix A) I had quite a few questions that I would use to facilitate the research journal writing process.

*Figure 1.* Timeline of personal writing.

Timeline of Personal Writing

Year	Age/Grade	Personal Writing
1992/1993	11-12/Grade 6	Journal Entry
1993/1994	12-13/Grade 7	
1994/1995	13-14/Grade 8	Poems (1, 2, 3) Journal Entries
1995/1996	14-15/Grade 9	Poem (4) Journal Entries Letters (1, 2)
1996/1997	15-16/Grade 10	Begin 1 <sup>st</sup> Journal Letters (3, 4, 5)
1997/1998	16-17/Grade 11	Poem (5) Letters (6, 7)
1998/1999	17-18/Grade 12	Begin 2 <sup>nd</sup> Journal Letters (8, 9)

*The Research Journal*

Student 2: Is your research journal similar to ethnographic field notes?

Carys: Very much so. Field notes are defined in a variety of ways and are generally said to be “ongoing, daily notes, full of the details and moments of our inquiry lived in the field, [they] are the text out of which we can tell stories of our story of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104). There have been many interpretations of field notes and the related research journal, as a way to track the researcher’s reflections on the research act (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Janesick, 1999). I took the research journal a step further to connect it to Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) ideas on writing as inquiry.

*Writing as Inquiry*

Carys: Writing as inquiry is seen as both a method of data collection and a method of analysis where they say that, “thought happened in the writing” doubting that they “could have thought such a thought by thinking alone” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970). Incorporating writing as inquiry, I wrote “to find something out” (Ellis, 2004, p. 170). This was my next major methodological decision regarding congruency. As a young girl I would find myself beginning to write and by the end I was in a space that I could not have predicted at the outset. At the time, I did not know what I was going to write about past a few sentences. Cooper (1987), when

reviewing journal writing, states that, “in the process new insights, understandings and experiences are generated which help the writer to realize or clarify that which was previously known” (p. 96). It was important that, as a researcher exploring these documents, I follow a similar process. Just as I include in my research journal guidelines, again as you can follow along with the many questions listed on the overhead (see Appendix A), I follow her advice on how to generate this type of writing. So instead of predetermining what I might find, instead of looking for, say, particular instances of traditional theories of stages of grief and loss, depressive symptomatology, levels of stress, etc. I would keep an open mind for what I might find.

#### *Writing Narratives*

Carys: Additionally, as a part of my research journals I followed Ellis’ (2004) guidelines for constructing narratives. A few of her suggestions include “Write a story about personal experience... Use dialogue and scenes, where appropriate, to bring the reader into what happened to you... Write evocatively, engagingly, and passionately, so that the reader will experience what you experienced, or remember or anticipate similar experiences” (p. 365). Ellis and Bochner (2000) discuss some of the underlying assumptions of evocative narratives stating that an evocative narrative “is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature; the

accessibility and readability of the text repositions the reader as a co-participant 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 emotional experience and thus challenges the rational actor model of social performance; [and] 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” (p. 744). In my study, I wanted to contextualize and complexify some of the personal writing pieces so I wrote narratives that emerged from the personal writing. For example, when reviewing a journal entry or piece of poetry, I would be able to recall where and when I wrote it.

Student 1: But it was so long ago. How can you remember the exact memory?

Carys: In this case, I consider these recalled events a little differently than you might expect from, say, someone’s ability to recall the exact memory of what took place many years ago.

#### *Narrative Truth*

Carys: Ellis (2004) states that “rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers on this end of the continuum embrace narrative truth, which means that the experiences they depict become believable, lifelike, and possible” (p. 30). When discussing her

autoethnographic storytelling, she says that she “worked from an assumption of “truth” rather than an assumption of “fiction”... and told a story that was restricted by the details of personal experience, [her] notes, and recollections of others” (Ellis, 1995, p. 317). By immersing myself in my personal writings I was able to accomplish what Ellis (2004) refers to as emotional recall or sociological introspection where I wrote narratives that come from the personal writings, some of which are included in my thesis. Where this has particular relevance is what autoethnographic studies claim to know. They do not claim to generalize to a larger population and culture but rather they claim to shed light on one person’s experience of the culture. They do not claim to know the fundamental truth but rather claim that there are multiple truths to know and that they seek out such multiple truths.

Prof: Having such a fertile ground of personal writings allowed you to be open to all of the possibilities of what might emerge. Eventually, though, this became overwhelming and you needed to go back to a defined research question. Though it somewhat evolved, what did your research question state?

Carys: Yes, particularly as a novice researcher, conceptually and practically handling all of the possibilities of where to take this data was

overwhelming to say the least. Two things helped me focus and structure my study.

### *My Research Question*

Carys: The first was the research question, that being: What can my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings from the time tell us that we do not already know? Inherent in this question is that I wasn't interested in reproducing something in the traditional literature on grief and loss. For example, I wasn't interested in using a traditional theory of the stages or tasks of young people's grief and loss to analyze my personal writings. So then, when I was reading the personal writings my research question allowed me to identify elements of the personal writings that shed light on what is not (yet) and/or seldom considered in the literature. The second thing that helped me focus and structure my study was much further along in the thesis writing process. About midway through, I decided to take a continuing education course called "How to write a screenplay." Originally, I registered in the course to learn new ways of writing narratives that were performative in nature.

### *Performative Writing*

Student 6: What do you mean by performative?

Carys: Well, early on, while I was reading literature related to writing as inquiry method I stumbled upon performative writing methods. Pelias (2005) says that “performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective” and that “performative writing attempts to keep the complexities of human experience intact” (p. 418). I decided that I would incorporate performative writing in my thesis for a few reasons. Pelias (2005) puts forth an argument showing what performative writing can accomplish what more traditional forms of academic writing do not. It “expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge... rests on the belief that the world is not given but constructed, composed of multiple realities... [and] often evokes identification and empathic responses” (Pelias, 2005, pp. 418-419). Ellis (2004) furthers this claim stating that autoethnographic “researchers seek to tell stories that show bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience. The goal is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete movements of lived experience” (p. 30).

Student 6: But what does performative writing look like?

Carys: Well, it can take many forms and many researchers have experimented with a variety of forms. Ellis (2004) writes a methodological novel instead of a typical text on autoethnography. In this novel, she is the professor and the other characters are her students and she tells a story of teaching an autoethnographic course. In doing so her reader learns about autoethnography. Bava (2005) uses dialogue between two researchers to explicate performance methodology. Some researchers write articles in poetry format (Austin, 1996; Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo & Kulkarni, 2007; Spry, 2001). Fox (1996) uses a three person layered account of sexual assault, where the victim, sex offender, and researcher's voices written side by side. Ellis (2002, 2004) experiments with letters and emails as a way to communicate autoethnographic studies. Gray (2003) uses a radio interview to discuss his creation of performative breast cancer theatre productions. In my case, I will incorporate performative writing narratives where I bring my reader into an experience that is connected to my personal writings from the time.

Student 2: You said that there was a second thing that helped you focus and structure your study, a continuing education course you took?

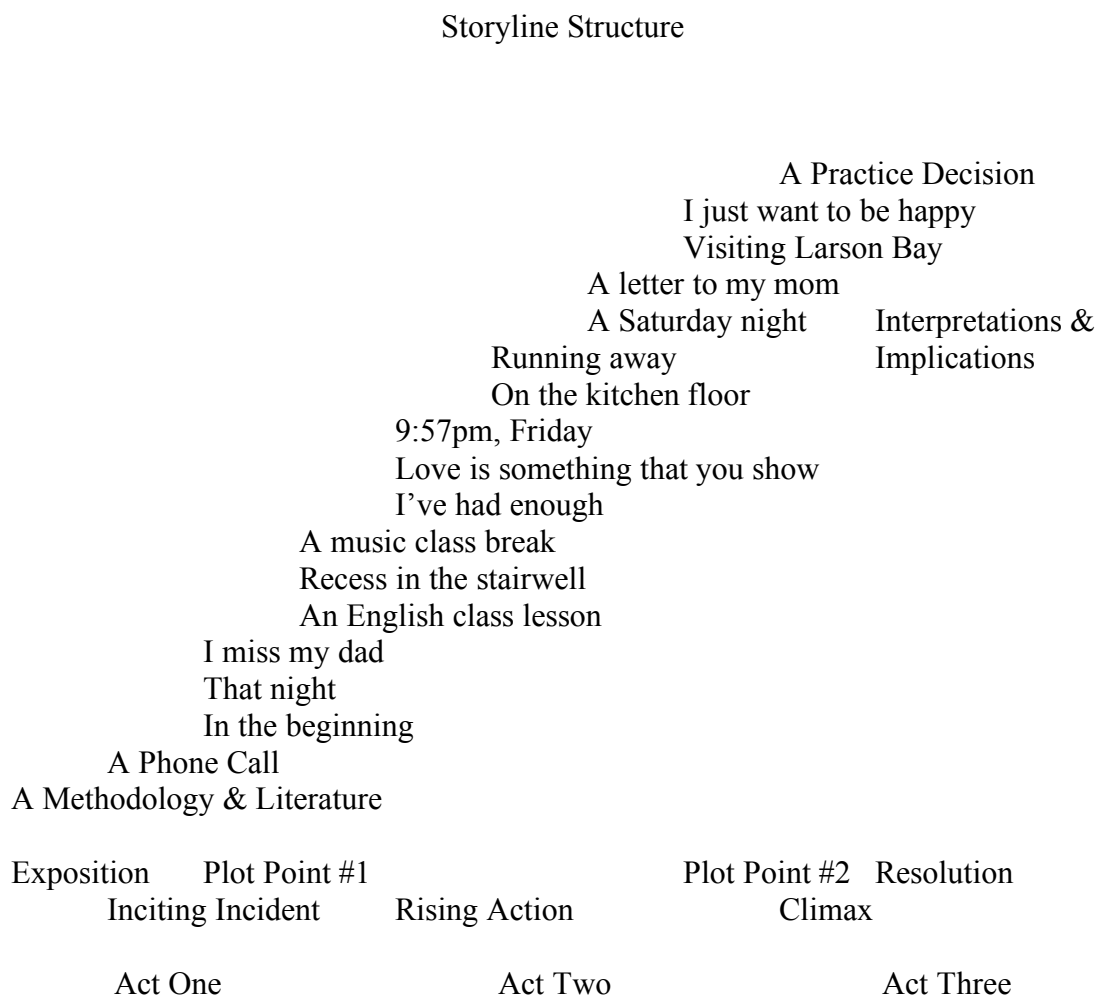
Carys: Right, thank you for bringing me back on track. Often autoethnographic researchers use metaphors to structure their representations of their studies.

*Metaphors as Structure*

Carys: Janesick (2000) uses the metaphor of choreography to structure her explanation of qualitative research designs. In her explanation, beginning decisions of the study are like warming up and preparation exercises, background work conducted by the researcher is like a stretching exercise, and ending the study is like cooling down. Ultimately, the movement suggested as with choreography is akin to conceptually moving through the design of a research process. Dellebuur (2002) uses the metaphor of a river to describe the drowning, floating, swimming upstream, and on-slippery-ground experiences to structure and map her relationship with and construction of a mediated body image. She says that, “the use of metaphors to explain concepts is powerful because metaphors make visual, through descriptive language, something that has formerly been conceived of in a theoretical manner” (Dellebuur, 2002, p. 19). Another example mentioned previously is Ellis’ (2004) novel where she uses the novel structure to teach a course on autoethnography. So then, the second thing that focused and structured my study was the storyline structure I learned in the continuing studies course. Just like (almost) every play, screenplay, novel, and story told, stories follow a typical format.

On the overhead (see Figure 2) you'll see the familiar plot structure. I'm sure you all remember learning this in elementary school or your introduction to poetry and prose course you took in first year of university. Exposition. Inciting Incident. Plot Point. Rising Action. Plot Point. Climax. Resolution.

*Figure 2.* Storyline Structure.



Carys: When it came down to needing to write my thesis I needed a structure with which to write it. From introduction to conclusion, I've used the storyline metaphor to structure my thesis in a coherent, story-like manner. These story elements are central to narrative inquiry in its representation of narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I was telling a story of my experience of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings, I thought what better way to structure that story than with the storyline structure.

Student 1: What is the inciting incident? What are the plot points? What are the rising action, the climax, and the resolution?

Carys: Well, without giving it away (as I hope you read my final thesis product), the story I tell in my thesis has two plots.

#### *A Story within a Story*

Carys: The first plot is that of my autoethnographic thesis process. Just as any thesis needs to convey, researchers must overview their process from introduction to conclusion, revealing to her or his reader what they did. The second plot is that of my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings. From beginning to end, I tell my reader a story. I use performative narrative pieces, much as you would

understand the scenes of a screenplay, which I've constructed in response to the personal writing as well as including the personal writing itself.

*Inclusion and Exclusion of Narratives*

Student 5: How did you decide what to include and what not to include in the final thesis?

Carys: That speaks to one of the main reasons why I decided to use the storyline structure. There was so much I could include, even when narrowing the personal writings down to what I considered to be experiences of grief and loss. I knew I couldn't include everything. That would be conceptually and practically impossible. So I had to choose. And this is what I chose.

*Stories as Analysis*

Prof: How do you understand analysis within this kind of research?

Carys: Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that, "the "research text" is the story, complete (but open) in itself, largely free of academic jargon and abstracted theory. The authors privilege stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations" (p. 745). Meaning is therefore created in the telling of a story. The story is the analysis. The story is the interpretation.

*Ethical Issues*

Prof: Let's move on to some of the ethical issues that emerge from this particular kind of study?

Carys: When it came to considering the ethical issues of my study, Ellis (2007) provided a detailed discussion of procedural and relational ethics. Meeting the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Board, I adequately dealt with issues of consent, confidentiality, and risk to self and others. As Ellis (2007) describes, procedural ethics are based on a premise that we do not know our participants and that we will have no contact with them once the research finishes. With the scientific clinical trial as the norm for completing an ethics approval form, I had a difficult time fitting my autoethnographic study into the required boxes. For this study, I submitted an ethics proposal to the human research ethics board at the university. As a part of the process, I needed to obtain consent forms from my family members. Much like a release form, they needed to be informed that since I was engaging in an autoethnographic study, their identities could not be kept confidential. They had the opportunity to review pieces that included mention of them with the option of asking me to withhold any information they wished (see Appendix B). With all other people, I could keep them confidential with generic names such as counsellor, friend, peer, teacher, and so on. As another part of the process, I had to consider the risk to myself this study entailed. The issue of risk to

myself seemed to be tricky and conflictual. The language in the ethics proposal seemed to contradict the goals of the autoethnographic process. For example, the form instructs the researcher to minimize the possibility of the risk or inconvenience of psychological and/or emotional stress. But I was doing the exact opposite. I was exploring up close and personal experiences, some of which are deeply saddening, highly emotional, and sometimes distressing. I believe this to be extremely important information to access. As such, I needed to make a plan so that if the psychological and emotional aspects became too much for me to handle, I would know ahead of time that I could go see a counsellor and/or alert my supervisor for advice.

