

Loss and Grieving: An Autobiographical Exploration of

Grieving the Death of My Father


by


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B.A., University of Victoria, 1989

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


MASTER OF ARTS
in Curriculum Studies
in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard


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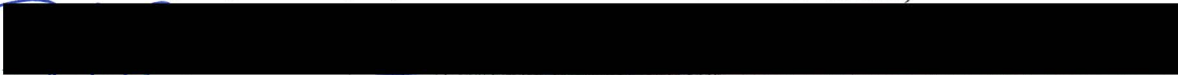
ABSTRACT

This autobiographical inquiry explores personal and social aspects of grieving a death, with the focus on grieving the death of my father. The purpose of the inquiry was to broaden an understanding of loss and grieving by exploring as deeply as possible a personal process of grieving. An autobiographical narrative approach enabled me to examine in the site of my own life issues of grief that extend beyond the personal and to illuminate universal aspects of grieving. This inquiry examines Western societal discourses that contribute to our difficulties in supporting ourselves and others in our personal processes of grieving, and discusses how we may more effectively support others and ourselves in grieving a death. It examines how theories of grieving produced by the dominant discourse which values results and "resolution" over the process(ing) of grief may impose a structure that negatively impacts bereaved persons by defining for them what *must* be accomplished and urging them to resolve grief within predefined parameters. Utilizing narratives, poems, and reflective analysis, issues, emotions, and experiences of grieving that have remained largely unacknowledged, dismissed, marginalized, and silenced by society and individuals are identified, discussed, and opened for further reflection and inquiry. The inquiry highlights the importance of supporting grieving persons to trust in and to retain their own authority in their grieving process. Finally, it explores some of the challenges and affirms the importance of becoming more emotionally present with one's own and others' grief.

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Acknowledgements

I respectfully acknowledge the support and guidance that others have offered me in my academic and life endeavours. I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Antoinette Oberg who supported and encouraged me to write and reflect upon the many offerings of one's lived experiences. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the encouragement and continued friendship of Kathryn and my "university dinner group" friends who patiently listened to excerpts and provided unconditional support. Thank you Mike, for your love and unwavering support and encouragement.

To my father and mother who through their honesty, integrity, love of learning, and lives well lived have inspired me beyond words.

Introduction

The topic of my inquiry is an exploration of my process of grieving the death and the loss of my father. My interest in furthering and deepening my understanding of loss and grieving is both professional and personal. As a nurse and counsellor I have had the opportunity and privilege of being present with and supporting people in their process of grieving the death of a loved one. Although I have studied much of the theoretical, clinical, and popular literature and research pertaining to loss and grieving, and I have experienced the death of several people to whom I was very close, nothing it seems, had prepared me adequately for the experience of grieving the sudden and unexpected death of my father. As painful as I have experienced it to be, it is most significantly, the personal process itself that has most deeply informed me of the life learnings and meanings that the death and loss of a loved one may have to offer.

What Brought Me to My Topic of Inquiry

Almost immediately after my father's death I experienced a sense of aloneness in my grief. Friends, although in contact initially, soon carried on with other aspects of their lives. I had a sense of needing to "find my own way" in my grieving, and in understanding and feeling the impact(s) and magnitude of this loss. As I searched the literature, including academic and self-help resources related to loss, grieving, and bereavement, I found myself distanced from much of the writing. It did not speak deeply to what I was experiencing. I did however find myself connecting to and with aspects of the literature that described first-hand, personal accounts of individuals' experiences with

grieving. I realized that it was this connection that I longed for in my own process of grieving. Within the quiet, yet profound moments of these connections I began to wonder if other people also longed for such connections with others as they grieved. As I reflected further upon my experience of grieving my father's death, I began to consider some of the factors that I thought might be influencing the ways in which collectively and individually we support, and do not (adequately) support, one another in the process of grieving a death. Although I had previously had an awareness of Western society's reluctance and discomfort with acknowledging death, as well as the losses that often stem from the absence of a significant person in one's life, I now knew and felt this on a much deeper level. I was drawn toward exploring and examining what may be contributing to our difficulties in supporting others and ourselves as we grieve, and how we may more effectively and compassionately support others in their process of grieving.

Purpose of My Research

The purpose of my study was to explore and contribute to our understanding and knowledge of loss and grieving. I chose to employ an autobiographical approach, including narratives and accompanying reflective analysis, in order to explore my process of grieving at the deepest level. In the process of my research, I explored issues, emotions, and experiences of grieving that remain largely unacknowledged, dismissed, and rarely discussed openly in Western society. By exploring the grieving process at an experiential level with narratives that discuss actual experiences of grieving (including some that may be seen as obviously significant moments or events, as well as those that reflect daily lived experiences) it is my hope that this research may be helpful in

facilitating ways of bridging what sometimes is an emotional gap between a grieving person and others who desire to support her.

Contextual Setting

In the early hours of May 19, 2000 my life altered dramatically and irrevocably with a dreaded phone call that woke me from an hour's sleep. My heart was pounding even before I picked up the phone, yet I offered myself a momentary reprieve as I waited to identify the caller by allowing the answering machine to field the call. And then I heard the voice. The fear palpable in the caller's voice instantaneously became mine. I knew in those seconds of time that something terrible was happening. The trauma of those revelatory moments was heightened by the anxiety of my family member whom I knew immediately needed me to be *there*, not standing in my own home which suddenly seemed incredibly far away. Her panic told me almost as much as her words. Dad had collapsed on the bathroom floor.

The shock of those moments catapulted me into a surrealism of loss and grief. The death of my father is unlike any other loss I have ever experienced in my life. As I write this, almost two-and-a-half years after his death, the process of grieving his absence and trying to grapple with the void of his once so intense presence is at times almost as untenable as the moment I *knew* he had died. My grief has shifted, dissipated in many ways; the waves of sadness and numbness are now much less frequent, and usually less intense. Yet the "forever goneness" is still in some ways inconceivable. Simultaneously, I feel myself

compartmentalize his absence far away from my consciousness. Perhaps it is from the little girl/daughter place that some part of me still says, "I don't want this to be."

My thesis is an exploration of my *process* of grieving the loss of my father. I have written narratives and accompanying reflective analyses to articulate and to explore experiences and emotions, including events and moments that while seemingly ordinary, impacted me deeply.

Although my personal process included a chronicling/journaling of many dimensions of my grief, I have focused my thesis on aspects, emotions, experiences, and interactions with others that I felt drawn to explore because I *knew* or felt that they had something to teach me. My process has been much different than I could ever have imagined. My expectations of what I might experience personally and how I would be impacted have evolved in a way impossible to (pre)conceive.

My Dad and I

As a little girl I loved to spend time with my father. Even when he was busy I would play nearby or sit with him, just to be near him. He was the one person in the world who called me by a nickname, and I reveled in it because it made me feel special. Although I was adopted and therefore not genetically related to my father, I always felt that we were connected in our shared love of nature. Dad was a marine biologist, not merely by profession, but much deeper than that; all living things fascinated him. He knew from the time that he was six years old that he was going to be a biologist. I think also that he could have been a wonderful teacher, for he loved to impart knowledge and engage in

spirited conversations with me about everything from the mysteries of a possible afterlife to sociopolitical issues. In many ways he taught me how to think critically, to question things, and perhaps to a fault, to think before acting. My dad had high standards in life and high expectations of me. "If you give it your best Duf, then you know you've done what you can," he would say to me when I felt daunted by a task or a life decision. He thought nothing of spending hours with me, sometimes in silence, sometimes offering his thoughts about some issue or idea I was considering. As I write this thesis of my process of grieving his absence from my life, I find myself hearing his voice in my head, still guiding me, giving me a jab to get going when I'm down, and above all, as I sit struggling with my thoughts, saying, "For gosh sakes Denyse, what is it you're trying to say? Just say it!"

Chapter One: Methodologies and Methods of My Inquiry

Introduction

There is no definitive "place" or moment from which to begin an articulation of the methods and methodologies of my thesis, for they are inextricably part of my way of being, of experiencing, perceiving, and living my life. I did not formally "choose" methodologies for this research. It is more as though I, (much like Alice in Wonderland who found herself in the midst of...) found myself already located in the midst of my process of inquiry in the ways in which I attend to, reflect upon and experience life, interactions with others, and the world around me. Writing and journaling about my process and emotions of grieving had, prior to commencing the formal thesis writing, brought several issues to my awareness that may otherwise have remained unexamined. I realized that further exploration of these issues, as well as other experiences, emotions, and the processing of my grief as it was happening, may also have relevance to others who are grieving.

My thesis consists of two separate, yet connected forms of text: the autobiographical narratives, poems, and other writings; and reflective analyses of the narratives. Each of the autobiographical narratives, poems, and writings may be read as a discrete account of an experience of grieving. Those who would like to read a sole narrative, poem, or other writing (due to an interest in a specific topic) are able to do so without necessarily reading the narratives collectively, or the accompanying reflective analysis. It is my belief that the study will be of interest to people who wish to refer to either the entire document or to individual aspects of the text(s).

The collection of narratives and other writings that comprise this portion of the document do not culminate in any form of "conclusion". Grieving is a process, and my inquiry reflects the struggles and tensions of being in (the) process. My orientation in life and in grieving is one of engaging as deeply as possible what I am noticing, experiencing, feeling, and what is "disturbing" me. This thesis very much reflects both the process and my orientation to look at what life and death may have to teach me, if I allow myself to take up and stay with, and in, the process of engagement. I began my inquiry with many questions, and as I suspected, I am concluding the research document with more questions than with which I began. It is this process of wanting to understand more deeply the experience(s) and process(es) of grief and grieving that motivated my re/search.

The Methodology of Autobiography

Autobiographical writing by process, and by its possibilities for opening discursive spaces for expression of emotions, and the development of self awareness by the author and the reader in their process of reading and reflection is, I believe, a particularly effective approach by which to explore the process of loss and grieving. Grieving the death and loss of someone with whom one shared a close relationship can be, or feel, isolating, particularly when others assume or act as though the bereaved person has "moved on in life" or should soon be "past the grief." As I read a diversity of grief literature early in my process of grieving (including academic, self-help, and clinical resources) I found that although some of the literature informed me of emotions, issues,

and reactions that many grieving persons experience, it did not speak to the depths of what I was experiencing. I found myself distant and distanced from much of what I was reading. I longed to know what others who had experienced the death of a parent or another significant person had felt initially in their grief. It was the personal accounts of others who were grieving to which I felt some sense of connection and (other-self) recognition of the process of grieving. I was deeply affected by the autobiographical writings and reflections of scholar and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, who, in his book, A Grief Observed (1961) spoke about his process of grieving the death of his wife. His words, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid" (p. 5) and his subsequent reflection that "...grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen" (p.29) helped me to become more aware of, and connected to, some of what I was experiencing in the restlessness and anxiety of my own grief, to which I could not yet find my own expression or words.

I began to realize that an autobiographical approach would allow and facilitate me to explore aspects of my experience of loss and grieving in an in-depth manner, examining and revisiting issues, thoughts, and emotions as both a method and a process of developing deeper understanding. An aspect of grieving that I chose to examine and explore through the process of writing autobiographically is the issue of how we may give voice to that which has been denied, and that which we have been disallowed permission to express. In many ways we have not been "given" nor have we been allowed a language in our society, for conceptualizing and expressing aspects of our grief.

Writing and processing, reflecting upon, and re/writing my grief within an autobiographical form provided me an opportunity to explore issues, emotions, and aspects of grieving that may otherwise have remained unarticulated, unspoken, denied, and relegated to the status of non-issues in our society.

In addition, I was stimulated to write my thesis autobiographically because I have, from the initial phases of my graduate work, been supported by my supervisor Antoinette Oberg, to write about the process of my experiences and to trust (in the knowledge) that one's lived experiences, reflected upon deeply, may contribute to deepening understanding(s) of life, self, and our sense of connectedness to others.

Autobiographical writing and re/researching, while focusing on (my) personal exploration of issues and emotions of grieving, is not contained to, and solely reflective of, my (the author's) own grief. It also speaks to, and of, aspects of universal human experiences and emotions of grieving. My thesis work was not a study of only my personal processing and experiences. Rather, I employed my experience, in part, to examine and explore dynamics, issues, norms, and values that are at play, particularly those that are dominant in our society and culture at large. By bringing issues, emotions and topics more fully into the open, it was my intention that I may invite others to reflect on their personal and cultural experiences of loss, and of grieving a death. In her book, Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy, author and educator Barbara Kamler (2001) discusses her ideas of "embodied texts" which describe the move in writing and processing "... to locate the autobiographical in its social and cultural landscape" (p.2).

In contextualizing autobiographical writing and narratives, the reader is invited also to reflect upon her process and experience, and how one's process, experience, and self are influenced by the personal, cultural, political, and societal context and dynamics. For example, I was further drawn to examining and processing grieving the death of my father in autobiographical writings because I noticed that others, and society generally, seemed to imply and require a return to the "status quo" as quickly as possible. The return to "normal," the expected, and the status quo is reflected, for instance, in the expectation and employment guideline of returning to work within three or four days of the death of a close relative. I wondered what was being protected, supported, and reflected in such societal expectations and mores. I was perplexed and surprised by others', and society's, responses as I initially grieved the loss of my father, even though my previous experiences of grieving the deaths of significant persons in my life (my grandmother, special "grandmother," and numerous great aunts and uncles) had also occurred within the same societal framework and expectations. Why did I expect that others, and society generally, would acknowledge my loss more openly, less restrictively than twenty years ago? Why were others implying or overtly re/minding me that "it is, or soon will be, time to move on"? My awareness and curiosity was, in part, related to why, how, and when (gradually, over time, with certain pivotal life events perhaps not consciously recognized) I had shifted my thinking and emotions to consider the process and the expectations of grieving (for myself and others) differently than I had previously, while simultaneously I continued to experience the same social and cultural influences that I had with my earlier experiences of loss and grieving. I was stimulated to consider how I may examine at a deep level my experiential process of grieving, in part to examine how and why it

differed from societal expectations of, and support for, individuals grieving a death. Dilthey (1981) asserted that "Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life is confronting us" (p. 122). I believed that examining and writing about my grief process may contribute to my own and others' understanding of societal factors and other systems and dynamics that may influence and impose upon one's personal process of grieving.

I found myself further attracted to autobiography as a means of exploring the accepted and sometimes deeply entrenched values contained within the maintenance of the status quo, and the desire for survivors' rapid return to "normalcy." Autobiography allows and invites what are termed by some academics as "disruptive texts," texts that call into question, examine, and deconstruct what educator and author, Madeleine Grumet (1981) terms the "taken for granted." In addition, Davies (1994) describes "collective biography" in reference to autobiographical, biographical, and narratives, and stories which "move beyond a statement about the particular individual who wrote the story to a revelation of the social and discursive processes through which we become individuals" (Kamler, 2001, p. 4).

A deepening of my understanding of the methodology of autobiographical research was further stimulated by a discussion with my thesis supervisor during which she identified that in studying one's own experience(s), one is always simultaneously studying, or at the very least, illuminating, fractal patterns of experience(s) of individuals and the culture at large (personal communication, October 16, 2002). Kamler (2001) notes that "feminist

writers in a variety of locations (composition, women's studies, education, English) have theorised autobiographical writing in ways which move it beyond the personal" (p. 155) and which extend autobiographical writing to reflect and address issues and experiences of the larger society. In addition, Gough and Kamler (2001) drawing on the autobiographical curriculum inquiry studies of Grumet (1981) assert that "this apparent subjectivity is highly socialized" (p. 10). Embracing these aspects of autobiographical research and its possibilities for exposing and exploring larger cultural and societal patterns of beliefs, values, and expectations, I began to wonder about my sense of aloneness and isolation in my grief as I was encouraged directly and indirectly to "move on" with (my) life. In what ways were society's expectations, actions, and inactions contributing to, and perhaps even exacerbating, a grieving person's sense of aloneness with grief? By writing and reflecting on my experiences of aloneness, I believed that I might be able to expose, or at the very least, open this topic for further examination.

Autobiography has also been used as a means of "engaging in cultural critique" (Kamler, 2001, p. 155) examining and unpacking the multiplicity of ways in which society and one's culture function to influence the personal as well as the societal aspects of life.

Autobiographical research and writing thus has the potential to stimulate societal, cultural, and personal/individual awareness, (self) reflexivity, and change. Brodkey and Davies (cited by Kamler, 2001) support the notion of contributing to the mutual process of what I call self-other, other-self influencing and engaging, by their assertion that "writing about the self becomes an invitation to identify, analyse and critique, to understand the discursive practices that construct the sense of self -- which in turn offer

possibilities for social change" (p. 3). In employing an autobiographical approach to exploring my personal experiences of grieving, I examined societal influences, (such as society's discomfort with talking about death directly), and how this affects an individual's experiences as well as the larger society's experiences of grieving a death. Increasing awareness of such issues and their potential impacts may facilitate us, individually, and collectively, to consider ways in which we may more effectively support grieving persons.

The aloneness that I experienced early in my process of grieving the death of my father juxtaposed with the sense of connectedness that I felt as I read the personal accounts of others who were also grieving strongly influenced the process and focus of my thesis inquiry. They had been my most effective and compassionate teachers in my initial grief and I wanted to find and create a way to continue this process. I wanted to inquire and write about grief in a way that was accessible to other people who were grieving. Using language that was accessible to people generally, avoiding jargon and terms specific to professional fields of practice and research facilitated me to do so. I had been authorized to write about grief in an autobiographical form, one which would imply and require academic rigor while simultaneously, I believed, allow my process and writings to be reflective of lived experiences of grief and grieving. Kamler (2001) voices my experience clearly in her statement that "To be authorized by the academy to write about one's life is a powerful and startling experience for university students" (p. 157). I found support in my process and my methodology in women's study and literature scholar Nancy Miller's (1991) assertion that "To produce new writing, to speak autobiographically in an

academic context is to speak 'against a language of abstraction'... " (p. 156, quoted in Kamler, 2001). While I embrace this notion, I also was challenged to reflect continually upon what I am writing, why I am writing it, what I am including, focusing upon, and excluding in the writings, and how and why I insert my self in the texts of my thesis. The academic rigor is always in process, significantly located, yet the struggle of how to check myself, my process, and my non-processing of some aspects of my grief also is necessarily central to the generativity and honesty of autobiographical writing, rereadings, and rewritings of one's processing.

Narrative As a Process and Method of Inquiry

We are born into a world of stories. Our births mark the beginning of a distinctive story in which each of us assumes a leading part. Our deaths end our unique stories, which live on in the minds and hearts of our survivors. Between birth and death, we rely on stories circulating through our culture to make sense of our everyday lives and guide our actions. (Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy, 1997, p. 307)

Drawing upon the ideas of Davies (1994) and Gilbert (1993a), Kamler (2001) states, "Stories are interpretive resources for dealing with the everyday world and for taking ourselves up within the cultural storylines available to us" (p. 57). Laurel Richardson (1994) a sociologist who embraces writing as a method and process of inquiry, underscores Kamler's assertion in stating "What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them" (p. 516).

As I initially considered how I might bring the very personal aspects of my grieving out into the open to be shared with others (with the hope of fostering others to find ways of sharing their own experiences of loss and grief) I immediately thought of the natural form of story telling/narrative. Narrative and story telling are central to understanding and articulating human experience (Richardson, 1990; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I had found solace and a sense of connection as I read the personal accounts of others who were grieving. Yet there were absences, silences in the stories of others and in my own story, things that had perhaps not yet found, or had not been allowed words. Stories are resources that we look toward and employ as a means of coping with our lived experiences. My experiences of grieving stimulated me to question: What are the potential effects and affects when narratives of our experiences of loss and grieving are absent, silenced, marginalized, or not readily accessible to us individually and culturally? As I prepared for the task of retrieving my father's ashes I could find no stories of personal experience described in the literature that may have offered guidance or facilitated the process of a difficult yet increasingly common life experience. I was alone in the physical and emotional experience of completing this task. Robert Stone's statement that "In the absence of honest storytelling people are abandoned to the beating of their own hearts" (Stone, 1988, p. 75) poignantly reflects the void of information and support that I believe many people experience as they grieve a death. I decided to write autobiographical narratives in part because I wanted to find and create a potential means of acknowledging and exposing this void.

Narrative as a process and a method of inquiry offered a means by which I could expose, challenge, and disrupt the dominant discourse of taboos against speaking about death, dying, and grief, and society's denial of death. The accompanying reflective analysis writings facilitated me to examine and question the absences in the narratives of our personal and collective experiences of loss and grieving. In addition, by exposing and examining experiences of grieving, including those which are rarely discussed, it was my intention to examine and deconstruct some of the dynamics which may be contributing to and maintaining our difficulties in supporting others and ourselves as we grieve. The possibilities for stimulating societal awareness and change were central to my inquiry as they are for many researchers (Richardson, 1990, Tierney, 1995, and Kamler, 2001). Narrative as a method and process of writing, re/reading, reflection, and reflexivity, repeated in varying cyclical forms, offers and invites one's stories to be told, and invites others to engage in their own interpretations, processing, and "telling" of their own experiences. Kamler underscores the importance of narrative as a form of inquiry, and a resource and stimulus for social change, in her assertion that "To confront death by constructing a narrative of dying is to break a cultural silence that refuses death as a part of life" (Kamler, 2001, p. 55).

The Process of My Inquiry

I began my inquiry from a place or "position" of uncertainty in both my grief and in the possibilities of ways and methodologies from which I might approach my inquiry. I had a desire to learn, to understand more deeply what this profound loss and my process of grieving may have to teach me and to open me to further consider.

In my early childhood years of education, I was taught to sit still at my desk, to listen and to take in what others had to say, to memorize and later to re/produce what was learned (the knowledge and knowings of others). It took many years and much painful processing to discover and to begin to reclaim what I believe is my capacity, and our collective human intrinsic capacity and desire for learning through, and within, our life experiences. The process and the topic of my inquiry reflect and support this perspective.

My intrinsic and gradually reclaimed inclination toward life and learning involves questioning, reflection, and introspection as a means of processing experiences and creating meanings that are not set, but evolving. From the moment of learning about my dad's collapse I was immersed in a process of questioning. His unexpected and sudden death infused me with multiple, complex and painful questions, unknowns, and uncertainties. Although I found myself at times intensely questioning the seemingly infinite "what ifs" and desperately wanting answers to these specific issues, somewhere within I realized that there were not, nor could there (ever) be, definitive answers. I could however, engage the process of questioning deeply, allowing what may emerge to be revealed. Recognizing, acknowledging, and deeply engaging the tensions of the "what ifs" rather than denying their presence freed me to open myself to the emerging process of my inquiry.

I did not begin my inquiry with "certain questions" (specific, definitive queries) or certain questions (things that could be answered definitively). I was not looking for, expecting or

needing answers (with the exception of the ongoing what if, and if only, scenarios). I began and continued my process of inquiry inductively, finding and creating ways of exploring my losses and grief that were open and opening to what(ever) might emerge or be revealed. It is a process of questioning, wondering, and being curious. My process, methods, and methodologies were inextricably intertwined, involving an "emerging design" (Creswell, 1998).

Integrity and Honesty

Meaningful inquiry involving processing of lived experiences calls for and upon one's integrity. The integrity of which I am speaking includes but moves beyond honesty to include an awareness of and a capacity for remaining as true as I am capable of being at any particular point in time to my process and the experience.

Paying Attention

The process of careful observation and a deep "paying attention" to my experiences, processing, and emotions of loss and grief was integral to my inquiry. Openness to noticing and paying attention to shifts in my thoughts and emotions, such as distancing myself from the experience or the impacts of the experience, and shifts in my sensing and feeling, were factors that I tried to remain aware of throughout this inquiry. Paying attention also extended to attentive noticing of what I perceived in my interactions with others (such as language used, body language of others and of self, tones of voice, topics discussed or shifted). Paying close attention to external stimuli and my internal processing, thoughts, and emotions, and my interactions with others and in life generally

was integral to developing an awareness of, examining, and deconstructing aspects of my grief as both lived experiences, and in the process of writing and analyzing the narratives. Others have also described their processes of paying attention as a method of inquiry. Barone (1992) describes the process of "heightened empiricism, a determined scrutinizing of the world around us" (p. 143). Frost and Bell-Metereau (1998) describe Simone Weil's method of attention to inquiry in stating that "to choose what to study presupposes a certain sensibility, and that one needs to have some sense of what one is looking for even to know where to begin looking" (p.53). Moreover, they add, "Weil argued that every inquirer must make critical decisions about where to look, how to recognize what one desires, and where to direct one's attention" (p.53).

Weil's awareness of knowing where and how to look, and how to direct one's attention as an inquirer, speaks poignantly of my father's way of being as a biologist, his attention to detail, to noticing the smallest of creatures in nature, to maintaining a focus about where one might find a marine specimen even if never before found in a certain location. I observed all of my father's paying attention qualities and practices, drinking in every detail of his detailed passion for nature and discovery. Without consciously realizing it until after his death, I am beginning to recognize how deeply his ways of being have become integral to my ways of and passion for paying attention.

Paying close attention as a process and as a method of my inquiry required that I become an attentive witness to my experiences, emotions, and thoughts, while simultaneously staying as emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively present with(in) myself, the

experience, and my experiencing of others as possible. It involves an awareness and observation of self, process, others, and what is happening in the immediacy of the experience. In addition, it requires what I refer to as practiced attentive discipline. This process requires not only the capacity to focus on deeply paying attention, but as significantly, it involves assessing when I need to release the process of careful attending at the completion of the attentiveness process at that time, or because it is no longer fruitful or emotionally tolerable. Integral to the process of paying close attention is the capacity for what is sometimes termed by psychologists as "sitting with one's experience" and creating a "holding space" or an emotional containment for one's self and experience as one's processing is occurring. Creating and maintaining an emotional containment for processing is essential. Without safe containment I am unable to emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually "enter into" the process of intensely paying attention, and processing the levels, depths, and intensities of whatever aspects of an experience may emerge, or that I find myself suddenly falling into (re)experiencing.

Introspection

Introspection was integral to my process of inquiry. Introspection is defined by Webster's dictionary (1978) as "a looking into one's own mind, feelings... and observation and analysis of one's self" (p. 739). It involves much more than what is included in this definition, however. Introspection requires simultaneous processes of reflection, reflexivity, paying attention, staying present with self, others, and the embodied experience, as much as possible. Narrative analysis and reflection as a methodological approach, while requiring introspection also required deconstruction and re-processing of

the narrative data on multiple levels (cognitive, emotional, psychological, and spiritual). It required deepening introspection to move toward processing of other and alternative awarenesses and deepening layers of possibilities and understanding.

Reflection and Reflecting

Reflection was ongoing and central to my inquiry process and "product" (written thesis). The etymological roots of reflection noted in Webster's Dictionary (1978) speaks to much of my method of reflective inquiry, and includes: "the fixing of the mind on some subject; serious thought, idea or conclusion, especially if expressed in words; a turning or bending back on itself; anything reflected; an image or likeness" (p. 1193). While reflection certainly required much serious thought, conceptualizing, re/viewing, and reconceptualizing of ideas and potential understandings (of my self and my inquiry), my process of inquiry also required as much as possible resisting the call of drawing my ideas, feelings, understandings, and thoughts to a close. Rather, reflective inquiry involved remaining as open as possible to emerging themes and possibilities. The notion of "turning or bending back on itself" (Webster's Dictionary, 1978, p. 1193) was also continuously part of my process of experiencing and considering my grief in the moment of the experience, and in the reflexive process of writing, and rewriting the narratives and the reflective analysis texts. Noticing, sensing, reconsidering, and opening again and again to what was and what may be revealed or emergent was integral to my inquiry. Analogizing to a more concrete form, I may conceptualize the potential for different and emerging ways of "knowing" as a "turning or bending back on itself" as like a fan, which when folded appears small, compact, and perhaps unrecognizable as the paper or cloth of

which it is constructed. Yet as it is opened it transforms gradually to reveal *something more* of itself which is different at various and shifting phases and positions of opening and closing.

The notion of reflection as "anything reflected; an image, or likeness" is also meta-analytically related to both the human capacity to process one's lived experiences and the process and production of representations of our experience(s), including written texts. The postmodernist perspective asserts that there is no objective reality, and that "all knowledge is socially constructed" (Richardson, 1990, p. 116) In addition, "Stories do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it... they are a representation of experience rather than the same thing as experience itself ('not authentic')" (Kamler, 2001, pp. 45-46). Reflection, obtaining or constructing "an image or likeness," is all that we can do with our experiences and our texts. They are as Kamler (2001) and Richardson (1990, 1994) and other scholars note, a representation and re/presentation of our experiences. I am further reminded of the re/presentational qualities of our constructed experiences and knowledge, by considering an image of ripples in a pond which are further reflected and refracted by the human eye, interpreting, reinterpreting, again and again, against, and with, the shifting refracting rays of the sunlight.

Deconstruction

I employed methods of deconstruction as an integral part of my inquiry. Deconstruction is a complex and multifaceted process, which includes different forms and foci. For the

purposes of my inquiry I used deconstruction as a means of uncovering, discovering, and exploring differing layers of experiences of my grieving, including thoughts, emotions, and themes (such as others redirecting my expression of guilt). I also employed deconstruction in my process of writing/constructing the texts of my thesis, particularly the narrative reflective analysis, and in the reflexive processes of reading, rereading, and rewriting of the texts. It involved noticing and questioning the structures of organization, discourses, and the patterns and ways in which our social and cultural norms are present and maintained (such as our deeply entrenched denial of death). I also employed deconstruction as a means of analyzing how language, sentence construction, and terminology (for example, the prescriptive and pathology-oriented language of some grief theories, and the absence of direct acknowledgement of death as demonstrated by our extensive use and substitution of euphemisms for the word death) constructs, structures, and influences us individually and collectively as a society.

