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## **On Healing HeARTs: A Saudi Woman Perspective on the Experience of Baby Loss, Art, and Compassion**

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On Healing HeARTs: A Saudi Woman Perspective on the Experience of Baby Loss, Art,  
and Compassion

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Alaa Saeed Alkhalaf

June 2021

Advisor: Erin K. Willer, Ph.D.

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Author: Alaa Saeed Alkhalaf  
Title: On Healing HeARTs: A Saudi Woman Perspective on the Experience of Baby Loss, Art, and Compassion  
Advisor: Erin K. Willer, Ph.D.  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The dissertation, “On Healing HeARTs: A Saudi Woman’s Perspective on the Experience of Baby Loss,” investigates how Shia Saudi bereaved mothers create meaning and make sense of their experience of baby loss. It explores the importance of art and compassion in the healing process. Using a multi-method design that includes art-based methods and autoethnography, I narrate my own experience of baby loss. The study relies on theories of sense-making and constructivism to interpret my findings. Looking at the experience from a unique cultural lens enables the readers and health providers to comprehend how certain cultural factors contribute to both the suffering and healing process. The study expands previous research and contributes to the body of knowledge of communication studies by exploring a fundamental component of the human condition: death. Four themes emerged from the research: continuing bonds, loss as an opportunity for growth, living a new normal, and identity reconstruction. I argue that art and compassion have the potential to help women in their healing process.

The project contributes to family and health communication by advocating for the importance of compassion and expressive arts to facilitate the healing process, while addressing a taboo topic: the experience of baby death and loss. The study has the potential to advance women’s health and patient-centered communication by exploring the bereavement experiences of women from the East. The project aims to challenge and

change the status quo of lacking compassion through highlighting the importance of empowerment, meaning-making, connection, identity reconstruction, and emotional expression for bereaved women to bring comfort and facilitate healing.

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To my caring and scarifying parents and noble grandparents who brightened my path with their sacred prayers and embraced me with their endless affection, and unconditional love, especially my deceased grandfather, Hassan, and my grandmother, Maryam (um Ali). To my gentle husband who has been always a source of continuous understanding and support to me during this journey. To my kind siblings, family, and friends with whom I spent the most innocent and beautiful years of my life...and to the gracious young youth and children we are raising.

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With love, Alaa

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## **Chapter One: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

My dream of motherhood was shattered twice. First, when I was told during my second trimester that my baby had a rare heart condition in 2012; and, second when I experienced a miscarriage three years ago. During the first week of 2012, I was hospitalized with my baby girl, Leen. While in the hospital, I learned that my grandfather, with whom I spent the first five years of my childhood, passed away.

Not only I did lose my dreams and my imagined future by losing my baby girl, I also faced significant health ramifications and had many existential questions related to my identity, such as: “Who am I in this world after these experiences? And how am I going to survive?”

While hospitalized with my deceased baby, I was treated insensitively by healthcare providers. And members of my community made comments and asked inappropriate questions when I returned home. I felt burdened by feelings of shame and guilt. Meanwhile, affectionate people—those who embraced me with understanding and care—facilitated my healing process. They saved my life. They offered me a hand to survive the darkness of my depressive thoughts. They inspired me to live and dream again with passion. Little by little, I started to read write, and make art again. I realized then, that I had escaped that terrifying tunnel of depression and was able to re-define my

purpose in life. I found meaning in my experience, and I sensed a calling for which I am now attempting to answer. A strong passion for serving people in need and touching their lives evolved in me. Going through such a painful mourning experience, I have a deep understanding of loss and bereavement and what it means to go through them. Nowadays, I see myself as a unique individual or a mature woman who can empathize with other mourning women and give them a hand during the storm of the loss whenever it hits. I am also an ambitious researcher who dreams of making a difference and positively impacting people lives.

No one can escape the trauma of loss. It is a component of the human condition. Thus, offering appropriate interventions to cope with tragedies are fundamental to the process of healing. However, when defining healing, it is important to note that healing does not mean a full recovery; rather, it is the process of accepting reality and regaining the ability to adapt to a new life:

We may be standing at the frontiers of a new ethic in regards to our understanding and treatment of trauma. Foremost is the recognition that we may never fully understand the inner reality and emotions of one who has suffered so deeply. It may be this acknowledgment that our patients have suffered the unimaginable, and that theirs is a depth of suffering beyond human understanding, that begins the process of healing. With this in our foundational stone, we can then begin to view healing as an acceptance of the life that is uniquely theirs, one that has taken them into hell and hopefully out the other side into a better life. (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 27)

### **Rationale & Warrants**

The present study will expand on previous research and contribute to the body of knowledge of communication studies by exploring a fundamental and complicated component of the human condition—a topic that is often met with denial by avoiding

discussing it: the issue of baby loss. Existing research has partially explored this topic in the U.S. culture. However, there is a dearth of research on the topic of baby loss and healing in the Middle Eastern.

The dissertation research herein is unique in that it aims to explore a very different cultural perspective of a minority group of Shia's women in Saudi Arabia, as represented by my lived experience. The study is essential to communication studies because it attempts to understand how I, a woman from in an understudied, culturally diverse area, perceives the impact of loss in my life; what meanings I assign to the experience; and what factors I consider essential for my recovery.