The piece that the ethics proposal did not cover was some of the relational ethical considerations that I felt important to at least consider. Relational ethics, closely related to an ethic of care as defined by Gilligan (1982) closely relates to my struggle with story ownership and interpretation, as does Ellis (2007) when she writes stories about family members. I was telling my story (or, at least a version of it), but by no means do I privilege my story over theirs. Why do I have the right to tell this story? Whose story is it? Is this my dad's story? Would he like it if I told this story or would he prefer if I didn't? By telling this story am I negating others' stories? How might my family members tell this story? I am interpreting others' behaviour in the writings. I was and am influenced by their lives

and I influenced and influence their lives in turn. As my family members are identified by association to me, what might they have to say when reading this text? Will my mother be unimpressed with how I portray her in my letters? Will my friends tell me a different story of their interpretation of the same events? The answer seems to be that this study presents *a* story of the *multiple* stories I could have told. Most importantly, this is my younger self's story. I, of course, am interpreting it from my current position. However, throughout the process I stayed true to what I felt would be important for my younger self to say. What would she want to say? What was she trying to say? How can I privilege her story in a world where younger voices are ignored, overlooked, and silenced? These are the many questions that I continually ask myself, some of them only tentatively answered.

#### *Criteria for Evaluation*

Prof: So, how then is an autoethnographic study evaluated if it is different than the typical positivist research evaluative criteria?

Carys: Well, this was a big switch for me but once I had a conceptual understanding of what kind of criteria autoethnographic studies were evaluated on I came to realize that it aligned with my own epistemological position with regard to how knowledge is created and what is done with research. Richardson (2000) lists five criteria for evaluating

autoethnographies: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of a reality.

Prof: Traditionally, validity, reliability, and generalizability are the evaluative cornerstones of what is considered to be good research. Could you describe how autoethnography considers these concepts?

Carys: Sure. To Ellis and Bochner (2000) “validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. You might also judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves, or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even your own” (p. 751). When considering reliability, they state that, “since we always create our personal narratives from a situated location, trying to make our present, imagined future, and remembered past cohere, there’s no such thing as orthodox reliability” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751). In autoethnographies, “generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751). Combined, that is how I hope my thesis will be evaluated.

*Conclusion*

Prof: Well, we're coming up to the scheduled break time. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we end?

Carys: What is particularly resonant for me with this kind of study is its relevance to the child and youth care field. All throughout my education at this School, the curriculum has emphasized self-awareness. Seeing as I am a counsellor-in-training and I would like to specialize in grief and loss issues, it's extremely important for me to be self-aware regarding my own connection to and understanding of grief and loss. I think that far too many times counsellors/helpers have not looked at their own younger experiences, of grief and loss or whatever issue it may be, and as a result are not as self-aware as they could be, therefore all too easily privileging taken for granted theories that interpret young people's experiences over the voices of young people themselves. Here, I am exploring my own experience. I recognize that I am not claiming to know all young people's experiences of grief and loss as a result of this study. I am however claiming that by exploring my own experiences, privileging my own voice, I may be more able to sit across from a young person and listen to her or his experiences.

Prof: With that, we'd like to take a short break and invite you to come to the next session where we'll review the literature.

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*Introduction*

Prof: Thank you all for coming back to this session. We will now move on to reviewing the literature for Carys' thesis.

Carys: In the following dialogue, my thesis supervisor and I will discuss the process I went through when reviewing the literature for my thesis study. We'll begin with how I approached the literature review, overview the articles that I found, overview some of the theories with which young people's experiences of grief and loss have been framed, and locate how I see my thesis study fitting within the literature.

Prof: Before you undertook the task of reviewing the literature, what did you expect to find?

Carys: I knew there had been a vast amount of literature written on the topic because, for as long as I can remember, I've been interested in and have been periodically keeping up with the current literature. I knew that within the literature, parental death has been perhaps the most common type of death studied, with sibling, grandparents, peers, and other losses following.

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Prof: What were some of the inclusion and exclusion criteria that you incorporated into your search?

Carys: When beginning this task, I searched multiple databases, including ERIC, Academic Search Elite, PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, and Women's Studies International. I used the following terms as my search terms: youth OR adolesc\* OR teenage girls; grief OR bereavement; and death OR loss. I limited my search to peer-reviewed articles and dissertations, going as far back into the published literature as possible. Yielding hundreds of articles, many of which were duplicates, I made a list of inclusion and exclusion criteria. When deciding my inclusion criteria I felt it important to parallel the categories I would have fit into as a younger girl. I was not intending to generalize my findings to a larger population, which is not the aims of the autoethnographic process; however, it was still important to find out what is said and known within the literature on young people who had similar experiences. I included those articles whose participants experienced a loss between 11 and 18 years of age. Furthermore, I included those articles whose participants experienced a parental death loss. Although preferable, I was not able to find enough articles that focused solely on young girls. Almost all of the participants in the studies were a combination of males and females.

Consequently, I excluded articles whose participants experienced a loss before or after that age range, including childhood and young adulthood. I excluded articles whose participants experienced a death loss other than a parent (i.e. sibling, grandparent, pet, or peer) or non-death loss (i.e. divorce or relationship breakup), whose focus was on anticipatory death or palliative care, and whose focus was a clinical intervention evaluation.

*Research on Young People's Experience of Parental Death*

Prof: What did that leave you with?

Carys: The loss of a parent during a young person's life is a profoundly life-altering event. Researchers have attempted to fully understand this experience and have subsequently developed a large base of literature with which to understand this topic. Even though I accessed multiple databases, hoping to therefore access multiple fields of scholarship, I ended up with most of the literature coming from the fields of psychiatry and psychology. What were fewer and farther in between were articles coming from the fields of counselling, nursing, social work, and even child and youth care.

In my search, I was left with many articles that assessed groups of young people on a variety of psychiatric symptomatology scales. For example, with a sample size of 360 parentally bereaved children, between the ages

of 6- 17 years, Cerel, Fristad, Verducci, Weller, and Weller (2006) conducted multiple interviews over a span of 2 years, comparing the psychiatric symptomatology of this population to clinically depressed children, and a community control group. They concluded that, “bereaved children were more impaired than community controls and less impaired than depressed children” (p. 688). Harris (1991) interviewed 11 female and male adolescents who experienced a recent parental death along with assessing psychiatric symptomatology by way of numerous checklists and questionnaires. She found that “all subjects reported moderate to high levels of intrusive and avoidant stress-related symptomatology” and that “these symptoms decreased significantly over the year” (Harris, 1991, p. 272). Kalter, Lohnes, Chasin, Cain, Dunning, and Rowan (2002) interviewed 40 female and male young people between the ages of 6 and 16 along with administering numerous psychiatric symptomatology scales, concluding that the “predictors of child adjustment indicate that parent adjustment is substantially related to how children cope in the aftermath of a parent’s death” (p. 31).

Also taking into account the surviving parent’s influence on their children, Kwok, Haine, Sandler, Ayers, Wolchik, and Tein (2005) underscore the significant impacts of positive parenting on alleviating psychological distress of parentally bereaved children. Silverman, Baker, Cait, and Boerner (2002) interviewed 160 female and male young people ranging

from 6-17 years of age and assessed them on numerous psychiatric symptomatology standardized scales. With their qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts they linked those young people at high risk for psychiatric symptomatology with negative “living legacies” of the deceased parent (Silverman, Baker, Cait, & Boerner, 2002, p. 338). Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryant, and Rey (1998) assessed 80 young people, ranging from 9-17 years of age, on numerous psychiatric symptomatology measures, comparing them with a non-bereaved control group. They found that young bereaved persons were more likely to have problematic externalizing and internalizing behaviours than their non-bereaved peers (Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryant, & Rey, 1998). Finding similar results, Worden, Davies, and McCown (1999) compared 125 parentally bereaved 6-17 year olds with a group of young people who experienced a sibling loss. Using both semi-structured interviews and standardized psychiatric symptomatology measures, they concluded that while there was no significant difference between the two groups, both are at risk for problematic internalizing and externalizing behaviours (Worden, Davies, & McCown, 1999).

In summary, almost all studies find that young people who have experienced a parental death are at risk for a variety of problems.

Student 4: Do any researchers look into cultural differences of grief and loss?

Carys: Not many that I could find. Ellis and Granger (2002) administered a questionnaire to 20 female and male adult African Americans who experienced a parental death in their adolescence, assessing their perceptions of the effects of loss. They conclude that family and other informal supports played a role in assisting the participants in the grieving process, that males had more delinquent behaviour as compared to females in response to the loss, and that household income did not have an effect on grief responses (Ellis & Granger, 2002).

Prof: These texts certainly paint a very specific picture of a young person's experience of grief and loss.

Carys: Yes, the grieving young person is seen as at risk for a host of problems, including, depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, sleep disturbances, poor school performance, sorrow, fear, and disorientation, amongst others. It is no wonder that there seems to be such worry for those young people who experience a death of a loved one.

Student 2: Researchers so far all seem to seek pathology, only assessing for psychiatric symptomatology.

Carys: That was my observation. These kinds of texts dominated what I found. For the most part, psychiatric symptomatology checklists and questionnaires were used. Mental health problems have been assessed by way of measurement scales, including the Hopkins Symptom Checklist, the Beck Depression Inventory, Child Behaviour Checklist, Mood and Feelings Questionnaire, the Youth Self-Report, and the Impact of Event Scale, amongst others (Gray, 1987; Harris, 1991; Kwok, Haine, Sandler, Ayers, Wolchik, & Tein, 2005; Rheingold, Smith, Ruggiero, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 2004; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001; Silverman, Baker, Cait, & Boerner, 2002; Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryant, & Rey, 1998; Worden, Davies, & McCown, 1999). Grief specific measures have been assessed by way of tailored measurement scales, including the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief, the Inventory of Complicated Grief, and the Extended Grief Inventory, amongst others (Brown & Goodman, 2005; Brown, Sandler, Tein, Liu, & Haine, 2007; Melhelm, Moritz, Walker, Shear, & Brent, 2007). What I found fascinating was that in influential works, such as Worden, Davies, and McCown (1999), the surviving parents were asked to complete the checklists and questionnaires, not the young person her/himself.

In their review of the bereavement research literature, Neimeyer and Hogan (2001) argue that, “there is little justification for future studies to assess bereavement as an exclusively psychopathological process” (p.

111). In their assessment of qualitative paradigms with respect to studies of grief and loss they state that, “it is clear that they begin to paint a picture of bereavement that is far more complex and less tidy than that suggested by the artificially simplified and controlled canvasses of quantitative questionnaires” (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001, p. 113). I had hoped to find such research that painted a different picture.

Prof: Were there any other texts that did not necessarily focus on pathology or connect to pathological outcomes?

Carys: I noticed some other kinds of articles emerging throughout the literature in addition to the medicalized focus. For example, Oltjenbruns (1991) studied the positive outcomes that young people experience after the death of a loved one. With a sample size of 93 young people between 16 and 22 years of age, participants answered a series of questions regarding positive outcomes experienced as a result of the death of a family member or friend in the past two years. Oltjenbruns (1991) reported that more than half of their participants report a “deeper appreciation of life”, “greater caring for loved ones”, “strengthened emotional bonds with others”, and “developed emotional strength” (p. 48). Researchers have also explored social support in connection with young people’s experience of grief and loss. Gray (1987) found that those young people who experienced a

parental death who had high levels of informal social support had lower depression scores.

Other researchers have been open to what emerges from the interviews collected. For example, Hsu, Kahn, and Huang (2002) interviewed 30 female and male adolescents from Taiwan communities whose father died noting common themes, including isolation from death, incompleteness, staying inside, worrying about mother, building connections with fathers, and restructuring the family.

Some researchers have explored the connection between grief and loss and resilience. For example, Lin, Sandler, Ayers, Wolchik, and Luecken (2004) examine resilience factors with a sample size of 179 8-16 year old young people who experienced a parental death within the last 4-30 months. Connecting their analysis to mental health outcomes, they conclude that, “resilient children perceived negative events to be significantly less threatening to their well-being... and also felt more efficacious in coping with those life stressors” (Lin, Sandler, Ayers, Wolchik, & Luecken, 2004, p. 680). Hurd’s (2004) case study, with a 14 year-old girl, who lost her father at age 8, explores resilience as related to grief and loss. Hurd (2004) analyses her participant’s experience through a developmental lens and identifies protective factors that contribute to her resilience, including close relationships with family members, intelligence,

no existing behavioural or psychological problems before the death, extended family support, amongst many others.

Schultz (2007) interviewed six female college students, between the ages of 18-25 years, who lost a mother in middle adolescence. Through phenomenological content analysis, 14 themes emerged split into three meta-themes: loss of mother impacts identity, relatedness on the path of identity development, and integration of loss into emergent identity. Cait (2004) interviewed 18 female college students who lost a parent between the ages of 11 and 17 years. Exploring her participants' experience of the grieving process and how that was integrated into their sense of self, she identifies three themes: constructing a relationship to the deceased, shifting family dynamics, and titrated grieving (Cait, 2004). Furthermore, Cait (2004) observes that her participants' experience of a parental death drove them to search for meaning and their new "sense of spirituality allowed them to maintain a connection to the deceased and have faith in the continuing presence of the parent" (p. 174).

Prof: Any others?

Carys: Taking a relational perspective on both young people and their grieving process, Ribbens McCarthy (2007) interviews young people, who were from a larger longitudinal study of young people's lives in Britain. She

discusses themes that emerged: the search for meaning, overwhelming feelings, social relationships and social context, risk and vulnerability, the significance of time, interventions, and young people's lack of power (Ribbens McCarthy, 2007). Also taking a relational perspective of young people's experience of a parental death was Sussillo (2005) who discusses young people's simultaneous letting go of and holding on to the deceased parent. She extensively explores the conflicted academic debate on what is thought to be good grief, noting that the adolescent's "continued yet altered relationship with the dead parent facilitates the grieving process and allows the separation and moving on. This inner relationship is not static but is transformed over the individual's developmental time" (Sussillo, 2005, p. 522).

### *Theories of Grief and Loss*

Prof: How did you conceptualize the studies within larger epistemological frameworks?

Carys: There was a common language that many of the researchers wrote with. I attempted to conceptualize the texts within different categories. They tended to fit within the larger epistemological positions regarding knowledge and what researchers can find out about people's experiences. Two philosophies or epistemological orientations jumped out.

The first is the modernistic, positivist orientation, which seeks to find universal truth claims, seeking one objective reality, and subsequently defining what is considered to be normal and abnormal behaviour. Within this orientation, well-known theories of grief and loss are located. Most predominant are the tasks of mourning (Worden, 1996) and stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) models.