The process of deconstructing (my) experiences, thoughts, and emotions, as well as deconstructing my texts, was intensive, disturbing, unsettling, and at times, exciting. It was a complex process that recurred in variant ways throughout my grieving and thesis writing. I am just now beginning to recognize that there is a parallel between the process of deconstruction and the process of grieving. Grieving a death, experiencing a major life event (such as divorce, a job promotion) and any events or factors that trigger or create change and accompanying loss(es) and grief disrupt our sense of equilibrium, centering, calm, or the "status quo". The change(s) disrupt us on all levels of our being (emotionally, psychologically, physically, socially and spiritually). The changes, shifts,

and disruptions that losses stimulate, (may) require us to engage in a re/viewing, a re/synthesis, and a deconstruction of what was for us (for example, our experience of "reality" and life) before the loss(es) and what we are now experiencing after change(s) and loss. Loss(es) and the grief, grieving, and internal process of mourning triggers our process and need for deconstructing and working toward a gradual re/understanding of aspects of self, relationships with others, and life itself. This process requires deconstructing multiple levels of one's being, aspects of one's self, and one's connection with and sense of purpose and belonging in the world. Concurrently, subsequently, partially, and perhaps quite holistically, we are stimulated by loss(es) to engage in reconstructing our self and our understandings of life.

Context(s) and Contextualization

Everything in the universe is embedded in a context, and every/thing has a relationship to, and with, something else. My process, methods, and the methodologies of my inquiry, processing of my grief, all of my written texts, and my personal subjectivity, and the subjectivities of others, are necessarily embedded in, influenced by, and effecting influences upon multiple contexts. Developing an awareness of contexts and the complex ways in which I, as a person, including the biases and influences of my multiple and shifting roles and orientations (such as "researcher", grieving person, student, research participant, counsellor, daughter, feminist) impact every aspect of my inquiry process and "product"/thesis is very important. Acknowledging these, and the multiple contexts, and the (embedded) contextuality of my inquiry is also critical. All aspects of my inquiry were influenced by, and were afforded more or less legitimacy and acceptance, status,

power, disempowerment, and disapproval by the context of my own evolving subjectivities and a diversity of social, cultural, political, historical, and religious discourses, particularly those of Western society.

Decisions Regarding Inclusion and Exclusion of Texts

Decisions regarding what to include and what to exclude in the written public texts of my thesis involved much thought, and often, soul-searching. Integral to the process was a need to be as honest as possible with myself as I considered the boundaries that I needed to place around the writing of specific topics, and the depths of disclosure that I felt comfortable exposing and exploring. In addition, I needed to consider my capabilities as a writer and my readiness to explore my process and issues, particularly in relation to writing to depths that may allow and invite generative processing of my grief and my inquiry.

I understand and fully agree with the consent guidelines of the Human Research Ethics Committee which were required to protect the confidentiality of my family members with respect to my research. Issues of confidentiality were of particular concern with my research because it is autobiographical and family members and others with whom I share a close relationship may be identifiable. My family members were also grieving the death of my father and were experiencing many difficult, and life-changing, events. Throughout the process of writing the narratives I maintained an awareness of my family members' feelings and needs, particularly in relation to respecting their confidentiality and privacy and their own processes and experiences of grieving. I experienced continual

constraints upon my inquiry related to topics of exploration that although potentially generative were excluded because of a concern for my family members. I wanted to ensure that their anonymity and personal experiences of grieving would not be compromised by such examinations.

Throughout my inquiry I experienced a tension between wanting to remain as open as possible to exploring whatever may emerge in my grieving (a qualitative approach to inquiry) while also noticing my occasional orientation toward a "broader perspective" of focusing on what I thought may be more commonly experienced issues, or aspects of grieving, and therefore potentially, (for others and myself) "more" helpful to explore than seemingly isolated aspects or issues of grieving. Factors pertaining to and underlying this tension are value-laden. Who is in a position/authority to identify and define what needs to be taken up as an inquiry, what is important, and what may be relegated to the unspoken, poorly articulated, or the subsumed? A deepening question that I needed to reflect upon throughout my process of my inquiry was whether I truly wanted to explore what may be more universal human experiences of grieving, or whether I was orienting myself toward a homogenized perspective of grief and grieving. Speaking of writing and all forms of inquiry, Richardson (1994) posits "The 'sense-making' is always value constituting--making sense in a particular way, privileging one ordering of 'facts' over another" (p. 520). This includes, I believe, the "sense searching", or what we identify as researchers as that which we will, or may, research. The notion of a "broader perspective" I believe, shifted me, or cognitively repositioned me *toward* a more quantitative, positivistic way of focusing research toward "generalizability". The internal struggle

between valuing the personal and the subjective as well as what Creswell (1998) terms "particulars" and "details" in qualitative research, *and* noticing my pull toward a possible form of generalizability, was continually at play, influencing subtly and more overtly my process of deciding inclusion and exclusion in the texts of my thesis.

As I noted the internal struggle and how it impacted me personally and as an inquirer in the midst of my research, I realized that I was (and probably always will be) in the midst of a larger tension, that of quantitative criteria, objectives, and value(s) of research versus qualitative values and purposes of research. My earlier experiences (as a biologist's daughter and as a nurse) remain within and tug at me, challenging me to reconsider and question my own personal and theoretical positionings. In addition, I cannot dismiss that I am immersed in and influenced by the multiple discourses of Western society which position, value, and privilege quantitative research above qualitative research (Bernstein, 1991, Munro, 1995, Sampson, 1978). Noticing the struggle, staying with it on all levels of my personal being, as well as in my inquiry process, which is inextricably linked with my personal perspectives and subjectivities, was essential to the integrity of the process and "product" (thesis).

An important consideration regarding inclusion pertained to what I noted as gaps, absences, silences and topics addressed indirectly in grief literature. I wanted to (and I did) explore and expose through my texts, topics and emotional issues that were missing, marginalized, not often spoken of, and not explored deeply in grief literature. I hoped that by bringing such topics out into the open, others might also feel encouraged to explore

and express aspects of their own grief. In addition, it was my intention that exposure and exploration of such topics might call into question our continued taboos against speaking openly about death and grief and thus stimulate increased societal awareness and ultimately social change.

Discussing writing as a method of inquiry, Richardson (1994) notes that "What we see depends upon our angle of repose" (p. 522). As I read and reflect on her words, I think about my "angle(s) of repose". I am drawn toward exploring things that are difficult and unsettling to me. I believe that they may have much to "teach" or tell me, if I am willing to listen and engage them deeply. This orientation has influenced what I chose to write about and to include in the texts of my thesis.

Some topics or aspects of topics were excluded from my texts because I could not seem to find the words to effectively and authentically articulate my experiences or emotions. I chose not to include some writings because although they were relevant, I did not feel comfortable to expose them within the public text of my thesis. In addition, my awareness of audience, of who would definitely and who might possibly read my public texts affected some of the topics and depths of my writing. The issues and emotions, though unwritten and unexplored, have their presence, and influence, however silent. Gough and Kamler (2001) speak deeply to this in saying, "Excluded from the text, they are the phantoms its author meets when he reads his own story. What has been said is only an index to what we are too frightened, or too lazy to say" (p. 11).

My Positionings and Orientation to the Process and "Product"/Texts of My Inquiry

It is my belief that all research is significantly influenced by the values, beliefs, and the personal, as well as professional life experiences of the inquirer. My methodological approach to this inquiry, and my philosophical perspective of life, and the processing of life experiences, are inextricably intertwined. I have come to embrace with a passion the perspective that each life experience has multiple interpretations, and that there is not one correct, ultimate, answer or "knowing" to be "obtained" regardless of the rigor, complexity, and multiplicity of our ways and methods of inquiry. This perspective of life extends beyond the academic and intellectual to a place or level of understanding that allows me to embrace (and sometimes merely, and barely, to tolerate) the disquieting awareness of multiple realities and possibilities with a sense (generally) of acceptance rather than resignation. Fostering an awareness of and focusing my research toward possibilities for social change was important to me personally and as a researcher. I concur with Tierney's representational practices with regard to qualitative inquiry, in which he states:

I concentrate on the development of qualitative texts that is geared toward change. Although I certainly respect those who conduct 'knowledge for knowledge's sake,' I concentrate here on those of us who are involved in social science inquiries that in some way hope to change the world (1995, p. 380).

It was important to me that my inquiry not merely contributes to a proliferation of the already abundant theoretical literature on loss and grieving. I exposed topics that were

uncomfortable to write about, and perhaps as difficult for readers to read, because they are actual experiences of loss and grief that are often silent or absent from our human texts. It is an opening from which I hope that we may individually, and collectively, support others and ourselves to continue to discuss, and to expand our expressions of our personal stories of loss and grief.

Writing and Rewriting, Reading and "Rereading" As a Process and a Method of My Inquiry

Reflective and reflexive inquiry involves an ongoing, active, engaged, and shifting process that is, I believe, as central to the inquiry as the "product". The individual texts, including the thesis document in its entirety, are always and necessarily open to ongoing reflection and reinterpretation(s). They re/present aspects of my experience as I was able or willing to conceptualize them in the moments in which they were written. As I began the process of writing narratives of my experiences of grieving, I had intended to write them as closely as possible to my actual remembering and experiencing of them. I somehow believed that if I reflected deeply and honestly, with the courage to "see" whatever may reveal itself, that I would be able to recreate a close representation of what my experience felt like in the moments in which it had been experienced. It took many readings, rereadings, and reflection upon my narratives, and feedback from others in a narrative inquiry class to truly begin to realize on deeper levels of my being what I had previously understood and conceptualized on an intellectual level. Cognitively, I had understood the theoretical knowledge of writing and narrative forms of inquiry as "a particular way of seeing and naming experience... and a representation of experience, not

the experience itself " (Kamler, 2001, pp. 45-46). Yet it was only as I again and again tried to write my experiences--experiences that moved (me) beyond the realm of mere theoretical understandings, and which seemed to lie flat before me on paper, part of me, yet not my full experience--that I gradually, and with some still lingering sense of sadness, truly began to realize the only re/presentational nature of writing.

The process of reflecting and remembering, writing, and rewriting aspects of my grief was an invaluable experience, personally and professionally. As I sat looking at my words, terms and phrases that partially expressed some of what I had experienced yet could not "capture" the integrity and the feeling of the "real moments" let alone what had shifted within me and in the world since those moments, I realized that this is our human experience. Each time we re/member an/and experience, we are transforming it, transmuting both our experience and our experiencing of it. The experience, our experience of the experience, and our knowing of our self and some part(s) of life can never be the same. This is also what I believe the death and absence of someone we love creates and ignites in our lives and selves: a realization, again and again, in different, and complex ways, that things and we, will never be the same.

As so often occurred in the writing of the narratives, and currently, in considering how to effect an ending to discussing the process of my process of inquiry (methodology), I am aware of how unnatural it feels, an ending to something that is always in process. This ending is all the more difficult because the writing that simultaneously spoke to and of (my) loss and grief now renders within me a further sense of loss as I end the formal

writing of my thesis. R. Ainley, editor of a book entitled, A Mother's Death: Daughter's Stories, poignantly articulated the complexity of narrative "endings" in stating that "Formulating an ending is an added complication in a difficult process, an experience that's constantly in progress, which often contains no final resolution in your own life. Some of the endings therefore have a feeling of temporariness; chapter endings rather than final endings" (Ainley, 1994, p. xx).

Chapter Two: The Process of Becoming More Emotionally Present In and With One's Own Grief and the Grief of Others

"Nothing makes people lonelier than to experience a crisis in their lives that no one else fully understands--especially when the pull from the outside world is so strong for them to be OK" (Akner, 1993, p. 78).

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss and open for further reflection themes and issues which I believe extend beyond the experiences of my personal process to shed light on how grief is constructed, perceived, and responded to in Western society. The discussion examines theoretical and societal constructs that define what is sanctioned and discouraged in our individual and collective expressions of grief. The themes and issues discussed in this chapter emerged throughout the first year of grieving the death of my father and are detailed in chapter three: Narratives and Reflective Analysis of My Process of Grieving.

In the process of grieving my father's death, I became aware of how frequently my expressions of grieving were misunderstood, only partially comprehended, transmuted into the listener's own interpretations of what I was saying, and even dismissed. I often noticed others' anxiety and discomfort in hearing and acknowledging the feelings and issues that I expressed. I was urged not to ruminate; to move on with life, through and past my grief. I was unprepared for the discomfort that others expressed in response to my grief.

My own experiences of grieving and my observations of the support that other grieving persons receive (and fail to receive) from their families, friends and acquaintances as they grieve have stimulated critical questions: In Western society, why do we experience such difficulty (in) effectively supporting other individuals in their personal process of grieving? What factors contribute to the discomfort and reluctance of others to listen openly and to hear on a deep level, the grief that is expressed? How does Western society's dominant discourse of grieving impact upon an individual's personal process of grieving?

My purpose is to explore these questions and to invite reflection upon, and further discussion of, Western society's values, norms and expectations, with respect to grieving a death. I will explore the impact of society's entrenched denial of death and the effects and affects of the (imposed) expectations created by society's dominant discourse of grieving that prescribe how grieving will or should progress, rather than supporting an individual's personal process. In exploring these issues perhaps we may open ourselves, as individuals and as a society, to learning how we may more effectively support others and ourselves as we grieve.

Western Society's Denial of Death and Avoidance of Grief

Denial of death is deeply entrenched in Western society. Not only is the discussion of death a taboo topic but expression of grief is also strongly discouraged. We may tolerate someone speaking initially and briefly of death and the sadness that they feel, yet we quickly seek to subsume their expressions of grief. Covert and overt efforts to suppress or

divert a grieving person's expressions of grief and mourning both reflect and perpetuate Western society's fears and discomfort with death, loss, and grieving. The extent to which we seek to deny death and relegate it to the realm of the unspoken is reflected in the language that we use to talk about, and more significantly, to avoid talking about, death. We have created a multitude of euphemisms such as "passed away," "gone," "at rest," and "lost" which suppress or blur the reality of death and ostensibly, soften its impact upon us. One needs only to read the obituaries in the daily newspaper replete with euphemisms and rare reference to the person actually having died, to realize how strongly we seek to avoid directly acknowledging death. Euphemisms are a reflection of the deeper issues and layers of our discomfort, anxiety, fear of death itself, and of grieving a death. Even when we attempt to speak directly of death, often we are re/minded not to be morbid or morose. If we must speak of "it" we are taught to substitute a myriad of oblique terms by which we should refer to "it" as if it will be too much or too harsh to hear *death* uttered. Yet we need to ask for whom would death acknowledged directly be too much? What are we attempting to protect ourselves from feeling, experiencing, and re-experiencing as we grieve a death? Death and loss are integral to human experience. We continue however, to act, speak, and avoid speaking, as if we can somehow protect and prevent ourselves from death and grief if we just transmute it into something more oblique or more palatable.

The silencing imposed by our avoidance of acknowledging death and the norms that we have imposed upon one another of not speaking too long, or too deeply, about our grief, paradoxically, speaks volumes. The deeply learned, culturally sanctioned, mutually

reinforced process of creating and maintaining a distance between death and our personal experiences and expressions of grief through the language that we use, and avoid, is integral to perpetuating our societal and personal denial about death, dying, and grief.

Effects of Society's Denial of Death

Denial of death and taboos against deep expressions of grief, while intended ostensibly to insulate us from acknowledging fully and being reminded of death and grief, paradoxically trigger and exacerbate the very fears and anxieties that we seek to avoid, contain or suppress. Denial severely impedes and often precludes our capacity to listen to and support grieving persons. We cannot effectively support a person to process their loss as we so deeply protect ourselves from acknowledging the reality of death and the impact of (the) loss. In denying death, we also deny or suppress our own emotions of grief. As a consequence, our ability to be emotionally present with a bereaved person is diminished. If we are unable to allow ourselves to experience our own emotions and reactions of grief, how can we effectively acknowledge, and be emotionally present to the grief of others?

Denial internalized perpetuates the silencing of our personal and collective grief. As we internalize the societal and cultural taboos against speaking openly about death and grief we learn to silence others and ourselves. Our societal denial operates paradoxically and synergistically to prevent and protect us from hearing (and desiring to listen to) a grieving person's pain and simultaneously conveys overt and covert sanctions upon those who may disclose their grief. As this process continues and is reinforced by the taboos against

talking about death and grief, a powerful cycle of silencing is created. We internalize the cultural sanctions of avoiding discussions and expressions of grief and become increasingly distant and distanced from our emotions, reactions, and experiences of loss, death, and grief. As we mutually reinforce the cycle of silencing we impede our awareness of, and capacity for becoming more emotionally present with our own and others' grief. We may become disconnected or disassociated from our emotions and experience(s) of grieving the loss. The pain of our losses cannot however, be eradicated by our personal or collective denial. The pain that is suffered as we grieve is intensified, I believe, by others' lack of acknowledgment of the depth of the issues and emotions of grief. Avoidance of the bereaved person or avoidance of discussion of the loss implicitly communicates and reinforces the norm that loss and grief should not be expressed. This may result in silencing the grieving individual, and may stimulate her to subsume her grief or her expressions of grief. Others' denial and discomfort with hearing grief expressed (demonstrated by a variety of responses, such as, prolonged silence, closed body language, diverting the discussion to another topic, or minimizing the loss) may contribute to a grieving person's sense of abandonment and isolation in her grief. As we repeatedly experience others' avoidance, diversion, and other forms of insensitivity to our personal pain and grief, we gradually become desensitized to our own and others' grief. We may internalize the explicit and implicit societal messages and ultimately learn to disown our emotions and experience of grieving. We have much to learn from another example of society's entrenched denial and disowning of issues and experiences. The reality and multiple impacts of childhood sexual abuse were avoided, denied, and dismissed by society until the early 1980's, at which time abuse was named and addressed

directly. Survivors were, prior to this, often denied acknowledgement of their experiences. Survivors were further negatively affected as a consequence of internalizing society's denial and minimization of abuse which not only served to silence them and undermine their trust and awareness of their experience, but which ultimately disacknowledged them. Naming of (our) experiences and the effects and affects of our experiences extends far beyond mere semantics. Only when we acknowledge the reality of death and grief directly, and allow others and ourselves to express grief fully, will we be able to support one another effectively and compassionately.

Counsellors and others who provide support to grieving persons are, as David Crenshaw, clinical psychologist and author of the book, Bereavement: Counselling the Grieving Throughout the Life Cycle, noted "far from being immune to the same kinds of fears, doubts, anxieties, and uncertainties about death that plague the people to whom we extend our help" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 30). Persons who are not aware of their own discomfort and anxiety about death, loss, and grief, and have not worked on (and are not open to continually working with) their own issues will not, I believe, be able to effectively support others who are grieving.

Society's expectation that bereaved persons move through their grief, generally within a matter of weeks, communicates to the grieving individual that they should "get over it" and may urge them to "move on in, or with, their grief" before they feel ready and supported to do so. Internalizing and transmuting one's grief to conform to society's expectations may result in shutting down expression or emotions and not allowing

oneself to deeply engage the process of mourning. Submerged or silenced, and now masked, one's grief is more difficult to access. The bereaved person may be (come) disassociated or disconnected from her/his emotions and experiences of grief. The impact of grief and loss remain however, affecting the bereaved person's capacity to process not only the current loss/death, but also subsequent losses. Shakespeare acknowledged this reality poignantly in writing, "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break."

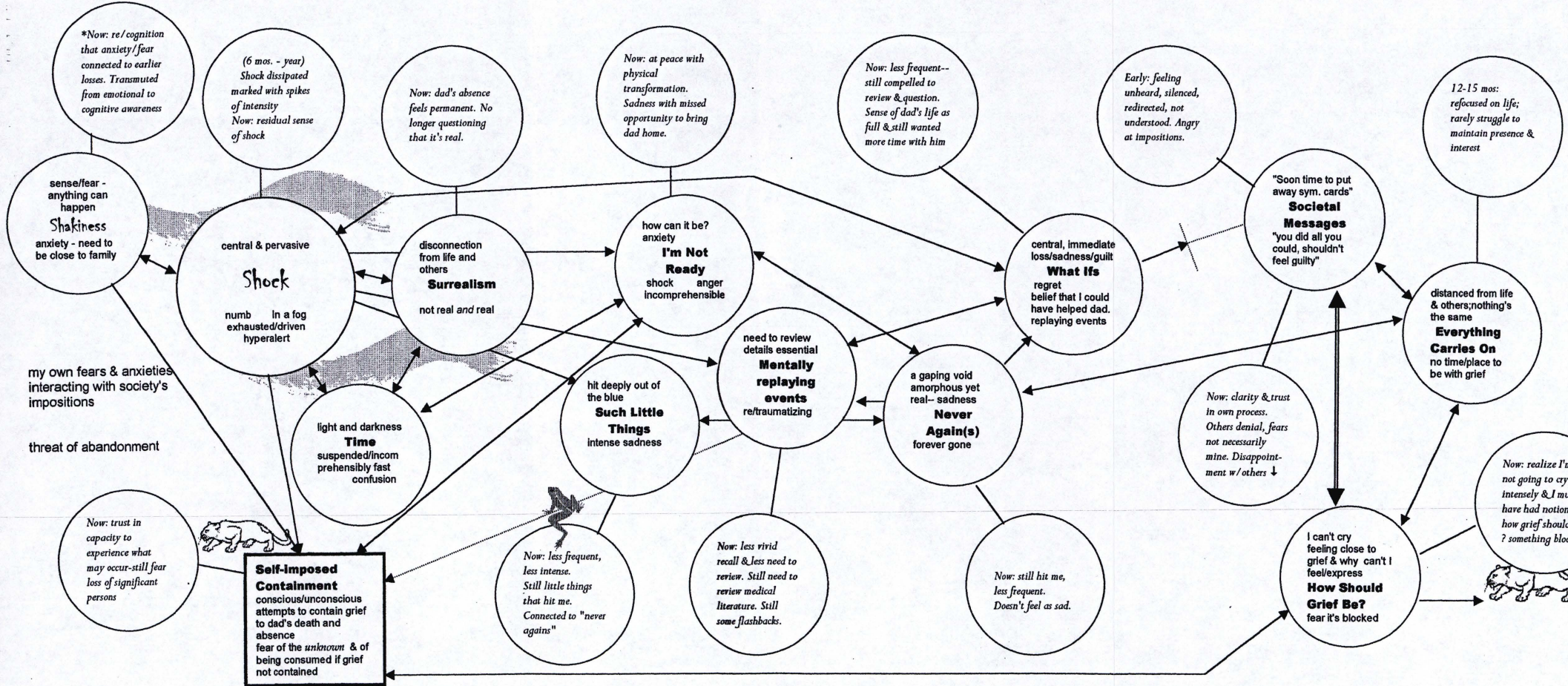
Living in a death denying society contributes to the challenges that each of us face as we attempt to identify and work through our own issues of loss and grief and develop our awareness and capacity for becoming (more) emotionally present with ourselves and others as we grieve.

The Constraints of Theoretical Constructs of Grief and Grieving

During the past forty years theories of grieving have been constructed, reconstructed, and continually modified by professionals in an attempt to define, explicate, and contribute to an understanding of what humans experience as they grieve. These constructs have not only defined what theorists and clinicians believe constitutes normative and pathological human experiences of grief, but they have in many cases, I believe, been extended to create doctrines that prescribe how a grieving person *will* or *should progress* through (her/his) grief. The template for theoretical constructions of the grieving process was developed by psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in 1965. A pioneer in the field of death, dying, and bereavement, Kubler-Ross constructed one of the earliest modern

theories of a dying person's process of grieving the imminent loss of life. Kubler-Ross's theory was subsequently extended by a diversity of professionals to encompass not only the dying person's experience of grieving, but also the process of grieving a death and bereavement. Her theory defined five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kubler-Ross's theory that each *stage* was important; that grieving involved a largely sequential progression (with limited allowance for "regression" to earlier stages) and that the dying person needed to work through each stage as a progression toward acceptance of death, is clearly valued and reproduced in a plethora of subsequent theories. Moreover, her theory has been translated into the clinical practice of counselling bereaved individuals by defining emotional stages or phases of grief that are often seen as necessary and integral to grieving. It is interesting and salient to note that Kubler-Ross's theory and clinical practice were called into question as of the early 1980's (Kuykendall, 1981). Yet derivatives of, and intact replications of her grief constructs continue to be promulgated, despite evidence that she may have directed patients' processes and progress as a means of supporting and maintaining her theory of grieving (Kuykendall, 1981).

It is my belief that somewhere within the formulations and re/creations of theories and other discourses of grieving trust in a grieving person's uniquely *personal process* of grieving has become secondary to the tenets of theoretical constructions. The emphasis is placed upon assisting a grieving person to progress through grief, (working through predefined stages, phases, emotions, tasks, and objectives) with the predefined outcome of resolving grief. While it may appear to be a positive objective and outcome, resolution



of grief is not always possible; moreover, it may be detrimental to one's self and one's experience to require or expect resolution. My personal experiences of loss and grieving and my research have led me to question: What may happen to a grieving individual and her/his uniquely personal experience and processing of grief amidst the influences of pre/defined and prescriptive theories of grieving?

The Imposition of Theories of Grieving on an Individual's Personal Experiences and Processing of Loss and Grief

Although theories of grieving have been developed ostensibly to facilitate our understanding of grief and to support people as they grieve, the objectives and tenets often impose and prescribe. Rather than facilitating a bereaved person to identify her own issues and emotions and supporting her to work through the loss in her own ways, the imposition of tasks and objectives may undermine her (own) capacity for processing *her* grief. Theoretical tenets that definitively define what the grieving person must accomplish, dictate for the individual what is necessary and even essential to do to resolve grief. A common phrase found in many theories (Crenshaw, 1991; Rando, 1991; Martin and Ferris, 1992) is "sooner or later you will need to go through..." The tenet is portrayed as unequivocal. Such imperatives designate in both language and content that the grieving person must do, face, or accomplish the pre/determined. The language is authoritative and directive ("you *will need* to...") clearly informing the bereaved that ultimately, there cannot be deviation from the *necessary* or *essential* tenets espoused by the theory if healing or normalcy/resolution is to be achieved. Many grief theories contain overt and covert foreshadowing of negative consequences and even threats of future

psychological, emotional, or social problems or pathology for those who do not work through and accomplish the pre/scribed essential tasks. For example, Rando, a clinical psychologist who specializes in grief and loss counselling has developed a theory of grieving which identifies and describes three phases of grief: avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation (1991, p. 19). Central to her theoretical construct of grieving, Rando asserted, "If you want to resolve your grief, if you want to leave the pain behind, if you want to be healthy and symptom-free, if you want someday to have as fulfilling a life as possible, sooner or later you must go through the pain" (p. 228). The message for those who are grieving is profound and foreboding. One appears to have little choice or possibility of returning to normal *if* one does not follow and ultimately comply with the tasks and objectives of many similarly prescriptive theories of grieving. Implicit within the authoritative language and content of such discourses is the covert message of a promise of a positive outcome or "resolution" of one's grief *if and only if* one follows the prescribed directives. Moreover, implicitly stated and foreshadowed is, I believe, the potentially deeply impacting threat or warning of negative consequences for grieving persons *if* they do not do what is defined as important or essential in a particular theory. Although I was familiar with several theories of grieving prior to my father's death, I found myself feeling shaky as I read statements that detailed what *must* be accomplished or resolved if... I wanted to be "healthy," "not stuck in grief" and a myriad of other anxiety-provoking possibilities, that are portrayed not only for the short-term, but are implied to potentially remain with one forever, if not resolved. The implicit and explicit warnings of potential pathology "if one does not do, resolve or..." may be experienced as threatening possibilities for grieving individuals. The death of someone significant in

(one's) life can shake up one's life, sense of self, and one's sense of being in the world. The ifs and "*what if*" possibilities are often already highly activated in grieving persons who may feel compelled to reflect repeatedly on what happened, why it may have happened, and how things could have been different. I believe that we need to reflect upon the implicit and explicit content, tones, and undertones of the counsel that we offer or provide to grieving persons. Similarly, Crenshaw's (1991) theory of grieving detailed seven tasks of mourning that focus upon what the bereaved person "must do" and "needs to do", such as the sixth task of "letting go." The theory also prescribes that letting go "can only happen after all the previous steps have been mastered" (p. 24). Rando's and Crenshaw's theories of grieving reflect the prescriptive tone and content of numerous grief theories, many of which assume authority over not only the grieving process/progress but also the bereaved person. The notion that grief can or should be "mastered" is, I believe, disrespectful of the complexity, uniqueness, and individuality with which each person may find her own issues and ways of processing grief.

Grief theories that prescribe definitive tasks and define outcomes of "successful resolution of grief" as well as those detailing the consequences of "unresolved grief" impose an objective-driven focus to the process/ing of grief. They may potentially move, push, or frighten grieving persons into "completing" their grief. While the importance of both the *process* of grieving, generally, and the bereaved individual's *personal processing* of grief is acknowledged by most theories, others' adherence to, and the grieving person's internalization of the prescriptions espoused by many theories may preempt effective support of (the griever's) personal processing.

The Management of Grief and Grieving Individuals

Theoretical constructs of grieving have extended beyond the professional and academic literature and domain of those who specialize in bereavement counselling and have become part of Western society's accepted discourse of grieving. Theories of grief and how grieving and the grieving individual should best "progress" have permeated the self-help literature. Having internalized the prescriptive tenets of grief theories, professionals and lay persons are often influenced, guided, and directed by the focus on working through and completing various tasks and objectives. Regardless of the intended helpfulness, many constructions of the grieving process, I believe, arise and are driven by a fundamental motivation to direct the grieving person to achieve a resolution of grief. Resolution, even if this is possible, should not however, supersede the significance of the process(ing) of grief. I question the motivation(s) of the focus on grieving individuals resolving (their) grief. We need to ask, why do we emphasize the importance of "resolving grief"? In doing so, are we suppressing our own motivation to allay our anxiety and discomfort in witnessing and supporting others' process of grieving by channeling their grief toward resolution? Until recently, many grief professionals and others in the general public spoke frequently about the notion of survivors experiencing or working toward "closure" in grieving a death. Yet in my own experiences of grieving the deaths of people to whom I was close and from my observations and interactions with others who are grieving a death, "closure" is not always realistic or even desirable. Terms such as closure and resolution of grief often do not, I believe, reflect a survivor's experience of grieving a death. Rather, such terms and the notions that they promulgate

and impose reflect society's discomfort with death, grief, and expressions of grief. They re/mind and direct survivors to "resolve" and complete (their) grieving and to do so as quickly as possible. The word resolution is defined as "the act or process of resolving something" (Webster's Dictionary, 1978, p. 1210). The words closure and resolution assign the notion of a "problem" to the very natural, inevitable, and unavoidable *life experiences* of death, loss(es), and grief. In addition, they define completion as a goal to be achieved in response to the "problem" of death and grief. The language that we currently employ is not only inadequate in acknowledging the complex and uniquely personal *process* of grieving but it is also misleading. Language extends beyond mere semantics to encompass and influence our beliefs, values, understanding(s), and expectations. I believe that we need to develop a language and vocabulary that more honestly reflects grieving (a death) as a process. Language that reflects, acknowledges, and honours our own and others' emotions and experiences of loss and grieving without the predefined goals and expectations of resolution and completion, respects the shifting, emerging, reemerging, *process* of grieving a death.