Worden (1996) states the young person must: accept the reality of the loss, experience the pain or emotional aspects of the loss, adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and to relocate the dead person within one's life and find ways to memorialize the person.

Kubler-Ross and Kessler's (2005) phase model states that the grieving person travels through a series of stages, those being denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In both these theories, successful transition out of the grieving process requires the grieving person to move through each task or stage largely in a linear fashion and to eventually let go of the deceased person, able to emotionally invest in new relationships. Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) comment on her original stages of grief and loss theory and acknowledge the misinterpretation the theory has had within its application. They only go as far to say that the stages do not have to be experienced linearly or in a predetermined amount of time; however, they continue to claim that the grieving person will experience

all stages (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). The task and stage theories, particularly when tied to adolescent developmental theory, dominate and are extensively covered in the literature on young people's experience of grief and loss (Balk, 1996; Balk & Corr, 1996; Balk & Corr, 2001; Fleming & Balmer, 1996).

The second is the post-modern, social constructionist orientation, which seeks to find multiple truths of people's subjective realities, contextual and cultural differences, and the individual meaning people make of events. Within this orientation, emerging alternative theories of grief and loss are located. Leading these emerging theories are the dual process approach (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and the meaning reconstruction theory (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002).

The dual process approach claims a simultaneous movement between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation where the bereaved person focuses on both elements related to the loss as well as elements related to restoration to health and well being (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Meaning reconstruction theory claims the bereavement process to be a crisis of meaning where the bereaved individual engages in three contexts of meaning reconstruction, those being sense-making, benefit-finding, and identity reconstruction (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002).

In their review of bereavement research, Neimeyer and Hogan (2001) argue that qualitative approaches with a social constructionist philosophy “are especially valuable in generating theory where little good theory exists, in revealing how people make meaning of events, and in moving toward a deep understanding of a particular phenomenon rather than a nomothetic set of causal inferences presumed to generalize across different cultures and settings” (pp. 105-106).

*Personal Writings*

Prof: After reviewing the literature on grief and loss, how did you approach the literature on personal writings?

Carys: I started with a wide-angle lens. I had a feeling it would be somewhat difficult to find the material I had hoped might exist. I widened not only what I would search for but also the databases I would search within. Knowing previously that feminist scholarship has been the leader in studying women’s genres of writing, including diaries, letters, and poetry, I needed to include databases that would access this information.

Prof: What did you find when you began this process?

Carys: For the most part, I found it difficult to locate material that aligned with what I was attempting to explore. Searching personal writing within the literature, within the younger population, using the search terms diary, journal, poetry, and letters, yields information on enhancing literacy and educational teaching practices (e.g. McMillan & Wilhelm, 2007; Wissman, 2007), enhancing therapeutic intervention (e.g. Froggett, 2007; Tyson & Baffour, 2004), determining risk taking behaviour (e.g. Hensel, Fortenberry, & Orr, 2008; Gorely, Marshall, Biddle, & Cameron, 2007), and pathological disorder (e.g. Franko, Thompson, Bauserman, Affenito, & Striegel-Moore, 2008). For what seems to be such a popular practice of young girls, exploring young people's experiences through their personal writings has not commonly been taken up in scholarly circles. Published and popularized personal writings have circulated through non-academic circles, including the diaries of Nin (1978), Frank (1952), and Lau (1989).

*Feminist Scholarship and Personal Writings*

Carys: Within the academic literature, more common is the feminist scholarship on the personal writing of women. The Personal Narratives Group (1989) uses personal narratives from texts including biographies, autobiographies, and life stories, as a site to explore women's lives. Bunkers and Huff (1996) explore women's diaries arguing that women's genres of writing, such as diaries, journals, and other forms of life writing, should be held as a useful way to access and learn about women's lives. Cooper (1987)

reviews the usefulness of exploring journal, diary, and letter writing stating that, “ultimately, journal writing encourages women to find meaning in their own lives. For centuries diarists have faced each new day, just as we do, with no idea what is next. When we read women’s diaries we enter their daily lives, with all the drudgery, all the surprises, all the disappointments the diarist faced. Perhaps we can learn from them how to face our own journey with the courage, intelligence, and enduring spirit exemplified by our foremothers, be they famous or obscure. This is the diarists’ true gift to us: through their struggles they teach us how to live” (p. 99).

Bunkers (1987) explores the theoretical and methodological questions when studying archived diaries and provides commentary on how researchers could benefit from studying this type of writing. She reminds researchers exploring women’s diaries to “remember that the value of unpublished diaries as forms of autobiography rests not so much on the writers’ reporting of events as on individual diarists’ perceptions of themselves and of their places within their culture; that is, on their expression of the inner truth of their experiences, a truth which is by nature subjective and which exists regardless of whether their experiences have been recorded as a part of the fabric of an official or “objective” history” (Bunkers, 1987, p. 15). In their study of adolescent identity, through multiple uses of poetry, Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo, and

Kulkarni (2007) state that “poetry can be viewed as a vehicle through which to communicate powerful and multiple ‘truths’ about the human experience” and that, “poems are powerful documents that possess the capacity to capture the contextual and psychological worlds of both poet and subject” (p. 302).

Begos (1987) compiles literature, both academic and non-academic, and reviews possible reasons why girls tend to write in diaries, briefly summarizes some of the published diaries of young girls, contextualizes published girls diaries in their historical periods, and gives commentary on why girls’ diaries prove to be an interesting source of information. Arons (1997) explores the journal writing experience, through the lens of psychological theory, for both males and females as a tool for self-growth. Proving to be a rich source of personal information enlightening researchers on women’s lives, Sinats, Scott, McFerran, Hittos, Cragg, Leblanc, and Brooks (2005a, 2005b) explore the spiritual lives of young girls through their personal writings, concluding that writing of this kind serves as a tool for spiritual self-care. They highlight and address persistent themes, including creating solitude, transforming to calm, preserving sensitivity, nurturing voice, and connecting beyond the self.

*Personal Writings and Grief and Loss*

Prof: How have personal writings been connected to young people's experience of grief and loss within the existing literature that you reviewed?

Carys: It is difficult to find studies that have used personal writings to explore the lives of young people, even more so when exploring the topic of grief and loss. Few studies have emerged in my search within this sparse subset of the literature.

Rosenblatt (1983) reviews 19<sup>th</sup> century diaries interpreted by 20<sup>th</sup> century grief and loss theories concluding grief was experienced "quite possibly as long as one lives" (p. 159). He ultimately dismisses the personal writings as an inaccurate representation of the diarist's life, deeming it unreliable because the diarist was not present to confirm and contextualize the details by stating that, "diaries are in many ways a flimsy foundation for knowledge. The relationship between what people say in their diaries and what would appear to an outsider to be going on in their lives may be tenuous, and there may be no way to verify most of what diarists say about their feelings" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 162). Working from a positivist theoretical orientation, this conclusion seems accurate. However, when seeking to explore personal experiences of grief and loss, personal writings may provide a space where silenced experiences may prove to

expand knowledge and understanding of the experience of grief and loss, valuing the multiplicity of the writer's experience.

In their review of Rosenblatt's (1983) work, Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, and Stroebe (1992) note the strong connection between the grieving diarist and the deceased loved one using "the wishes of the lost one as a guide to action" and that "a common recourse for the grieving was to try to retain ties" (p. 1209).

Furthering this literature on exploring individuals' experiences of grief and loss as expressed through personal writings, Balk and Vesta (1998) analyze one young woman's journal entries, spanning four years, showing her maintained connection to her deceased father while finding a core theme of "finding herself" (p. 38); triangulating the data with psychiatric symptomatology measures while reviewing her journal entries, they connect her journal writing to what Stroebe and Schut (1999) theorize as the restoration orientation, from their dual process approach.

I hope I can extend what is known about grief and loss and personal writings by exploring my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings.

*Conclusion*

Prof: What unique contribution to the field are you making with your study?

Carys: First of all, as of yet, young people's experiences of grief and loss have not been looked at in this autoethnographic way. Second, so often I read about the emotions, both that are categorized as negative and positive, associated with the grieving experience. Never are these emotions detailed on an individual basis, but rather, they are skimmed over by checklists and questionnaires. Additionally, young people's thoughts, ideas, values, experiences, actions, hopes, aspirations are seldom, if ever, looked at within the grief and loss literature in any detailed manner. I wanted to explore these individual experiences. I have a belief that each individual's emotions, ideas, values, experiences, actions, hopes, and aspirations are just that, individual. While I certainly acknowledge that, for example, the experience of sadness may have common qualities across populations, I wanted to know what sadness looks like, how it is felt, and what kind of context it is experienced in. Conversely, I want to know how outcomes typically categorized as positive, such as strength and self-reliance, look like, how they are felt, and what kind of context they are experienced in. Few studies seek these experiences out on an individual level and because the autoethnographic process aims to shed light on these experiences I hope my study will do just that. Third, common in the literature are conflicted discussions regarding the continuing of bonds with the deceased

perceived as adaptive or maladaptive to the grieving process and general health and well being (Schultz, 2004; Sussillo, 2005). The philosophical debate fascinates me as it speaks to the wider epistemological orientations that researchers have when assessing young people's behaviours. As I present in my narratives and subsequent interpretations of my personal writings, continuing a bond with my dad after his death was important. Not only did I want to know why this was important, I also wanted to know what this looked like on an up-close and personal scale as opposed to the brief afterthought it is given within the literature. Ultimately, I hope that by exploring my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings from the time, I am able to expand upon the existing literature on this topic so that we all might be able to understand this experience in a more detailed, personal, and individual manner.

Prof: We're coming up to the end of our time with you all. We'd like to thank you for being such an attentive audience. With that, we'd like to invite you to the second part of this presentation titled 'Constructing a Life (Part Two): Interpretations and Implications,' set for next week. Thank you all for coming.

## INTERLUDE

## A Phone Call

*Setting: Present day, evening. Carys sits in her study.*

After having just spent a full day of reading literature on young people's experience of grief and loss, I find myself exhausted. All of the theories, the studies, the interpretations, and the implications have my mind racing in circles attempting to form connections between and across the texts. I make myself some hot chocolate and sit down in my chair to write a research journal entry, reflecting on the day of readings. Opening up to the first blank page in my notebook, I begin to write.

*There are so many thoughts racing through my head trying to conceptually understand the vast number of studies on young people's experience of grief and loss. Even when I limit my search to young people's experience of parental death, I am amazed at the diverse literature that has emerged in my search. I'm finding it difficult to hold so much information in my mind at one time. After reviewing some of the studies I've found, I decided to review some of the literature reviews that other researchers have conducted to explore how other researchers have conceptualized the literature. So much of the theoretical foundations of these studies have relied on a relatively small set of models to guide their own formulations and understandings.*

*Not only are my eyes exhausted, I feel emotionally drained. At times I found myself getting angry with what some of the authors were writing. I find it difficult to read through an article that seeks out only pathology. Over and over I read about symptomatology being assessed and grieving young people claimed to be at risk for multiple problematic behaviours and outcomes. Hardly ever do I hear my experience echoed in the theories that claim universal application. Why? Conversely, I find it relaxing to read through an article that seems as though the researchers have listened to the young person's voice and sought out strengths for getting through a typically difficult time. Just today I reread a theory that discussed the complexity of emotions that young people feel and how these feelings are highly subjective and need to be understood at the individual level not at some generalized universal level. I read articles on how young people are actively seeking ways to make meaning of their experiences and am amazed at the strength, honesty, and vulnerability they bring. But I am nevertheless brought back to those articles where I find myself becoming angry, as though the purpose of the theory created is to control young people, seeking to police their behaviour. I cannot get past these articles. Not only do I feel myself angry and frustrated but I also become sad. Where is this sadness coming from? Do others have such personal responses to reviewing literature that is also close to their own personal experience?*

Just then I remember I have a phone call with my thesis supervisor the next morning. I'll have to remember to bring this response up with him. I put my books away and head to bed.

It's nine o'clock in the morning and I wait by the phone for my scheduled phone conversation with my supervisor. The phone rings, I pick up and we begin our discussion. As I typically cover the expected update of how my thesis is coming along, he notices that my tone of voice is hesitant when discussing how I am coming along with reviewing the literature.

"I've been stuck on it for a while and I cannot figure out why. I've reviewed what seems to be hundreds of articles and books. I've narrowed the articles down to a manageable amount, including some, excluding others. I've also sought out many of the common texts and original theories with which many of the more current articles cite as their theoretical framework." I relay.

"Okay. That all sounds like you're on the right track." He says.

"But last night..." I pause.

"Last night..." he replies, his tone of voice inviting me to finish the sentence.

"Last night, after a particularly long day of reviewing articles I found myself anxious, almost angry. When I read some of the more traditional research on grief and loss I am immediately brought back to when I was young. I explicitly recall one specific event and I can't get it out of my mind. I can't seem to move on to read the next sentence, let alone the next article." I admit.

"Tell me about what you're remembering." He asks.

"Okay. Well, it was soon after my dad died. I was 11 years old. My mom took my siblings and I to see a counsellor. We first went as a family. I guess this is recommended to families who have just been through a death in the family. I don't

remember how many times we went to see this counsellor all together. What I do remember is that for some reason I had to go see her individually. No one told me why. I thought I had done or said something wrong and that's why I had to see her by myself. I remember sitting across from her and she was asking me how I was feeling. I remember how I was telling her how much I missed my dad and how sad I was and how I couldn't stop thinking about him. She started to tell me about how I was in shock that this terrible event had occurred and that it was okay that I was feeling sad. She told me that I might not understand what's happening. I told her that I did understand, that my dad died and that I would never see him again. She said that after the shock I currently feel I would feel anger towards him for leaving us. I remember disagreeing with what she told me. I said that I wasn't mad at my dad for leaving us to live without him. I told her that I thought it was good of him to try to protect us from getting hurt and that I was sad that he was hurt. She said I would eventually not be sad anymore and that each person has their own time that they take to get through this process. Eventually, I became silent, just listening to what she told me. After seeing the counsellor, I told my mom I didn't want to see her again. I don't remember anything after that."

Even after that short telling of an event that happened so long ago, I feel sad for my younger self. This memory has stayed with me. I feel sad not only for what I was going through but also for the counselling session itself. I am sad that I had to silence myself for her to tell me something that did not fit for me. I am sad that she must have interpreted my silence as agreement, or so I assume. I am angry that she didn't listen to me, even if I wasn't very articulate as perhaps I thought I was.

“This memory is significant. You’re involving yourself in an autoethnographic study and you must go with whatever presents itself. If these are the events that are presenting themselves, you must pay attention. To not pay attention to these significant events would go against the aims of autoethnographic research.” He advises.

“But the events that are surfacing don’t directly have to do with the personal writing.” I notice my theoretical devil’s advocate, positivist-trained voice arguing with the process I’m engaged in. I’m stuck trying to re-train myself to value an iterative process versus a prepackaged deal where everything is planned from the start.