Discourses of grieving that emphasize outcome (accomplishing required or essential tasks and objectives) have I believe, been developed in part, to enable us to manage grief and grieving persons. The structure or "scaffolding" that is created by many theoretical constructs of grieving provides a form by which we may impose or prescribe containment of a grieving person's expressions and issues within parameters (such as tasks, phases, and objectives of grieving). Structuring facilitates the management and containment of our personal and societal anxieties, fears, and uncertainties about death. It supports our

quest to make grief predictable and re/solvable. Managing grief enables us to experience some semblance of control over grief and the grieving individual. Without such control death and bereavement may, we fear, feel or be overwhelming.

In grieving the death of my father, I repeatedly noticed and felt others' discomfort as I verbally expressed and emoted (tears in my eyes, voice quavering) the losses and grief that I felt. I observed that others' discomfort increased after their attempts to persuade me to shift the topic or the intensity of my expressions did not produce the intended result. It is imperative, I believe, to explore what may be coming into play when we seek to shift grieving individuals away from their felt grief and their expressions of grief. The discomfort that many of us experience while witnessing grieving persons express grief openly is produced by our inculturated denial and fear of death, which impedes our capacity to be emotionally present with them as they process their grief. We are motivated, in part, by our own discomfort and anxieties, and thus we seek to take action(s) to diminish or allay the bereaved person's grief. The process of influencing the process and expression of others' grief is also supported by and reflected in the way in which society tends to perceive grieving persons. Grieving individuals are often perceived to be "emotional," "vulnerable," "weak," and "out of control" and thus are placed in a one-down or demoted position. Collectively, we reflect this thinking and way of being any time emotion prevails as a focus rather than rationality and intellectuality. Conceptualizing grieving individuals as weak and demoting them in the process signifies and supports our sanctioning of the pre/dominant discourse of grieving.

Management of grieving persons is effected, in part, by directing and containing grief within parameters such as those defined in many theories as necessary or essential tasks, phases, and objectives of grieving. Our society, which values resolution and results over process is, I believe, strongly reflected in this dynamic. If, as in Western society, the dominant discourse is one which values rationality, predictability, and certainty, and these qualities are clearly reflected in many grief theories, then emotionality, unpredictability, and uncertainty are devalued. Thus, the authorized discourse, and ultimately, society's valued way takes precedence. As a consequence, grieving persons are urged to get or keep their grief under control, and to "move on in life" and "past grief" quickly. Expressions of grief, being emotional, "consuming," (to whom?) and unpredictable, are met with discomfort, avoidance, distraction, and emotional absence. Although it is my belief that people generally are unaware of the extent and depths to which their responses and reactions to grief are influenced and determined by the dominant discourse, the discomfort with others' grief and one's own grief is an internal emotional signal that something is needing to be attended to, and reassessed in our present beliefs, and ways of being with our own and others' grief. It offers us an opening from which we may examine and begin to change our beliefs, values, emotions, and experiences with loss and grieving.

The Effects and Affects of Managed Grief

The objectives and prescriptions of grieving espoused by many theories may disrupt, distract, and undermine a grieving individual's self-knowledge and trust in her/his own process of grieving. Theoretical and popular literature on grieving that defines or

proposes *for* grieving persons what *must* be experienced, worked through, or resolved may discount or undermine their capacity to identify for themselves, issues and emotions of loss and bereavement.

The perceived need and the decision to manage grief impedes our ability to be emotionally present with a grieving individual. To be emotionally present to the bereaved person and their expressions of grief, one needs to listen fully, and invite the person to further express and explore any and all aspects of their grief. If counsellors and others are strongly guided by theoretical constructs, tasks, and objectives that are predefined, they may be hindered in effectively supporting the grieving person's process. Clients' experiences may not be acknowledged as they are redirected to focus on "essential tasks." As will be discussed in the following subsection, resolution of ambivalent emotions is not always appropriate or therapeutic for the grieving person. Reframing a grieving individual's expression or processing to "facilitate" healing or resolution of this issue and other issues and emotions would likely hinder rather than effectively support the person's process of grieving.

Taking the Tasks and Objectives of Grieving to Task

Underlying the imperatives of the prescribed tasks and objectives of grieving is the assumption that some other (the author/ity of a theory or "the other" who promotes it) knows better than the bereaved person her/himself, what is important and necessary for her/him to acknowledge and process. I believe that it is essential for us to question and reflect upon what we may be imposing on grieving persons by presuming and ascribing

thoughts, emotions, or reactions to the very personal experience of (their) grief. Who is truly in a position to decide what must be acknowledged, accomplished, or resolved in a bereaved person's experience of grief other than the bereaved individual? Many grief theories and clinicians assert that the grieving individual must recognize, acknowledge and work through the pain of the death of a significant person in their life (Crenshaw, 1991; Rando, 1991; Martin and Ferris, 1992). This may be an accurate statement for a majority of people who are grieving the death of a significant person, yet it does not support or acknowledge diversity in people's experiences and emotions of grieving. Grieving is a complex, multidimensional process with issues and experiences that are unique to each individual. The grief that a person may experience is not necessarily respected and understood by others when individual experiences of loss and grief are relegated to the typical, collective, or universal experience(s) of grieving. A survivor may not initially, or even subsequently, feel pain in response to the death of a person. She/he may instead feel relief, joy, ambivalence, or a myriad of other possible emotions and reactions to the death and absence of the person. For example, if the person who died was abusive, oppressive, volatile, or indifferent to the survivor, the survivor's emotions, thoughts, and reactions will likely be very different than if the relationship were more nurturing and less conflicted. The survivor may purposely choose not to work toward, or to embrace, a shift in thoughts and emotions, or to otherwise work through, or with, feelings of ambivalence. The survivor may instead recognize that ambivalence is integral to her/his experience with or relationship to the deceased. If a grieving person is experiencing ambivalent emotions and thoughts in relation to the deceased, resolution of the ambivalence is not always positive, helpful, realistic or desirable. In grieving the loss

of my father, I recognized that in death, as in life, I had (and I continue to experience) conflicting emotions pertaining to an aspect of my relationship with him. The ambivalence remains and in a sense it honours and maintains the integrity of my experience of what happened. The ambivalence feels integral to my capacity to acknowledge and integrate that the experiences that happened were real, and that they cannot be changed or eradicated. I will not, nor do I feel the need to resolve them. I recognize their presence and I acknowledge them as one aspect of my relationship with my father that cannot and should not be transmuted.

Congruency Between What Is Asserted in Theories of Grieving and the Effectiveness of the Support and Counselling Offered to Grieving Individuals

Much of the grief literature identifies the resolution of guilt as necessary to the healthy resolution of one's grief (Tatelbaum, 1980; Ward, 1983; Angel, 1987; Rando, 1991; Attig, 1996). In addition, many constructs of the grieving process assert that a grieving person needs the opportunity to express her emotions deeply and fully, including guilt. Yet I question the effectiveness and the willingness with which individually, and collectively, we truly support grieving individuals to express guilt. My personal experiences and research have stimulated me to reflect upon others' discomfort (and my own) with supporting and even allowing a bereaved person to express guilt as fully and repeatedly as the person may feel is necessary to process her grief. As discussed in my narratives and reflective analysis, my attempts to explore residual feelings of sadness, regret, and most particularly guilt, were met by admonishments and directives from others (many of whom have counselling credentials and are working in a diversity of

helping professions). Statements such as, "You did all that you could to help your dad. You can't blame yourself." "Your father was an adult, responsible for making his own decisions," whether intended to do so or not, shut down my expression and processing of this aspect of my grief. Others' responses served to redirect me from exploring my sense of responsibility, and more generally silenced me from disclosing my grief. My sense of guilt, regret, and sorrow however, remained.

Difficulties in Being Emotionally Present with Others Who Are Grieving

Disclosing grief, and having it unheard or prematurely reframed may result in the bereaved person feeling more alone and even isolated in her/his grief. The grieving individual may be distracted or dissuaded from attending to her self-assessed and emerging experience when others impose a restructuring of grief. What may have been an opportunity for the person to experience and explore a deeper awareness of her process and emotions may instead be shifted to re/focus on the notions and directions of an external authoritative source. Theories of grieving and practices that (re)orient a grieving individual to the "knowledge", perspectives and beliefs of external authorities rather than supporting the person to notice, acknowledge, and trust in her/his own internal process undermine, redirect, and may reauthorize a grieving person's process of grieving and her/his sense of self. An example of an imposition aimed at restructuring a grieving person's process is explored in my narrative, *Some of Us Find it Upsetting*. Our family friend Louise stated that she and other friends of our family were disturbed each time they heard my father's voice on our answering machine. She informed me that his voice should be erased because it was "upsetting to hear him." Support and acknowledgement

of my family's feelings and our need (in our initial phases of grief) to maintain his voice on the tape (preserving a sense of his presence until we felt ready to emotionally accept his absence) were absent. In addition, being informed by Louise that, "other people aren't calling because they find it upsetting to hear his voice," was experienced as (and was, in essence) a threat of abandonment if we did not conform to others' needs and requests.

There are several potential effects that may occur when *others* impose a distraction upon a grieving individual. A most significant impact, I believe, is the disruption of a bereaved person's processing of grief. For example, distractions may result in a grieving person silencing expressions of grief and subsuming exploration of the issues or emotions interrupted by the distraction. In addition, one's sense of trust in one's own process may be shaken. Another potential effect stimulated by others' distractions and diversion is that a grieving person's *process of grieving* or the content (issues explored) may shift to comply with the discourse of grieving suggested by the other. The author(ity) of (one's) grief is impacted, at least in the moments of the diversion. Although such diversions may offer a bereaved person opportunities for exploring other aspects of loss and grief that she/he may not have considered, the potential for redirecting the person (away) from personally significant, self identified issues or layers of grief must not be discounted. Awareness of both the potential for distracting or redirecting a grieving person's process, and the potential effects and affects of distraction and redirection of an individual's grief is important. In addition, the timing with which others interject or introduce other topics or ways of perceiving aspects and emotions of grief is also significant.

Imposing a distraction or redirecting the grieving person's process and expression of grief also enables the helper/other to distract her/himself from processing these or similar emotions or issues. Counsellors and others who have diverted and otherwise avoided processing their own issues and emotions may not be able to effectively support a grieving person to fully express and process her/his grief. Issues and emotions of grief that remain unexpressed or which are unable to be acknowledged by self or others may compound the impact of the loss felt when grieving a death.

Supporting Others and Ourselves in Grieving

"Becoming mindful has to do with letting go of ambitions to control, solve problems, or achieve something. Instead we choose to bear witness" (Johanson and Kurtz, 1991, p. 13).

Reflecting upon my experiences of grieving the death of my father I have become increasingly aware of how others (and I) interfere with offering full emotional presence by imposing various forms of redirecting and managing others' grief. I have become painfully aware of how important it is to listen fully and to invite a person who is grieving to further express and explore any and all aspects of their loss and grief. Sitting quietly, perhaps in silence with a grieving person and allowing what may emerge (internally or more overtly in expression) offers respect and a space for *her/his process* and expression of grief.

My research and process of grieving my father's death have led me to question the need for proliferating theories of grieving without taking the time for individual and societal

reflection on how we perceive loss and grief, and grieving persons. When we seek to apply the universal or the general to a person and her/his unique life losses and experiences, we disrupt and preclude respectful understanding of her/him as an individual, as well as her/his personal experience of grieving. Aspects of grief theories may contribute valuable insights and information in supporting others and ourselves with respect to grieving a death. Grief is often unsettling and distressing on all levels of one's being. Having access to general information about what one may experience in grieving a death may be reassuring and helpful. A friend who experienced the death of her partner two years previously related that general information offered in an open-ended way was helpful to her because it normalized some of her process of grieving without defining and prescribing what must or should happen. In my own experience of grieving, writing about, rereading what I have written, and reflecting upon it, I have noticed that what tended to be helpful to me was others offering space, attentive listening and acknowledgement of what I was expressing, without reframing my experience(s). When a friend said gently, without judgement (in relation to my expressions of guilt at not having taken more time and effort to persuade my father to have his high blood pressure assessed), "You really feel a sense of responsibility," I was able to begin to feel that I did not need to push my thoughts and feelings away; it was okay to just feel them. What was offered to me in those moments was a deep listening and an opening for what I could not yet put into words. My experience of grieving was honoured, heard, and accepted as what I was feeling at that moment. My experience and feelings did not disappear into a constructed, collective grief, that whether intended or not seeks to unify, explicate, and impose a universality to grief and grieving.

William Blake's words from, "On Another's Sorrow" speak eloquently to the complexity and human challenge of being present emotionally with our own and others' grief:

Can I see another's woe
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief? (Blake, 1789, stanza 1)

Becoming More Emotionally Present With and Supportive of Grieving Individuals

As I considered writing about the process of how becoming more emotionally present with grieving persons may be fostered, I began with the notion of how I, and others, might be able to develop and offer a climate of emotional presence that would support and allow them to *be with* their experience as much as they were able to be at that particular moment of their grief. As I began this process I was hit by the words that I had chosen for this subsection, "becoming more emotionally present with." I was immediately flooded with sadness, tears flowed without me physically crying. It was a complete overtaking of emotion, and yet, it was a floodgate of relief. I was, in spite of myself and my attempts to keep this part of the research academic, objective, and focused on the cognitive, brought back by, and to, something within. It told me with such a deep force that I could no longer shove it away or press it back down again. I had thought at the outset that this subsection of my chapter, and certainly the chapter itself needed to be grounded in "research," "objectivity," and "theory" to demonstrate the rigor of my thesis and my chosen methodology. Hadn't I had the rest of my thesis to reflect, question, and express my grief at a gut level? I had assumed the position of the academic objective (and

the objective academic) throughout the writing and research of this chapter. It is from this position that I embarked upon the writing and reflection on the topic of emotional presence. Seeing my words "becoming more emotionally present" brought me immediately, suddenly, and in retrospect I realize, probably inescapably to my core--a place from which there is no avoidance because it is so real in the present moment and simultaneously somewhere that is, or feels, timeless. In being hit so fully and so intensely there is no way, and in essence, no pull to avoid. Instead, amongst the painful flood of emotions that runs with currents beyond what I know (and yet I know them) there is a sense of inner calm, a peace beyond anything that I can will upon myself.

The knowing and the process cannot start from somewhere outside of me, from a position that states: I can examine emotional presence by focusing on what I, or other people need to do, or can do, in being more emotionally present to and with grieving persons.

Becoming more emotionally present to others who are grieving cannot (I now realize deeply) start with my focus on what I can do for, and in the presence of an other who is grieving. To begin with a focus on others feels safer, more objective, and if I'm honest, more noble. Yet I cannot simply bypass my own fears, discomfort, anxieties, and the pull to run away from being present in, and with, my own grief. It needs to begin with my own processing, and my own process of becoming more emotionally present with my self and the losses from which my grief flows. In the moments in which I realize this I see the irony before me: I am doing the very thing that I have been exploring in my discussion and analysis of prescriptive predetermined discourse theories on grieving. I was attempting to begin the discussion of emotional presence by focusing externally on what

may need to be facilitated or offered (by myself and others) to more effectively support grieving persons in their expression and processing of their grief. I realize amidst the overwhelming experience of this floodgate, that *be/coming* emotionally present to and with grief, and grieving persons, needs to have its initial (and ongoing intermittent) grounding in my own gut-level experiences. Even attempting to become more emotionally present with others requires that I am able to tolerate, and stay with my own grief deeply, at least on some occasions, to notice, feel, and experience the emotions and the process deeply. It involves a willingness and courage to experience becoming and being (in the moments of intense grief) as emotionally present as I am able to be, to and with my own grief. I recall reading that: "We are drawn to that which we fear and from which we have much to learn." Perhaps it is not surprising that I have chosen to write about grief; something which has touched me from my beginning, and which I have never "resolved." Yet even being or feeling so close to loss for much of my life, I continue to suppress my awareness that one of the most difficult life lessons is also one that is my beginning. I am drawn to learning about how to support others and myself more effectively in processing grief and life losses because, and in spite of, the scariness of my own experience of loss, of a nothingness, nothing and no one there. If I manage to stay as present as I am able to with it, there is the knowing of the fear of annihilation. No wonder I and others seek to avoid "going to" let alone trying to stay present with our own personal (and universally humanly shared) "places" and experiences of our losses. For all the personal processing of grieving the loss of my father, experienced, felt deeply, written, analyzed and reflected upon, in the work of this thesis, I have tried to compartmentalize my emotions and processing of the losses and grief to that of the grief

that I feel solely related to his absence from my life. Yet that is not the truth of my experiences. This loss, the death of my father, cannot be separated from all the multitude of losses, those consciously recalled, and others that may never be named or fully known to me on a conscious level, but are imprinted on my being. I am not alone in this experience of unknown yet felt losses, many of which may never be "identified," yet are very real and present on some level(s) of one's being. Such losses are awakened, stirred in us, each time we face another loss, including a grief that feels in the moments of experiencing to have no origin (and may have no end?).

Becoming more emotionally present to my own and others' grief is a lifelong process that speaks of and to resilience. It requires a trust in some part of myself that knows, beyond merely cognitive rationality, that it is my fear of, not the objective "reality" of annihilation that I struggle to avoid and to face in experiencing, and in staying in, and with, the inextricably intertwined loss/grief/(re)birth and awakenings.

Without continuing to engage this process as fully as possible, how may I even begin to invite and to support a deepening awareness of and a compassionate way of being with an other who is grieving?

Facilitating the Process of Becoming More Emotionally Present

In grieving the death of my father I have become increasingly aware of the difficulties and the incredible opportunities for shifts in my grief by allowing and supporting myself to engage the process of becoming emotionally present to whatever emerges. The process of inner witnessing and becoming more emotionally present to grief is a uniquely personal journey. I cannot define, describe or detail the process for others. Even to attempt to do so would be disrespectful of the unique life experiences, self-awareness, and personal journey of each human being. What I am able to offer is an exploration and discussion of what I have found helpful as I attempt to remain with the process and the emergence and reemergence of aspects and emotions of my grief.

As I consider the question posed by my thesis committee: "How did you cultivate the process of inner witnessing and emotional presence that allowed you to reflect and write about your grief," my awareness is that it seems always to have been with me, integral to my way of being in the world. In many ways it does not feel as though it is a decision or a conscious choice. Rather, it is an inner knowing, an awareness emerging from deep within that engaging the process and staying with(in) as it unfolds is a matter of survival and self-preservation. My early experience of loss was, I believe, a catalyst, a necessary entry into becoming more emotionally present to the intolerable experience that threatened me. The experience was a sudden and irrevocable disconnection from my biological mother immediately after birth as I was to be placed for adoption. My infant experience over a period of three weeks was like being swallowed up in a void with *no one there*. The level of emotional intolerability *feels* so intense that even as an adult I am

able only to experience and process momentary glimpses before I find myself wanting to retreat, to block remembering and reexperiencing the abandonment, disconnection and aloneness. What I have learned however is that by allowing myself to sense and to feel what is emerging, and staying with it emotionally and on a soul-level for as long as I am able to do so, I experience a shift and often a release of another layer or aspect of my sensing, feeling, and awareness of this experience. My experience as an infant is not resolved; the processing is not completed. Each emergent glimpsing of the experience offers an opportunity to process another aspect of this loss.

Opportunities for Accessing Emerging Personally Meaningful "Information"

It is my belief that life experiences such as the death of someone significant can shake a person to her/his core, leaving her/him feeling raw and vulnerable as she/he attempts to make sense of what has happened and the impact of the loss. The losses and changes that a person experiences as she/he grieves may be unsettling and disruptive, leaving her/him feeling emotionally shaky and uncertain. As unsettling and frightening as this may feel, the vulnerability and uncertainty that one may experience as one grieves may afford or offer an opening to emerging personally meaningful awarenesses. Within the rawness of grief if we are able to stay present with our in-the-moment experiencing of what is unfolding we may access an opening to new, differing, and deepening layers/levels of (self) awareness.

"When we enter into a witnessing state of consciousness, we do not end up talking about experience from a distance. Nor do we get caught up in the drama of experience. Rather, we become fully present to our experiential reality, while at the same time our inner witness stands back and curiously studies its nature" (Johanson and Kurtz, 1991, pp. 17-18).

My Personal Process of Becoming More Emotionally Present

Trusting the Draw to Inner Witnessing

The underlying draw toward physical, emotional, and spiritual equilibrium is the basis of my grieving process. There is deep sense of wanting and needing to connect with and know my personal truth. Being able to trust that I have the capacity to cope with what is emerging is central to my process. I nurture self-trust in my capacity for inner witnessing each time I support myself to pay close attention on all levels of my being to what I am sensing, feeling, thinking, and experiencing in the moment. I respect and acknowledge my feelings as they flow and evolve, knowing that they offer and reflect my inner experiencing and my knowing of self. There is also a *knowing* that what needs to emerge will emerge.

Being in the Process

Becoming emotionally present to my experience involves noticing emerging feelings and allowing and supporting them to come to a fullness. It also requires noticing sensations and contractions in my body (such as tightening in my gut, clenching of my jaw, constriction of my throat, shakiness, and my heart racing and pounding) which alert me to

something that is emerging and needing to be processed further. Sometimes what is emerging is so intense that I feel overwhelmed with fear and I begin to imagine how I can avoid experiencing what feels too frightening. Staying with(in) my process involves noticing and acknowledging my fear and my draw toward avoiding processing my experience. It involves noticing how I am avoiding processing and attempting to protect and withdraw, for example, by contracting areas of my body, crossing my legs tightly, repeated self-talk mantras of "I can't take this," "No, no, no..." and shaking my head back and forth repetitively. Noticing, acknowledging and respecting my fear and anxieties facilitates me to stay present with what is unfolding. Awareness of shifts in my emotions, bodily sensations and tension patterns in my body are key throughout processing as they offer significant clues to my experience and to what is emerging in the moment. Simultaneously, allowing images to arise that express my physical and emotional sensations helps me to stay present to my experience.

Paying careful attention to, allowing, and tracking my thoughts, emotions, and sensations throughout my process is also central to becoming more emotionally present to my experience. Tracking is important because I have learned that I may sabotage my experience (subverting or redirecting its unfolding) by judging, minimizing, negating its legitimacy or reframing it while I am in the process. In addition, tracking my thoughts allows me access to differing and deepening layers of processing as I notice the intricate interplay between my thoughts and my emotional experiencing of what I am processing. I respect that all aspects of processing have unique and invaluable offerings.

I support myself to stay present with what is emerging by knowing and compassionately accepting that a core fear that arises during processing might be my felt and sensed fear of annihilation and emotional/spiritual death. I remind myself that I can be open to my experience in the present moment(s) *and* I can also choose to process it when I am more emotionally ready to do so. This aspect requires trust in my capacity to "hold" the experience at some level and not submerge or abandon it to my unconscious.

Encompassing the processing of my experience is a nurtured and deep trust that as I become more familiar with my process I now *know* that what needs to emerge will emerge. I also trust that (ultimately) I will be okay and that I will experience shifts in my self. Knowing and trusting this fundamental awareness facilitates a relaxation toward engaging my process.

Self-Comforting

I employ a variety of self-comforting behaviors to facilitate and support me in creating a holding environment for my process. I engage these behaviours spontaneously throughout my processing to facilitate deeper and continued accessing of an experience. I also draw on them consciously when I am experiencing anxiety or fear while in process. Examples of my self-comforting behaviours include slowing and regulating my breathing, using rhythmic motions such as rocking, imagining a safe place, and repeating brief phrases as a calming mantra such as, "I'm okay," and "It's okay to remember."

I have found that embracing self-comforting and grounding behaviours while processing is a personally empowering means of supporting myself to remain as present as possible

with what is emerging. Reminding myself of the option of accessing support from friends or a therapist is also helpful as I engage my process.

Reviewing My Experience of Processing

As my system settles after having allowed an emotional processing to come to a fullness I am aware of a multiplicity of shifts on all levels of my being. For example, I feel the tension in my body dissipate and the contraction eases and releases. I know and feel deeply a personal truth about my life and experience which needs no external verification or validation. I experience a sense of clarity and calm that flows between my mind, heart and spirit. There is a deeper knowing and understanding of my emotional and psychological roots and my pathways in this life and at the same time I experience a sense of opening, and a sense that there is so much more to experience, integrate and contextualize with earlier and subsequent processing. There is an internal movement or shift in myself that extends to the outer world. Even when emotionally painful processing has taken place I often experience a sense of wonder and grace. I trust that I will have other opportunities for processing and simultaneously accept with humility and compassion that I can never know where an experience of processing will lead me. This is a wonder that I hold in awe.

I am aware of the shifts on all levels and I realize that I am changed not only through what has emerged, but also by experiencing the process. I accept that each experience with processing will be different and that each has its own offering. I have a sense of knowing that I have another "piece of the puzzle" of (my) life and that this piece will,

with further processing, be integrated with what has already emerged and will over time become part of what is yet to be experienced and processed. This does not represent a conclusion or ending or even a movement to conclusion or "ultimate understanding." Rather, it offers me an opening to connect more deeply and fully with life and others. As I allow and experience each process I realize that I am learning to tolerate and even to move toward less fearful embracing of incongruencies, dichotomies, uncertainties, unknowns, and sometimes almost intolerable emotions and sensations. In some ways the draw toward becoming more emotionally present to my experiences is similar to the process of photosynthesis in which a plant is drawn toward the nourishment offered by the sunlight. As I experience the shifts in my being, sensing, and knowing, I am increasingly drawn to becoming more emotionally present to my experiences.

An Example of My Personal Process

What I have outlined in this discussion of my experience is the fundamental attitude and approach I bring to each experience that arises in my process of grieving. I offer the following example of my processing of an aspect of my experience described in the narrative, I'm Not Ready. As the funeral director asked, "When would you like to pick up the ashes," my first observation was nausea and constriction in my gut. As I reflect upon this experience currently, I notice the same nausea and constriction. I feel anxious and simultaneously notice my thoughts darting as I imagine possibilities for avoiding (re)processing this experience. I notice that I am experiencing reverberations of the shock I felt that night. I realize I need support and I feel intensely that I must do this alone. I recognize that this is a familiar pattern; this sense of having to figure things out and being

able to get through it and of having to face life alone. As I allow this realization I begin to see with a greater clarity, and an accompanying sense of fear, that this pattern is one that traces back to my beginning; to infancy. Right now I'm feeling sadness about the whole picture (of early experiences of being and feeling unsupported and the "decisions" I've made because of this knowing) and simultaneously I feel reassured and empowered by the familiarity of the pattern. I am struck by how real the pattern feels and I feel the fear that is (still) attached to it and I am also able to realize that it was learned. I can feel the sadness and be with it and at the same time I trust that I will be able to track this pattern of experiencing more readily in the future.

As I sit quietly after this processing I am suddenly flooded with another level of awareness, a connection that is hard to stay with because I cannot share it with my dad. My own personal journey with experiencing and reexperiencing "the void" was also a fear that my father lived with and could not seem to allow himself to embrace or follow. I feel incredibly sad for him. My initial thought is that if only he were here I could tell him of how supporting myself to be as emotionally present with my process and my emotions as possible has created shifts in my knowing and experiencing of the void. Yet this awareness reflects my experience and my processing. As I stay with the simultaneous sadness of my sense of this lost opportunity and the engulfing loss of my father's absence from my life I realize that my pathway is not my father's.

Supporting Emergence

"Mindful, nonviolent therapy simply helps us discover and affirm the wisdom of our inner experience" (Johanson and Kurtz, 1991, p. 38).

As I reflect upon how I may respectfully employ what I have learned about loss and grieving from my own experiential processing to support grieving persons I am drawn to the source from which my own process emanates; trust. Perhaps the most helpful thing I can offer to others who are grieving is a patient quiet presence that offers space for the person's process to emerge and flow. It is not enough to offer space within the pretense of patience. If I cannot trust my own process and embrace its wisdom, I will be unable to trust the process of another human being and be *with her* as she experiences the unfolding and transforming of her experience(s). In recognizing that each person's life experiences are uniquely and richly her own, I am able to support her to trust in *her* own capacity to grieve by accessing ways of processing that feel safe and respectful to herself and her life experiences.

Chapter Three: Narratives and Reflective Analyses

Introduction

This chapter consists of narratives that discuss aspects of my lived experiences of grieving my father's death. The narratives that I chose for inclusion in my thesis do not represent a linear progression of my grieving process. Rather, they reflect the process(ing) of aspects, emotions, and experiences of grieving. The narratives included in this text are excerpts of my personal writings that I believe speak to issues, queries, and emotions of grieving that are often denied, avoided, minimized, or relegated to the realm of the unspoken because they reflect emotions and experiences that are considered negative, morose or "unacceptable" in Western society. It is my intention and my hope that by directly discussing a diversity of issues, emotions, and experiences, that others may also be encouraged to express the narratives of their own personal experiences of grieving.

Writing the narratives was much more difficult than I could ever have imagined. I entered into this inquiry with a life-long passion and capacity for examining my processing of lived experiences even when and often particularly if the issues and emotions surrounding an experience were, or felt, frightening, tenuous, and intense. I thought that I would be able to enter into and engage fully and repeatedly the complexities and depths of the life-altering experience of "losing" my father and that I would be able to articulate the process encompassing all levels of my being and my process(ing). The process of engaging the emotions and experiences of grieving and simultaneously attempting to

articulate them was often psychologically and emotionally difficult and intensely disquieting. I found myself avoiding writing and becoming easily distracted as I engaged the writing of several of the narratives. I wondered (and I continue to consider) what I was avoiding and what I was attempting to distract myself from noticing, sensing, feeling, and experiencing deeply. In the moments in which I write this awareness I realize how deeply I have internalized the societal imperatives and expectations for grieving a death. I have integrated and held aspects of these impositions even as I simultaneously seek to subvert and move outside of them. The struggle to articulate and more significantly even to find (the) words to write about how my father's sudden death and absence feels, is in part a testimony to the individual and collective constraints that we have imposed and continue to impose upon one another and ourselves as we grieve. Recognizing and acknowledging the existence and influences of such constraints is a central focus of this inquiry and the narratives and reflective analysis texts. Perhaps as we become more aware of the constraints, directives, avoidance, and silencing of expressions of grief and the impact of these impositions we may begin to open ourselves to creating a language with which we may more honestly and deeply articulate our personal grief and more compassionately hear the grief of others.