“Write the events as narratives and see where you go from there.” He responds.

“Okay, I will.”

Shortly after, we finish our phone conversation, and I begin to write.

After writing the narrative of the event I seem to be able to have acknowledged it and understand more fully as to why that event has stayed present with me for so many years. Today, this experience informs me that I had my own idea of what grief and loss would look like for me. This emotional response to literature and remembering how I was told what I should feel and not invited to share what I felt is just the tip of the silent iceberg. Now even more I am compelled to engage in this study to learn about the voice I was expressing all throughout those years. What is it I was trying to say about my experiences? What was I experiencing

that was not accepted as okay? What is it about being silenced that makes you want to scream your story out loud?

The more I engage in the autoethnographic process, the more I realize I need to go back in time and follow my own grieving process to let my younger self inform me. I must go back in time to remember those experiences. My personal writing will guide this journey.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### IN THE MIDST

#### In the Beginning

This story begins in the fall of 1992. You might consider mine a typical, happy family. At the time, my dad, a general practitioner, had gone back to school to become an orthopedic surgeon. He was in his last year of residency. My mother was a substitute teacher and stay at home mom. I am the eldest of their four children. We lived near the university where my dad attended school, in a friendly suburban neighbourhood.

In September of 1992, a young man broke into my family's home in the middle of the night in search for money for drugs. In my dad's attempt to protect my family, he was stabbed multiple times by this man and died that early morning of a massive amount of blood loss. While the rest of my family watched my dad lay on the front lawn, waiting for the ambulance to come while being assisted by neighbours, I was upstairs on the phone with emergency services.

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### That Night

*Setting: Fall 1992, middle of the night. 11 years old. Carys' room. On the phone with emergency services.*

“How old is your dad?” The lady on the phone asks.

“Forty something.” I respond.

“Do you know what happened?” She asks.

“I don't know. There's blood all over the walls and floor. He's hurt.” I say.

“How old are you?” She repeatedly asks.

“I'm eleven.” I say.

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## I Miss My Dad

*Setting: Fall 1992, afternoon. 11 years old. Carys sits in her basement writing.*

*I miss my daddy Geoffrey Arthur Cragg. He died in a robbery. That man who killed him I hate and I will never forgive him.*

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### An English Class Lesson

*Setting: Fall 1994, midday. 13 years old. A grade 8 English classroom.  
Carys sits at her desk amongst 25 students while the teacher stands  
speaking in the front of the room.*

“We’re going to move on from limericks in class today.” The English teacher instructs. “Does anyone know anything about Haiku poetry?”

The class is silent.

“Well, this is my favorite kind poetry. These poems hold such wonderful meaning in their short passages. This is how these poems work. There are 17 syllables in Haiku poetry, split into 3 lines.”

She continues to review the rules of the Haiku poem.

“Does anyone have any questions?”

“But I thought that all poetry had to rhyme.” A boy in the back row shouts out.

“Not so, James.” She replies.

“Do you mean, 5 words, 7 words, 5 words?” A girl with a confused look asks.

“No, not quite. 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables.” The teacher corrects.

“Oh.” She remarks.

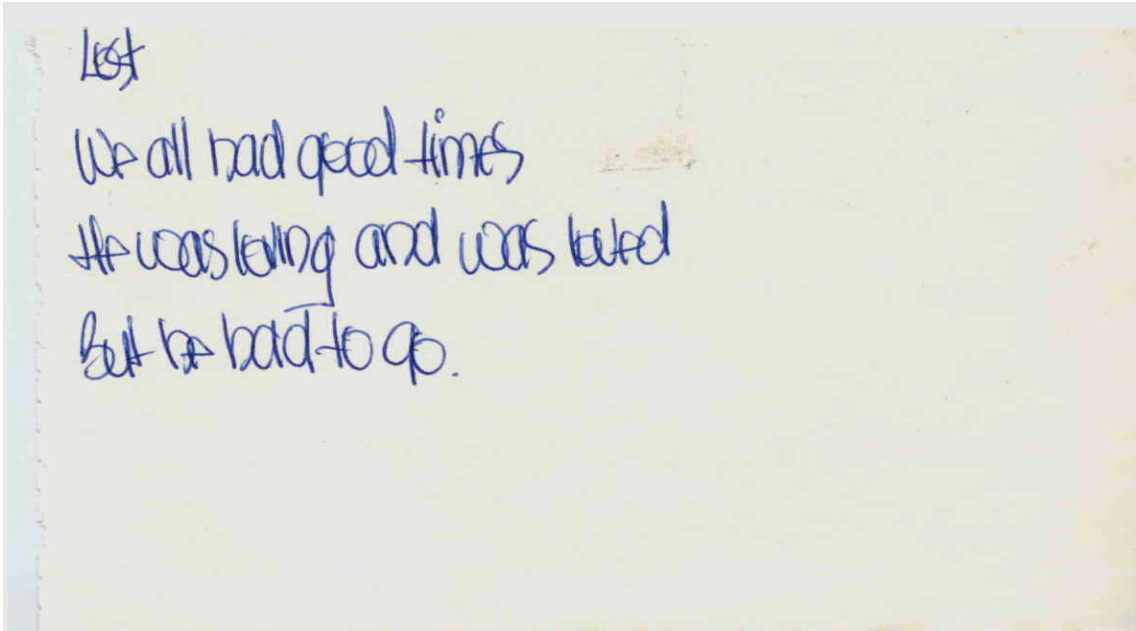
The teacher reviews a few examples to further explain the concept. “Okay, now that we’ve gone over the basics, I want you to try to write one for yourself. You’ll have about 20 minutes or so, so get to work.”

Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes go by and nothing. *I don’t know what to write.* I overhear the boy next to me whispering to his neighbour telling him he’s writing about making fun of the teacher. The girl next to him says she’s writing about how boring school is. I refocus on my blank page. I feel myself getting nervous. My heart beats faster. I notice myself taking fewer breaths. *I don’t know what to write.*

“Okay, 2 more minutes class and then I’d like you to hand them in.” The teacher calls out.

A wave of calm rushes through me. *Daddy, I think.* I position my pencil, tune out the chattering voices surrounding me, and write.

Figure 3. Lost. Haiku poem.



Just then, as I read it over, the teacher calls out, “Okay everyone, hand them forward.”

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### Recess in the Stairwell

*Setting: Fall 1994, midday. 13 years old. A busy middle school hallway.  
Recess has just begun. Carys and her friend stand at their lockers.*

“What did you write about in English class today for the shape poem Carys? It was my least favorite one. I think the limericks are easier.” My friend inquires as we pull our recess snacks out of our adjacent lockers.

“Oh, nothing. Just wrote about my dad.” I respond.

“But the teacher pulled you to the side when we all left class. What did she say?”

“I guess she just wanted to see if I was okay. She said I could go visit the counsellor if I wanted to.”

“Are you okay? What did you write?” She asks with a concerned and hesitant tone.

“It doesn’t matter.” I say.

We are en route to our typical recess hangout, the stairwell, which has bleached white paint covering the concrete stairs, walls, and ceiling. The sun’s light penetrates the skylight, almost as if focusing on our little group. Three of our other friends have already taken their seats on the steps when we arrive, leaning against the railing.

“What are you guys talking about?” They ask.

“Carys wrote a poem about her dad and the English teacher was asking if she was okay.”

“Can you read it to us?” They ask.

“Sure, I guess.” I say.

They all sit on the stairs and I stand below the bottom step facing them. I pull my binder out of my backpack, open to today’s class’ work and begin to read. “Grief. I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know what to say, if anything. There were lots of people, many people who cared and went through the same thing, but I knew I’d never be the same.”

Two of them tear up. One stands up and gives me a hug.

“Don’t you get sad when you read that to us?” She asks.

“Yah, doesn’t it make you sad thinking about it, and writing about it too?”

Another one follows up.

“No, I like it. It makes me feel better.” I respond and put my binder back in my backpack.

Just then, the bell rings and we head back to our lockers.



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### A Music Class Break

*Setting: April 1997, midday. 15 years old. A grade 10 music classroom. Carys sits in the auditorium seats amongst 15 students while the teacher sits at the piano in front searching through his music scores.*

Fifteen or so of us sit here in the auditorium seats, waiting for the teacher to sort through his sheets of music to pick out our next song. He sits in front of his piano shuffling sheets and asks one of the students to come help him find a song. The rest of us sit and wait. Having just finished practicing the African Anthem, which we've been doing for months, I think to myself. *I hope he doesn't pull out the sheets for Amazing Grace. I'm so tired of thinking of new ways to sing it. The girls who sing it with him are just showing off, like the big opera or Broadway stars.*

To my right, a couple of girls form a circle and practice their parts in the upcoming musical, acapella. Further down the row a few girls pull out their makeup cases and powder their noses, the same girls who were taking up all of the washroom mirrors at recess, I recall. The teacher doesn't notice. To my left, a couple of girls whisper gossip about the girls in the front row, who are showing off their singing capabilities, hoping the teacher will notice and ask them to do a solo. Scattered amongst us, chemistry textbooks emerge from backpacks, and girls study for the huge

chemistry exam next class. I stop looking around, lean over in my seat, pull my journal out of my backpack, open it to the first blank page, and begin to write.

*Everything is so stupid. 2 months ago everything was perfect. How come it has to be this way? I miss my dad. And that makes it even harder on other things like how I look, how I'm doing in school, how I perceive my friends, and everything else that is in my life right now. Why does it have to be this way? Everything good is taken over by bad. I'm in music right now. What a waste of a year. Just singing, no getting up and acting. Screw this.*

Just then, the teacher calls out to the group. "How about another rendition of Amazing Grace?"

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## I've Had Enough

*Setting: July 1997, evening. 16 years old. Carys' bedroom. She sits on her bed writing.*

It's a gorgeous summer evening. The sun has set and the darkness is quickly taking over the sky. Sitting in my bed, propping my back up with a pillow, I lean my head back and it touches the corner walls of my room. The house is empty; everyone is out doing their thing. I reach over to my desk where a stack of paper sits. I grab a notebook, some paper, and a pen. Leaning back against the wall, I begin to write.

*Daddy,*

*He<sup>4</sup> died yesterday. I don't know if he is with you yet, but he will be. Tell him I said hi. And that I love him. And please tell the person who controls this all (if there is one) to screw himself. Daddy, I was thinking so many things today. And I am so confused. I don't understand why. He was so beautiful. So smart, so kind, and everything else. I thought so much today. What do I do? What should I learn from this? How is everyone going to deal with this? He shouldn't be gone. He should be here with us. It wasn't his time. And you too. Oh my god. This is so much. I just keep crying and crying. I don't know how to act. I know I can get through this, but I don't get*

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<sup>4</sup> A teenaged extended family member's sudden death.

*why I have to. I am so sick of it. Why does everyone keep leaving me? I know I am going to live my life. But why does it have to be so hard? It hurts too much. I am so afraid. I mean who is 'he' going to take next? Please talk to him and tell him to stop it. I haven't done anything wrong. Ever. Daddy, what should I do? I'm sorry for not writing longer. It's just I can't stop crying. I love you so much, and tell that to him.*

*Love,*

*Carys*

I wipe the tears that have streamed down my face to my chin. As I feel my body exhausted, I fold up the paper and leave it on the desk. On the top of the folded piece of paper, I write: *I'VE HAD ENOUGH*. I lay my head down on the pillow, bringing my knees up close to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. I close my eyes and fall asleep.

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Love is Something that You Show

*Setting: November 1997, afternoon. 16 years old. Carys' room.*

I walk into my house, having just driven back from school. Kicking my shoes off, then walking up the stairs, I head to my bedroom. I throw my bag on my bed and then pull the journal out from amongst my textbooks, the one my guidance counsellors gave me that afternoon. Delicate pink, green, and orange flowers grace the covers. I sit down at my desk and I open up to its first blank page and stare. I grab a pencil out of my top drawer and I begin to write.

*I just want people to say – no matter what grades you get (whether it be an A or a C-), no matter how you look, no matter if you have a job or not, 'I still love you and you're the most important thing in the world to me.' And I want someone to say that without saying – 'but you should try harder at school, and you should try to get a job, and you should try out for the musical.' Cause maybe if they just say that I'm special no matter what (without saying 'but') then maybe in time I will do better at school, and maybe I will get a job, and maybe I will try out for the musical.*

*No one loves me. Love is something that you show. It's not something that you say or hide. It's something that you show. It's the way you look at someone in the eyes and then smile. I don't think anyone loves me. When mom says she loves me it isn't true 'cause she says it either*

*after I say it or she says 'of course I love you, you're my daughter.' You don't love someone or something because they're your daughter or husband or friend. You love them because you just do. 'Cause of the way you look at them, or the way they look at you just makes you feel so good and warm inside. I know that daddy loved me and I know that he still loves me because when I think of him he makes me feel all warm inside. I know that he loved me cause when I used to hug him he was really comfy. And never once did I ever feel cold.*

*I think I just might explode. I have so much to say. But no one cares to listen long enough or no one cares to do anything about it except say 'what's wrong?' Then, when I say everything (and when I say everything – I mean it – I wouldn't joke about that) everyone says 'oh don't say that, everything's fine, don't worry.' They say that because they have nothing to say. What they should have said in the first place is nothing. Then I would have more respect for them.*

By now I am sobbing, so much that I cannot continue to write. I slide the journal to the side of my desk, knowing I'll be back to write later on.

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9:57 pm, Friday

*Setting: December 1997, evening. 16 years old. Carys' bedroom.*

I close my door, muffling the sound of the music playing out on the deck. I walk over to my desk and take a seat. Opening my drawer to find my journal, simultaneously searching for a pencil, I notice the time displayed on my watch on my extended arm, and begin to write.

*It's 9:57 pm. Friday. My friends are outside on the deck having a great time. They're dancing. I, on the other hand, am sitting in my room. I'm so not fun. Why can't I have fun? I must be so boring to them. Why can't I just go out there and have some fun? Why can't I be like them? They must be having so much fun. I wish I could do that.*

*What is with me? I can't get out of this "stage." I'm so bored. I want to have fun. So what is it? Daddy why am I like this? I never have fun. I just sit there being 'cute.' I'm so annoying. I bet everyone thinks that too. They probably say that to each other. I'm so afraid of that. I deserve it cause I am, but I want them to not say those things.*

*I want someone other than the guidance counsellor to see that something is wrong and just hug me once in a while. Not one of those*

*fake “hi” hugs, but a real hug. Like an “I love you” hug. And “I always will even if you are incredibly boring.”*

*Why can't I be invisible? Why can't I just dance in front of everyone and not worry about making a fool of myself. My friends are having so much fun. They just dance and sing. They look so free. So wild. I'm not. I'm sitting in my room writing to myself. See, I am pathetic. I'm so embarrassing. I must be such a drag.*

*Why can't I have one of those moments where you realize you have to change?*

*I want to have fun like the rest of them.*

*I think that's all you need to know in life. How to have fun. Everything else just falls into place. Daddy, you knew how to have fun. At least you looked like you were having fun, and everyone else says you were the best at having fun. I want to be like you. But I can't, at least it's hard when you're gone. All I really have is memories and pictures and stories to look at for your guidance. And I know that's enough, but it's still very hard.*

I put my journal back atop my desk, stand up from the chair, and exit my room. I hear the laughing and music playing. I reemerge onto the deck where my friends are dancing to the music. A friend takes my hand and twirls me around, bringing me onto the self-created dance floor.