The Telephone Call

My heart is pounding even before I realize what is happening. I'm out of bed and halfway across my room, drawn by an energy that is beyond me. It's pitch dark. What time is it? How long have I been sleeping? Who is phoning in what feels like the middle of the night? Phone calls at night are notoriously ominous, I think to myself, unless, no, I'm not on call. Perhaps it's a crank call from someone who enjoys awakening someone from a sound sleep to meet a dead silence or crude words. I won't give them the satisfaction. I'll let my answering machine downstairs pick up the message. I wait for the rings to engage the machine. I hear a click followed by the answering machine relaying the recorded greeting. Almost immediately I hear a voice superimposed upon the recorded message. Before I can pick up the receiver I recognize the voice, panicked, words spilling out rapidly in repetition, "Denyse, Denyse..." I can't pick up the phone quickly enough, panic now within me. My heart is racing and I feel my hands shaking as I grab the phone out of its cradle. "Hi, what's wrong?" I can feel the caller's fear, now mine also. "Paul has fallen in the bathroom and we can't get him up," she says. "You've got to call 911 right now!" I respond. "We called the ambulance and they're not coming, they're not coming," she replies with panic in her voice. "Okay. You've got to hang up the phone right now and I'll call 911. We'll be right over. Hang up the phone right now." I just want her to get off the phone so that I can call 911. Everything feels unreal, yet I know it's real. Something is terribly wrong with dad. I hear the phone click. Dead air. No dial tone. I press the on/off button on the cordless phone trying to get a dial tone. Nothing, no dial tone. I feel panicked. I have to help dad. I yell to my partner, "Hurry, hurry up. Dad's collapsed in the bathroom. I can't get a dial tone on the phone. Get the cell phone in the glove

compartment in the car." I race downstairs to the kitchen to try the other phone. No dial tone. I press the button several times. Useless! Still no dial tone. Where is the cell phone? A second later I see my partner at the front door, cell phone in his hand just as I hear a dial tone. I press the numbers 911. After several seconds I hear a female voice say, "What's your emergency; Fire, Police, or Ambulance?" "Ambulance," I respond. The tension of waiting is unbearable. I can hardly contain myself. It's all taking *too long*. "Ambulance, how may we help you?" "You've got to send an ambulance to 1843 Mountain Place. My dad has collapsed on the bathroom floor and he's unconscious. I'm afraid he's had a CVA or an MI. He's not someone who would just trip and fall. My family called for an ambulance already, but the ambulance hasn't come yet," I relay as quickly as possible, resenting every second of time that passes. "Are you at the residence right now ma'am?" "No. I'm at my own home about ten minutes away." Why is he asking me this? Doesn't he think that my father has actually collapsed and is unresponsive? Why is he wasting irretrievable time? "Ma'am, the ambulance is just pulling into the driveway now." "Thank you." "You're welcome ma'am." Hanging up the phone I call out, "Come on, come on, the ambulance is there, we've got to get over there, hurry up!" I just want to be at dad's house right now. Even a second is an intolerable delay. The quiet of the night belies what's happening within me. "Drive faster, please. We've got to get there." I wish I were driving. I'd go faster. It feels as if time is standing still *and* slipping away. I look at the clock on the dashboard. It's a few minutes after 1:00 am. I try to recall the time displayed on the VCR when I first heard the panicked voice on the phone and I draw a blurry uncertainty. I feel myself leaning forward in the seat, willing us to arrive at dad's home more quickly, as if I can project myself forward and arrive sooner. Soon enough?

The urgency is unrelenting. Could anything be soon enough for me right now? "Pray," I suddenly blurt out. "We've got to pray." "Yes," my partner responds while nodding his head. "All we can do right now is pray," I reiterate. I'm so scared that I can't think of what to pray. The Lord's Prayer. That's what I need to pray. I recite part of it in my head, stumbling over the words, distracted by what seems to be a "forever car ride". I can't concentrate long enough to pray. "Are you praying? You are praying aren't you?" I ask, not pausing for my partner's response to my first question. I feel so helpless. I can't even be there with dad yet. What's happening to him? "I think it's really serious. Do you think he might die?" I ask, trying somehow to come to grips with what feels surrealistic. My heart pounds. We're only at the corner of Robertson and Sumac. We have to hurry up. "I'm afraid he might die," I blurt out, no longer able to keep my fear internalized. We drive for a minute or two in silence, but inside every aspect of my being is hyper-alert in my desperation to get to dad. Finally we turn onto Enco Drive and wind our way up to the top of the hill. As we reach Mountain Place I fight the urge to jump out of the car and run to the house just as I did so many times as a child. I can't possibly arrive soon enough. I see the lights of the fire truck parked at the bottom of the cul-de-sac along with an ALS ambulance and some other emergency vehicles. It's too much to take in all at once. All I notice is the reality of all these vehicles. This is actually happening. I run up the driveway to the double-entrance front doors that are usually used only on special occasions. One of the doors is wide open. I see a member of my family sitting in an armchair in the living room, tears streaming down her face. Another family member is seated next to her, appearing shaken, as though she is in a state of shock. I hear my voice ask, "Where's dad?" Someone responds, "He's in the bedroom." I start to walk down the

hallway toward the bedroom. A firefighter stands halfway down the hall, tall and very still, like a sentinel, with his back to the wall. As I approach he steps forward and says, "Maybe you should wait in the living room with your family." "I need to see my dad." There is no doubt, no need for discussion. "I need to see what's happening to my dad," I say as I walk past him. I reach the bedroom door and I see my father's body on the carpet less than a foot from the bathroom in which he collapsed. A paramedic is performing chest compressions in a rhythmic pattern while another paramedic "bags" dad, squeezing air into his lungs, trying to breathe for my dad who lies lifeless on the floor. I feel frozen, fixed in place watching all that is happening. I hear a kind of voice inside my head that tells me that my dad is dead. There is no emotion to the voice as if it is only a statement. He looks so very ashen, waxy, beyond pale, as if his life has already slipped away. Where did dad, go? Is this really dad? It's as though it's not really my dad, and this is not happening, yet I know it is happening.

I need to stay, to see what is being done to him. I wish I could talk to dad to tell him that I'm here and that I love him; to reassure him of our family's presence, to let him know he's not alone. I don't say anything, at least not out loud. I'm afraid to speak; the paramedics might be distracted from the resuscitation. If I speak they may insist that I go to the living room and not watch what is being done. I might distract them to the point of costing my dad his life. All I can do is stand and watch.

I hear one of the paramedics say, "Stop compressions. Let's check the rhythm." They stop the chest compressions and all of us immediately look at the cardiac monitor sitting on my father's bed. All I want to see is a rhythm. Please, let there be a rhythm viable

enough to bring my dad back to life. Nothing even nearly reminiscent of effective heart activity appears on the monitor, not even an adequate rhythm to defibrillate.

I'm afraid, terrified. What feels surrealistic, nightmarish, and impossible to comprehend, feels simultaneously real. "Resume compressions," I hear someone say. My dad's chest moves up and down with each compression. His hand looks waxen, unreal in colour. I wish I could touch dad's hand even for a moment to let him feel my presence.

I turn away and walk down the hall back to the living room. I sit with my family, trying to find something comforting to say. Words seem so inadequate. I can't really think of what to say to offer solace. I look at my family and feel our pain meld. "I'm going to go see what's happening with dad," I say to them. I can't tolerate not being near him. I feel as though it's all I can do. It's what I need and want to do for dad and for myself. Dad doesn't look any better. One of the paramedics is administering IV drugs and recording the status of dad's condition, while another paramedic performs compressions and a third paramedic ventilates dad's lungs. The paramedic who is recording the resuscitation procedures stops writing for a few seconds. I'm afraid to speak. I'm worried that I'll interrupt their efforts. I want to know what my dad's status is, and simultaneously, I'm afraid to know. I hesitate, then blurt out loud, "Can you be honest and just please tell me what's been happening with my dad? Did he still have a pulse when you arrived? Do you think he's going to die?" "He had a little bit of electrical activity when we arrived but not really a viable rhythm," one of the paramedics replies. I feel numb. It's as though I'm in a play watching something that's not real. It's as if any moment we'll all "wake up" or

realize that this is just unreal. I stare off into the distance feeling numb and trying to numb myself further to what is happening in this room now transposed into an unbelievable nightmare.

I suddenly remember another family member. My family wasn't able to reach him earlier when they telephoned him. I walk to the den and shakily dial his number. I hear the phone ring and then several more rings follow. Pick up the phone Tom. I hear a click followed by his recorded message. "Tom, if you're there pick up. It's Denyse. It's 1:20 in the morning. I'm up at dad's house. Could you please give me a call back as soon as possible? It's important. Bye." I hurry back to the room to see how dad is doing. He looks the same. A few moments later one of the paramedics calls for a check of dad's heart rhythm. All of us fix immediately on the heart monitor. I hope for a rhythm, anything that indicates life or hope of the possibility of life. Artifact, that's all there is on the monitor; erratic, silly, meaningless jags and spikes that I want to scream cannot be my dad's heart activity. I hear myself blurt out loud, "There's not much happening on the monitor." The resuscitation efforts are not helping dad. One of the paramedics calls for defibrillation. I watch him reach for the paddles and then place them into position on my father's chest. I don't want to see electrical shocks ejected into dad's body. Even in my anxiety I wonder why they are subjecting dad to this procedure when he does not have a heart rhythm necessary for a potentially successful defibrillation. I feel as though we are violating his body. I'm contributing to the violation by not questioning the decision to defibrillate my father when he doesn't have a viable heart rhythm. I tell myself that dad's spirit is no longer trapped or contained within his physical body, yet his body is still part

of who he is. I want to look away as the paramedic defibrillates, but instead I find myself compelled to watch what is happening to dad. I am still watching as they defibrillate a second time. I can't stand what it does, and doesn't do, to my father. I look at the monitor; still no heart activity. The paramedics resume CPR. I can feel myself getting shaky.

Time. What time is it? I have no clear idea but the time that must have passed frightens me. I have to know even though time seems and is in other ways irrelevant. "How long have you been working on my dad?" I ask, needing an answer to what I fear. The paramedic who is documenting answers. I tell them that I'm worried about how dad might be physically and mentally if they now, after so much time has elapsed, somehow managed to get his heart beating again. How much damage may there be to his brain? Dad would hate living in a severely impaired condition, perhaps unable to speak, walk, or to think clearly. I'm afraid that my dad won't be able to live his life the way he would want to continue living if they are able to get his heart beating after so much time has elapsed. I feel so clinical; my nurse instinct on alert but this is happening to my dad.

After several more minutes of resuscitation efforts one of the paramedics turns and asks, "Would you be all right if we decided to stop CPR?" "Yes, I would be." I'm aware that stopping the CPR means that all attempts to revive dad have ceased. It means that dad dies. It means that dad is dead. Somewhere within me I feel that he has already died. I think that he may have died before I arrived. We've all been trying through medical interventions, and thoughts and prayers, to help dad to survive, to have him be okay again. But, he's not going to be okay. He's not going to survive.

I'm giving my okay to stop any further attempts to resuscitate dad. Am I honestly thinking about my dad's needs and what he would want or am I projecting my own fears? What is he aware of right now? Can he see what's happening? Is he hovering, waiting? Is he afraid? Does he feel alone, abandoned? Is he aware of all the love we feel for him?

The paramedic explains that they are not authorized to make the final decision to stop the resuscitation efforts without consulting the physician on-call. He asks me if it would be all right if he called the doctor to provide a status report and to receive a consultation.

"Yes. There's a phone right here and there is also a phone in the first room down the hall," I respond. I hope that he'll choose the phone in the den. I don't really want to hear the conversation. I made the decision on my own without consulting my family because I think it may be too difficult for them. I'm trying to protect them, but am I really protecting them? I can't really protect anyone at this impossible moment of time. I can't even help dad except maybe by stopping the intrusion of CPR *if* he has already died.

I feel torn. I want to stay near dad and I also need to see how my family is doing. I need to let them know what is happening. I walk toward the living room. I hear the paramedic on the phone as I pass by the den and try not to hear the words. My family is distraught. I've never seen them in such pain. I never imagined the shock and pain of anything like this happening to us. I try to find the words to prepare them and myself for what is happening without knowing what might be decided by the doctor on call. I wish that I could tell them something positive or at least hopeful. I return to the bedroom, back to standing at the door-frame, watching the paramedics continuing to perform CPR on dad

while their colleague consults with the doctor. A few minutes later the paramedic returns and states, "I spoke with Dr. Matten and he agrees with the decision to discontinue CPR given the circumstances." I nod and say, "Okay." I know that this means that my dad with certainty will die once all the resuscitation efforts cease. I ask the paramedics, "Would I be able to just talk to my dad for a minute please? Could you continue doing the CPR while I talk to dad, just in case it helps to perfuse his body while I speak to him?" "Sure," they say as they nod their heads. I reach for my dad's right hand. It's very cool. I try to talk to dad to tell him that I love him. It feels strained, impossible really. Did you hear dad? Did you know that everyone was nearby? I truly hope so. You are so loved. We would never have left you alone. It feels very stilted with all the strangers: paramedics, firefighters, and police officers. I can't say goodbye with strangers listening. I can't think of what to say. How can this be happening? Is it actually real? You look so far away dad, as if you're no longer part of this world.

"Thanks for letting me talk to my dad," I say to the paramedics. I need to tell my family that dad has died. I leave dad for the moment and return to the living room to talk to my family. "The paramedics did everything that they could but they just couldn't get dad's heart beating again," I say, quietly and shakily to them. I hear my voice and the words that seem so hollow, almost as though they come from someone other than myself.

Why did dad have to die like this?

Beyond Words

The paramedics inform me that they'll be finished soon and that our family will then have an opportunity to see dad. I nod and answer, "Yes." "We'll move your dad up on to the bed in a few minutes so he'll look more at rest," the paramedic adds. "Thanks," I answer. I look at my dad and I know he is dead, but it feels like a dream. I wish I could just wake up from this and discover that it's all a hideous mistake.

I walk from my parents' bedroom to the living room to be with my family. We sit near each other physically, but it's as if we're in our own worlds. No words seem possible. What I want to be able to say is that dad will be okay. I can't believe that only an hour ago he was still alive, just getting ready for bed. I try to avoid thinking about this. Dad is dead. I have to help my family.

I feel intensely restless. I can't sit still for more than a few minutes. I can't tolerate being away from dad, yet I also feel I should be with my family. After a few minutes of sitting in the living room I can't sit still any longer. I get up and walk down the hall to the bedroom. Dad is now positioned on the bed, yet I still picture clearly where he lay on the floor, with the paramedics performing all the resuscitation efforts... One of the paramedics says something to me. "Pardon," I respond. "We've had to leave all the tubes in place for now. It's required under circumstances of unexpected deaths," he informs me. "Yes, I know," I answer, not feeling anything, except a dullness.

Somebody, (I don't remember if it was one of the paramedics or one of the police officers) tells me that the coroner has been notified as a requirement of an unexpected death at home. "Okay," I answer, as I go through the motions of responding to what's happening and what needs to be done. I feel someone behind me near my left shoulder just as I hear a voice. It's the female police officer who says, "I've called the coroner and left a message for him. He should be calling back fairly soon. After he's informed of what's happened he'll let us know whether or not he needs to attend at the house or whether it's okay to release your dad's body to the hospital." She touches my arm gently and I see that her eyes look moist. It helps to know she is not just going through the motions. Why does she seem to be able to feel what I can't?

A few minutes later as I'm walking back to the living room a man walks toward me. I don't recognize him. Has he been here all along? He introduces himself and tells me that he is the female constable's supervisor. "My colleague is completely capable and qualified," he states, "but I'm required under the circumstances of unexpected deaths to remain in attendance until the coroner renders a decision of whether he needs to come to the house." His voice is kind and his calm manner is reassuring. "Yes, I understand. Thank you," I answer. The paramedics and firefighters finish packing up their equipment. One of them asks me dad's birth date, which he then immediately writes on a form. The paramedics say goodbye to our family, offering words of kindness which escape me, yet which somehow provide a sense of connection for me amidst the shock of all that has happened. "Thank you for all your efforts and your kindness," I manage to offer in return. They nod and one of them shakes my hand before leaving. I'm not sure how many people

in total were in attendance, helping dad directly and standing by. The house feels full of "strangers" who are now no longer really strangers. Their presence seems to remain even after they have left our home.

I sit down in the living room again with my family but I feel the restlessness within, as though I should be somewhere else. After a few minutes I find myself standing up and moving to the entrance of the hall, unsure of where I should be. The police officer asks, "How are you doing?" I answer, "Okay," and nod in an attempt to reassure her or maybe myself. "Hopefully, the coroner will call soon. I'll repeat the call if I don't hear from him in the next few minutes." "Thanks," I respond. I have no idea what time it is or how long it's been since dad died. Time seems irrelevant and elusive.

After a while the phone rings and the police officer goes to the den to answer the telephone. She walks into the living room a few minutes later and asks if she can speak with me. I follow her down the hall to the den. "That was the coroner on the phone. He doesn't feel that it's necessary to come to the house. He's given permission to release your dad's body to the hospital," she informs me. "Good. What happens now?" I ask. "I'll call Alvin's Patient Transfer Services and arrange for them to take your dad to the hospital. They're usually pretty good at arriving fairly soon," she says. I shake my head back and forth as I feel the anxiety suddenly building within me. "I don't like that company's way of working. They don't lift people properly. I've seen them on other occasions when they're lifting and transporting people who have died, including a good friend. I don't want them to just drag my dad on to their stretcher." I feel sick inside. I don't want my

dad treated like an object. The police officer looks at me intently and after a moment she says, "I'm going to phone them and let them know that taking care to move your dad gently is very important to your family." "Thanks," I respond, feeling my anxiety diminish slightly. "Would you also tell them that I'm going to be there when they move dad. I want to help to lift him." "Sure," she answers with no hesitation. I hope the transfer people don't even think of trying to persuade me not to help when they arrive.

There is so much happening. Everything feels and is outside of our control. It's not right, I think to myself. Dad is dead, and we don't even have the opportunity to say goodbye in our own time without people we don't know being in our home.

What about dad's soul? Has his soul had any peace in all of this? He's had his body assaulted with all of the resuscitation efforts and now his body has to be moved, taken away from us at a time that is not his, nor ours, but is capriciously at someone else's control. Why can't dad's body and soul have peace now for at least a little while?

I return to the living room and inform my family that two people will be coming in a while to take dad's body to the hospital. I feel numb as I tell my family. It's as if I'm just making an announcement about some mundane matter. But it's dad. He's going to be "taken away" soon.

I want and need to say goodbye to dad, but I'm not ready. Everything feels so filled with other people, other(s) timings. Those of people, and of things, forces beyond me, and

more significantly, beyond dad, and what he may have needed and wanted. He was always private and quiet. This is not at all what he would have wanted.

I walk to the bedroom and once again see my dad lying on the bed. Someone has put a chair next to the bed. I stand looking at him for a while. It's dad's body, but I know he's not here. Just a shell. He's gone somewhere or at least he's no longer in this physical form. I want to say goodbye, but the incredible shock, the speed with which everything has happened, makes the whole thing seem impossible, surreal. Is that really you dad? Am I really standing here, looking at you, and you've already gone?

I stand for a while just trying to think of what to say. What do I say? How do I say goodbye? Finally, I sit down on the chair next to him and touch his hand, trying to feel, to *make* a (re)connection. It doesn't feel like him, it's like I'm touching a mannequin. I feel as though I'm outside myself, watching myself watching and sitting with dad. I sit with him for what feels like a long time. I can't think of anything to say.

And then I hear myself blurt out, "Oh, dad, we'll never go for one of our walks again." As I hear the words, it suddenly hits me that dad is actually dead. I feel nauseated as if I'm in an elevator that has suddenly dropped several floors and there's no one, nothing there; a huge void, an all aloneness. Until this moment I don't think I've ever felt such a deep despair. I feel myself numbing out, dulling it.

How much time has passed? I notice something; some sort of sound coming from somewhere in the background. What is it, I wonder, suddenly feeling irritated at this squeaky noise interrupting these moments of dad and I together. It sounds like a fan rotating way off in the distance. Why does it have to be happening now when I'm trying to be with dad? I can't concentrate on him with this noise. I try to block it out. Suddenly, in the fleeting of a second I recognize the sound and my heart races with excitement. It's a tree frog! How often had we watched tree frogs in nature, marveled at their camouflage against the leaves and bark? We worried when the numbers visiting our pond had begun declining. I listen as the frog emits another three croaks and then falls silent. I didn't hear the frog croak again, just persistent enough for me to hear what transcended any words or thoughts dad and I could possibly have shared. I *knew* in that moment that his death was a physical separation, an incomplete severance.

Oh dad, I thought I had lost you forever.

Reflective Analysis of Beyond Words

I didn't have the opportunity to say goodbye to my dad before he died. He had, I believe, already died when I arrived at the house and first saw him lying on the bedroom floor. It was such an incredible shock to see my father lying there. I felt deep within me that he was already "gone", no longer part of this life or my life. In some ways I remain in shock with the awareness that dad could have died with no opportunity for any of us to say goodbye. It's not that I'm fighting to accept just this reality. It's the whole experience that feels surreal.

There were so many people at the house that night. It was overwhelming. I am still not certain of the number of professionals who were involved in trying to bring dad back to life. It seems ironic that our family, so private and quiet, would at such a sacred moment as that of the death of my father be faced with so many people and so much activity. The time seemed to belong to others: the paramedics, the police who were to remain in attendance during the resuscitation efforts and ultimately until my father's body was released to the coroner's assessment or the hospital morgue, the coroner who was to decide whether or not to attend at our home, and the patient transfer service providers who would ultimately arrive when they were able to arrange the transfer.

I was initially relieved when the coroner provided permission for dad to be taken to the hospital because it meant that no further interventions would be required. Perhaps dad and our family would be able to have some moments of peace before the transfer. I didn't however want my dad to have to go to a hospital "morgue." I find it difficult to

acknowledge this word. I have memories of the hospital morgue with my nursing experience. I couldn't imagine my father "there." But there was no possibility for alternatives, not in the case of unexpected and therefore potentially suspicious deaths. I was required or forced to simply find a way to accept what was and what is.

Saying goodbye to my father that night was one of the most difficult things I have ever experienced. I knew that the patient transfer personnel would be arriving soon and yet, the exact moment was again, not of our saying. I had to find a way to say goodbye before they arrived, before the opportunity was gone forever. I recall looking at dad, willing myself to look closely at him, to take in everything about him so that I could remember always... But he didn't look like himself. It was him, his body physically, but the essence of who dad was had already "gone," "left," or at least I thought so. I stood beside dad for several minutes. Nothing came to me. I couldn't think of one thing to say. We had shared a lifetime of moments, yet I could find no thoughts, no words. I remember beginning to feel intensely anxious that I would not be able to find a way to say goodbye to dad and that this opportunity would be lost along with my father.

The entire experience was surreal and unnatural. We were surrounded by strangers who "dictated" the sequence, the timing, the necessities of what would be happening and when. In retrospect, I am able to recognize something more about how difficult it was not only to say goodbye to my father, but also to do so under the constraints and dictates of legal and medical requirements. It is not that I am in any manner unappreciative of the efforts and expertise of the paramedics and police officers that cared for my father.

However, it is with sadness that I realize that the circumstances of my father's heart attack led to a series of interventions, which ultimately "medicalized" his death and affected his transition from life into death and perhaps beyond. My father's death, or at least his journey from this life, was in many ways not peaceful. Perhaps his death was in some ways quiet, peaceful, natural and serene, for he collapsed suddenly, after having had a wonderfully full day of living. Was that how it was for you dad? Were you aware of anything about to happen? Did you have a forewarning or any sense of what was about to happen? Did you feel frightened?

It is difficult to ask these questions and to reflect upon their possibilities. I will never know the answers. Yet to attempt to deny or dismiss these queries does nothing ultimately for my need to know and to understand something more about how my dad experienced his transition from this life.

Why? How?

The day after my dad's death. The telephone rings.

"Hi Denyse. It's Elise. How are you all doing?"

We talk for a few minutes but I find it difficult to concentrate and maintain my end of the conversation. I know that Elise means well and that she is genuinely concerned. It's just that it takes so much energy to talk to people at present, answering their questions about dad and how we are all managing.

"It's such a shock," Elise states.

"Yes." I'm relieved that she is acknowledging the reality of dad's death as I feel it; a complete shock, unbelievable. Simultaneously I feel irritated by her statement. I want to say, "Of course it's a shock. Don't you think I'm only too aware of it?" Elise hasn't directly asked me to explain the cause or contributing factors related to dad's death and yet the expectation is far from merely subtle. Yesterday, (the day of dad's death) she telephoned me after our initial conversation and asked if there had been any sign that dad was unwell. The question makes me nauseated. I've been asking myself the same question again and again, reviewing details of time spent with dad recently and over the past few years. What am I to say to Elise and all the other friends who are also insistent in asking if we had any knowledge of dad being in poor health? "Had he been more tired than usual, lately?" "Did he mention having pains in his chest?" "Did he have check-ups regularly?" they ask. I know or at least I feel that they are inquiring because they are genuinely concerned about what happened to dad. They are asking questions directly in an attempt to understand how someone who appeared to be so healthy and who was active in all aspects of life could suddenly collapse and die of an apparent heart attack.

Their questions pierce me, cut through the murky sense of disbelief and surrealism that permeates my experience of dad's death. Such questions are only too present for me without further reminders. I cannot imagine how I did not notice any signs of cardiac disease. It is probable that dad died of a massive heart attack, a sudden stopping of his heart, most likely. But, maybe it was a stroke or? Dad was never short of breath was he? He had never appeared fatigued or short of breath after climbing stairs, building rock walls, shoveling soil, or did I simply not notice? I was worried about his facial colour at times during the last year and a half. Sometimes his colour was almost pasty or jaundiced. I asked him on several occasions if he was feeling all right, as his colour was different than it was normally. Dad would always be quick to reassure me with a nod and a smile. "Oh yes, I'm fine dear," he would say with a lilt in his voice. And then there were the occasions when I would pursue my questioning further. "Are you sure dad? You're not feeling tired? Are you sleeping all right?" I would inquire, hoping he'd say more about how he was really feeling. Again he would reassure me, insisting that he was feeling well and that there was nothing to worry about. "It's the yellow finishing tint on my glasses. It sometimes makes my colour appear off and it makes me look tired," he would add. Those stupid glasses. How I hated them. They made dad appear older, fatigued, and unwell. I loathe the thought of those glasses now. Would I have pursued a follow-up of dad's health more conscientiously if it weren't for the glasses?

Questions. Pointed, piercing questions. I cannot answer others' questions, let alone all the queries that now loom regarding my father's health and death. Yet, they expect some kind of an answer or response. All I can do is reiterate their disbelief and my own. "Yes, it is a

shock," I repeat to people again and again as they inquire. It seems so painfully inadequate to not be able to know what my father was experiencing in his life and during his death. What kind of a daughter have I *really* been? I thought I was so close to my father. There must have been so much I didn't know.

I find myself providing answers and responses to these impossible questions from somewhere within myself that is disconnected from what I am feeling. I cannot really feel fully what has happened. I can acknowledge to myself and to others that dad has died but it's as though I cannot really feel that he has gone. I answer their questions with factual information and little more. But I feel disconnected. I can't get caught up in their emotion(s). From somewhere within I find and create stock responses to try to satisfy their questions. Yet in the moments of their asking, my own yearning to know and to comprehend what caused my father to die without warning is superseded, without any opportunity except in retrospect, to ask: Why? How? How can it be?

Reflective Analysis of Why? How?

There is something that needs to be said about the expectations that I receive from others as I talk with them about how I think and feel that things may have been different for dad "if only..." If only, is part of my sense of losing dad, part of my grief that waxes and wanes but cannot be resolved. Yet how quickly I have heard the responses and admonishments from others that express: "You shouldn't feel guilty. Your father was a grown man. He needed to take responsibility for his health." Don't they realize that the ultimate reality is that my father is dead? The loss is irrevocable and irretrievable. Perhaps it is with this realization that others may make such definitive statements as the aforementioned, as well as other statements that may be intended to assuage the if onlys, and the what ifs that I cannot help but consider. "You did all that you could to help your dad," they remind me. Such statements are frequently followed by a pause that implies that this is a definitive reality or awareness that would be best accepted without further question or reflection. Simultaneously, in the instant in which it is spoken I feel silenced. I am *re/minded* that my feelings and queries related to how things may have been different are futile. The message conveyed by others is that there is no purpose in ruminating, for it will only result in intensifying and prolonging my grief. Do they not realize that I need to reflect upon my father's death deeply, frequently, and even repetitively? At times I feel a mixture of sadness, confusion, and guilt as I question how dad could have had such severe cardiac disease without me having an awareness of it despite my knowledge of him as daughter and a nurse. How could his health have been so seriously compromised while those closest to him had not even the slightest awareness? This question frightens me. It causes me to realize with no possibility of avoidance that I

(we) can never know what will or may happen to ourselves or to those we love dearly. A naïve safe bubble of protectiveness has ruptured.

I am also left to wonder what else I did not know about my father. Did he often keep things hidden from me perhaps to spare me from anxiety or worry? Did he know or even suspect that his heart was failing? I will never know what he may have kept hidden or why he may have decided not to inform my family. It is painful to try to accept the reality that I can no longer just ask him. That possibility like so many other possibilities have gone, disappeared with my father.

The Office

I walk downstairs in my dad's house and enter his office, once my brother's room, and for the past twenty years, my father's office. I feel dad's energy as soon as I enter the room. Physically, it appears as though he has just left and will be returning in a few minutes to continue his work. I feel him here busy with his diverse life endeavours. I am overwhelmed as I look around the room. His desk on the left side of the room holds his Underwood typewriter surrounded by stacks of papers, envelopes, and binders. There are piles of orders for biological specimens including business orders that dad recently completed and orders that were to be filled. Stacks of letters from friends and acquaintances are also neatly organized on the desk. I had no idea that dad was maintaining correspondence with so many people. How did he have the time to write to so many individuals when his life was so busy, so full with work and hobbies? It is not as though I did not know about dad's projects, yet as I sit here quietly in his office, seeing and feeling all that surrounds me of his life I now realize how much more there is (and was) to know about my father. I am filled with sadness, a sadness that floods me completely as I realize that I'll never have the opportunity to talk with dad again about what I now see and feel and what I am continuing to learn about his life.

I am overwhelmed dad. I respected you as a person as well as being in awe of your accomplishments, but now in these moments I am suddenly aware that there was so much more that I did not know. Why didn't I take the time while you were alive? Did I actually think that you would be here forever? Did I think that I knew most of what you were doing in life, and who you were as a person as well as being my father? I don't think that

I'm simply being maudlin. It is only now, in these moments of sitting quietly in this room, *your* environment with so many of your life works surrounding me that I am brought to the inescapable awareness that I have missed, time and again, opportunities to know you, to feel some of what you may have felt about the people and things that meant the most to you. In reflecting upon this loss I am called also to wonder what I am missing in my knowing of others. I am only able to consider this latter awareness superficially, for I am grieving intensely for *you* dad. I'm remembering what I knew of you and simultaneously I am aware of what I have missed, and all that I may have learned about you, if only. Ifs and if onlys are potentially infinite. In actuality, I recall you warning me of the potential quagmire of living with the focus of *if only* scenarios. Yet I am now experiencing the effects and more significantly the affects of not inquiring and of assuming that I knew you when there is so much more I could have known. I know that it cannot be dad, but wouldn't it be incredible if you and I could sit down together and talk like we used to just one more time? I feel in my heart that one more conversation would be as meaningful to you as it would be for me. We did have the most intense and diverse discussions, didn't we? I know that I'll never have this with anyone else, not with the same intensity and diversity as we shared in our talks together. As I sit today in your office it feels as though time has stopped. In some very poignant ways, time has stopped, altered, shifted beyond recognition with your death. I am left behind in some ways just as surely as your stacks of papers and projects, unfinished yet still somehow in progress.

"I Just Wanted To Talk..."

(Two days after dad's death)

The telephone rings. A family member answers the call, utters a few words that I am unable to hear and then says, "I'll let you talk to Denyse." "Hello," I say tentatively as I have no idea who is calling. There is a pause for a few seconds before I hear a male voice say "Hello." "Hello," I say for the second time. He responds with a fairly thick accent, which causes me to listen more attentively. "Hello. Could I speak to Paul please?" My heart begins to pound. I feel as though I've just been hit in the gut. Seconds pass. I'm so shocked that I can't think of how to respond. I thought we contacted almost all of my father's friends and acquaintances to notify them of his death. I try to review what he has just asked me. Maybe he's asking to speak to another family member whose name is very similar to my father's name and I'm just not understanding his accent? I feel myself calm slightly, the tension relieved by this thought. "I'm sorry," I respond, "she can't speak with you at the moment, she's resting." He responds as though he has not heard what I just said. "I phoned to him earlier and the lady said that he was sleeping. I want to speak with Paul," he repeats. My heart is racing. I feel shaky, as though the floor has collapsed beneath me. Is this someone's idea of a joke? No one would have said that dad was sleeping. I hear his voice continue, "I called earlier and she said he was asleep. I'm calling now to speak to Paul." I feel as if I'm in a nightmare. No one in my family would ever have told him that dad was sleeping. Moments later it occurs to me that maybe he had spoken earlier to Kathy (an extended family member). Perhaps Kathy was confused by his accent and thought that he was asking for the family member who shares the similar-sounding name. "I'm sorry. Paul is not sleeping. I wish he were just sleeping but I'm

afraid he's not," I tell him with an edge of anxiety tingeing my response. I wish for his sake, but primarily for my own peace of mind, that I didn't have to be having this conversation. "Oh... Oh...", I hear him respond with a quaver in his voice. Listening to his voice I realize that he is not just an older man, close to my father's age, but that he is, or at least he sounds, quite elderly. I hesitate, pause for what feels like a long time, but not really long enough for me to prepare what I know I need to find a way to tell this man. "Are you sitting down?" I ask as calmly as I am able to with the intense stress of the moment. "No. No, I'm not. You think I should sit down?" he inquires, his voice even more unsteady. "Yes. I think that it would be a good idea." "Okay. If you think so," he responds. "I'm afraid that I have some very sad news to tell you. I'm sorry, but Paul has died. He died two days ago, on Friday, early in the morning," I hear myself recite as I protract the details, for perhaps this will soften the starkness of this blow. I hear him stammer, as if he is searching for some way to respond. "Uh... oh..., but I saw Paul just three evenings ago at the club meeting." "Yes," I state, in a reporter-like tone, which is all I can manage, "it's an awful shock for all of us. It's hard to believe, but it has happened. Paul had a heart attack, we think, and unfortunately he could not be revived." "But he seemed well that evening," he responds. "I know," I answer, "he apparently had a very good day visiting friends, completing some business, and going to the photography club meeting in the evening. It is a big shock. I'm sorry to have to tell you such sad news." After several seconds of silence I finally manage to ask, "How did you know my dad?" "I knew Paul from the photography club for many years. My name is Harvey Sittel." Suddenly as I repeat the name in my head, things shift for me. I realize that I knew this man when I was a little girl. He is my best school friend's grandfather! I am completely

taken aback. I have not spoken, nor heard of him for years, although as I think about it, I now recall that dad had mentioned that he was a member of his photography club. I feel myself transported back in time and simultaneously, the currentness of the shock of my father's death somehow coexists in an inconceivable way. He tells me his age at present. "I don't get out very much now," he adds. I realize that before I heard from Mr. Sittel, if asked, I would have imagined that he must have died several years ago. Ninety-eight years old! He is now ninety-eight, I repeat in my head. It is hard to imagine that someone who had seemed even in my childhood to be old could still be alive. We don't say it aloud, there is no verbal acknowledgement, not even hinted, but it is as though in those moments of pausing we are both wondering about the order and the irony of life, or more poignantly, of death. How could dad who appeared to be so healthy and vital, now so suddenly, with no warning, be dead while someone twenty years his senior who is, and has for some time been experiencing frail health, out-survive him? It is overwhelming to me, beyond comprehension. Yet the awareness is stark and clear. A voice from somewhere within me reminds and chastises that all or even much in life and death does not have a logical sense. Still, it hurts intensely. I can't understand how dad can be dead. I try to subsume my feelings, mired in disbelief and tied inextricably to questions that have no answers but still beg the asking.

Moments later I realize that I have drifted off, submerged in the returning shock of the reality of dad's death. I return my focus to Mr. Sittel. I can hear the sadness in his voice as he struggles to accept the news of my father's death. I ask if there is something that he wanted to talk about with Paul or something that I could help him with? "No," he replies,

"There was nothing special. Uh... I used to phone sometimes just to have a chat. There was nothing. I just wanted to talk to him."

We remained silent for a few moments, sharing without words, the same sentiment, now an impossibility for both of us.

I'm Not Ready

The doorbell rings. I answer it and my heart begins to race. I feel the nausea returning. Why is he here four days after dad's funeral? I feel shaky, retraumatized just seeing him again. He's a nice enough man, it's just what he represents right now; the recurring reality of my dad's death, as if it isn't already real enough without unanticipated reminders. The funeral director has arrived on our doorstep as suddenly and unexpectedly as my father's death. He smiles slightly and greets my family. Rick invites him in and we sit down in the living room. "Really," I wish I could say, "can't this be over?" The funeral director asks how we're doing and we utter responses that are polite, and that say nothing much about what we're really feeling. I see the funeral director's mouth moving, and I listen intermittently, but I don't really want to hear the meaninglessness of just words.

I feel myself startle, my mind and body suddenly alert as he says, "When would you like to pick up the ashes?" Why is he asking this of us now, so soon after the funeral? I thought he told us that we could take all the time we needed. The funeral director pauses for a moment, and then says, "I could bring the ashes to your home tomorrow afternoon if that would be convenient?" I feel as if I've been hit in the gut. "What's the rush?" I want to say to him. Instead I remain silent. I notice some of my family members becoming increasingly upset, but no one says anything. The funeral director says something else which escapes me. I feel trapped, but there's no where to go, to escape, physically or emotionally. I wish, magically, that this would all just go away. I hear my voice say, "I'll pick up dad's ashes." I've just told him that I'll pick up the ashes, but I don't want to. I don't feel ready. There's no time for wishing though, as I hear the funeral director ask, "How is tomorrow morning at 10:30?" "Yes," I answer hastily, wanting this hideous

moment in time not to be protracted any longer than is absolutely necessary. He continues talking for a few more minutes before he finally gets up and leaves.

Nothing in life has prepared me adequately for what I need to do tomorrow morning. I wish that Rick could come with me, but I know he has to go to work. I try to think of someone, one of my friends who might come with me, even just to wait in the car while I retrieve the ashes. I consider a few of my friends, but then realize that they will either be working or looking after their children. I can't think of anyone who might be able to come with me. I'll have to do this alone. I try to imagine what it will be like to pick up my father's ashes. I'm a nurse. I've seen babies enter this world, and I've been present with people who are dying but I can't imagine that dad has been rendered to ashes. How could someone so strong, competent and vital now be reduced to mere ashes? I try within the deepest part of my being to understand, to find a way to come to grips with it before I have to go to the funeral home. The recurring question of how I will do so is never far from my awareness. I try to still its intrusion but it refuses to acquiesce.

Later in the evening it occurs to me that it might help to talk with my cousin, Gerard. Maybe he can help me to understand how dad, who held me in his arms, cuddled me on his lap, read to me as a child, and walked me down the aisle just nine months ago can now be gone? I ask these questions, try to find words for what is incomprehensible, as I talk to Gerard. I tell him that I *feel* that I should be able to understand the transformation. I witnessed dad's death. Is there something wrong with me that I cannot comprehend, cannot somehow bring myself to believe, (or to accept), that dad is now rendered to

ashes? It's a relief to hear Gerard say that he is also having trouble coming to grips with what has happened. "He seemed so healthy. It's hard to imagine that he could just die," Gerard says. We talk for a while and by the end of our phone call I'm a little less anxious. Still, I wonder how I will cope with what I have to do tomorrow. The "if" question of whether I will be able to follow through with this responsibility doesn't really exist. I know that I have to do this. I'm the designated person. Yet the uncertainty of how I will manage remains in my thoughts and heart throughout the evening.

I awaken from what must have been sleep yet I feel unrested, already aware of what I must do this morning. I'm continuing to live at my family's house for now. It's the only place that I can imagine being at present; close to my family and to dad, who is still very much a part of this house. I walk downstairs to the bathroom. I stand under the warm steady stream of water and feel it cascading off my head and shoulders. I feel things tight within me, not able to come out. Why can't I cry? The shower is normally my refuge, the sound and soothing flow of water surrounding me. No one to see or hear me cry. Yet, nothing comes. No tears, no rage, no release of sadness. My emotions, and the entire experience of my father's death, remain contained within me.

I walk into the kitchen where my family is preparing breakfast. "Hi, good morning," we greet each other. As we talk it seems that none of us has been sleeping well. It is as though night is at present, a time for quiet aloneness, time to reflect, to review what happened *that night*; snippets of images and memories of dad, things that have to be done

to settle dad's life works. How can his life just be over? He was so vibrant, with many life projects in progress, engaged with friends, and with us as a family.

We sit together at the kitchen table for breakfast, talking intermittently as we scan the newspaper. I don't feel at all hungry. I sip my coffee and pretend to be interested in my toast, which sits on a side plate growing cold. I avoid mentioning anything about picking up the ashes this morning, knowing that it may further upset my family. I know that they remember though. How could they, or I, forget? Part of me feels so unprepared. Does anybody realize what a shock this truly is? I feel like I've been transported into another realm in which still feels surrealistic, doing things I've never imagined having to do, and knowing that I need somehow, some way to do them. "I'm not ready," a voice echoes inside my head. I wish that I could say it out loud, so that somebody might hear me and tell me it's going to be okay; whatever okay is within all of this experience. The frightened part of me wants to delay what I'm going to do this morning, even just a little. Nausea lingers, and keeps company with the anxiety that seems always to be with me at present. I just have to do it. The how will have to come as it will.

Ten o'clock comes and goes. I can no longer put off the inevitable. I say goodbye quickly to my family. I try to distract myself from thinking about the purpose of the drive by listening to the radio. As I get closer to Pike Road my heart starts to pound. I've had two visits to the funeral home during the past ten days and I dread the thought of seeing the place again. I don't feel as though dad is there, but it's where his physical body is, now just ashes. It's unbelievable. I continue down the winding road, trying to prepare myself

mentally for what I'm about to do. I pull into the completely empty parking lot of the funeral home. I *wish* I could stay in my car. I hope that the funeral director will just give me the ashes. I don't want to talk. I delay as long as possible before I get out of my car, walk to the building, through the main door and into the reception area, and wait a few feet from the desk. My heart is racing. The funeral director enters the room a few minutes later. "Hello," he says while extending his hand toward me. I don't want to shake his hand, but, out of a well-ingrained courtesy, I do. The funeral director suggests something to me about going to the sitting room next door to talk. I follow him passively into the other room and we both sit down. He leans forward slightly, his facial expression conveying concern. I don't need to talk to him. I don't know why he has suggested that we talk. In the seconds that pass in silence I wonder where my dad's ashes are. Why doesn't he have them? He asks how my family is doing and how I am managing. I reply politely, something that I think may satisfy his questions. "How are we supposed to be doing?" I wish I dared ask; my anger close to the surface lately, and now rising in response to his presence in my life and his questions. "It's a difficult time," he responds. I nod, not having anything to say. He turns his focus to religion, or perhaps what may be to him spirituality. I don't find much solace or even much meaning in our discussion. The reality is, I miss dad. I can't believe this is really happening. And, more than anything I'm worried about my family. I have an unshakable fear that something will happen to someone else in my family. I listen on some superficial level to his words, yet they seem empty. I don't know how I manage to interject, but somehow I begin to tell the funeral director that I can't believe how this has happened; the shock, the surrealism of the last eleven days, intermittently pierced with an almost impossible reality. He changes the

direction of the discussion, saying something about the mysteries of life and death. What does he know, any more than I, of the mysteries of life and death? How can he inform me about *my* feelings, *my* experience of the trauma of dad's death? Why did I open this discussion further by talking about my feelings? It was a mistake I now realize. I feel the urgency to leave suddenly rekindled. The funeral director says something else and finally stands up as he tells me that he is going to bring the ashes. I feel numb now, just holding on to what I need to do. I watch as he reenters the room carrying a purple velvet sac, which he gently unfolds, revealing the urn. I nod as he comments on the container, and I thank him hastily as I reach for it. I'd been told by a friend to expect that it would be heavy, but when I finally grasp the container it is heavier than I had imagined. I mumble a few words to the funeral director, and he gives a concerned look as I turn to leave. I walk to my car quickly, fumble for my keys, wanting to get out of this parking lot, away from the oppression that envelopes me. I get into my car wondering where to place the urn while I'm driving. I think that it would be the safest on the floor but that doesn't feel right. I wish I could cry, but the tears won't come. I place the urn on the seat beside me. I keep my hand on it to hold it in place as I drive. I can't believe I'm driving in my car with my dad's body/ashes sitting beside me. I'm so afraid that I'll get in an accident, or that I'll have to stop suddenly and the ashes will spill. I distract myself listening to the radio. I change the station to music that dad would like better. I feel silly after a few minutes and change the station back again. Nothing feels right. Finally I arrive home, the intense urgency with me once again. I cannot wait to put the urn away, in a safe place and out of sight.

Reflective Analysis of I'm Not Ready

Amidst the shock of trying to imagine what it will be like to retrieve my father's ashes I realize that it might be helpful to speak with someone about the impossibility of how someone so strong, competent, and full of life could now be reduced to mere ashes. I try within the deepest part of my being to understand and to find a way to come to grips with it. I need to find someone who might be able to help me to reflect on this incomprehensible, not to give me answers or solutions but to help me to understand the levels and layers of anxiety, disbelief, confusion, and shock that resonate within me.

I have been trying to find words for something that is and feels beyond me on every level of my being. I know on some level that the ashes are not actually my father, they are merely what is now left of his physical body, the physical presence of his life on this earth. I tell my cousin Gerard that I *feel* that I should be able to understand it or at least accept it. As I say this, the "it" becomes both my father's death and his physical, spiritual, and holistic transformation.

Yet it is so much more than this. The transformation is much more than that of merely his body. I am beginning to realize that this experience is not something that can be understood by me, and perhaps also not by others? It remains suspended, not completed, and yet very real. Physically and metaphorically it speaks to me of my father's presence, and now his absence, so difficult, painful, confusing and surreal. Transformed forever, both my father and I.

In the moments of talking with Gerard, trying to share that which has not truly come to be known and felt fully within me I was able to connect with someone who like me, has no answers and who is also left with a sense of awe at the mystery not only of dad's death but also of his life. He also finds it difficult to comprehend how someone who has been so close to us is now physically able to be just ashes.

There are layers upon layers of thoughts and feelings that refuse to acquiesce even when I need respite. Does anybody realize fully what a shock this is? I see the shock reflected in my family members but somehow we don't or can't put words to it, at least not yet.

It is still difficult for me to believe that I drove in my car with my dad's body/ashes sitting beside me. It seems unbelievable that my dad's body now exists in a container. Nothing in life has prepared me for this experience. As I drove home I was worried that the ashes would somehow spill and be lost. I could not get this thought and the fear that surrounded it out of my mind. I am now, suddenly, completely, and incomprehensibly the protector, our roles in life and with one another are now fully reversed.

Further Reflective Analysis of I'm Not Ready

As I reflect upon the experience of preparing myself for something that was beyond me at the time and which in many ways continues to feel beyond my comprehension, I realize that something is still missing, something that I am struggling to articulate. I wonder if I will ever find the words? As I try to understand something more about the nature of what is missing and what I am missing in the loss itself and my understanding of it, I am stimulated to consider the impact of subsequent significant events, and the timing of them, upon one's experiences of grieving. I can not help but wonder if I was so surprised by the funeral director's unexpected and untimely agenda of identifying a definitive time and means of accomplishing something for which I was, on all levels of my being unprepared, that I was catapulted to another level of shock? Perhaps by examining this experience I may be able to understand something more about the impact of an unexpected event superimposed upon (my) grieving the unexpected death of my father.

My father's death was sudden and unanticipated. We who knew him well had no forewarning and so it seems that other unexpected events surrounding his death (such as the unexpected arrival of the funeral director) may have further exacerbated and intensified the effects and the affects of my loss and grief.

In attempting to comprehend what the experience of retrieving my father's ashes represented to me at the time and what it continues to be for me now five months subsequently, I would describe it as being pushed into doing something that I was not prepared for emotionally, psychologically, mentally, and spiritually. In some very deep

ways the primary trauma, the loss of my father, has been compounded and intensified by this secondary experience. The circumstances surrounding the experience of retrieving my father's ashes recapitulated aspects of the primary loss as once again in temporal proximity to the loss of my father I found myself suddenly (re)experiencing something for which I was unprepared.

A complexity in attempting to review past experiences is that once we have been touched by an event or a particular occurrence it is not possible to know what our experience may have been prior to the influence of these intervening factors. As a consequence I do not know how the experience of retrieving my father's ashes may have felt and what it may have meant to me had the circumstances been different. Yet I cannot help but wonder how the experience may have felt then and even now if rather than arriving unannounced the funeral director had telephoned, thus providing me with the opportunity to exercise a greater degree of agency regarding when, how, and possibly with whom, I may have chosen to pick up the ashes? I accept the reality that I will never know the answer to this question. I am however, aware that being required to retrieve my father's ashes before I was emotionally ready to do so did not permit or support me to take decisions and actions at a pace that might have enabled me to be more prepared and less shocked by the experience. The funeral director's unexpected arrival at our home and his persistence in requiring that our family make a decision without adequate time to process the information deeply influenced my sense of loss. In quiet moments of reflection I have a sense that the experience and the residual memories would have been very different had I chosen when and how I would retrieve my father's ashes. As I attempt to envision this

experience I begin to *feel* a significant shift, which allows for the possibility of a very different nature to this experience. I believe that had I been allowed and supported to act when I was ready I may have had the feeling of "bringing my dad's ashes home".

Instead, the experience was that of picking up his ashes. Is what I have done within this shift in my heart and mind simply a shift in semantics? Although this is perhaps possible it feels much deeper than this, as though what I was longing for was the opportunity to take action from and with my heart, not merely in order to fulfill an external(ized) and other-directed requirement based on objective and objectified time-frames. This brings me to the question of what may happen to our heart, our experience of something, particularly a sacred life experience, when we take action from an objective and objectified position or (im)position? I am asking questions that can have no definitive answers or absolutes. Yet not allowing myself to question and to explore the possibilities does not eradicate the existence or the impact of such factors.

I have named the narrative and the experience, I'm Not Ready, because I believe that it speaks openly and honestly of the significance of time in the process of grieving. My personal experience addresses the larger issue of the importance of offering and allowing people who are grieving to take the time that they need, as decided by them, to have and to do their own grieving in their own ways and in their own time. Research pertaining to loss and grieving acknowledges the importance of allowing and supporting bereaved individuals to take the time that they need in their process of grieving. The significance of this awareness is underscored by author Carol Lee (1994) in her book, Good Grief: Experiencing Loss, in which she states, "Not only will the timing be different for

different people, but also the amount of time" (p. 118). W. Foster-Evans bereavement coordinator at the Hospice of Marin in California concurs with this perspective in asserting that, "People need to go through the grief process at their own pace and in their own way" (1994, p. 94). Yet as evidenced by the experience described in my narrative and examples that will be explored in some of the other narratives, it is apparent to me that we continue to conceptualize and impose objective time-frames and requirements upon people who are grieving. Most employment agencies allow a predetermined number of days of compassionate leave for employees who have experienced the death of a family member. Although compassionate leave allows time for funeral preparations and initial bereavement, grieving individuals are required to return to work within a time frame which is predetermined and not necessarily in concert with their needs. What messages about the *process*, the experience, and the complexities of feelings associated with grief are we implying and imposing upon individuals and society generally when we continue to enact these arbitrary and objective designations of acceptable time given or allowed for grieving before returning to work? What (explicit and implicit) messages do we assimilate from these accepted, though not necessarily acceptable, designations of time allowed for grieving?

Reflecting upon why I remain so deeply affected by this experience five months after my father's death, I am finally able to arrive at the question, why didn't (or couldn't) I do what I needed to do, and proactively advocate for the time that my family and I needed when the funeral director pressed our family for a decision regarding the retrieval of my dad's ashes? It behooves me to consider how my process of grieving was influenced by

the explicit and implicit societal designation and imposition of time. Even though I believed in taking the time that I needed to move through and with my grief I allowed myself to be influenced by the external factors of time and the authority of another professional rather than trusting my own sense of timing in grieving this loss. In the moments in which the funeral director asked when we would be retrieving the ashes I knew that I was not yet ready. I felt the resonance of this awareness to my core. In retrospect, as well as in those moments, I knew what I needed. My inner voice, my gut knowing was strongly present. I simply yet significantly needed to listen and follow through on its message.

As caregivers and professionals who are in contact with people who are grieving I believe that we need to reflect deeply upon our own beliefs about objective measures of time in relation to the very personal and individual awareness and felt sense of time that may be experienced and required by someone who is grieving.

An aspect of grieving that remains with me is a sense of surrealism in which I experience some degree of acceptance of the loss, yet simultaneously the loss of my father in some ways continues to feel unreal and incomprehensible. Although the intensity of the surrealism ebbs and flows, somewhere in my being I feel that I have not fully comprehended that he has gone. It is as though part of me has not yet felt or perhaps refuses to feel the reality and permanence of the loss of my father.

Clinical and academic research is replete with data describing the commonality of the bereaved experiencing a sense of denial of the loss, or denial of the circumstances of the loss, as well as a sense of surrealism that may accompany loss. Grief clinician and author, Dr. Beverley Raphael describes this process by stating, "The bereaved person feels a sense of unreality, as though what has been said or what has happened could not possibly be true... as though it must be happening to someone else. There is a feeling of being in a dream or nightmare from which he (sic) will awake... These moments or hours of numbness or shutting out give the ego time to mobilize its resources so that the death and the loss may be dealt with gradually..." (1983, pp. 34-35). The assessment of clinicians and researchers who work with bereaved individuals is that the surrealism of the loss dissipates within days, weeks, or at the very most, a few months. I wonder however if this may be a myth, an expectation that we have come to endorse in North American society as part of our collective denial of death, and perhaps also because it has been touted by professionals? Surrealism, and some degree of denial pertaining to the death and loss of my father, the suddenness of the loss, and my struggle to comprehend and accept that my dad is now merely ashes continues to be part of my experience of grieving. I believe that the continued and gradually evolving surrealism is part of my personal path and process of grieving my father's death. Yet it is difficult to speak of this with friends and professional caregivers that reassure me or correct my thinking, re/minding me that *they* believe that I have resolved my sense of denial and surrealism. I am left wondering whether other bereaved individuals also experience similar responses including a lack of acknowledgement or minimization of their reactions, feelings, and responses as they grieve.

A Sign Received

When I was about twelve years old I remember talking with my dad about death and what it might be like to be to experience the transition from this world to whatever may lie beyond this life. We were both interested in the possibilities of telepathic communication and we would sometimes practice sending thoughts and messages to each other in an attempt to test our abilities. On several occasions I correctly identified my father's thoughts as he willed them to me telepathically. In these moments our excitement in the potential for communication beyond words, and we hoped beyond worlds, was piqued. I remember one day my father saying to me that if something ever happened to him he would try to send me some kind of sign. I promised I would try to pick up his sign. And I would also signal back I assured him.

As I grew into my adolescence the practice of telepathic play with my father diminished, giving way to other more pressing concerns. Occasionally we would test our capacities just for fun, but never again did we discuss the topic of sending a message after death. Perhaps no further discussions were required. For I heard the tree frog that night, dad, at a moment in which I felt unbearable despair. And in the moments of this "sign" I realized with a certainty that only the heart can truly feel, that the connection we shared could not be severed even in death.

Such a Little Thing

It's 12:30 a.m. and everyone in my family has gone to bed. I wonder if they are able to sleep. I can't even contemplate sleeping at present. I have no awareness of time. The seconds blend into hours and simultaneously it feels as though time has stopped. I have never before experienced such a sense of disorientation and disconnection from time. I find some comfort in noticing the light of the morning, dusk, and the complete darkness and stillness of night. It reminds me that the cycle of the days really is continuing even though I don't feel part of what is at present, merely going on around me. I have fallen behind, and away, from life. Yet I can see by the changing of the day's light that time does not stand still with me.

The house is incredibly quiet, yet my mind and body remain on full alert. The restlessness that I have felt since dad died is still very much with me. It is as though I am constantly preparing to do something or as though something (more) will be happening any minute. I cannot rest. And for some reason I do not feel tired, not even a sign of sleepiness although I have not slept for almost two days.

I think about reading for a while but I am unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes. I decide to go to the kitchen, my favourite place in my parents' house. I think about a few things, and nothing. My thoughts are rapid and disjointed. Tea. Yes, that's it. I'll make some tea. I walk to the cupboard, slide open the door and begin to reach for the container that holds the tea bags. And then I see it, a package of unopened cream cookies. I feel my throat constrict, tightening in an attempt to contain the overwhelming sadness

that I suddenly feel. I will myself to remain at the cupboard even though I want to back away. Here I am in the kitchen free to eat and drink whatever I please, thinking about having a cup of tea. And dad who so loved sweets will never have another cookie.

Reflective Analysis of Such a Little Thing

As I reflect upon the experience described in the narrative, Such a Little Thing I feel myself flood with sadness. The impact of such a seemingly innocuous thing as a package of cookies is absolutely profound. Why? How can it be that something so unexpected, so seemingly insignificant as a package of cookies can affect me more deeply than looking at dad's picture or hearing his voice when the message on my parents' answering machine is activated?

I wasn't even thinking about my dad when I opened the cupboard in search of the tea bags. Maybe that's part of it. To *remember* that dad is no longer here at a moment when I had just been living my life. It's not that I had, or have, forgotten him. Yet how can it be such a deep, sudden jolt, a shock all over again to realize that he is gone? It makes me afraid to realize that there will be other times, other moments, and other reminders of the loss of my dad that may come at any time, anywhere. And there is no way to prevent, or even to avoid them. For, just as his death was sudden, with no forewarning, so these moments may, and I now know, will appear. It is a recapitulation of the loss, again and again, at the command of something beyond me.

When I saw the cookies I felt completely overwhelmed with sadness. I don't know why. I can't begin to explain or understand it, except to acknowledge that it was a most painful realization. It was as though I was hit with the full impact of dad's death for the first time; his absence from (my) life was made real; painfully and suddenly real (again) by a package of cookies. The realization was like a blow to my gut. Never again would dad eat

a cookie. It seems so trite, so unimportant and insignificant. Yet it isn't just the cookie itself, although dad loved his sweets. It was the *never*; the realization that he could not, would not, ever again enjoy a cookie or anything else in life. There is something about my grief that relates to the awareness of opportunities missed, forever. So many occasions of "never again" for those of us who are left behind to contend with, to be expectantly or suddenly, and sometimes even happily reminded of, struck with, and struck by. The "never again(s)" are going to be, I believe, as difficult as the recurrent thoughts of the "what ifs" and the "if only(s)" as I remember and grieve for my father.

There was another aspect of this experience that I am unable to forget. There was something about the package of cookies being unopened that has significance. I recall feeling hit by the realization that night that not only would dad never be able to eat another cookie but also, he never even had a chance to try these cookies. Would it have made any difference to my dad if the cookies had been opened, if he had enjoyed at least one taste? The question seems silly to me when I see it before me on paper. Yet it is not merely just a/the cookie. It's the realization that something that my father enjoyed is simultaneously no longer possible for him to experience, and is also no longer necessary to him. He has moved beyond, away (from) the earthly needs and requirements of life. I am however, not truly ready to accept this reality. It's too soon and too final.