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## On the Kitchen Floor

*Setting: December 1997, evening. 16 years old. The family kitchen.*

I slowly sink into the hard surface of the kitchen floor. If only I could go further to represent this hollow pressure inside of me. The dark blue glow on the horizon reminds me that, yet again, I am alone on a Saturday night. Not only is my family all out, leaving me alone in this cold, empty, quiet home, but my friends are out too. Where they are I do not know. I am here. I squish my face, attempting to expel the tears suspended in my eyes. I grab the hardwood floor, wishing it would give just a little so my muscle could push the pain out of my body into somewhere else, anywhere else. I lay there, face down, knees tucked into my chest and against the floor.

Outside becomes darker. *How long have I been lying here?* I like the dark. It holds and respects the pain better than the light of day. I push my hands against the floor, this time to lift myself up. I drag my hair off my face. It rips away from the dried tears. I feel empty. I stand with my hands on my hips, as if to hold myself up. I push my shoulders back, raising my chin up. I look around. *Still alone*, I think, I feel. I walk to my bedroom, sit at my desk, open my journal, pick up my pencil, look down at the blank page, take a deep breath, and begin to write.

*Look at me. It's Saturday night, and I'm sitting at home doing nothing. Today I woke up with huge puffy eyes on the couch. No one cared to come to see me last night. In case I don't remember in 30 years. I just cried for like an hour on the kitchen floor.*

I put my journal back into the desk drawer. I pull the covers of my bed back and slide in. I rest my head on the pillow, pull the covers up to my neck, close my eyes, and fall asleep.

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## Running Away

*Setting: November, 1998, evening. 17 years old. A friend's bedroom. While her friend is out, Carys sits alone on her sleeping bag on the ground and writes.*

It's early evening and my friend's family is out. It's been a long day and I don't feel quite comfortable in the rest of their house so I decide to stay in my friend's room. Having just finished all of my homework for the next few days, a geography mapping assignment, a mathematics logarithms work sheet, and a photography photojournalism article, I put my books away. Sitting on my sleeping bag, leaning against my friend's bed, I take my journal out of my backpack and begin to write.

*I guess getting 90% on my social studies essay should be more exciting than I'm taking it right now, right? Well, I'm pretty excited getting the highest mark in all of my teacher's grade 12 classes. Most of all I'm excited about him saying congratulations when he handed back the essays.*

*I've been at my friend's place for a week now. So many things have happened. I haven't cried since Friday afternoon so I'm proud of that. I left for many reasons. Some having to do with mom and the rest me. Many people have said that it is unfair of me to put my family in this*

*situation. Many have said I should be at home or I should go home. Well, I probably should go home and I should be at home but sometimes life isn't the way it should be. For instance, I should have a father but I don't. I am being selfish but I think it is for a good cause. I'm leaving home cause I would like to be happy. Many people don't agree with me.*

*I saw my counsellor on Friday. She said I shouldn't go home 'till mom, me and her talk things over. She saw mom today. Just them by themselves. It's better that way so she can sort of get to know her.*

*Right now I don't know what I want. All I know is that something has to change in our family before I go back. I have an idea of what but it doesn't seem possible. I'm a good daughter. I drive once in a while. I clean. I do my homework. I study. I get straight A's. I don't get wasted every weekend. I don't drive recklessly. Why does everyone take advantage of the fact that I'm strong and I won't get mad at them? I don't want to be controlled by them. It has to stop.*

*Love always & forever, Carys*

I sigh and feel relieved. I put my journal away and change into my pyjamas. Just then my friend comes back from her soccer practice. She changes into her pyjamas and we stay up all night talking and laughing, planning how we're going to try to win the 'spy versus spy' grad class game.

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## A Saturday Night

*Setting: January 1999, evening. 17 years old. Carys' family's kitchen.*

After just finishing watching my favorite TV show, I walk upstairs to the kitchen. The phone rings and I pick it up.

“Hey, you didn’t call back to say if you wanted to go to the party down the street.” My friend remarks.

“Oh right, sorry.” I say.

“Well, do you want to go? I’m probably heading out in an hour or so. Come meet me at my house.” She asks.

“No, maybe another night.” I reply.

“Okay, see you Monday.” She hangs up.

I open the freezer to find a pile of frozen dinners. I pull one out and walk over to the microwave. Setting it for five minutes, I close the door and press start. Leaving it to heat, I move over to the kitchen table where my journal rests. I sit down at the table and write.

*I'm at home on a Saturday night because I don't want to go to some party where the following will occur (like every other night): We will go to some house where everyone is sitting around a room. Some will be talking (stoned or drunk) passing around joints, etc. There will be*

*a corner where the TV is on and around 3-5 guys will be playing on the Nintendo. There will be 2-4 girls in the bathroom checking their makeup (for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time that hour). There will be some people outside making fools of themselves – falling over or throwing up in the bushes. There will most likely be cocaine at this certain party tonight. Then when everyone gets bored – finally – they will stumble out of the house at 2am and drive home drunk or stoned on various types of drugs.*

*I despise this behaviour. I'd rather get straight A's.*

*Carys*

Just then, the microwave bell sounds. I take a fork out of the cutlery drawer and head back downstairs to see if anything is on the TV.

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## A Letter to My Mom

*Setting: July 1999, evening. 18 years old. The hallway of Carys' home. An argument between Carys and her mother has just occurred. Carys walks towards her bedroom.*

I storm back to my room from the kitchen. I'm boiling hot, absolutely enraged. I slam my door as I reach my bedroom. Pictures in the hallway crash to the ground. Falling into the covers of my bed, I scream, my voiced muffled by my pillow. *AHHH*. I can't stand this anymore. I hit my bed, scrunching the covers into my hands. *Why doesn't she understand? She doesn't listen to anything I say. She just wants me to shut up. She thinks that all I do is complain. She calls me selfish, that I have no responsibilities compared to what she now has to deal with without dad here.* It's too hot so I open my window. *I'd better not scream out of it. Last time I did that the neighbours called my mom to see if everything was okay.* I kneel on my bed sticking my head out of the window. I hold on to the frame. I breathe in the cold air, feeling it enter my lungs. Tears stream down my face, but I make no noise. I sit back on my bed. It's dark, nighttime. I move over to my desk. Pulling out my chair, I sit down, turn my desk lamp on, and pull some blank pages out of the top drawer. I put my elbow on the desk propping my head up with my hand, tightly grip my pencil in my other hand, and begin to feverishly write.

*Mom,*

*Why is it that every time I leave this house it's like some huge burden lifted off of your shoulders? And when I come back it's some huge inconvenience. Ever since grade eleven it's been like that. Like I'm in the way of everyone just because I think differently.*

*For 3 years now you've told me to relax. You've tried to change me for 3 years. And now you're saying that you can't change other people's personalities. We just have to deal with them. Thanks a lot for putting up with them and bitching at me for 3 years to shut up and relax.*

*I'm not selfish. You just only notice that part of me 'cause that's when I'm loud. Everyone is selfish. You too. You're selfish when you leave for the night to your boyfriend's – by the way, I don't think that's a bad thing. If you want to be happy, then do it. But technically, that's selfish. So when I need dinner (by the way I'm still your daughter) then fine, I'm selfish. But when I've been working shifts I get hungry and I'm sick of shoving frozen food in the oven. I've been doing that since the beginning of grade 12.*

*Why am I so mad at you? Because you're unfair. And don't tell me 'life's unfair.' Life's unfair because Daddy was killed right in front of our eyes. Life's unfair because our cousin didn't get to grow up and have kids of his own. Life's unfair for those reasons not because you treat me differently than them.*

*Why have you put into my mind the idea that I'm an inconvenience? All my friends notice it. I don't bring up problems with them. I bring up problems with you 'cause I think it's worth it to fix. Is that selfish?*

*You lucked out. Not with Daddy but with us. You don't have to deal with harsh drug problems or terrible grades. Oh, yah, for some reason I think it's a good idea to bring up problems underlying the surface one (ie: the car). You waste time trying to fix the surface problems when the one's under are growing and growing till you won't be able to handle them anymore. What the hell are you going to do then? Give up?*

*Don't ever think that the surface is all that there is. I don't know about them or you but I don't just bitch about food, driving, etc. There's always something underneath. I've told you that a million times. I guess you just weren't listening.*

I fold the pages of paper into the envelope, quickly walk over to my mom's room at the other end of the house, slip the envelope under her closed door, walk back to my room, get into my bed, and attempt to fall asleep.

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## Visiting Larson Bay

*Setting: July 1999, morning. 18 years old. Carys' bedroom. She lays in her bed having just woken up.*

The sun instantly wakes me up as it beams through my window, like every other early summer morning. I sluggishly get out of bed. Recalling that exam marks should have arrived in the mail yesterday, I rush to the mailbox, hoping that today is the day they come. I shuffle down the driveway, open the mailbox, and sort through the mail. As I walk back up the driveway and into the house, I drop the other mail on the kitchen counter taking the envelope addressed to me, with its anticipated school district seal. *I know where I want to open this*, I think to myself.

I quickly shower and dress then head to the car, with the envelope in tow. Turning the car on, I back out, and wind my way along the scenic low road. Just a few minutes drive later I park the car on the gravel road leading down to the bay. I step out of the car, lock and shut the doors.

It's a bit chilly outside, typical west coast weather. Massive green trees on both sides of the path sway overhead. Their leaves shake against each other, creating a shivery sound above. I stop to listen. I let it take over me. I stand at the top of the hill looking down. *Darn, I wore the wrong shoes again.* I walk slowly taking

sidesteps. I take a few strides forward, stopping at the water fountain. I read the dedication plaque. It reads:

*The water fountain, benches, and upgrade of this park have been  
placed here as a gift from the friends of  
Dr. Geoffery A. Cragg  
Use and enjoy with respect.*

I bend forward, put my hand on the ‘push’ button, lean my head down, feel the chilly water hit my lips, close my eyes, and take a drink. Back down the hill. Sure it’s summer yet it is always cold under the trees, especially in the early morning. Maybe it’ll be warmer once I get to the beach, where the sun peaks through the bay. I slowly inch my way down the hill. The gravel moving under my flip-flops shifts my balance a few times. I carry my envelope and car keys in my left hand, leaving my right hand to do the balancing. I reach the uncut grass. I stop and focus my attention to the view instead of the ground. The bay is recessed, hidden along the shoreline. Ninety-degree rock face extends from either side of the beach. Grass covers the ground until reaching the rocky shore. The water is dark blue, contrasting the light blue sky, meeting each other out on the horizon. I notice the water has an immediate calming effect on me. I can breathe with ease. I turn, with my back to the water, and walk over to the bench at the perimeter of the grass. My feet are sprinkled with water as I shuffle over the dewy grass. I kneel in front of the rock next to the bench and read its plaque, as I do every time I visit. It reads:

*Dr. Geoffery A. Cragg*

*I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy permanent planet. The proper function of a man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time. – Jack London*

*Dedicated to the wonderful spirit of this man from his many friends and loving family.*

I close my eyes and sigh. Standing up, I walk a few steps and sit on the bench. I cross my legs, slowly tear the envelope open, and read its results aloud. “Look. 81. 85. 82. 83.” I say out loud. I turn the piece of paper to face the plaque. A wide grin emerges on my face. I smile an accomplished smile, a proud smile, taking time to consider what my dad might have said to me.

The following day I write.

*I got my provincial marks back yesterday. English 81%. Geography 85%. Math 82%. History 83%. 69 points away from a scholarship. Oh well, no big deal. I opened them up at Larson Bay – with you Daddy. Mom got mad at me for not opening them up in front of her. Typical. She said that I was supposed to just rip the envelope right open when you get them from the mail. Did she not think that I wanted to share this with you?*

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## I Just Want to be Happy

*Setting: August 1999, evening. 18 years old. Carys' family's home. She stands outside on the deck.*

The sky is clear, a beautiful summer evening. I stand in the middle of the deck, looking out at the islands scattered across the water. The water appears as blue velvet. As the sun sets to the west, the glow of pinkish red spreads across the horizon. Noticing the eagles fly overhead, I watch them swoop down near the water and soar back up to their resting place in the towering tree nearby. My breathing slows and becomes deeper, as if to take in every bit of the fresh evening air. I sit on a deck chair, bringing my knees up to my chest, with my feet on the seat of the chair. The wind begins to pick up so I wrap a blanket around my body. Placing my journal on my knees, holding it with one hand and a pen in the other, I begin to write.

*I really want to be purely happy. And I honestly think that by going away and doing everything for myself (not for mom, not for guys, not for girlfriends, not for anyone – maybe even not for you daddy) then maybe I'll be happy. It's true, you have to make yourself happy first. Then you can be happy with other people. You have to love yourself. Then you can love someone else.*

*But what comes first? Do you have to learn how to be happy then you can love yourself? Or is it that you have to love yourself to be happy? Either way – how do you love yourself or how do you become happy? I think they're the same thing – don't you?*

I rest my journal beside me on the chair. Readjusting the blanket and repositioning myself on the chair, I watch the sun disappear behind the mountains. Blue darkness covers the sky, mountains, and ocean. I take a deep breath, let the breath out of my body, and close my eyes.

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## INTERLUDE

## A Practice Decision

*Setting: Present day, afternoon. A private office at a counselling centre.*

*Carys enters the room and sits at her desk flipping through recently referred client case files.*

Sitting at my desk, I open a client case file. I recall my first session with this client, just last week. On the left, I review her intake form, reminding me of her demographic information<sup>5</sup>: Name: Jane. Gender: Female. Age: 17. Birth Date. Residence. School. Physician. Family. My eyes glance over to the right of the file, noting the assessment I completed last week. I read it over: Presenting Problem, Family Functioning, Medical History, and finally, Diagnosis. Moving back to the intake form, I flip the page over to read some of the initial intake counsellor's comments. Her reason for referral reads: *Hasn't grieved the death of her mother. Died three years ago.*

*Hmmm. I think to myself. Hasn't grieved. What does that mean? Is that even possible? Can someone not grieve? I wonder what the intention of the person who wrote this meant. Did her father say this when referring her to the centre or was this the intake counsellor's language? Or both? In what way has she not grieved? Or perhaps the better question is in what way has she grieved that isn't the way she is*

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<sup>5</sup> Client composite.