Perhaps the intensity of my feeling has something to do with the issue of fairness, or more accurately, my beliefs about fairness; about how things will be, or would be, or should be, *if life was, and is, fair*. It seems unfair that my father who loved life and who

was so vital, both mentally and physically, is now dead. And, I try to tell myself, that's what happens, at least sometimes. No forewarnings, no opportunity to take one last look, engage in one last conversation, or...

Some of Us Find It Upsetting

The telephone rings. Louise, an older friend of the family calls.

"Hello."

"Hello, Denyse? It's Louise. I'm just calling to see how your family is doing."

"Oh, hi Louise. It's hard, you know. We're doing about as well as can be expected right now I think. It still feels like a shock," I answer, unsure of how much she really wants to hear.

"It will be difficult for quite some time," Louise responds.

We talk for a few minutes. Louise's voice tone shifts suddenly, becoming directive as she says, "I'm not sure if your family just hasn't thought of it or if you just haven't gotten around to it yet, but do you know that your father's voice is still on the answering machine?"

I feel my body tense. I remain silent for a moment, unsure of how I will be able to respond to her chastising message.

Louise continues, "Frankly, I find it upsetting. And I'm not the only one. Some of your family's friends are also finding it upsetting to hear his voice, you know. You *really* should change the message."

"Yes, we know that dad's voice is still on the tape. We find it reassuring to hear his voice. It's been a big shock losing him and it would be another loss to miss this reminder of him right now. Dad was here for 78, almost 79 years. We can't wipe out his loss and we don't want to pretend to do so by erasing his voice so soon after his death."

"Well," Louise responds firmly with no hesitation, "I just thought you might not have been aware that it's upsetting people to hear his voice. Some people aren't calling because of it you know. They're so upset by his voice that they just hang up."

"We will change the tape at some point. We're just not ready to yet. We're still in shock. At the moment it helps to hear dad's voice."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that you'll be changing the message. I thought I should tell you how it's affecting other people."

I pause for a second not wanting to talk further with Louise. It's exhausting enough to be the gatekeeper for the family without having to defend our need to grieve. After a brief exchange we say goodbye.

And I am left with a sense of bewilderment and anger. Who has given Louise or anyone the right to tell my family what we should do in our grief? Isn't it enough that we've lost dad with no chance even to say goodbye? Do we have to sever our sense of connection further by quickly erasing a small semblance of his presence because it is apparently upsetting others?

Reflective Analysis of Some of Us Find It Upsetting

I feel my anger surge when I reflect upon the telephone call from Louise. It was an ambiguous contact that contained a double-message. Louise telephoned (ostensibly) to inquire as to how our family was doing in grieving dad's death. I believe that she genuinely intended to offer support and comfort in her phone call and that she did so in the initial comments of her phone call. The intention and the focus of her communication changed suddenly and unexpectedly. I understand that it was probably unexpected and perhaps even a shock to hear my dad's voice after his death (ironically, just as my father's sudden death and absence has been a shock to our family). The shift in the focus of her conversation with me happened abruptly, with no opportunity to prepare for the change in content and focus. It was a recapitulation of my growing awareness of how quickly and irrevocably loss can change one's life.

Louise's question, "Do you know that your father's voice is still on the answering machine?" was not fully and merely a query. Rather, it embodied a tone (in both her tone of voice and the content of her question/statement) of chastising and not merely informing us of the presence of my father's recorded voice message. Her statement was posed as a question, yet Louise did not intend it to be open for my perspective or my expression of our family's need to grieve in our own ways and at our own pace. The question was more honestly and accurately a statement which was intended to inform us that it was not appropriate (*to others*) to have dad's voice remain on the tape after his death. In essence, it was an imposition of an others' values, beliefs, and needs upon my family's process of grieving. If it had been clearly and openly asked as a question rather

than a statement intended as a re/mind/er of our ways of grieving I think that it would have offered me an opportunity to express how we were actually coping with our grief. Instead I felt admonished and redirected. I was being informed implicitly that this aspect of our grieving was inappropriate and selfish. The implicit re/minder became more explicit as Louise informed me that others were also upset. I now felt as though we were being held responsible in part for Louise's feelings and the feelings of others. I perceived her statement, "some people aren't calling because of it" as a threat. It signified the threat of abandonment of contact. Grief in itself is often a lonely process, one in which a grieving person may feel abandoned by others who are uncomfortable with (their) grief. Such demands and admonitions serve to intensify the sense of isolation and alienation that a grieving person may experience.

Louise's "question" of whether I was aware that my father's voice was still on the answering machine was a shock to me. Suddenly the entire focus of the phone call had shifted from a position of inquiry and concern as to how we were coping with our grief to Louise's discomfort and upset after hearing my father's voice recording. I responded with an immediate gut reaction, defending my father's right to be remembered and grieved by his family and others. Even now in retrospect, I find it difficult to accept that she expressed this (her) concern and sentiment intensely at a time when our grief was still raw. What was the purpose of her inquiry? Why should my father's voice not be on the answering machine? Why in Western society are we in such a rush to eradicate or suppress the tangible reminders of someone after their death? Whose needs were being met in the moments of her inquiry? Whose grief is it? How is one's grieving process

affected when the needs of other individuals conflict with the needs and emotions of the primary survivors?

In responding to Louise's inquiry I was protective and defensive of my need to hear my father's voice as a means of feeling his presence still close by. It was a reassurance and a tangible reminder that dad was real and that the presence of his life is not eradicated by his death. I know that there will come a time that our family will be ready to retire the tape of my father's voice into safekeeping in our hearts. But, it is not time yet.

What I would like to say to Louise and to others is that I know that my father is dead. I am not in denial nor am I morbid in my desire to feel and sense his presence still very close to me. I have already lost his physical presence in my life. (Why) do I need to move on in my life and my grief in measured time to the needs of others?

No Time

It's been two weeks since dad died. Everything in the external world seems to be carrying on as usual; bills continue to arrive, I've returned to work, meals need to be prepared, my pets needs to be cared for. It feels as though life is determined to remind me that everything must carry on. Yet how can I carry on as if nothing, or nothing much, has happened when I know in my heart and my mind that nothing will ever be the same again without dad?

It does not help that with the exception of my immediate family most of the people in my life are carrying on with their lives, and in their interactions with me, as though nothing, or nothing of great import, has occurred. Their absence of acknowledgement, their silence in even mentioning my dad reminds me that I had better get on with life and all that life entails, just as those around me are doing. There is no time; no time for what? I don't yet have the words for what is lacking and what it is that I need to help me with the depth of sadness that I am just beginning to feel. I feel as though I'm merely going through the motions of living, of doing what needs to be done or what I have come to accept as needing to be done. Even this is becoming more difficult as I struggle to find the meaning of mundane activities in relation to the loss of my dad. There is no time, no place to just be with my grief in the external world.

And Everything Carries On

It's my first day back to work after dad's death. As I begin walking up the stairs to my workplace my colleague says, "Hi," and while I'm returning his greeting he states, "I'm going to need to leave an hour early today. My girlfriend isn't feeling well." I nod and respond, "Yes." He continues without pausing and says, "Betty's been having some more problems with her digestion." I nod, and as I do so I recall my colleague telling me a month previously that Betty had decided to postpone corrective surgery and wait to see if the situation might resolve. I try to listen patiently and with interest. As he continues talking I begin to feel more and more distanced from him, his concerns, and from myself. I try but I cannot fully devote myself to his concerns about Betty's health. I wish I could stop him right now and ask him, do you know, do you remember that my dad died two weeks ago? Instead I remain quiet, nodding occasionally, going through the motions of listening even though I am unable to focus on much of what he is saying. As he continues I find it increasingly difficult to listen. I want to say, "Well at least Betty is still alive. My dad is dead! There's nothing that can be done for him now." Why hasn't he acknowledged the fact that my dad has died? Is this too much to ask or to hope for? How can he stand there going on and on about his partner's non-life-threatening ailments and ignore the reality that I am grieving the loss of my father?

Reflective Analysis of And Everything Carries On

As I reflect upon the narrative, And Everything Carries On I become increasingly aware of another dimension of the aloneness that I have been feeling as I grieve the loss of my father. It struck me as I began to write about the mundane yet necessary activities of daily life (such as preparing meals, bathing, and doing the laundry) that need to be fulfilled even as I grieve, or perhaps in spite of my grief. These activities have since my father's death, diminished in importance. Their significance pales in comparison with a loss that is immeasurable, the loss of someone who can never in any way be replaced either in the role and relationship of my father and more significantly in my heart. (How) can life carry on as usual?

While I know in all aspects of my being that life cannot go on as usual, and that my life is not in the quiet moments of aloneness experienced as life before my father's death, the apparent expectations of others around me and of society in general is that, "one just needs to pick one's self up and carry on." It is as though people who are grieving are allotted a week or perhaps two weeks to grieve; to notify others of the loss, to prepare for and attend a funeral or memorial service, to express our emotions for a designated period of time, after which we are to return to life as before. Reminders of this tacit expectation abound in our society. For example, many of my friends attended my dad's funeral and stayed to talk with me in the hours immediately following the funeral. I felt supported by their presence and comforted by their desire and willingness to remain close to me physically and emotionally. I have not however, heard from my friends since my father's

funeral three and a half weeks ago. I know that it is not because they do not care about me. I have enough prior experience with them to know that if I contacted them and expressed my need to talk about the loss of my dad they would listen and offer support. Yet what I yearn for is unsolicited support and contact with others that I do not need to initiate. A spontaneous phone call or a visit with no specific agenda would be helpful. I'm not certain that I even need to talk about my father and the loss of his presence in my life in any detail. I just need their company, to sit quietly with me or go for a walk.

I am left wondering about the absence of my friends during this time. In some ways it mirrors the absence of my father. It's in some ways as if they as well as my dad have left (me). As I reflect on this thought I am reminded of the saying, "Ultimately, we all face life alone." Ironically (or perhaps not) it was my father who introduced me to this saying during one of my early childhood losses. He spoke of it in an attempt to help me to cope with a loss that was at the time extremely painful. In the moments of my current grief I am left wondering, is it possible to realize and to accept that one is ultimately alone and that no one and nothing may ultimately eradicate or even ameliorate the loss and the grief that is experienced, while also longing for, and requiring something from one's contact with friends, family, and others? Am I afraid to be alone with my grief or with myself?

The lack of contact with friends as I grieve at times intensifies my sense of loss. It is as though others have forgotten about my father's death. It is as if they lack a deep awareness of what this loss means to my family and to me. The lack of contact, the silence, speaks volumes. What it says to me explicitly and covertly is that I need to "go it

alone." It implies that although I am grieving there is nothing that can be done and that time itself is simply required. Do they not realize that I am, as all persons who grieve, already alone in and with my grief? Aloneness is an integral, and I believe, an inescapable part of grieving. Grief calls upon me to sit with it, to feel it, at times when I feel unprepared. Grief has another plan for me. Ultimately, there is no escaping aspects of and moments of aloneness and the myriad of emotions that come to me in the solitude of being alone in and with my grief. Even when I do manage to subsume my sadness, anger, and the oppressive feeling that blankets so much of my experience of losing dad, the emotions surface again. They arise at their whim it seems, often at the most inopportune and inappropriate moments. For example, when I consider the situation of the narrative, *And Everything Carries On*, the anger that I experienced in my interaction with my colleague was I recognize in retrospect, and perhaps even in the moment, disproportionate to the situation. Yet I could not truly suppress my anger. Although I restrained myself from saying what was painful to acknowledge, which was that at least Betty was going to be okay, but dad is dead, my anger intensified. It prevented me from listening to or even caring about my colleague's legitimate concerns. My colleague's expression of his life concerns was a sudden reminder that I may have the inner life of my grief, but the world and others have demands that cannot wait.

I have often reflected upon the saying "Time heals all wounds." Time will not, could not, be adequate or enough to allow me to feel and experience what I need to with my grief. There is so much more than time that is necessary for (my) grieving. I cannot yet begin to

articulate clearly or fully what I may require. Already however, I sense that time is only part of the process.

When I reflect upon my anger and sense of alienation from my colleague as he expressed concern about his girlfriend's health I realize that his lack of acknowledgement of my father's death may be a reflection of our society's endorsement of the notion that time alone, in and of itself is *a*, or *the*, great healer. It is as though others are saying implicitly and explicitly, "This too will pass." Yet (how) will it pass? There are numerous sayings such as, "Time is a great healer," "This too will pass," "Time heals all sorrows," and "These things take time," that inform us that time is somehow a panacea for (our) loss and grief. These statements instruct and sanction that time (alone) and time alone is all, or at least to a great extent, what a person needs in order to grieve. I wonder however, what we may as individuals and as a society be protecting ourselves and others from feeling and experiencing as we endorse and maintain the premise of these sayings. It is as though we learn through the messages of these sayings to send one another away physically and emotionally to grieve or to heal a loss. We then expect the person to return to our company, and to life, and simply carry on as if (their) life is unchanged.

I'm not certain that others in my life actually wish to ignore acknowledging the impact that the loss of my father has had upon me. It may be that they are unsure of what to say and in their uncertainty they say nothing. Perhaps they fear that they will upset me if they mention my father? When friends and acquaintances fail to acknowledge the loss of my father I am left with a silent, yet powerful message that I also should not mention "it." In

the moments during which an opportunity for acknowledgement is avoided, the taboo of speaking openly about (our) loss(es) is I believe, quietly and mutually reinforced.

As much as I desire a deep connection with others as I begin my process of grieving I am also aware that time alone with my grief is precious. Solitude is essential in order for me to be able to recognize and feel fully what comes to me only at moments when I am alone, in the shower, walking in nature, driving in my car, listening to music. It is as though some aspects of my grief wait and require me to be alone before they reveal themselves. I need the solace of solitude in order to let what wishes to come, emerge more fully and without the reservation I often feel when I am in the company of others. The aloneness of my grief neither asks for, nor requires explanations, resolutions or logical thinking. It does not attempt to assuage my feelings of confusion, pain, and guilt. In some ways I am less alone in these quiet moments of solitude than when I am with others.

Postlude Reflective Analysis of And Everything Carries On

(Two-and-a-half years after dad's death)

As I reflect upon my difficulty in being present to my colleague's concern about his girlfriend's health, I am now able to recognize another dimension, one which I have deeply internalized from societal norms and expectations. The dominant discourse informs us that we should "get over" our losses and grief quickly, and return to "productive" work and life projects within a matter of days or weeks. My coworker, who was also influenced by, and enculturated in the societal expectation of bereaved persons returning to the status quo shortly after a death, expected and ultimately required that I would or should be "back to normal." He expected that I would be "over" my grief and able to be focused upon and empathic to his concerns about his girlfriend's health. Reflecting upon this situation now I am able to recognize aspects of an impossible juxtaposition that is created and reinforced by the dominant culture that informs and requires us to move on and past grief quickly. At the time of the interaction with my colleague my grief was fresh and raw. I was only beginning to feel the impact as the shock and surrealism was just beginning to subside. Although I realized in the interaction with my coworker that I simply (and significantly) needed to have my loss acknowledged by him, I had also internalized the societal expectation of moving quickly past my grief and returning to "functioning productively" in the world. The reality of, and my awareness of, the rawness of (my) grief was in conflict with the societal expectations of grieving, and of grieving persons. In the moments of this interaction I found myself resisting and rejecting my own needs, experiences, and emotions of grieving my father's absence and embracing the cultural messages of "moving on in life," past (one's) grief,

and not wallowing in (one's) losses or in self-pity. The anger that I felt toward my colleague for not acknowledging my grief was I now realize, more deeply reflective of my anger at myself for needing and wanting to have my loss and grief acknowledged. I had so deeply internalized the dominant cultural norms and expectations of grieving that I rejected aspects of my self and my grief, and directed the anger and negative judgements inward, internalizing them as my selfish and self-focused needs. I no longer perceive my anger at not having my loss acknowledged as selfish. I now re(cognize) the dynamic of avoiding acknowledgement of loss and redirecting the bereaved away from expressions of grief, as undermining of our human need to grieve deeply, to have our sadness and our loss(es) acknowledged both by our self and others. Internalizing the expectations of the dominant discourse reinforces the process by which we begin and continue to deny emotional presence and compassion toward others and ourselves as we grieve a death.

How Is Your Family Doing?

There have been many telephone calls from family friends asking how we are managing since dad died. It is comforting to know that people are genuinely concerned about how we are doing as we try to cope with our grief. It is however, hard to admit even to myself that when friends ask how I am doing and even more significantly, how I'm feeling, I often don't know how to answer. I feel blank, as if I don't know how or what I feel. Within the moments of their asking I feel myself becoming anxious. I must answer something, somehow.

How can I not know how I feel about losing my father? The question, "How are you doing?" hangs heavily in the air, unanswered and unanswerable for me at this point in my grieving. I don't have the words or they won't come to me. I try to compose my response and myself in the dreaded seconds that follow the inquiries. What emerges from my mouth feels alien to me. It is my voice, yet I recognize little about the thoughts and feelings expressed as being real. How do I even begin to express how I'm doing with trying to realize, believe, and accept that dad is gone forever? Do I tell them that it doesn't feel real? Yet I knew the moment that I saw the paramedics working on dad that he was already dead. It is hard to acknowledge this thought even to myself. It seems such a detached awareness to have had in those moments.

Did dad sense my lack of hope? Did my lack of faith and hope contribute to my father's death? Objectively, based upon my dad's history of not being one to fall or trip, one could ascertain that his collapse was almost certainly due to a serious physical crisis; most

likely a massive heart attack or stroke. Yet how did this awareness actually allow me to believe, when I initially saw him, that he was unlikely to survive?

It is hard to acknowledge that I had these negative thoughts and beliefs during the last precious moments of dad's life. Even if I could find the words to discuss these issues and the painful feelings associated with the circumstances of my father's death, I cannot trust that others would want to hear what I am struggling to understand. To somehow be able to find the words and the courage to articulate this experience to others only to have my words hang in the air, with no response, or with an all-too-quick dismissal is too great a risk. To express what I feel only to realize that I have "howled into the wind," unheard, not understood, is more painful than remaining silent.

People say to me, "How are you doing?" but do they (and do I) genuinely desire to know? Are they, and am I, truly ready to hear what may emerge? On occasions when I have told others that I wish I had done more to convince my father to have his elevated blood pressure assessed and treated they are quick to re/mind and reassure me with statements such as, "You did all that you could. You shouldn't feel guilty. Your father was a grown man." Do they not realize that such responses although meant to reassure or comfort me, actually intensify my anxiety and my sense of aloneness with my grief? Their immediate reassurances communicate that they do not understand. If they did, they would surely realize that when you love someone and that person dies it is natural for those who grieve to reflect deeply and repeatedly upon the circumstances of that person's death. The need to reflect is perhaps intensified for me because my dad's death was unexpected and very

sudden. Why is it that others are so inclined towards attempting to placate the pain, the ambiguities, the "if onlys" of those who are grieving? Is it because they (we) fear that they (we) will not be able to bear the pain of others? Yet it feels necessary, therapeutic if not almost impossible not to talk about aspects of my grief, sometimes repeatedly within one conversation.

Why is it that people frequently provide or attempt to provide answers or statements of authority when I raise questions and issues that are beyond the capacity of human beings to know or to ascertain? For example, I have related to others that I believe that I may have been able to convince my father to have his blood pressure assessed by his family physician if I had talked with dad quietly over tea, with no other distractions in our midst. If I had informed my father of how worried I was about his blood pressure, I believe he would have agreed to have a cardiac assessment. People respond with statements such as "You tried to do what you could. It was up to your father." Their responses are designed to convince me to accept (once and for all?) that I did all that I could for my father. In essence, they are declaring that I should not feel guilty. In the certainty and the authority of their proclamations I am left abandoned, alone with my belief that I could have done more for my father if only I had taken the time, the care, and the effort to do so. I know this in my heart. Perhaps this awareness may shift somewhat with time, yet I believe that it will always be a reality that is inextricably part of my father's death. This reality lies beyond the confines of the objective rationale that others offer with reassurances that are intended to put difficult and painful issues to rest. It dwells within the nature of the connection that I shared with my father. I cannot dismiss my awareness that I could have

placed more effort into encouraging my dad to seek treatment for his high blood pressure simply because people implore or imply that "there was nothing more that you could have done." How is it that the individuals who express such reassurances miss the most salient aspect of the outcome of my actions and inaction? My father is dead and it is no longer possible to undo what has happened. Perhaps that is precisely why they state their reassurances calmly and authoritatively. The underlying message is "What's done is done. There is no benefit in ruminating on how things might have been done differently." It is not however, done, over or finished for me. I still reflect (and need to do so) upon how I could have made a difference in my father's life. A reality is that I may have been able to convince my father to have a check-up. Had he undergone a cardiac assessment and treatment even a few months prior to his death, realistically he may have been able to enjoy several additional years of life. Angioplasty or bypass surgery may have been viable options. I cannot dismiss these possibilities simply because they are painful to consider or because people tell me that I should not ruminate about "what might have been." And please, I want to say to friends who find it difficult to hear my sadness and my feelings of anger and guilt, don't feel as though you've failed to help me or to be a good friend if I'm *still* sad and *still* repeating the same issues. I need to talk about it. I need at times to repeat the same things again and again, because I can't quite believe what has happened. I'm trying to accept a loss that still feels impossible.

Silence Protected

I have been bracing myself for Father's Day. What am I going to do without my dad? It hasn't even been a month since he died and already there's an anniversary date, which of course, has to be Father's Day. I wish it could just be canceled. What I really want though is just to not have to face this.

Do I just try to ignore the day and pretend that it's nothing special? It's not really possible to do so because there are reminders everywhere. I can't turn on the TV or walk into a store without seeing advertisements everywhere for Father's Day. As painful as it is without him, I cannot, and do not want to dismiss the day. To even try to do so would be in some deeply significant ways a further severing of our relationship.

Friends and colleagues are talking to me, or at the very least around me, about what they're getting their fathers or plans they have to visit their dad that day. I can hardly stand it. It's like I am invisible, and my dad's death was insignificant. They seem oblivious, or maybe they don't care? It is almost as though there is a silent conspiracy, a continuing on as if nothing important has happened. It is important though I feel like saying, out loud, so it, and I, can't be ignored. Maybe it's actually that it is so horrible it can't be talked about? To have it acknowledged by others would be such a relief, and a recognition that this won't be just another Father's Day. Instead, one of my friends explained at length her potential plans to visit her father this year on Father's Day; something she hasn't done for years. She knows that my dad just died, she was there just a few weeks ago at the funeral, listening to me choke out my eulogy. I think that my

obvious pain over losing dad has been a catalyst for her to reconnect with her father. Why doesn't she mention it though? I feel angry to simply function as an example, as a foreshadower of what may come for her or others in the future, and still there is no acknowledgement. What is the conspiracy of silence all about? Part of me would like to say how it feels to hear her and others talk about their dads without even a mention of mine. Yet to do so is such a huge risk. I cannot tolerate the possibility of howling into the wind at this moment of vulnerability. Silence is for now protected, but at whose expense?

Surrealism

I feel a strong resistance, a denial or suppression of something or some part(s) of me. It's as though I'm in a time warp. Time feels, and in many ways is at present, surrealistic. It doesn't feel as though dad has been dead for a month. It can't be a month already can it? And yet in another way it feels as though I haven't seen dad for a year. It's as if he's really gone; not just his physical being, his physical presence in my life, but also what we had together, what made us father and daughter. It can never be again. It can never again be I have to keep reminding myself, except in memories, remembrances, fleeting feelings, sudden reminders that come out of nowhere and are gone just as swiftly. Perhaps this is part of the aloneness of grief. These moments, glimpses, visits in our mind and heart with the person and the things that we have lost, are invisible, unnoticeable to others. Life goes on around us. That's just how it feels. Life, in all its' multiple possibilities and actualities continues just as it did moments before. Yet I am for these moments removed, outside of life's happenings, in a place that I do not yet know how to even begin to describe. As removed as I feel in relation to others and to life's occurrences, I am in these moments the closest to my dad. It is not that I can see or feel him, or even necessarily sense his presence. It's just that for these brief moments he is dad again and I am his daughter.

"Us" and "Them"

Sometimes as I listen to my friends talking about spending time with their dads on Father's Day I feel as if I'm living vicariously for a few moments; as if it were possible for me to give my dad one more card and have even one more conversation together. I want to tell my friends to follow their hearts and spend time with their dads on Father's Day and on ordinary days. It is hard to resist saying, "You never know what might happen by next year." I'm aware that this thought reflects to a great degree my own needs in my own grief. It also reflects my fear that something can happen to someone I love at any time. I thought that I had at least partially prepared myself for dad dying some day. I realize now that some aspects of the preparation have helped me. I didn't leave many important thoughts and feelings unexpressed with my dad. Yet I could never have imagined the intensity of the void I feel at present. Sometimes when friends talk about their fathers I find myself thinking, wait until it happens to you, then you'll know. Know what? I'm not certain of the full meaning of this thought. It is in part an awareness that I have "crossed over" and I am now "standing on the other side." I have joined with others who have lost their own fathers. It's as though there is an "us" (those of us whose fathers have died) and a "them" (whose fathers are still living) and who couldn't really know how it feels to be one of us. I remind myself that this separation is a creation in my own mind and heart. Yet it feels significant to acknowledge this transition; this crossing over which is irrevocable for both myself as survivor and my father as the transitioned being.

I feel alone sometimes, different, separate and separated; now a minority amongst a majority of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances whose fathers are still living. At times

I long to talk with and to just be around others who have experienced the loss of their fathers. I want to ask them how they felt then and how they feel now. Primarily I long for a sense of connection. I need to know that there are others who may have felt something of what I am feeling.

Did You Have Any Forewarning Dad?

As I reflect upon the events and circumstances of my father's death I am struck by the awareness that what may have been a natural death (a sudden and massive heart attack) became a situation of multiple complex and invasive interventions performed by professionals who attempted to bring my dad "back to life." In retrospect it is of course impossible to say what would or could or may have happened "if only." It is however important to me to reflect upon what happened in the last few minutes of my father's life and during the hour and a half following his death. It is, and was, part of my father's experience of life and of death. In acknowledging the reality that this was solely my father's experience I must also acknowledge that I cannot with any certainty know of his experience of (his) death. Ultimately, it was and it can only be, his experience, born of and embodying all dimensions of his life, his "be-ing" in the world. I am able only to recognize and express my feelings, thoughts, and sensing of what I saw, felt, knew, and queried, or more accurately, of what I think that I saw, felt, and know of what happened. It is a separation of my self from that of my father; a separation that no degree of reflection, honesty, discussion with others or remembering can ameliorate or eradicate. I felt this separation, the differentiation of myself from my father profoundly as I sat with him trying to find the words, the way(s), to say goodbye to him, and to us, as father and daughter. The awareness that dad and I would never again have one of our conversations about life or talk again on the phone about matters that are trivial or significant, that we would never again just sit together having our late afternoon tea, hit me suddenly and with an almost unbearable intensity as I stood beside dad, wanting and needing to say goodbye to him.

Yet how could I say goodbye to my father when it felt unbelievable that he had died? He was fine just an hour ago my family informs me. I saw dad just two days before and we had a wonderful family dinner. He had been happy and had not appeared in any way unwell. How could you have died dad? Why didn't I notice something? How could I be so distant from my father and what he must have been experiencing physically when I thought we were close? As I reflect upon this question I feel overwhelmed by sadness. Did dad experience pain, fear, an ominous sense that something was wrong or was about to happen minutes, hours, or days before he died? Did he experience any (fore)warning that his heart was failing? I will never be able to completely resolve these queries. They will remain with me always, even if or when they are not as prominent in my thoughts as time passes.

Stifled Grief

I feel as though something is missing inside of me, something that I have not been able to articulate to myself or to others. I have attempted to inform my family and a few close friends that I feel as though something is dulled, stuck, suppressed within me. I haven't been able to cry about my dad's death. It's as though my grief is strangled within, contained, yet wanting (or waiting?) for some expression. Other people tell me that I am grieving. Yet I wonder how they can know this and how I can be so clear that my sadness is stifled? The paradox of this makes me feel more alone, alienated even with myself. Perhaps it is better to keep such (self) awareness and queries to myself? I remember when I was struggling with anorexic tendencies as an adolescent feeling terrified inside, realizing that my gut was actually burning, gnawing with hunger. I remember thinking that I have to tell someone; just tell my mom that I'm scared, and I can't eat. And then the terror would seize me. If I tell her she'll *make* me eat. I decided to keep my fears, my awareness, as confused and as frightening as it was, inside me. In some ways this was destructive to my physical health, yet I also knew that others wouldn't or couldn't understand what was really happening to me. They would just want me to eat. I was too frightened, terrified to eat, to gain weight, to get fat; and I knew that they couldn't understand the power of this aspect of my life. It wouldn't correspond with their understanding, their perspective of life and of living. And so, I kept it to myself.

I've tried on several occasions to say that I don't know what is happening inside of me, what's happening with my grief. I can't cry. I just don't understand it. I can cry about a small animal whose life has been extinguished by a careless driver or in response to a

story I've read in Reader's Digest, or in hearing about another person's loss. Yet I can't cry about the death of my dad.

It's not just what I've been able to say to myself and to others. I can state without emotion that my dad is dead. What does dead really mean? For those of us who loved and cared about the person who died it's about living and being in the world without the person. It's about finding a way, or ways to live, to be in the world without the relationship that we had with our loved one who has died. As I write this I realize that in many ways I have not yet begun to do this. I am still expecting to see dad at home, out in the garden, in his office, at the kitchen table drinking tea.

Although I am able to tell myself and others that dad is dead it is merely a statement of fact, a cognitive awareness capable of excluding emotion and deep feeling of what has actually happened and what is continuing to happen within me. Dad is not only dead. He is in some very significant ways lost to me. All of the things that we shared together, created together, that I experienced throughout my life with him have changed somehow. This loss is so huge, so unbelievable to me. I think now that I never expected to be facing the loss of my father other than for brief moments as I tried to imagine what life would be like or might be like *if* something happened to dad. Even on those few occasions when I allowed myself to begin to imagine what it might be like when something happened to my father I actually continued to believe on some level of my being that it would not happen. Am I still not able to imagine it happening, even though it now has happened? Dad is dead. What does this mean? This question shocks and frightens me. I'm afraid to

begin to reflect upon it. I feel shaky. I want to push the fears away, squelch them, just make them go away. I don't really want to feel the sadness, and even more significantly, the *void*. I don't want to feel the finality of this loss. The only feeling that I can't contain is anger. I feel it burning within and sometimes it spills out. I feel such anger, rage at times.

What If

The events of the night that my father died remain etched in my mind. I have recorded every detail and aspect as deeply as possible into my heart and my mind. I replay the moments again and again in minute detail, recalling them as if they are happening before me at the present moment. It is beyond simply a recall of what happened in terms of factual events. I *feel* the moments in their full intensity, as if my father's life is before me once again. It is as though in these moments I relive not only what did happen but also, I become acutely aware of what might have been "if only." In writing these two words, "if only" I am suddenly overwhelmed with sadness. How can I let myself reflect upon let alone embrace the "if only(s)" that could have been part of my father's life and instead came to be associated with his death? It is too painful (isn't it) to truly think about and allow myself to feel the "what might have been" scenarios knowing that my father is no longer alive, no longer able to be saved regardless of the "what if(s)" and "if only(s)"? I've opened the floodgate now. The tears are flowing despite my attempt to suppress thoughts of what else or what may otherwise have been "if only." I have not (yet) been able to subsume the "what if(s)" since the moment I saw my father that night collapsed on the floor with the paramedics working on his body. The thoughts sometimes arrive in a deluge, one on top of the other, and sometimes alone, with just my heart and my head to hear them echoing. What if this had never happened? What if my father just had not collapsed and arrested? Would he have kept on living for months or years? Why that night, at that moment, with no particular or at least no apparent stress or physical strain to precipitate or contribute to his collapse and subsequent death? Why could this just not have happened to dad?

I have tried to suppress the "what ifs" particularly with an awareness that ultimately there can be no answers or definitive explanations let alone an undoing of what came to be. Yet I cannot completely suppress the possibilities of the "if only(s)" and the "what if(s)" surrounding my father's death. To do so even briefly is only make believe, a dishonest attempt at pretending that the queries do not exist or that they do not matter, even though and even *as* I feel them still tugging at my thoughts and my heart.

In writing this I am struck by a poignant irony. It was my dad who informed (or warned) me as a child and again as an adult not to spend too much time and energy thinking about and imagining the "if only(s)" and "what if(s)" in and of life. He taught me that such thoughts and the emotions that often accompany such thoughts could or would potentially consume one (me). Yet they are part of my grief, exacerbated by the very sudden unexpected occurrence of dad's death. Suppressing or otherwise attempting to subsume these "what would/could have happened if" scenarios does not eradicate them. I cannot simply will them away. To attempt to do so is every bit as much an exercise in pretending and make believe as what my father informed me was the underpinning of the process and product of imagining and considering the infinite and negatively time and energy-consuming possibilities of "what if" scenarios. Am I trapped (or have I trapped myself) within the wishful, childlike, magical thinking of "what if(s)" in an attempt at finally, and with finality, understanding and accepting the loss of my dad? Even if or when I ignore, deny or pretend that I do not have such thoughts, they (re)visit me. As painful and exhausting as the process of review often is it seems and feels very necessary.

The process of allowing (and sometimes of being unable to stop) myself from engaging the "if only" and "what if(s)" is at times freeing. It guides me to other layers of my grief. For example, the seemingly infinite possibilities of such imaginings bring me closer emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually to my/a child(like) perspective of grieving. It is as though I am suddenly able to be deeply sad, devoid of the need to reign in my feelings.

It is such a struggle at times to stay with the myriad of potential scenarios of what might have been "if only" or had I (just)... *For, I will never know what might have been.* I have instead been taught to ask and to direct myself toward asking the question, what is the point and the value of entertaining in (one's/my) mind and heart the "what if(s)"? In Western society we are informed by others (and subsequently we learn to inform ourselves as we accept and integrate this thought-stopping and feeling-stopping process) that the possibilities rarely come to fruition and are therefore, not usually worthy of consideration. I have been instructed, vis-à-vis the beliefs and values widely accepted and promulgated in Western society, that allowing and encouraging such thoughts equates to wasted time and reflects unnecessary and potentially harmful rumination that will only prolong and exacerbate one's loss and grief. My grief informs me otherwise. What is the reality of my father's death and his loss to me? The "what if" and "if only" thoughts simultaneously emerge and are strengthened by my desire and need to understand, to learn more about and to feel all aspects of what my father's death and his absence means to me. The notion that I cannot know definitively and completely the answers to my

queries does not diminish or assuage my emotional, spiritual, and "daughter-need" to reflect frequently and even repetitively upon the possibilities of what might have been. This process consumes energy and time and occupies a significant place in my being. Yet not allowing these thoughts time and a place in my self and in my grief (by attempting thought-stopping psychological techniques) may, I believe, enable the "what if(s)" a greater opportunity to consume me. Attempting to repress or suppress them may contribute to the "what ifs" becoming disenfranchised, disowned, and isolated, yet still present and always looking for entry into my consciousness. Allowing them and on occasion inviting them to be with me seems to be the most truthful acknowledgment of my process and my self.

In my attempts to verbalize to others some of the "if only(s)" I am frequently, if not predominantly, met by silence or a rapid re/minder not to hurt myself (or them?) by ruminating upon what might have been. "You'll never know for certain," I am informed by others. I want to say to those individuals and to others, that I cannot eradicate the queries, the unknowns, and the uncertain dimensions of my father's death simply by not verbalizing them. I want to remind them and myself also, that grieving is a *process*. I want to tell them that it would help me to be listened to and truly heard. I need at times, to repeat again and again, to myself and to others, aspects of the "what if(s)." After all, as confirmed by many people who knew my father well, it was not at all likely that he was going to die at the time and in the manner in which he died. There were no obvious precursors, no signs to indicate to others that he was not in good health. Why am I expected not to "ruminate" (reflect seriously and deeply) upon "if only(s)"?

What is (and is there) a line between denial (or avoiding consideration of possible contributory factors) and being consumed by "what if(s)"? I hear the words expressed by others echoing in my head, "You can't change reality," "You did all that you could," and I suddenly feel guilty, foolish, and confused about my need and drive to reflect upon the restless "what ifs." After all, the reality is that my father has died. This fact is true and irrevocable.

Even after receiving the results of the autopsy, which confirmed that my dad had severe coronary artery disease, there are still many unknowns and questions that remain unanswered. For example, did my father experience any symptoms prior to the night he collapsed? I am plagued with this question. The pathologist also mentioned that dad had suffered quite a large myocardial infarction five days prior to his death. (How) could he not have experienced any symptoms? Would my father's awareness of symptoms (if present), and timely and appropriate medical intervention have actually or even potentially extended his life? Sometimes I know that I will never know why dad died without any apparent forewarning. Sometimes I still need to ask and listen to the possibilities of the "if only(s)" and the what if(s)" I go back and forth and to the sides and all over trying to see and to feel things from all and every possible position. I don't know if deep within I believe that I may eventually quell the need to know, to understand, and to accept what has happened if I allow myself the queries. Perhaps on some level I believe and hope that by deeply engaging the process, ultimately the (contributory) cause(s) of my father's death will be revealed. Perhaps it is neither, and both? For the

present, the "what if" and "if only" thoughts have their place within me. Whether invited, encouraged or sometimes discouraged by me, we are at present traveling this path together.

Reflective Analysis of What If

The "what ifs" and "if only(s)" have diminished in frequency and intensity during the past several months, yet they continue to be significant. I am gradually coming to realize that the process of considering how things may have been different may never completely dissipate. The shock and the unexpectedness of my father's sudden passing from this life have affected me deeply. My dad's death was my first experience of a sudden death of someone whom I loved. There was no time for goodbye and no time to prepare. It hits me that my previous sense of how I thought things would be has been completely and irrevocably disrupted. And, I could not have seen it coming. I now realize that prior to the shock of this experience, I had a belief, or maybe it was (just) a strong hope or faith, that dad would live for a long time. How long, I ask myself now as I try to imagine how life seemed and felt before May 19, 2000. I know that for the past eight years I had thought seriously about the possibility of my father dying. How could I not do so? As a nurse I have seen life extinguished in young people who just hours and days previously were strong and vital, just reaching or living within the prime of their lives. I was very cognizant of my father's age. He was 78 years old. Statistically, he had arrived at an age at which many people in Western and European societies die. I worried about dad suffering cancer, a stroke or a heart attack. I worried not only about my father dying but also about the possibility of him developing a physically or mentally debilitating condition. In retrospect I am able to see that I did have some degree of reality and preparedness. Yet it does not seem to have been enough, nor even adequate. So much was impossible to consider let alone embrace.

I was aware of the importance of trying to bridge the strains in our relationship. I would remind myself that what is said and done (as well as what is left unsaid and undone) could be forever left in limbo *if* anything ever happened to my dad. And, here it is right before me on paper. Words I have spoken to myself and to others often, "*If anything ever happens.*" The *if* only(s) that revisit me now are as ominous as the *if* only scenarios that I previously allowed myself to consider, or more accurately, to not consider. Prior to my dad's death, as I reflected upon the possibility of "*if anything ever happens*" I would correct myself mentally and transform the thought to "*When something happens*"

Immediately after replacing the "*if something happens*" with "*when something happens*" I would feel incredibly anxious and suddenly distracted. It was a thought that was physically repelled by my mind and body. I would feel a nausea-like sensation. Simultaneously, I would emotionally and mentally push the "*when*" thoughts far away. They didn't belong, did they? Was it really necessary or right to think about the very real probability of my father dying? Ultimately it did not matter. My mind could not hold on to the possibility of "*when*" and the unspoken *how* it (death) might happen. I could not stay present with the possibility, let alone find a way to accept the possibility or the probability of losing my father. And, it seems that some part of me is still railing against the reality now, even though there is no longer an "*if something happens.*" *If* has arrived, fully, suddenly, completely, and infinitely. The turn or the shift of "*if something happens*" to "*when something happens*" is beyond simply a cognitive, rational realm of understanding. It is a matter of my heart finding if it may, its own way, to its own understanding, in its own time. Time beyond the confines of the clock, beyond the acceptable parameters of grieving designated by our society.

The shift from *if* to *when* something happens is far beyond semantics. In the process of even attempting to embrace the possibility of "when something happens" I found myself trying and almost compelled in the process, to consider (exactly) what might happen and how it might be for my father. The possibilities seemed vast, confusing, and terrifying. In addition to pushing these possibilities away from my awareness, I would console myself with the thought that I cannot predict when, if or how my father may become ill and/or die. I might die before dad. I would tell myself that if it is not predictable then why should I continue to put myself through the process of trying to prepare myself for what might be *and* what might never be?

So much thought, wondering, and reflection, all in an attempt to understand and accept what has happened. The simple yet very real truth of the matter is that I did not want my dad to die. Ever! This is perhaps the most honest thought I can possibly express in my grief. (How) could I have prepared myself for the probability of my father predeceasing me when in the depths of my being I did not want to envision this ever happening?

How Can It Be?

Why am I having such difficulty writing about my experience of saying goodbye to my dad? I feel overwhelmed with sadness as I see these words before me. Saying goodbye is an essential part of acknowledging all that my father meant to me and who he was as a person and as a father. Yet, as I stood beside my father I could not truly conceive that he was dead. On some level I *had* to acknowledge that he had died. I willed myself to do so initially by repeating the words internally, "My dad is dead." I could not however believe, nor could I truly feel that dad was actually dead. Is it possible to comprehend and believe that within minutes someone we love has "gone," departed from life and from us forever?

When dad died suddenly and unexpectedly, in the fleeting of mere seconds, it was unbelievable, inconceivable and surreal. I could only acknowledge this irrevocable and overwhelming reality at a distance. It was as though I were watching a play, not real life, not the actual life of my father, my family and myself. (How) can it be real? How can dad be alive, thinking, feeling, and laughing as he did only minutes before he collapsed and suddenly, irrevocably be dead?

Saying goodbye to my dad was not how I wanted it or perhaps more honestly, not how I had thought it *should* be. It was supposed to have been more meaningful, more deeply felt. Yet the reality is, I couldn't really feel his absence, not yet. The goodbye, like his death, was somehow beyond what I could possibly have known before this experience.

I Miss...

I miss time alone with you dad,
 just you and me; with no interruptions, no distractions;
 no other voices to hear, places to be, things that need
 to be done in these moments together.

Just you and me,
 talking about life--about what really matters.

And how, I ask, can it really matter when things sometimes are so hopeless; even futile?

Are things futile?
 Or maybe it's the mindset you're in right now?

If you want to reduce it to that, then everything's futile--

If you think about what is, just *now*, you're limited.

Yes, maybe... But, it still cannot be bypassed or eradicated.

If you keep it inside, it festers,
 talking about it, letting yourself be sad, letting it out...

What if this is all there is?

This is what is, right now. What else there is, is what happens,
 and what you decide to make of it, and with it.

That's it--We have a choice of how we perceive it, and what we
 do with it,
 no matter what *it* may be.

The thing is, do we make an honest choice, a courageous
 decision--or do we, do I, choose to take the safe path?

To follow what's inside you. To take heart;
 that's important.

What if you've already lost heart?

Have you ever been afraid you'll never regain it?
 Maybe it's not something to be quantified--to lose, to gain?

I miss engaging deeply, as if there is nothing else,
thinking out loud,
bouncing ideas all around.

Fleeting, yet extraordinarily significant revelations and revisitations
that would delight, stun, annoy, and occasionally settle in one, or both of us;
that disappeared as mysteriously and quickly as they appeared.

To talk until we were finished--for now;
knowing we've only brushed a surface,
one or two possibilities.

Feeling buoyed, unsure, electrified, sometimes frustrated
by what was created between, and within us, in these moments;

silently anticipating, and knowing that,
we'd talk again,
to depths, of as yet, untitled topics,
about things,
often left
unspoken

The Loneliness of Grief

My father's death was then, and is now, a shock. It seems only natural that I am called repeatedly to consider how, if, and why things happened, including most significantly, how my father's life may have been extended. Why has it been my experience that others have not encouraged me to express the "what if(s)" and "if onlys." They have instead attempted to shift me away from, and out of, my need to consider the unknowns and uncertainties. Repeatedly I am reminded by such reactions, that our society does not adequately support nor even accept a grieving person's need to review the "what if(s)." Pronouncements such as, "You will never have an answer to such questions," are often followed either by silence or a statement indicating that it is best not to put myself (and them) through the agony of questioning and wondering. In the wake of such responses I am silenced. The loneliness of grief weighs heavily. The queries are not quelled, just temporarily subsumed. I wonder how many others who are grieving can relate to this aspect of grief? Do we simply, and ultimately learn how, when, if, and to whom we may express, and not express (our) what if(s)? Why are our societal and cultural taboos about death, loss and grief still prevalent and thriving? Individually and collectively, what are we fearful of?

Multiple Layers of Grief

The process of writing about my grief is so very humbling. I see before me themes, issues, thoughts, and feelings that are inextricably intertwined throughout the narratives and the reflective analyses. In some ways I find it reassuring and comforting to realize that there is a sense of continuity, a semblance of stability within the sometimes overwhelming flood of emotions that I continue to experience. As I see the same feelings, issues, and questions repeatedly expressed I am moved toward accepting that they may now be deeply part of me, part of my experience of loss and of life, forever.

How is it that I begin to write about a particular thought, feeling, or experience and suddenly, without realizing it until it is before me on paper, I am revisiting issues, thoughts, "what ifs" that I had no idea I was about to reexamine? At times I feel disheartened by seeing the same issues, the same thoughts again and again in my writings. Am I stuck in grief? Should I have "moved along" to focus on different thoughts, different feelings by this time in my grief? Another part of me reminds me that there are no "shoulds." I cannot however, completely release myself from some idea of how I thought things might be "by now." Another part of me knows that I am grieving in my own way, irrespective of any external measure or judgment.

As I continue to write and as I reread previous writings, I learn something more about the multiple layers of (my) grief that are both consciously and unconsciously part of my experience of losing my father. Thoughts and feelings that I have considered privately, or that I have shared with others in depth, will often reemerge, perhaps not with the same

degree of emotion, or the same intensity, or the same emphasis on a particular facet of the loss. Nevertheless, they "arrive," often with little or no warning, much like an earthquake that hits "out of the blue." I am left in their wake feeling the ripple effects and affects of the aftershocks.

There are also the moments in which a thought or feeling about my dad is suddenly and pleasantly triggered. I am reminded of times spent together in nature or in conversation. These memories although generally happy, are also bittersweet. In these moments of remembering I am also reminded (sometimes shockingly) of the reality that I do not have (a) dad anymore. It is at once, a double-loss that is painful to accept. I do not have my dad in my life anymore, nor will I ever again. I also no longer have, nor will I ever again have a father. In the very moments of such re/minders I feel the aftershocks ripple through me. I am never sure how long they may be with me or how intense they may be *this time*.

Sometimes, a seemingly innocuous thing ignites a reminder. The other evening just after dusk, I heard the sound of our wind chime swaying to the rhythm of the wind. Many times I have heard it and felt lulled by its quiet tones. Yet this time I was reminded of the night dad died and of the subsequent days when the restless wind came to stay, informing me of his presence and his life energy. At other times, things that "should" or could be overt reminders (such as friends talking about their fathers) leave me unaffected, untouched in heart and mind.

Whose Grief Is It?

Even in the moments of arriving to find my father lying on the floor with the paramedics working to resuscitate him I was not able to allow myself to feel fully the trauma of what was happening. From the moment that I was informed that dad had collapsed, my grief has been inextricably intertwined with my family's loss and grief. I chide myself for even wondering how our grief could not be intensely interconnected and even enmeshed as our family is very close and dad was a central member. Yet it is beyond the shared connections of our grief over the loss of someone we loved. From the moment I received the phone call it has never truly been *my* experience of losing my dad. It was from the beginning a loss and grief directed by the experiences and needs of my family. I could not truly feel my own emotions and experience my own anxiety and sadness at the times when I needed to do so. Much of my own process of grieving has reflected the experiences and needs of my family. No matter what I witnessed of the resuscitation and the decisions that were ultimately required regarding continuing or halting treatment, I could not, nor did I, fully focus on my father. I needed to think about my family. How are they doing? What support do they need right now? How can I tell them? What are they going to need when...? And if...?

How many times have I silenced myself from expressing the awareness that I didn't have the luxury of thinking about my own grief without first, and predominantly, thinking about how my family was coping with dad's death? It is difficult to admit this realization, in part because the word luxury seems disparate from the experience of grieving the loss of someone whom I loved. Yet to have been able to feel more fully the sadness of

witnessing my father's death without focusing upon, and intensely worrying about how my family would cope, is in many ways beyond my experience.

I would be dishonest with myself if I were not to acknowledge that I occasionally try to imagine what dad's death and his absence would mean to me separate from the initial, and evolving needs of my family's grief. I can only attempt to imagine at this point in time and in process. I *think* that I may have experienced a deeper sadness, a more internalized and acute process of grief that was more connected to my relationship with my father, and how his absence really feels. I long to be able to reflect on what is now severed from my life, independent of the needs and experiences of others. It was *my dad* who died, I want to scream until someone (who?) hears me.

Maybe it is enough, and essential, that I hear myself?

Real Life

I was watching a fictionalized medical drama on television during which a patient's condition deteriorated unexpectedly and he suffered a cardiac arrest. The doctor yelled for the crash cart and ordered the nurse to charge the defibrillator to 200 joules. I was anticipating each order, waiting to hear the various drugs that were sure to be prescribed, and watching the ominous cardiac rhythm on the monitor when my throat suddenly became so tight and constricted it was as though someone was pressing on it. Tears flowed down my cheeks even though I wasn't aware of crying. I tried to eradicate the image by closing my eyes and shaking my head repeatedly back and forth. I wish I had not seen this stupid program. I watched as the doctor identified the cardiac arrest and I knew the interventions that would likely follow, and still, I was completely unprepared, unaware of even the possibility of the potential fallout of watching the drama. Suddenly it was not a television program I was watching; the patient wasn't a TV character anymore. He was instead my father lying on the bedroom floor. The hideous defibrillation procedure was performed on my dad. I witnessed it and sent it away somewhere inside of me until now. Now it leaps out at me like a cougar that lurks in the shadows waiting for its' moment. I sit for several minutes feeling shaky and dazed, vividly remembering while trying to suppress some of the reality of that night as if it might be just a TV show.

Survival

Today as I was sitting near the ocean I saw an elderly couple walking slowly on a paved pathway. As they approached a curb they hesitated for a few seconds before the woman looped her arm inside her partner's arm and guided him ever so slowly and unsteadily up and over the curb. After regaining some steadiness they continued slowly along the sidewalk; their bodies frail and visibly shaky. I could not help but watch them, their steps tenuous and uncertain.

I don't recall thinking about it, at least not consciously. Rather, I was struck suddenly by the question: How is it that this frail elderly man, so unsteady and shaky on his feet, is still walking around, and dad who was so vital, is dead? It wasn't merely a cognitive inquiry. The thought originated from somewhere deep within me. It resonated in my gut and informed me once again, of the absolute incomprehensibility of my father's death. In the moments of watching the couple and seeing this example of the tenacity of, and for life, my father's death suddenly felt even more inconceivable. I was left reeling, in awe of another human being's capacity to survive despite the frailty of his physical being, while my father, visibly fit and healthy, has died. I cannot help but wonder, will I continue to be hit by such piercing thoughts, at any moment, for the rest of my life? Will these experiences and triggers, and the feelings that they elicit, continue to impact, and in some ways invade, not only my memories of the moments of my father's death, but also my memories of my father in life?

I had no conscious thoughts of my father when I first noticed the elderly couple. They were merely a couple out together on a Sunday morning walk. A completely benign, if not pleasant activity, just like my father's lighthearted conversation with my family mere minutes before he collapsed on the bathroom floor. Yet now I know first-hand, unequivocally, that life can change, cease, transform irrevocably, with no forewarning, in the most benign and unsuspecting circumstances. As I begin to reflect on this awareness I am hit by another question, what would, or will it be like if, or when, I no longer *notice* or *feel* such reminders of my father?

Reflective Analysis of Survival

As I reflect upon the experience of noticing the frailty of the elderly man as he walked with his partner I realize that I continue to have a sense of amazement at the unpredictability of life. Months after observing the elderly couple I am still struck by the survival of someone so frail in comparison to my father who was vigorous and strong. I have, since shortly after my father's death, found myself quietly making assessments of other people's health, particularly older individuals whose health is, or appears to be, compromised. I cannot help but wonder how my father could have died with no obvious signs of poor or failing health, while others, particularly those who are in questionable or poor health continue to prevail. It is difficult to admit these thoughts to others and even to myself. It is not at all that I wish illness on anyone, nor do I think that anyone with poor or compromised health should have died instead of my father. It is just that I cannot eradicate the incomprehensibility of such ironies. It is also not simply a manifestation of my old nemesis, my struggle to understand and accept the maxim that "life is not always, and not often fair." I do not perceive my father's death as unfair. He had enjoyed a full life of almost seventy-nine years. Statistically, he enjoyed a greater than average life span in good health. He did not suffer, at least for any length of time before his death. I cannot however dismiss the thought, sometimes strongly present, at other times less so, that he could and would have enjoyed many more years of life. It feels in some ways as though the ax fell, indiscriminately upon him at that moment, discontinuing his life while he was still so vital.

How should, or could, it have been different, I ask myself? I have no answer that satisfies me. There are however, few means for me to ameliorate what I continue to feel and to experience in my grief. I had hoped for and I had expected to have more time with my dad. I know that I was fortunate to have reached adulthood, even middle age before losing my father. And, I wanted more time with him.

If

Always a qualifier, "if." *If* I had noticed a sign that my father's health was tenuous... *If* I could have been (more) prepared. Even now, months after my father's death, my thought that I may have been prepared is qualified as *more* prepared. Little words that come to mean so much are also full of thoughts and hopes that die slowly and perhaps are never extinguished. *If* I had been *more* prepared; not prepared, *just* (more) prepared, the entire experience of losing my father would have been different I believe. I cannot however, truly know how it would have been different. I can now (only) imagine.

If I had known that my father was seriously ill, I would have spent more time with him in the months before he died. I would have spent conscious, mindful time with dad. Quiet moments together with no words spoken and no need for words. I would have said a few things that remain with me now, that would have been significant for my father to hear from me. I would have told him that I loved him, without just assuming he knew that I (still and always) loved him. There are so many moments of missed opportunities never to be retrieved.

Pandora's Box

There are moments when my grief is so close to the surface, so raw, that I disengage from even the possibility of facing yet another loss. I find myself unable to reflect upon any further "if only(s)." They are a painful reminder that nothing can be done now that dad has died. And, if I cannot (and could not) alter the events and outcome of my father's sudden death, what else may happen and will happen beyond (my) control and beyond what I wish would happen? In the moments of such thoughts I sit and stare, unable to focus on anything mentally or emotionally. There is the feeling, or maybe the hope, that if I just block it out, even for a while, I won't have to feel the gaping hole of the "what if(s)" *and* the absence of my father.

There are some "what if(s)" that I have not (yet) allowed myself to explore. Perhaps I will never feel ready to open myself to what may be revealed. A Pandora's Box best left intact and undisturbed? There is always an omnipresent danger in exploring the "what if(s)" and if only(s). What if, and what happens when, I discover something that I regret or that is exceptionally difficult to accept, which once revealed can never again be eradicated from memory?

Projected Father Loss

Today I noticed a young woman's interactions with her father whom she sees only once every few years as they live at opposite ends of the continent. They seemed to have an amicable relationship with intermittent light talk flowing between them, and yet their conversation was also somewhat stilted, as if they might soon run out of things to say. I thought about how different her relationship with her father was from mine with my father. Rarely did we run out of things to say. In fact we would often talk until late into the night and not seem to run out of political or social issues that couldn't wait to be argued or practical topics about directions and choices to consider in our lives. As I listened to this young woman's discourse with her father I wondered, do you really know your father? Do you sense a loss with your relationship and is it all you'll ever know of each other? As I listened I felt a mixture of sadness and envy, and annoyance. I'll never have the opportunity to talk with my father again, but she has *this* chance and perhaps many more. It seems sad to me that they connect so fleetingly, as if they were two birds who touch briefly in mid-flight before parting, as if too much contact might prove impossible. Tomorrow is the last day of their visit. I feel heavy with a vicarious, projected, and somewhat unidentifiable sense of their loss inextricably mixed with mine.

Postlude

Reflections on My Process

Throughout the writing of my thesis I have felt overwhelmed by the thought/gut-wrenching feeling that I cannot continue, that this just has to end. I am not always clear on exactly what must end, for the process of experiencing grief and writing about the grief have become inextricably intertwined. It is extremely difficult at times to stay present with my feelings and thoughts. Instead I find myself sitting and staring, unable to take the feelings or the intensity of the feelings any longer. Sometimes I realize that I am making a decision to turn my emotions off. I know in such moments that I need to direct my thoughts to something else, even to a place of oblivion, just staring at some part of the floor or table with no particular thoughts, just the calming feeling of nothingness. Time escapes me during these moments. I am aware only that I need to "be" somewhere else, outside of and beyond the intolerable and vacuous place that seems to have, or may have, no end. I have been to, and sometimes suddenly found myself in what I experience to be a dark space, a gaping nothingness. It used to feel terrifying to be there and sometimes it still does. I feel as though I might be (or it might) swallow me up--this space, and the energy in it. If I stay there, the feelings get more intense and I feel myself falling into the chasm. I don't go back there very often anymore. I know now, deep within me, that it cannot and will not swallow me up. Yet just the reminder resonates back to my core and my beginning.

This writing alludes to (my) early experiences of loss and grief. I have been avoiding writing, and more significantly permitting myself to feel them as they intermittently

attempt to make their (ever)presence more fully known and felt by me. Again and again in the writing of this grief, I subsume what it is that I fear about loss. (For me) it is a huge life process and project. One which metaphorically (and sometimes I sense, possibly in actuality) I fear that I may fall into and never return. In beginning to allow the fears to reemerge in grieving the loss of my father, I realize how much I have tried and needed to contain and compartmentalize this loss. (How) could I possibly survive the overwhelming void created by my father's sudden and irrevocable absence *and* simultaneously even consider facing other life losses? Even with all my attempts however, I have not been able to compartmentalize this loss. I have lived and felt the fears and anxiety with me throughout this process, unsubsumed by my attempts to divert and distract myself. Each loss, or even the sensing of a potential or impending loss, resonates back to (my) earlier losses, some of which I know in my soul and not (yet) in words. I cannot be present to the loss and continued absence of my father and not feel, on some level of my being, whether consciously acknowledged or not, all those that came before it.

It is more than the sum of losses past which are never truly "passed." The fears and the intense need to push away the possibilities of loss(es) lie not only with what has come, and their multiple and exacerbating influences, but also in the "knowledge" of what may, or more honestly, *will* be coming. The potential losses are now made much more real, intermingled with the shock of dad's sudden death and the realization that the "*ifs*" are more honestly "*whens*."

Intense Sadness

(Nine months after dad's death)

I've been very sad as of late. It's an incredible sadness that hits me with no forewarning. There is nothing that I can particularly identify as a definite cause or source. It is a very lonely sadness. How can I even begin to talk about it with others? It feels so intense, so much my experience alone. The other day I was sitting and reading the newspaper, and suddenly tears began to stream down my face. My throat felt as though it was being crushed. I wasn't actually crying, the tears just flowed.

I really miss dad. It is the most intense its been since he died. It's really just hitting me now. Yes, I know that grief has its own ways, its own time, its own needs. "It will take as long as it takes," I hear a voice inside my head recite with an all-knowing confidence. How many times have I said this to others or encouraged others who are grieving to allow their grief to come when and as it may? "But it's frightening," I want to say now; now that it is happening to me. To not know when I may be flooded with sadness, a sadness that feels as if it will swallow me up with(in) it. A sadness that has and knows no bounds. A loss for which there is no acceptable resolution beyond reminding myself with painful recitations that: Dad is not coming back. He is gone. He will not experience the blossoming of spring that surrounds me now in the midst of this aloneness. I hear the birds sing, throwing their voices out for the world to hear. But dad and I will not hear their songs together. We will never share the rebirth of nature and all its wonders ever again. The world feels lonely despite all the fullness of life around me.