*supposed to be grieving? I wonder what she thinks of her grieving process. We didn't get to discuss her mother too much last week, just a few pieces of information. I hope she might want to get into this conversation today, but perhaps she won't.*

I am reminded of the meeting I had just this past week with my clinical supervisor here at the centre. Upon her invitation to discuss my theoretical orientation to grief and loss we discussed how I apply my theoretical orientation to my practice with the young people I see here at the centre, almost all of who are grieving the death of a parent. When sharing my ideas with her, her response seems all too hurried wanting me to quickly move clients through the stages of grief. When I offer to change the course of the conversation to emerging theories of grief and loss including meaning reconstruction theory, the dual process approach, relational powerlessness, and others, I am abruptly halted in my speech and brought back to her need for me to “tell clients about the well known stages of grief so that they can feel normal.” After some time of attempting to create an expanded dialogue on the subject, I quickly learn that my ideas are not welcome. I notice the smirk that appears on my face, noting the irony of how difficult it is to stand up alongside the powerful discourses of what is traditionally understood as the normal grief and loss process.

I glance at the clock on the wall, noticing I have just a few minutes before my client arrives. I recall our first meeting together. *Hopefully today we'll get to talk more about what she'd like to talk about, instead of these assessment questions I must ask for her records. I wonder if I effectively set a foundation for that to occur. The meeting was friendly. I attempted to mimic her energy. I think I asked enough personal questions in addition to the required ones. She seems reserved, as though*

*she knows what she wants to say and when she'll let someone know what she's thinking. I must respect this.* Just then I hear the phone ring.

“Carys speaking.” I instinctively state as I pick it up.

“Your 5pm client is here.” The receptionist informs me.

“Thanks, I’ll be right out.” I respond.

Hanging up the phone, I stand up simultaneously closing the files on my desk, walk out the door, and walk towards the waiting room. Opening the door, I motion my hand for her to come in.

“Hi Jane. Looks like a stormy cloud has lurked upon the city, how did you manage to not get soaked with rain?” I ask as we walk towards my office.

“My dad dropped me off in the covered area just down the street.” She responds.

“Ah, I’ll have to remember that when I leave this evening. Thanks for the tip.” I say.

“No problem.” She says.

We sit in our respective chairs. I note that she picks the chair closest to the door. As I reach for my pad of paper and pen, she adjusts her seating, crossing her legs, left over right, right over left, then settles back with her left leg over her right.

“So today, and the rest of our sessions will look a bit different than last week.” I continue. “Last week I needed to ask a whole bunch of questions to get a big picture of what life is currently like for you.”

“Yah, you asked a lot of questions.” She affirms.

“Yes, I did. But today I’d like to go into more detail with some of the things you touched upon previously. Would that be okay?”

“Sure.”

“I want you to keep in mind, though, that at any point, if I’ve asked a question or traveled down a path that you don’t want to go, please let me know. You can say ‘hey Carys, let’s talk about something else’ or ‘seriously, that’s an odd question’ or something like that.” I say with a casual tone, hoping that I’ve laid the groundwork for her to feel comfortable telling me that I’ve asked something she does not want to talk about.

“Okay.”

For the next 30 minutes we discuss Jane’s life. Trying to get a better picture of her day-to-day life and attempting to get an idea of how she sees her life going, I ask a series of questions. What does she like to do for fun? What is school like right now? Who are her friends and what does she think of them? What is life like at home? At this point she briefly mentions her mom and I wonder if this is a good time to open the conversation up to a more detailed discussion of her mom.

“Do you think it might be okay if we could talk about your mom for a bit?” I inquire with a tentative tone.

“Okay.” She shuffles in her seat and I notice she looks uncomfortable.

“Let me know if I ask a question you don’t want to talk about. Like I said before, you’re more than welcome to say, ‘Carys, seriously, I don’t want to talk about that. Let’s talk about something else’ and we’ll move to the next conversation. Would that be okay?”

“Yah, that’d be fine.”

“Can you tell me a bit about your mom? What was she like? What did you do together?”

“I don’t know. We hung out around the house together a lot. She was a stay at home mom and she did a really good job at that.”

“Could you tell me what you mean by a ‘really good job’?” I ask.

We discuss her mom. She informs me of some of the differences between then and now. She tells me she likes hanging around the house because it reminds her of her mom but that doing so makes her sad sometimes as well. Eventually, I inquire about talking about any of this with her dad or brothers. She tells me how they don’t understand her. She says that her dad thinks she hasn’t grieved.

“What do you think he means by that?”

“That I haven’t said goodbye to her, that I keep everything inside, I haven’t let out my emotions, like I haven’t gotten over it.”

“What do you think about that?”

“I don’t know.” She replies.

Just then I notice a smirk on her face so I ask, “Could you tell me what the smirk is about? What were you thinking just then?”

“He’s concerned that I haven’t gotten over my mom dying. But it all seems so silly.”

“Tell me what you mean by ‘silly.’ What all seems so silly?”

“Like how people say I need to grieve.”

I pause to think. *I have a choice to make. The language that I choose to use is crucial. Do I ask about instances to assess how she hasn't resolved her grief? Do I invite stories about her movement through each stage of grief and loss, as my clinical supervisor might wish me to do?* Again, I recall the recent supervision meeting with my supervisor, telling me that my job is to let my clients know of the stages of grief and loss so that they can feel normal. It, apparently, is my job to construct a conversation around those theories, seeking to guide my clients through this process if they haven't done so in an adequate way, in the prescribed way.

"I don't know about you but I've heard about a lot of theories out there about how people should grieve or shouldn't grieve." I decide to say.

"No kidding. Like my dad, he says I should be feeling this or doing that. Or like on TV the other day, they said that grieving people should 'let it all out' and then they'd come to 'closure' or something."

I can see she's picking up on some of the language that circulates through people's conversations, through the media. I wonder what she thinks about how her dad wants her to behave.

"Tell me, what do you think about that?"

"I don't know. He doesn't get it."

"What do you mean when you say 'he doesn't get it'?" I ask.

"He just doesn't. That might be fine for him. But it's not for me."

"Okay." I pause for a few moments wondering what I'll say next.

"How about you tell me about how you want to grieve?"

There's a pause again.

I notice her taking a deep breath. Visually, she seems more relaxed. Just then, she opens her mouth and says, “Well... let me tell you.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

## WRAPPING UP

## Interpretations and Implications

*Setting:* Present day, early afternoon. A small university classroom. A poster on the door states, 'What's Up Doc – Constructing a Life (Part Two): Interpretations and Implications Presented.' Carys and her thesis supervisor (referred to as 'Prof' below) sit at the front of the room while 10 students sit scattered in the chairs.

*Introduction*

Prof: Thank you everyone for coming today. I see a few familiar faces from our presentation last week. As some of you may know, I've decided to take a tangent from the typical 'What's Up Doc' series, where professors present their current research to school members. Instead, Carys, one of the School's graduate students will present on the interpretations and implications of her research. This is part two of her presentation.

Carys: To orient those of you who did not attend last week's presentation, I recently presented on the methodology and literature of my thesis study, that being an autoethnographic exploration of my younger experiences of

grief and loss as expressed through personal writings. Last week, I gave an overview of my study, the methodological decisions I made throughout the process, the epistemological position of this methodology, some of the ethical issues that emerged, as well as its criteria for evaluation. Then I reviewed the existing literature on young people's experience of a parental death, common grief and loss theories, as well as personal writing literature. Today, I'll be presenting on the interpretations and implications of my study. We'd like to keep this presentation informal, so please feel free to jump in with any questions that you may have. For my thesis, I engaged in an autoethnographic methodology exploring my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings from the time. Included as personal writings are the journals, poetry, and letters I wrote from ages 11 to 18. At the outset, I kept an expanded definition of grief and loss, allowing the personal writings to inform me of the impact of my dad's death when I was 11 years old. Autoethnography seeks to describe the lived experience of the researcher and invites readers of those texts to reflect on their own experiences and of those around them (Ellis, 2002). Within this methodology, I utilized the writing as inquiry method to facilitate writing narratives that would contextualize and complexify the personal writing pieces (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

To tell the story of both my thesis process as well as my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings, I

use alternative forms of writing in a performative manner with the intention to bring readers into my experiences. Performative writing aligns itself with autoethnography as it is a method that seeks to bring its readers into the writer's "palpable emotional experience" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 767). As some of you have read the narratives, I won't go into detail with them here. Instead, I will present to you the interpretations and implications of the narratives and personal writings.

### *Interpretations Part One*

Prof: I've had the chance to read some of your narratives and associated personal writings and to tell you the honest truth, I had a very strong reaction. You take me into the depths of sadness and eventually bring me back into what seems to be okay territory; however, at some points I just wanted to put down the text and give you a call to see if you were okay.

Carys: Your response begs the question, was I okay? On the outside, I seemed as though I was doing pretty well. I did well in school, seldom participated in what is considered to be unsafe behaviour, and so on. My personal writings were a completely different world. Here, I do not tell the story of how others' might have perceived me, although my personal writing world engaged the outside world at points throughout this story. To tell you the truth, at points, I was not okay and in some cases it was the writing that got me through. In fact, there are points within this story that could be

interpreted differently than as I might have at the time, or even now. Take, for example, running away. This could be seen, and is often seen, as an at-risk behaviour. I, however, at the time and to this day interpret my running away from home as an act of standing up for what I believed in. Or, another example might be the arguments with and subsequent letters written to my mother. This could be interpreted as conflict but I also saw it as a way to develop my own voice and what I thought to be the right and wrong way to be a family. What I believe to be important in this story is that I did get through this difficult time and learned some very important things. Most importantly, I believe the one thing that I will take away, and perhaps readers might take away, is to listen to the voice of the younger person. How does s/he interpret her/his life?

Prof: With that said, at this point in the presentation, we'd like to take an alternative way to present to you a performative piece of writing, a dialogue between Carys' current and younger self.

Carys: If the act of analyzing means to "separate into parts", "to loosen", and to engage in a "detailed examination" (Pollard, 1994, p. 26) of something, and the act of interpreting means to "explain the meaning of something" (Pollard, 1994, p. 418), I offer the meaning of my detailed examination in an alternative format. When creating the performative piece that my supervisor and I will present to you, I was in the midst of immersing

myself in my personal writings. Using Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) writing as inquiry method, I began to respond to some of the questions I set out in my research journal guidelines. Early on in the process, I found myself unable to answer the simplest of questions and I didn't know why. That's when it dawned on me. What better way to answer these questions, leaving room for the unknown to emerge, if I had a conversation with my younger self? In this situation, the conversation that would take place would allow space for ideas to emerge, questions to be answered, more questions to be asked, and interpretations that could exist that might not have existed if I had not created such a space. Of course, the discussion is imaginary, in some ontological space between my current and younger self, yet I wanted to know what my younger self had to say.

To begin, I wrote out a few of the questions from my research journal, with the intention that I would have my younger self answer these questions leaving room for unknown information to emerge. My intention here is to privilege my younger voice in the interpretation of her personal writings. Instead of theorizing with some abstract jargon, I present to you what my younger self might have said in response to wondering what all of these personal writings mean. In my attempts to access my younger self's voice, I immersed myself in the personal writings once again, wondering what I might have said at the time. For you today, my supervisor and I will present to you that discussion. I will be the voice of

my younger voice (read as carys<sup>6</sup>) and my supervisor will be the voice of my current self (read as CARYS).

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CARYS: I'd like to have a conversation about your personal writings, including your journal entries, poems, and letters. Because I'm exploring your personal writings in relation to grief and loss, I'll be asking you questions that connect the two. I have a series of questions to explore to further interpret your personal writings. Let's begin. Tell me when you first began writing.

carys: Well, I recall writing before my dad died. I remember a story about my siblings finding my journal and reading it. My dad found them reading it and they got in trouble for it. I liked doing things by myself when I was younger. I guess that's maybe why I started then, but it was never on a regular basis. After my dad died there were times when school counsellors or teachers encouraged me to write, either because of an assignment or because they knew I liked writing. I have some poems from English class and one of my journals was given to me by a school counsellor. My mom knew I liked to write and so after our arguments became too intense, she told me to write to her, then we discussed what I

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<sup>6</sup> Composite of my younger selves, age 11-18 years.

wrote. Writing seemed to just catch on as a natural way of expressing myself. Thinking about it, I remember the moment when I realized I needed to write. It must have been only a year or two after my dad died. After he died I remember thinking about him all of the time, about memories, how he died, what it would be like if he were here now. I thought about him for a significant portion of the day. One day, I don't know where I was or what I was doing but I had a thought that changed everything. I thought wherever he might be now, how can he tell if I'm thinking about him? What if he thinks I no longer think about him? How disrespectful of me to shut him out of my life. I didn't think he could hear my thoughts so writing seemed to be the best way to talk to him and with him. Writing was better than talking because I could write anywhere – in class, at home, on the bus, wherever – and no one would know what I was doing. If I brought up his name people became weird as if I wasn't supposed to continue talking about him. Now he would know I was keeping him in my life. He was still my dad and this is how he would stay my dad. Through the writing.

CARYS: So your dad was the audience of your writing.

carys: Yes. Most of my journal entries are addressed directly to him. I start out many of the entries with 'Daddy,' or they would be signed 'your daughter' or something like that. Or they were indirectly addressed to him within

the writing, asking him questions, etc. Or I would tell him to look away while I wrote about boys.

CARYS: What about the letters and poetry?

carys: The letters are to my mom. The poetry was more *about* my dad, not necessarily *to* him. I knew he was paying attention to it because he could somehow see what I was writing. And I would sometimes refer to my poetry in my journal entries. Some of the poetry was for class but then I kept them and continued to write for myself. Some of the poems are addressed to no one in particular. One of the poems was for my mom for a birthday present. It was about heaven and my dad being somewhere like that.

CARYS: Heaven in a religious sense?

carys: No, not like that. But just that I thought he was still around, that he went somewhere, his soul did not die along with his body. I tried to visualize his presence, his hugs when I was sad. My idea of where he had 'gone' changed over the years. Earlier on I referred to places like heaven. Then it became more of the idea that he was in me, in my heart and soul. He lived in my thoughts, my memories. So the writing became more of an attempt to keep him alive because I had control over how I expressed

those thoughts and memories. Why not have him live in my writing, I guess.

CARYS: Let's talk more about the journal entries for a bit. When and where did you write? Was there a particular place and time you wrote?

carys: Most of the time I wrote at night in my bedroom. I have this old antique desk where I would sit. Sometimes I would write in class or on the bus home from school. You'll see I would sometimes write while with friends. One time I remember having my friends over at my house one night and while they were dancing I would leave and go to my room to write. I didn't know how to be like them so I would remove myself from the group.

CARYS: What kinds of things would you write about?

carys: Mostly about how different I felt from my friends and lots about the boys I had crushes on. I would write asking questions to my dad about everything, for advice, about the meaning of life, what he thought about the people in my life. I would tell him about what had happened that day. I would tell him how alone I felt and how painful it felt to be different but that I didn't want to be like my friends. I would recall memories with him. I would tell him about accomplishments and disappointments. I

wrote a lot about the conflict between one of my siblings and me and the conflicts between my mother and me. Basically, I wrote everything that I thought we would talk about if he were alive. My poems were mostly about my theory of grief and loss. They're actually titled that. Lost. Grief. Heaven. Gone. All of them are. The pain, the difference, the never being the same. The letters were about how I didn't like how I was being ignored or how I was being made to feel like this huge inconvenience for bringing up problems. I didn't like how I was being treated, ignored, and only listened to when I yelled. So I yelled and screamed in the writing saying this and that weren't okay. Everything changed after my dad died. My family relationships, particularly with my mom, were completely different. I think the letters kept our relationship from dissolving. We weren't like this before he died. Sure kids and parents fight but not in this particular way. I knew she loved me but there wasn't any love expressed in the family. Before my dad died, we used to all have so much fun. It's as though all of the fun was lost when he died. She didn't have the time to give to me, understandably as she now had to take care of a family by herself, and I was vocal about how screwed up everything was because of how things had completely changed because my dad wasn't there.

CARYS: Let's talk about voice, your ability to say what's on your mind. How did writing play a role?

carys: After he died, I soon realized no one wanted to talk about him. Pictures on the wall weren't enough. I wanted to keep him present in every moment of my day. I was mad that everything was changing because he died. Dinner was different. My mom was different. Everything changed. I was mad so I wanted to say it, to vocalize the continuous thoughts in my mind. I felt like I had so much to say. No one had the time or energy to listen or deal with what I was saying, so I wrote it down. Everyone seemed to think I was okay because I did well at school and I wasn't involved with drugs or other potentially unsafe things. They just thought that because I was somehow 'strong' I could figure out life by myself. Apparently their time was better spent on other people. They just moved on to the next person who looked like they couldn't handle it. I wasn't okay. I think I would have gone crazy without writing. I felt so alone with the way I understood the world with wanting to make things not so awful. So I wrote and then kept writing. Writing gave me the feeling of not being so alone. It gave me a world where what I had to say was okay. None of my friends seemed to think about the things I thought about. I created room for me to be okay. When I was writing, I was okay. Writing my thoughts down never felt bad, as other people would when I tried to talk about him. My dad and the paper were listening. I felt better after writing, not because anything was solved or figured out but because I got to say what was on my mind. I couldn't do that anywhere else. When no

one else was able or willing to take care of me in the ways that I thought I needed, I took care of myself.

CARYS: You mentioned something about your theory of grief and loss in your poetry. What do you mean by that?

carys: There were so many people telling me what I was supposed to be feeling. I didn't agree with or respect what they had to say, so I came up with my own ideas. And no one else around me seemed to understand so I wrote it. The first few poems came to me in English class. We were learning different forms of poetry. Haikus and shape poems. Everyone was writing jokes, about cars, about sports, about the person sitting next to them. Whatever. And this is what I came up with. I would sit there and think about what I could possibly write. I remember once, my teacher said that there was a minute left to write. I came up with the haiku poem. I continued writing poems about my experience of grief. Somehow writing it, it became okay. Once I wrote a poem or a journal entry it didn't feel so unclear and confusing in my mind. It was there, in front of me, and somehow that made it okay.

CARYS: And the letters?

carys: There's a lot of anger in the letters. I was so mad that I was being left alone to figure it all out. My mom and I didn't think the same way. She didn't understand me and I didn't understand her. I would spell out everything that I was mad about because in our arguments together I couldn't seem to find the right words to express what I was thinking. I couldn't seem to verbalize my thoughts when we would interrupt each other, raise our voices. After reading the letters, she would sit down with me and go over each point. It seemed to diffuse our heated arguments. Most of the time nothing was solved. I still felt the same way and thought that she didn't understand. But I liked that she would read them and listen to what I had to say.

CARYS: Do you think writing helped you?

carys: I don't really think of it in that way. What would have helped was if my dad didn't die. But writing did make me okay. It was as though I had this one thing I had that I could do, that didn't make me feel so alone, so different, that didn't make me feel crazy. It made me feel that I was okay because it understood me, because it was me. It calmed me. It would relax me when nothing else could. There was no way my dad was just never going to exist in my life again. There was no way I was going to settle for him not being there. I could control writing to him. He was there with me when I wrote. No one else got it. They just wanted to move

on, get back to the regular way of doing things. For me, everything changed, there was no going back, and writing gave me a way and a place to figure it all out. So I guess it helped because the writing took care of me. He took care of me through writing. So I guess I took care of myself. I took care of myself when no one else could. I became pretty independent. I knew I could get through all of it but I'm pretty sure I'd be in a different place without writing, a place where I wouldn't be doing very well. It made me think by myself, for myself. I would discuss my life with my dad. I would ask questions. I would decide what to do about a situation. I would say why I thought something was good or bad. I would be lost without writing.

CARYS: Lost. That's an interesting word to use.

carys: Yah, lost. My world, as I knew it to be, was lost the day he died. Everything I knew changed and no longer existed in the same way. I had to make a new life for myself. Writing grounded me. It made my thoughts concrete, real, in front of me instead of lost in my head, lost into thin air without my dad there to read or hear them. Writing kept me alive instead of becoming lost, as I viewed many people around me. When I felt lost in my thoughts, or lost in an unfamiliar or unwanted situation, I found the writing and in the writing I found me.

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Prof: Interpreting the personal writings in this manner is somewhat controversial.

Carys: Yes, it goes against many standards with which data and subsequent analyses are interpreted. Typically, interpretations are presented through matching data analysis with existing theories and practices. The research methodology and epistemological position that I chose does not fit within the modern positivist research methods and epistemological positions and subsequent ways of presenting interpretations. Interpreting the data and narratives this way felt more congruent with the way I positioned myself with respect to the impact of stories and the privileging of younger voices.

### *Interpretations Part Two*

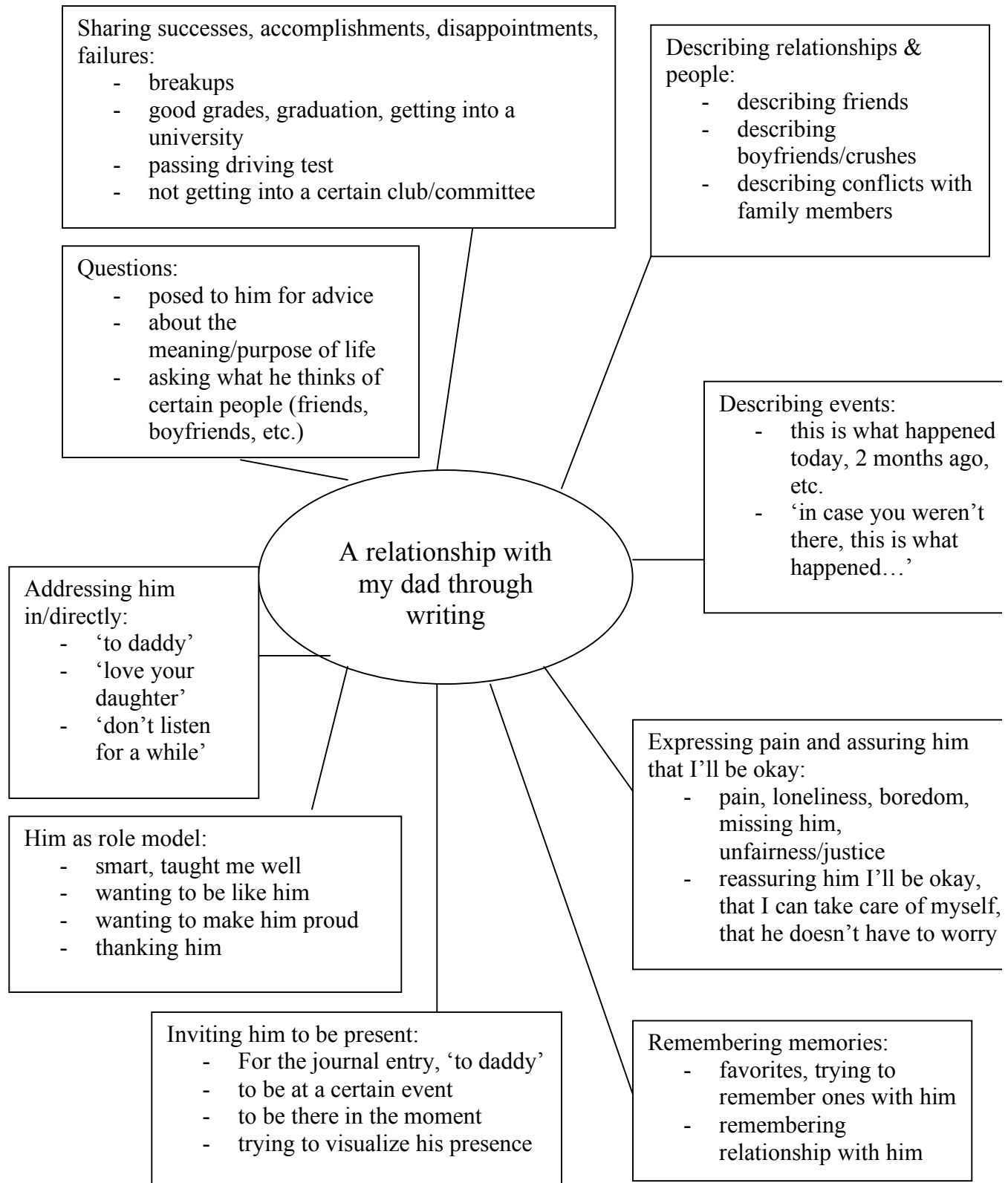
Carys: With that said, I did decide to analyze and interpret the personal writings in a more conventional form. With the journal entries being the bulk of the data, and while immersing myself in the personal writings, I engaged in a mind map activity seeking to create themes and another visual way of representing the data. On the overhead (see Figure 5) I outline the themes that emerged from the journal entries. Finding an overarching theme, across all of the personal writings, the idea of ‘constructing a life after death through writing’ became very clear to me as the main purpose and

meaning of the writing itself. The idea of ‘constructing’ had three meanings for me.

First, I was constructing *my dad’s life* and creating a relationship with him after his death through writing. I wrote to him, about him, asking him for advice, telling him of my day, basically recreating a relationship that I refused to let die along with his body. Second, I was constructing a *new life and relationship* with my mom through the letters I wrote to her, as after my dad’s death everything I knew had changed and at many points in time our relationship seemed to be dissolving. Through writing letters to her, we kept alive a relationship that might have otherwise turned out differently. In those letters I was able to express myself and she was able to listen. Third, I was constructing *my life* after my dad’s death through writing as after my dad’s death my life had completely changed. I clearly felt differently than those around me. After his death, I had to take care of myself. The only way I knew how to do that was by writing. Through the writing, I created a life, perhaps a preferred life to the one that I lived in outside of the writing. Writer Anais Nin perfectly summarizes my writing process at the time when she writes, “I could not live in any of the worlds offered to me... I believe one writes because one has to create a world in which one can live... I had to create a world of my own... in which I could breathe, reign, and recreate myself when destroyed by living” (Nin, 1976, 12).

Figure 5. Journal Themes.

## Journal Themes: Constructing a Life After Death through Writing.



Carys: This finding is similar to Susillo's (2005) comments regarding young people's tendency to maintain bonds with their deceased parents. Using the term "Constructing the Dead", she reviews the literature that supports the observation that young people seek out a multiplicity of ways to continue their relationships with their deceased parents. Sussillo (2005) finds it "compelling that each young person actively engaged in an ongoing process of "constructing" the longed-for lost parent which involved creating the meaning of this now dead parent in the child or adolescent's life and finding a way to carry the lost parent forward" (p. 511). Here, she supports a relational perspective of bereavement citing playwright Robert Anderson, "death ends a life, not a relationship" (Sussillo, 2005, p. 523). In this study, I have shared a lived experience of grief and loss as well as how I constructed a life and relationship with my deceased father by way of personal writings.

### *Implications*

Carys: The idea of construction challenges many traditional ideas about young people, particularly when it comes to their experiences of grief and loss. Young people are typically seen as at risk for a series of pathological outcomes. Overall, young people are painted as passive recipients of their environment, at risk for deviant behaviour and a range of pathological disorder, needing to complete a series of tasks and stages in order to successfully complete the grieving process and let go of the deceased

person. The picture I have created in this study aligns with emerging literature that considers young people to be active participants in their environments, seeking out their own health and well being in the best way they know how.

### *Implications for Practice*

Prof: When it comes to putting these ideas into practice, what implications would you say your study has?

Carys: Schultz (2004) observes that, “one of the areas of lingering debate in the grief literature centers around the notion of the bereaved maintaining a relationship with the deceased” going on to say that many researchers “clearly indicated the adaptive and beneficial role that a continued relationship with the deceased can play in the lives of bereaved persons and has thus raised the need to reexamine traditional theory on the grieving process, which posits that such an attachment is typically representative of maladaptive grief” (p. 28). Silverman and Worden (1993) find that “bereaved children devoted considerable energy to connect with the deceased in some way. They did this through dreams, by talking to the deceased, by feeling that the dead parent was watching them, by keeping things that belonged to the dead parent, by visiting the grave, and by frequently thinking about him or her” (p. 309). In her research on the simultaneous tendency of letting go and holding on to the deceased

loved one, Sussillo (2005) finds “the emphasis on constructing the dead and creating continuity clinically invaluable” (p. 512).

In what ways are young people attempting to sustain bonds with deceased loved ones? Here I show an up-close and personal story of how I constructed a relationship with my dad after his death. Instead of supporting a severing of bonds between the young person and their deceased loved one, I imagine that conversations between helping professionals and young people could be open to more possibilities for what successful grief looks like. However, Sussillo (2005) also cautions saying the helper “needs to be careful not to impose the idea of maintaining continuity as a rigid expectation or a required stage of mourning that dictates a specific form” (p. 522). The idea here being that any theory that emerges from the literature not be taken and practiced with strict rules implying that grief should be done in one, and one only, way. I think the interpretations of this study call for helping practitioners to seek out varieties of theoretical orientations to grief and loss and not settle for one. Just as a counsellor might have an awareness of many counselling theories and adapts her/his approach to her/his individual clients, so too will it be beneficial to understand the variety of experiences of grief and loss that young people feel. Stroebe et al. (1992) argue that there needs to be a multiplicity of perspectives when it comes to understanding and

interpreting the variation of grieving experiences. The common thread here is to listen and privilege young people's voices.