Being There

I am thankful that I was able to be with my father as he died or at least in the immediate moments following his death. I cannot imagine how much more painful the experience of dad's death would have been for me if I had not been able to be with him as he made his transition from this life. I know that it is not always possible to be with someone we love as they die. I also know deep in my heart that experiencing the loss of my father would have been even more devastating and painful for me if I had not been present. I felt, even in the moments in which I watched with fear and disbelief, the attempts to resuscitate my dad as he lay waxen on the bedroom floor, that I *had* to be there with him as much as possible under the circumstances. The thought that I may have missed this sacred moment of his life is something that is so painful to even attempt to imagine that I find myself actively suppressing the possibility. Months after dad's death I remain keenly aware that someone I love may die suddenly *and* I will or may not be there with the person. This possibility, once rather abstract, however possible or even probable now feels very real, close at hand. I have crossed a bridge with the experience of my father's death. I can never again return to the notion that it won't or can't happen, or even that it is unlikely that someone I love will die and I will not be physically with the person. Death seems more real, almost palpable since dad died.

I am now acutely aware in my heart that life is very tenuous. I can no longer take it for granted that I and people whom I love, will naturally just continue to live. I knew this prior to losing my father, but somehow it was different, more distant, negotiable in my mind and heart. But there is, I now know, ultimately, no negotiating life or death.

In the hours and days that followed my father's death I was shaken by the thought that I might not have been with him as he died. In reality, two days later and I would have missed being with him as he died. I would have been away in California on a vacation that had been booked several months previously. The shock of his collapse and death was so intense that to have missed seeing and being with him would have been excruciatingly painful, a loss intensified by another loss. Weeks after his death I could not bear to be more than a five or ten minute drive away from my family without feeling unbearably anxious and restless. I *had* to be physically nearby. It felt absolutely necessary to (my) emotional survival. What if something happened to one of them? If it could happen to dad who was by all appearances in good health, how could I possibly not consider that it could happen to someone else? Fifteen minutes longer and I would not have been present for dad.

Minutes, that is all it takes for someone to miss being present when someone they love dies. As I see these words before me on paper they defy or at the very least, minimize the depth of meaning that this awareness now holds for me.

Almost A Year

Almost a year has passed since my father died. I have watched the seasons emerge and ebb, and wondered in my heart how everything in nature carries on and my father is not present, not here to experience any of life's changes. I tell myself that of course life continues, before and long after each one of us has completed our personal life journey on earth. Yet in quiet moments of aloneness with no one to tell me otherwise, I find it painful to remember that dad is no longer here to experience the wonders of life that at this time of year abound everywhere. I cannot help but wonder what I am missing; what small yet precious miracle of life am I oblivious to in the absence of dad's observations of nature?

I am noticing things, dad! The wind; gentle breezes merging into blustery flows have returned in the last two days just as the restlessness of the wind on the night that you died and intermittently for days after your passing. I felt your presence, your continuing of life work on earth in the energy of the wind for days after you died. I feel it again, right now, in this moment, an energy, *your* energy all around me. I sense your presence in nature, in things of and in the wind.

Ocean and Earth

Today we interred dad's ashes
what is now of his physical being
gently, with loving care, returned to the earth
from which life emerges and eventually returns

A full cycle of life that began before known to others
a life lived never ceasing to be amazed
at how
the smallest of creatures sought its prey
how its mandible articulates with precision
to allow movements unimaginable by human creation

A life lived
delighted by such wondrous diversity
at things unnoticed and dismissed by others
teaching me to notice, to look carefully
before I stepped upon the path
at what small life may, or does, lie before me
awakening me to wonders beyond a hurried journey
marked by blind footsteps

Life lived
a sacred mystery
to which there is no end-point
in answers or in the living

As we returned dad's body back to the earth
fine granules of delicate sand gently sprinkled over his ashes
beginning again
as nature's perfect rhythm
a meeting of ocean and earth

Orange flowers (your favourite colour, dad)
grown in our garden
placed with care upon the earth
a symbol of our love for you
and your journey on this earth

Few words softly spoken
a poem drifting on the breeze
carrying us apart from you
within life's sacred circle

Mapping of the Major Themes of My Process of Grieving

Shock

- being/feeling in a fog
- hyperalert
- exhausted/driven
- numb/dulled
- cannot truly believe what happened

Early in Grief (first 9 months)

- shock gradually easing; non-linear with spikes and waves of intensity
- more connected to life and others but easily distracted

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- cognitive and body memory of the shock of dad's sudden death remains with(in) me and I still feel the shock at times
- much less intense and less frequent

Shakiness

- intense *need* to be physically/geographically close to family
- heightened anxiety when leaving my family even for short periods and short distances
- sense/fear *anything (what?)* can and may happen at *any time*
- anxiety feels palpable
- loss of dad and grief over his absence mixed with other losses (*scary*)

Early in Grief

- heart pounding while driving away from my family
- at peace with solitude at my own home *and* sudden intense encompassing feeling of needing to return to my family
- afraid; feeling little (child-like) at times, back to the "place" and the fear of nothingness and no one there (early loss as infant placed for adoption?)

As I Processed My Grief

- anxiety and fear of being away from my family dissipated over time (about five weeks) before it felt emotionally tolerable
- gradually I no longer felt palpable anxiety when not with my family

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- awareness of how my anxiety, fear and shakiness were connected to my earlier losses
- transmuted from felt/sensed/palpable experience to a cognitive understanding and position of reasoning: "someone I'm close to may die and I won't be present." (a shift from initial, early grief when this awareness and possibility *felt terrifying*)

Surrealism

- life and dad's death feels real and not real
- dad's dead/he can't really be dead
- watching others and life happening
- sense of apartness and disconnection

Early in Grief

- dad's death and absence feels surreal
- still feel disconnected at times from life and others

Fifteen Months After My Father's Death

- dad's absence *feels* permanent

Time

- time felt very different from how I normally experience it
- time felt:
 - elusive
 - surreal/blurry
 - events felt "long ago" *and* "it can't already be three days/weeks"
 - suspended *and* impossibly fast
 - confusing
- marked/made sense of initially merely by: lightness (it must be day) darkness (night); internal "body clock" disconnected from events of the external world

Early in Grief

- time alternately felt long ago *and* incredibly fast
- time marked in relationship between the present and dad's death

Nine Months to a Year

- my sense of time gradually returned to a perspective held prior to dad's death
- less frequently relating experiences and events to dad's death

Containment of Grief

- my attempts (consciously and unconsciously) to contain my grief over my father's death and absence to only or primarily this loss, yet other losses were being triggered while grieving his death
- scary to feel earlier losses, emerging losses, *and* dad's death simultaneously
- suppressed experiencing aspects of earlier losses because I feared it would be overwhelming
- fear of *the unknown* and of being consumed if grief was not contained
- concerned and anxious about the loss of other significant person(s)

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- not possible to contain grief; increased self-trust in my capacity to experience what will come *and* my fear and anxiety of *the unknown*, the black void remains
- as the time between dad's sudden death and the present continues, my anxiety decreases, yet I am aware of how devastating the loss of someone else may be

Mentally Reviewing & Replaying Events of "That Night"

- seeing, re/viewing, replaying again and again the events of "that night"
- consciously reflected on and reviewed as well as spontaneously and unbeckoned
- intense recurrences of scenes, moments, images which were particularly upsetting as I tried to fall asleep at night
- traumatic: being/feeling back in those moments
- real *and* surreal
- vivid and minute details replayed and reexperienced

Early in Grief

- retraumatizing: heart pounding, anxiety, feeling of being right back in those moments; images clear and detailed
- compelled to review and to recount each detail
- felt *essential* to retain each detail/image related to the fear of forgetting what happened and unknown fears

- recurrent questioning and wondering:
 - why?
 - (how) could it have been prevented?
 - how could I not have known dad was at risk/ill?
- intrusive vivid visual replays of witnessing resuscitation
- triggered also by hearing sirens which result in my heart racing and anxiety

Later (eight to fifteen months after dad's death)

- *still* reviewing and questioning
- details vivid, but not as clear as initially
- very anxiety-provoking to review but still need to do so
- sirens still trigger anxiety and fear related to my experience and the trauma that others may be facing

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- less vivid recall of events
- less need to consciously review
- trust that I will not forget what was/is important
- infrequent spontaneous replay
- still review especially before falling asleep or if reminders (information related to heart disease)
- still wonder how I didn't notice symptoms
- drawn to review medical literature with thoughts of what if and how *could* things have been different?
- sirens no longer trigger anxiety; reconceptualized as emergency vehicles traveling to help others

I'm Not Ready

- pressured to do what an other requires/imposes
- feeling nauseated with anxiety and shock
- knowing that it's not right/I'm not ready
- wondering *why?*: what's the hurry/whose timetable is it to retrieve dad's ashes?
- why am I feeling such anxiety at the thought of this requirement?
- *How (can) dad now be just ashes? inconceivable, incomprehensible*
- I don't want to do this alone *and* there is no one to accompany me

The Retrieval and the First Few Weeks Following

- not ready *and* I have to do this
- shock and unpreparedness for *role reversal*: I am now the responsible one (funeral preparations, arranging and receiving autopsy results)

- reality of role reversal hit while driving home with dad's ashes. I'm now looking after dad (and other family members)
- anxiety, wanting to disassociate from the experience of retrieval
- anger/rage (at what?)
- anger at: the timing/pressure of someone else's direction; not wanting dad to be dead/not wanting to have to do this; funeral director redirecting my feelings and informing me how to feel; religiosity cloaked as spirituality while struggling with the inconceivability of dad being transformed to an impossible form (ashes)

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- at peace with the reality and physicality of the transformation to ashes
- initial and early inconceivability shifted as I prepared to inter dad' s ashes 15 months after dad's death (seeing the ashes made the transformation real)
- role reversal is now experienced as a role passed on to me by dad
- anger at the funeral director pressuring/imposing upon our family has dissipated, yet I still feel robbed of being offered the time and opportunity to "bring dad home" (rather than just retrieving his ashes): the feeling has shifted to sadness at this lost opportunity
- I now realize that I felt angry at dad: for dying and abandoning us *and* making it necessary to retrieve his ashes

Why? How Can It Be?

- Why? How can it be? feels unrelenting
- dad's absence is a huge gaping hole that seems to have no bounds
- unrelenting wondering of what feels and seems inconceivable, yet is real(ity) *and* surreal
- **why?** is piercing, intense, almost unrelenting questioning and wondering why this happened:
 - how could I not have known dad had heart disease? (feeling sick, sad, not there for dad)
 - why didn't he inform us of symptoms?
 - did dad know he was unwell? and (how) could he not have known?
 - did I *really* know dad or did I just *think* I knew him?
 - what else didn't I know about him?
 - helpful that others are also shocked (shared experience)
- anxiety of the unknowns intensified during the stillness of night

Early in Grief

- why? and how can it be? were still very intense
- attempt to still/quiet the questions internally, but they soon (and suddenly) return
- need to bounce queries and the same thoughts and feelings with friends yet being redirected by them leaves me feeling (more) alone
- beginning to realize emotionally, not just cognitively, that I will *never know*, no definitives, yet I still need to question

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- still question whether dad knew he was unwell
- sad at the possibility that he didn't/couldn't tell us (was he alone in/with this knowledge?)
- why? is still present but more acceptance that this is how dad's life on this earth came to completion
- more at peace now; less desire to continue questioning but still rekindled at times, particularly triggered by external reminders

What If(s)

- *central, immediate* to my grief
- intense, frequent, vivid reflection on: what if(s) and if only(s)
- loss, sadness, regret, and guilt are intense: I believe and know I that I could have encouraged dad to see a doctor (based on strength of our relationship)
- a sense/hope/belief that death may have been prevented *IF...* (sense I failed dad)
- *needing* to review, explore, question the preceding events of dad's life leading up to his death
- examining details and possibilities feels essential
- needing to verbalize what ifs to others but seldom heard and reflected, instead re/minded, redirected and silenced by others chastising (You shouldn't...)

Early in Grief and the First Year

- recurrent, frequent, intense review and wondering (9 months to the first year) spontaneously triggered and in response to reminders (information re: heart disease)
- still feel and believe I could have persuaded dad to have his hypertension assessed
- sadness, guilt, and regret still present

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- less persistent need to reflect and review
- still find myself compelled to question
- greater sense of acceptance (not resignation) of dad's death and the way in which he died
- now re/cognize his life as having been full *and* I still wanted more time with him; missed time/opportunities still integral

Never Again/Things Missed

- "I just wanted to talk..." (realization cognitively and emotionally) of never having another opportunity to: some things I can identify (such as never having a chance to talk again, walk in nature) and some are unidentifiable: a gaping void, amorphous, yet very real
- intense sadness at opportunities *gone forever*
- represents the "forever gone-ness" of dad

Early in Grief

- sadness at the "never agains" hits suddenly, intensely
- less frequent than during the first 2 months, but painful
- suppress emotions when they hit in the company of others

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- never agains have dissipated, less intense
- still hit out of the blue and with little things that actually mean a lot

How Will or Should Grief Be?

- I can't cry (relates also to shock and surrealism) emotions feel blocked
- feeling close to grief *and* simultaneously wondering why I can feel and express sadness with other (and smaller losses) and not with the death and absence of my father: confusion and guilt
- anxiety and fear that I'll block my grief and I will never fully feel the loss and that parts of my grief will be suspended
- fear and anxiety that something, some aspect of this grief and loss will "get me" at a later time

Early in Grief

- still feel blocked in emotion
- (9 months) started to cry, but not definitively connected to dad's death and absence

- how did I imagine my grief would feel?

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- I now realize that I am probably not going to cry intensely
- *this grief, this loss* is unlike any before
- now aware that I must have had pre-existing notions of how my father's death and absence would be and how my grief would and should be processed (internalization of cultural and societal impositions)
- still feels as though something may still hit me; something feels blocked or suppressed

Some of Us Find It Upsetting

- anger at not feeling understood and being directed by an other
- fierce protection of my own and my family's grief: need and right to grieve in our own time and our own way(s)
- reassurance in hearing dad's voice

Early in Grief

- angry at being re/remembered by an other of dad's voice *still* on the answering machine
- angry that we are being pressured to meet others' needs and beliefs at the arbitrary societal time table for grieving
- feel somewhat threatened in grieving in my own way(s)

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- anger has dissipated
- clarity regarding my needs being acknowledged, respected, and supported
- increased self-trust in knowing when to make changes as I grieve
- at peace with keeping dad's voice message until we were ready to "let go"
- treasure having a recording of dad's voice

Whose Grief Is It?

- tension between what my family and I need and the needs of others
- whose grief is paramount? (image of "tug-of-war," competition of self/others' needs as my family and I grieve)
- confusion/anxiety/anger/tension
- am I being too self-focused?

- aware others are affected and triggered by this/my grief and loss, yet needing their support not redirection or competition of losses and grief

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- clarity and less tension: *It's my grief* and my family members' grief (others will be okay)
- at peace with this
- more cognitively based awareness: others' fears are triggered by loss, death, grief: knowing and respecting this, *and* not subsuming my grief

And Everything Carries On

- life was going on around me: felt distanced from others and life
- life carries on, yet nothing will ever be the same again without dad
- absence of others and lack of support: silent and verbalized societal messages that inform that, "things should/will soon be back to normal."
- no time or place to be with my grief in the external world
- difficult to focus on others and the external world: I accept this *and* wonder if I'm selfish or too self-focused

Early in Grief

- difficult to experience grief *and* function as if everything carries on when things are not the same in many ways
- allowed myself to be emotionally non-present to life and others for brief periods of time

A Year to 15 Months

- refocused on life for the most part; very rarely a struggle to maintain presence and interest
- rarely feeling disconnected from others and life

Such (a) Little Thing(s)

- little things, *seemingly insignificant* moments and issues hit me deeply, out of the blue
- sadness related to dad "never again" having a cookie, tea, hearing a song
- never knowing when and what I'll be hit with/by

Early in Grief

- still the "little things" that trigger intense missing of dad and sadness

- not truly understood by others as they seem to be insignificant things
- a wave of sadness when it hits

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- initially in grief and still now it is the "little things" that hit me to my core: sadness at what's lost and "never-agains"
- now less frequent, less intense
- reminders such as tree frogs croaking continue to be happy connections with dad

Societal Messages and Influences

- "It's not okay to be emotional (or too emotional)."
- "Soon it will be time to put sympathy cards away."
- "You did all you could. He was a grown man."
- "You shouldn't feel ... guilty, responsible, like you failed."
- "It won't always feel this bad. Time heals."
- Others reframing my feelings, concerns, and queries resulted in feeling unheard, not understood, and more alone with my loss and grief

Early

- feeling unheard, silenced, and shut down in my emotions and expressions of grief
- feeling alone, not understood, "crazy" yet not crazy
- longing for connection with others especially hearing from others who've experienced the death of their father
- angry at not feeling heard fully, not understood, and the imposition of society's/others' prescriptions

Months after dad's death

- rarely express my grief to others as I'm often redirected ("you shouldn't feel...") or distracted (reframing of my expressions) by others
- anger at people not listening, redirecting, or avoiding the topic
- shut down in the presence of others; grieve on my own time, my own way(s)

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- clarity regarding my experiences and emotions being my own and not needing acceptance from others
- others'/society's denial, anxiety, fears are not (necessarily) mine and I don't need to carry them
- I'm connected to my process and emotions as ongoing, not resolved, evolving, and shifting

- anger and disappointment with others has dissipated
- increased trust in my own process

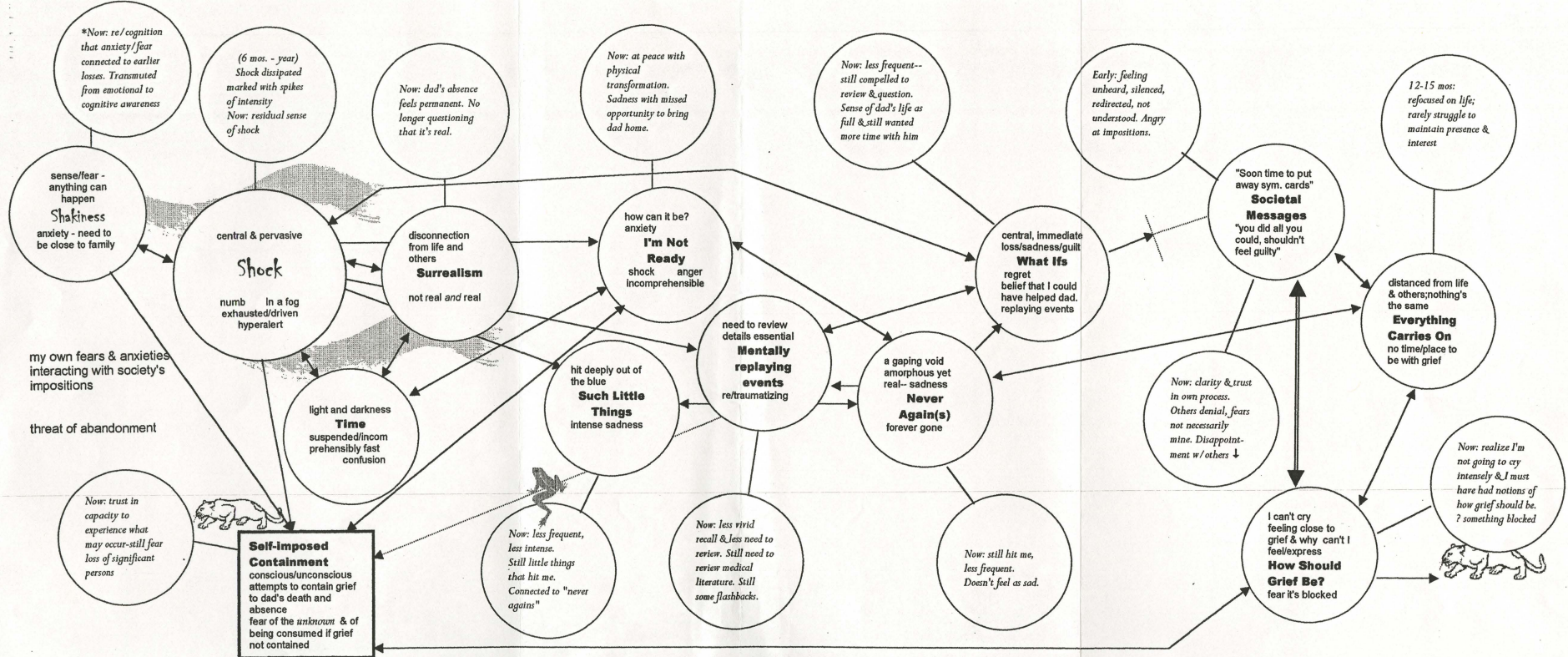
Others' Opportunities with Their Fathers

- painful to watch and hear of others' relationships with their dads: a stark blow that I no longer have a dad and wondering am I still dad's daughter?
- painful to see Father's Day cards and to hear of others' plans to be or not to be with their fathers
- feel cheated
- disconnected myself from Father's Day (three weeks after dad's death)
- feel separate and different from those who still have their fathers and wanting connection with others whose fathers have died

Now (30 months after my father's death)

- still feel sadness at the loss of an ongoing, developing relationship with dad
- still feel sadness and projection of feelings when others seem not to have connected relationships with their fathers
- occasional jealousy and envy at others who still have their dads
- partially disassociate myself from Father's Day; feel and sense my relationship with dad at other times

Visual Mapping and Interconnections of Major Themes of My Grieving Process



Engaging Autobiographical & Narrative Inquiry

Required Me to Reflect Continually Upon:

- what I was writing
- why I was writing it
- what I chose to include & highlight
- what I excluded, obscured, &
subsumed-- & why?
- how I inserted myself into the texts

Questions That Emerged Throughout My Inquiry:

- **In Western society, why do we experience such difficulty in effectively supporting others in their personal process of grieving?**
- **What factors contribute to our discomfort and reluctance to listen openly and to hear the grief that is expressed by others?**
- **How does Western society's dominant discourse of grieving impact upon an individual's personal process of grieving?**
- **How may we more effectively support others and ourselves in grieving a death?**

Insights and Understandings That Emerged and
Which Invite Further Inquiry:

- **the importance of supporting grieving individuals to trust and retain their own authority in their process of grieving**
- **supporting others and ourselves in becoming more emotionally present in (our) grief**
- **inviting others to express grief as a way of acknowledging and processing their grief:**
 - **the significance of telling one's story and having it listened to patiently, respectfully, without redirection**
 - **facilitating others and ourselves to break the cycle of denial and silencing and find our voices in expressing grief**

- **reviewing and deconstructing theories of grieving to consider:**
 - **whose authority is reflected in the theory?**
 - **are there warnings/threats?**
 - **noticing the language used:**
 - **power : demoting/labeling grieving persons as weak, irrational, & "emotional"**
 - **prescriptions**
 - **expectations**
 - **pathologizing/medicalizing grief**
 - **the concepts of "resolution" and "closure":**
 - **who do they serve?**
 - **do these notions/practices merely reflect society's need to silence expressions of grief?**
- **moving away from implying and imposing time frames, warnings/threats, and expectations**

- **a call for developing a more respectful and inclusive understanding and acceptance of the uniquely individual process of each person: respecting/supporting the authority of each person**
 - **shifts in language employed**
 - **movement away from judgmental assessment of grieving persons**
 - **listening to what a grieving person identifies as experiences, issues, emotions, that she/he would like to work on/shift/explore**
 - **trust in and support the authority of the grieving person**
- **encouraging the creation of language for expressing aspects of grief that have been disallowed, discouraged, and denied**
- **encouraging recognition of grieving a death as an integral part of life rather than "an event" that one should move through quickly in order to return to "normal"/status quo**

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Dear _____,

You are being invited to give permission to be mentioned (though not by name) in a study entitled *A Daughter's Experience of Loss and Grieving: An Autobiographical Exploration of Grieving the Death of My Father* that I am conducting as part of my graduate work in the department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Victoria.

As a graduate student, this research is part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Arts and it is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. A. Oberg. You may contact her at (250) 721-7807 or speak with me if you have any questions.

The purpose of this research project is to further knowledge and understanding of the experience of loss and grieving beyond what is available in clinical and theoretical accounts and information. The research process will consist in my writing narratives of my experience of grieving my dad's death. I have chosen to utilize an autobiographical approach in order to explore the grieving process at the deepest level. By exploring the grieving process at the experiential level using non-technical language, with narratives that reflect actual experiences of grieving, I hope that my research may be helpful in finding ways to bridge what sometimes is an "emotional gap" between a grieving individual and others who may desire to support them.

Research of this type is important because there continues amongst individuals, and society generally in North America, to be a reluctance to discuss and explore openly the topics of death, loss, and grieving. Individuals' and society's reluctance to speak about and to listen to others experiences and emotions related to grieving may contribute to a grieving person's sense of loss and isolation. It is my hope that the autobiographical focus of this research may stimulate and contribute to an increased openness and sensitivity to expressions of grieving on a personal as well as a societal level. The methodology of utilizing personal (autobiographical) accounts, in language that is non-clinical, may stimulate an increased awareness of the ways in which we may support ourselves and others in the process of grieving.

You are being asked to give permission to be mentioned (though not by name) in this study because you were present during some of the experiences and events that I will be examining in the course of this research on grieving the loss of my father. The data being examined in the study are my experiences and responses to grieving, 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 an integral part of my experience, with your permission, I will refer to your presence where applicable.

If you agree to voluntarily give permission to be mentioned in this research, you will have the opportunity to read and to make editorial changes, additions and deletions, to narratives

which include mention of you before anyone else sees them. 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.

Reading of the narratives in which you are mentioned will involve some time and effort including editing the narratives if you so desire. Approximately two hours of time may be required.

There are some potential risks to you in reading the narratives in that they may stimulate an intensification of your grieving of this loss, and previous losses, which may also be recalled. For example, you may experience changes in sleeping and eating patterns as a result of reading the narratives related to this very personal loss.

To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken: I will advise you of available counselling and support services and how you may access these resources. I will endeavour to minimize these anticipated risks and help to prepare you by providing examples of the experiences/events that may be included in the narratives that you will be reading.

There are some potential benefits to you in reading the narratives in this study. These include possible shifts in your own process of grieving losses in general, and more specifically in relation to grieving the loss of my father whose death is also personally significant to you.

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 do 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 the research any information which includes mention of you.

Because of my relationship to you as my _____ it is important that I mention specific ethical issues about consent. There is a chance that your decision of whether or not to give your consent to be mentioned in this study could be affected by our relationship. For example, you might agree in order to please me. To help prevent any chance of coercion, I have asked a third party person to present this letter to you and to request your consent. Your consent to be mentioned in this research must be completely voluntary. 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 this study, please understand that you may withdraw at any time without any consequences and without any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study I will not include in the research any information which includes mention of you. I respect your decision to consent or not to consent to be mentioned in this research.

I will ensure that research information in which you are mentioned will be made available to you for your reading, editing and decisions pertaining to changes, deletions etc. after the

initial draft, upon request, and prior to the research being made available to public reading, including prior to the thesis defence.

Please note that because the research is autobiographical, 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 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 defence. At that time, the study will be shared with my supervisor and the members of my thesis committee.

There are no other planned uses of the research data/narratives other than to fulfill the University of Victoria requirements for a Master's thesis. 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.

Upon completion of the thesis requirements, or if for any reason the research can not be completed, all research data/narratives held on the computer hard drive will be deleted, including those files in the recycle bin and backup files. Any paper documentation containing your name and/or identifying information will be shredded.

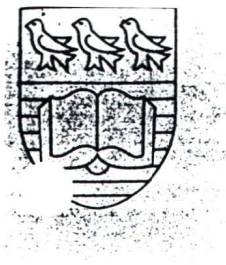
In addition to being able to contact me and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice President Research at the University of Victoria (250-721-7968).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of your permission to be mentioned in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the person delivering this document or by me.

Your Signature

Date

A COPY OF THIS CONSENT WILL BE LEFT WITH YOU, AND A COPY WILL BE TAKEN BY THE PERSON DELIVERING IT TO GIVE TO ME.



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University of Victoria - Human Research Ethics Committee

Certificate of Approval

<u>Principal Investigator</u> Denyse Pareizeau Graduate Student <u>Co-Investigator(s):</u>	<u>Department/School</u> EDCD	<u>Supervisor</u> Dr. Antoinette Oberg	
<u>Title:</u> A Daughter's Experience of Loss & Grieving: An Autobiographical Exploration of Grieving			
<u>Project No.</u> 055-02	<u>Approval Date</u> 15-Mar-02	<u>Start Date</u> 23-Mar-01	<u>End Date</u> 14-Mar-03

Certification

This is to certify that the University of Victoria Ethics Review Committee on Research and other Activities Involving Human Subjects has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.

J. Howard Brunt
Associate Vice-President, Research

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions/minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of "Request for Continuing Review or Amendment of an Approved Project" form.



University of Victoria

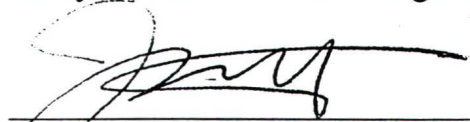
Human Research Ethics Committee

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

<u>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</u> Denyse Parizeau Graduate Student	<u>DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL</u> EDCD	<u>SUPERVISOR</u> Dr. Antoinette Oberg	
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<u>TITLE:</u> A Daughter's Experience of Loss and Grieving: An Autobiographical Exploration of Grieving the Death of My Father			
<u>PROJECT No.</u> 402-00	<u>START DATE</u> Mar. 23, 2001	<u>END DATE</u> Mar. 22, 2002	<u>APPROVAL</u> Mar. 23, 2001

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the University of Victoria Ethics Review Committee on Research and Other Activities Involving Human Subjects has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.



J. Howard Brunt,
Associate Vice-President, Research

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions/minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of "Request for Continuing Review or Amendment of an Approved Project" form.

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Title of Thesis:

Loss and Grieving: An Autobiographical Exploration of Grieving the Death of My Father

Author:



Denyse Marie Parizeau

March²⁰, 2003