Furthermore, I present a series of narratives and personal writings that explore the personal experiences of numerous emotions, values, ideas, thoughts, and so on that I intricately associate with my grief and loss experiences. Some of those feelings include: sadness, anger, pain, confusion, despair, isolation, love, boredom, strength, fun, and happiness, amongst others. I wanted to know and expand upon what it was like to feel these feelings, what contexts they emerged in, and how I attributed meaning to them. Instead of assessing these feelings on a pathological outcomes measurement tool, I sought out these experiences, brought my reader into these experiences, and hopefully inspired my reader to do the same. Seldom are the emotional experiences of young people included in studies in any meaningful way.

Finally, the autoethnographic process that I engaged in for this study, looking at my younger experiences of grief and loss as expressed through my personal writings, mimics what I believe could be potentially beneficial for the counselling (or related) context itself. Asking for and about the intimate details of a young person's life, giving them space to voice these often silenced experiences, supporting and facilitating the changes of relationship with their deceased loved one, and encouraging a

variety of forms of expression that young people engage in are just a few of what I consider to be the implications of this study.

### *Implications for Self*

Prof: It's my understanding that Ellis (2004) extensively discusses the therapeutic effects, on the researcher her/himself, of engaging in autoethnographic studies.

Carys: While this has been an enlightening experience, the particular resonance this study has for me is its emphasis on listening to my younger voice. In my own practice with young people, I'm always seeking to understand their experiences, acknowledging their voices, and trying not to silence the ways in which they express themselves. Here, I was able to hold my younger voice as significant, allowing my younger voice to have room in a theoretical space that does not normally allow for such experiences to exist, let alone inform practice. Perhaps with this study, I've made just a little bit of room for one young girl's experience to be considered.

### *Conclusion*

Prof: We're coming up to the end of our time with you all today.

Carys: Thank you for all attending, taking time out of your busy schedules. We appreciate your attention and your thoughtful questions. I hope there has

been something useful here for you to take away for your studies, your practice, and/or perhaps yourself.

## AN ENDING

## This Ending

*June 2008*

*Dear Reader,*

*The time has come to complete this text. It has been quite the journey and I thank you for joining alongside me. I hope that by presenting this story for you to consider, I have inspired you to think differently about the young person sitting across from you, beside you, or in the other room. I hope this text invites questions that give voice to young people's experiences. What else might they want to say? How might I invite a more expanded experience of grief and loss to be given voice and expression? I hope I have offered a story that opens space for alternative stories to be considered about young people's experience of grief and loss. I hope that more stories emerge that stand up for young people's diverse experiences of our world.*

*Coming to the end of this text, immediately I think of the multiple meanings of ending, that is, ending this text and endings of grief and loss. While I must come to an ending of this text, I certainly hope that this is only the beginning of the journey I will take in my contribution to the field. And while I must end this story of my younger experiences of grief and loss, in no way do I understand that grief and loss*

*ever ends. It morphs itself. It changes. It evolves. It presents itself anew with each passing day... Perhaps coincidentally, there is a parole board hearing for the man who killed my dad, scheduled within the same month I'm set to orally defend this thesis. Will I attend? How will I now understand this aspect of my loss, as an adult, not an 11-year-old girl? Just as significant an event is the anticipated experience of walking across the graduation stage, once again without my dad physically present to say whatever he might have said to me in that moment of accomplishment. These experiences do not end but continue to be a part of my life and continue to be sources of strength, sadness, wisdom, pain, accomplishment, and joy. I take him with me and have a more fulfilled life because he is there.*

*As I reread this complete text, I think of the parallels between the counselling session I sat in as an 11-year-old girl and the clinical supervision meeting I sat in not so long ago. The two experiences of being silenced by dominant theories of how I should behave, how I should think, and how I should respond bring me into a confused, angry, and saddened space. Silencing young people's experiences, I believe, is a linguistically violent act, with repercussions we cannot even imagine. This is a space I do not wish to participate in, in any way, shape, or form. When asked to reflect upon what this kind of research has been like for me, immediately I think of what a wonderful opportunity it has been to articulate my ideas of my younger experiences of grief and loss. I think back to that counselling session and clinical supervision meeting and think 'If I only could have been more articulate. Maybe then, they would have listened to me. Maybe then, I would have been taken*

*seriously.’ These experiences demonstrate the power of dominant theories and the ways they have been taken up in practice, how in everyday situations they leave no room for alternative points of view. And now, with the opportunity to articulate my ideas of my younger experiences of grief and loss, within a community of academics and practicing helping professionals, I am consequently relaxed and relieved to have had the opportunity to express an alternative point of view. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for listening.*

*There are ways we, as helping professionals, can provide space for young people to articulate their experiences, their feelings, their values, their thoughts and ideas about the world they live in. Perhaps by joining young people in their journey instead of forcing them to live in a predetermined way of how they should live, it might open up a space for endless possibilities of journeys of strength, health, and wellbeing. Every conversation and interaction presents a new opportunity to open space for a more expanded experience of grief and loss to occur. Conversely, every conversation and interaction presents a new opportunity to ignore, overlook, and silence young people’s diverse experiences and ways of being. Which conversation will you choose?*

*Yours truly,*

*Carys*

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## APPENDIX A

## Research Journal Guidelines

Tracking the research process is necessary to develop multiple layers of meaning and interpretation of the originally written material being studied. As such, I will follow these research journal guidelines to enhance, contextualize, and interpret the originally written material and use the research journal for subsequent description, analysis, and interpretation in this study. Similar to a questionnaire that a researcher might give their participants, and use the responses to analyze and interpret the topic of inquiry, I will use the research journal as a secondary source of data.

The following questions and guidelines have been adapted from Ellis' (2004) 'Guidelines for Personal Writing Papers' (p. 365-367), Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) 'Creative Analytical Writing Practices' as writing as a method of inquiry practices (p. 974-975), Sinats, Scott, McFerran, Hittos, Cragg, Leblanc, & Brooks (2005) 'Questions that Shaped the Research' (p. 19), and Arons' (1997) 'Exploration Into Journal Writing' questionnaire (p. 91-92). These guidelines intend to begin and continue an iterative and reflexive writing process that develops, enhances, contextualizes, and interprets the originally written material, tracking the autoethnographic process while highlighting and bringing forth the research issues that come up throughout the study.

Reflecting upon the originally written material, I will respond to some of the following questions:

- 1) Where was I when I was writing this entry? Describe the setting.
- 2) What is my current interpretation of what was going on at the time?
- 3) What else was going on (events, problems, etc.) that I did not write at the time?
- 4) What was I trying to convey in this entry?
- 5) What thoughts, memories, and feelings are raised by reading this entry?

When reflecting upon the writing process in general, I will respond to some of the following questions:

- 1) When did I first start to write diaries, poetry, and or letters?
- 2) Please describe what life was like at the time that I first began to write.
- 3) As an adolescent girl, what prompted me to pick up a pen and write?
- 4) What kinds of things did I write about?
- 5) Describe what the writing process was like for me (i.e. how it made me feel, what it made me think of, what it was like if I couldn't write, and so on).
- 6) Was there someone/thing I had in mind as an audience for who I was writing to, when I were writing? If so, who/what was it and why do you think this person/thing was important for me to write to?

- 7) Was there a particular place that I wrote in (i.e. a particular room, outside space, at a particular time of day)? If so, why do I think I chose that place/time to write in?
- 8) Describe the relationship between me and my writing.
- 9) Do I connect my experience of grief and loss to the writing process? If yes, how so? If no, how so? OR How do I connect my experience of grief and loss to the writing process?
- 10) Reflecting on my written accounts, what was I attempting to express about my own grief and loss process?
- 11) If I were to let others (peers, professionals working with youth) know what the grief and loss process is like for me, what would I say?
- 12) How was writing helpful/not helpful to my process of grief and loss?

Taking the direction of recommended writing practices, as a form of ‘writing as inquiry’ that is often used in autoethnographic studies, I will respond to some of the following guidelines. These guidelines are taken directly from Ellis’ (2004) and Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) work:

- 1) Write a story about personal experience.
- 2) Use dialogue and scenes, where appropriate, to bring the reader into what happened to you.
- 3) Write evocatively, engagingly, and passionately, so that the reader will experience what you experienced, or remember or anticipate similar experiences.
- 4) Write concretely and expressively. Show rather than tell, which means showing action, dialogue, and gestures.
- 5) Write your paper as a coherent story with a beginning, middle, and ending.
- 6) Write to find out what it is that you know and experienced. View writing as a process of inquiry and discovery.
- 7) When appropriate, try to listen to and portray the multiple perspectives of other people involved in the story.
- 8) Try to represent the complexity of and contradictions in experience. Listen to the many voices in your head and heart.
- 9) Concentrate on writing yourself as a survivor, on writing a story you can live with and in.
- 10) The story should be hopeful, yet not simply “and we lived happily ever after.” (Life doesn’t work out that way. Even “recovery” and “understanding” are complex.
- 11) Transitions should unfold, not just happen suddenly.
- 12) Try to write a story that makes you feel better and helps you cope better.
- 13) Try to write in the chaos of the experience. At the same time, try to organize the chaos as a coherent story that readers can follow and understand and that will help you organize the experience for yourself.
- 14) Get inside your experience. Then get outside it and view and edit it from a distanced perspective. Then go back inside and re-experience it. Moving in and out is what makes a good personal narrative.

- 15) Try to write in a way that pulls readers into your experiences, then provoke them to enter into their own, and then step back to observe, compare, and analyze.
- 16) Write a story that has dramatic tension and character development. Make it a page-turner.
- 17) Decide which events are critical and describe them in a way that “expands the moment.”
- 18) When appropriate, use creative forms such as drama, poetry, or multi-voiced narrative.
- 19) Think about voice and style – try to find the one you’re comfortable with. Decide whether you will write in the first, second, or third person voice.
- 20) If required, include analysis sections in which you write in a more analytic voice about the significance of your project and connect to appropriate literature or weave analysis into a seamless text with the narrative.
- 21) If you wish to experiment with evocative writing, a good place to begin is by transforming your field notes into drama.
- 22) Write a “layered text.”
- 23) Try some other strategy for writing new ethnography for social scientific publications. Try the “seamless” text in which previous literature, theory, and methods are placed in textually meaningful ways rather than in disjunctive sections.
- 24) Write your “data” in three different ways – for example, as a narrative account, a poetic representation, and readers’ theatre.
- 25) Write writing stories. These are reflexive accounts of how you happened to write the pieces you wrote.

The questions and guidelines outlined above will serve to begin and continue an iterative and reflexive writing process that follows an autoethnographic approach that uses ‘writing as inquiry’, where the writer writes to find something out, to enhance, contextualize, and interpret the originally written material and use the research journal for subsequent description, analysis, and interpretation in this study.

## APPENDIX B

## Consent Form

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

You are being invited to give permission to be mentioned (though not by name) in a study titled *Life/Death Writing: An Autoethnographic Re-membering of my Younger Experiences of Grief and Loss* that I am conducting as part of my graduate work within the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria.

As a graduate student, this research is part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Arts and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Daniel G. Scott. You may contact him at (250) 472. 4770 or speak with me at (604) 970. 5162 if you have any questions.

The purpose of this research project is to further the knowledge and understanding of younger people's experience of grief and loss. Following an autoethnographic approach, I will explore my experience of grief and loss as expressed through journal entries, poetry, and letters written during my youth. By looking at my own experience of grief and loss, as expressed within these written documents, I hope to contribute to a body of knowledge regarding young people's experience of grief and loss. The autoethnographic approach seeks to explore close, personal, and individual experiences, connecting those experiences to social, cultural, and political meanings of the phenomenon of study. Engaging in this process, my goal is to help those young people dealing with grief and loss and those helping professionals working with young people dealing with grief and loss.

You are being asked to give permission to be mentioned (though not by name) in this study because you are mentioned in some of the originally written material (i.e. journal entries, poetry, and letters) and were present during some of the experiences that I will be examining in the course of this research on my written expressions of grief and loss, in the response to the death of Geoffrey A. Cragg. The data being examined in the study are *my* experiences and responses to his death and related experiences, not *yours*. In order to respect the privacy and very personal nature of your grieving process, I will not be examining your responses to grieving. However, because your presence was a part of my experience, with your permission, I will refer to your presence where applicable. I will refer to you as either my mother / sibling.

If you agree to voluntarily give permission to be mentioned in this research, you will have the opportunity to read and make editorial changes, additions, and deletions, to narratives, which include mention of you. All editorial changes to these narratives as requested by you will be respected and upheld by me and will be maintained in subsequent drafts. Prior to submission of the final document you will

have a final opportunity, if so desired, to review and edit those portions of the document in which you are mentioned.

Because of my relationship to you as my mother / sibling it is important that I mention specific ethical issues about consent. Your consent to be mentioned in this research must be completely voluntary. In addition, your decision to read, or to not read and edit the narratives must be completely voluntary. If you decide to give permission to be mentioned in the study you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study I will not include in this research any information that includes mention of you.

It is important to mention possible inconveniences as a result of consenting to be mentioned (though not by name) in this study. For example, when reviewing the narratives that include mention of you, the process may bring up memories from a difficult time in your life, possibly causing emotional and psychological distress. As well, reviewing the narratives that include mention of you will involve approximately 2 hours of your time.

It is also important to mention possible benefits as a result of consenting to be mentioned (though not by name) in this study. For example, when reviewing the narratives that include mention of you, you will have the opportunity to understand my experience in more depth and therefore understanding your own experience of similar events through another's perspective. Furthermore, including mention of you will contribute to a more complete picture of my experience and will therefore offer a more complete picture to the future audience who will be learning from the results of this study.

Please note that because the research is of autobiographical nature, and you share a familial relationship with me, and you were present and integral to some of the experiences of the loss that are being explored in this research you may be identifiable to readers of the final public version of this research. However, until you give your permission and the research document is made public, everything I write will be kept confidential by keeping the research data/narratives in a locked filing cabinet, with the key kept securely away from the filing cabinet. The computer containing any of the research documentation is password protected. No one other than you and my thesis supervisor will have access to the research prior to your acceptance of the narratives in which you are mentioned and prior to the dissemination of these writings for thesis defense and subsequent publications. Subsequent to the completion of this study, I will destroy any documents that have been created in response to the originally written material that include mention of you.

The planned use of this research is to fulfill the University of Victoria requirements for the Master of Arts degree. Upon satisfactory completion of the academic requirements, a Master's thesis becomes a public document to which any member of the public, as well as the academy will have access. I will make this

document readily available to you. Furthermore, I plan to disseminate the results of this research by way of presentations at scholarly meetings, published articles, and instructional workshops for youth and helping professionals working with youth dealing with issues related to grief and loss.

In addition to being able to contact my supervisor and me at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250.472.4545.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of your permission to be mentioned in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Your Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM WILL BE LEFT WITH YOU AND A COPY WILL BE LEFT WITH ME.**