Robert W. Buckingham and Peggy A. Howard (2017) state in their book: *Understanding Loss and Grief for Women*, “cultural traditions have a significant influence on one's grief. Knowing how a particular culture views death is important in understanding women's experience in mourning” (p. 83). Additionally, they argue: “cultural norms and traditions significantly influence bereavement. They become ‘shaping agents’ of grief that reinforce both women’s (and men’s) roles in the grieving process” (p. 75).

Heavy emotions follow loss—fear, sadness, guilt and shame—and need a safe space to be vented and expressed. This study’s design promises to offer such a safe space. Autoethnography provides us with a meaningful “platform” to contain such heavy emotions and produce intellectual knowledge. It has the capacity to uphold “a commitment to methodological and intellectual rigor and at the same time honors creativity, emotion, and researchers’ lived experiences” (Willer, 2020, p. 3). Leavy

(2018) notes, “People talk about giving those who are marginalized a voice. I believe that everyone has a voice; what many don’t have is a forum. If you cannot hear someone’s voice, you are not standing close enough.” (p. 353). Being the researcher and subject of the study simultaneously, I intend to give myself a voice and an ear, to talk about my story and hardships, and to listen to my inner voice. I will allow the reader to be close enough to comprehend how I view my experience, and to learn something from my experience about me, my cultural ideals and beliefs, and women in general.

Baby loss experiences can be comprehended and embodied through art-based approaches. Patricia Leavy maintains in her handbook, *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* (2019) that the experience of psychological trauma is an example of right-hemisphere communication. The complex impacts of trauma on the brain and body are encoded within the limbic system and the right hemisphere of the brain. She writes:

The right brain holds the memories of sounds, smells, and tactile and visual experiences, along with the emotions these memories evoke. Consequently, developing interventions that address the right brain dominance is believed to be an important factor in both the expression and processing of trauma memories and a part of successful intervention. (Leavy, 2018, p. 80)

On a personal level, I consider its therapeutic nature an essential part of this study. Although using my previous artworks and perhaps creating new ones can be used to recall memories and evoke emotions to analyze the data, representing the experience through artwork can re-story the events, and re-breathe life into what has been considered deceased. I believe this project will ultimately have a cathartic impact on me, and a lasting influence on the reader and the viewer.

According to Patricia Leavy, “the beauty of Art-based practices can open minds and hearts and foster empathy in the viewers, allowing them to see and think differently, and to feel more deeply” (Leavy, 2009, p. 21). Further, Donna Schuurman (2002) states:

Sorrow needs expression, but it’s not always with words. The more tools and permission we provide for children and adolescents, the more likely they will find their expression rather than the narrow options we might offer. Give sorrow words, yes, but also paint and glue and hammers and nails and long walks and quiet and music and play and all other possible forms of expression, including silence.

Thus, considering the statement above, when it comes to investigating and dealing with an experience of trauma following the loss of a loved one, a study that is grounded in autoethnography and art-based inquiry should be considered an excellent inquiry strategy to analyze women’s grief and loss experience, given its capacity to decode and address these memories and emotions properly.

The study aims to highlight the importance of providing basic needs of empowerment, meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and emotional expression for bereaved women—all of which are essential to bring care, foster comfort, and facilitate healing. My hope is that, “if given voice, even in written form, my autobiography may provide other bereaved parents with the courage to voice their own miscarriage and healing stories” (Hering, 2014, p. 94).

Autoethnography is a growing field of qualitative inquiry, usually used for taboo topics. I think that reflecting on a personal experience, for such a silenced and shunned topic in many cultures, can add a new perspective to the body of knowledge. Thus, I think my study can add a unique perspective to the communication literature.

As a female who has experienced baby loss and other types of loss, a poet who appreciates creating arts and looking at reality differently, and a bilingual researcher, I have the positionality to conduct an auto-ethnographic study effectively. Such positionality offers me the capacity to authentically reflect on my lived experience of loss and grief, represent the Arabian woman by voicing her concerns and needs for recovery after loss, and perhaps shape new reality or possibilities for change and improvement with regard to care and empathy in the aftermath of baby loss.

Central to the design of the current study is immersing myself in a search for meaning behind my loss and grief experiences in hopes that I might gain new insight about it. I can think of myself as an a/r/tographer—an artist, researcher, and teacher (a/r/t)—at the same time, focusing on how meaning is made through living inquiry through artistic practices (Willer, 2019, p. 1069). I believe that conducting an autoethnography, consisting of both self and visual narrative of women's health, has two main benefits. First, it has the potential to enable me to discover more aspects about my identity, retain previous ones, and regain confidence in them. Second, it is a career preparation project. Conducting a project that focuses on factors contributing to improving the wellbeing of women can pave the way for more a/r/tographic practices related to family, health, and cultural communication in the future.

In summary, while the experience of pregnancy and giving birth by itself can lead to post-natal depression because of the hormonal fluctuations, we can imagine the significant challenges to women's wellbeing resulting from the experience of baby loss. Going through such experience and seeking to find ways to intervene and aid the

recovery processes, I advocate for employing both compassion and expressive arts due to their therapeutic potential. Compassion has a therapeutic influence on women's wellbeing as it soothes the soul. Though, we often don't know how. Thus, we need to explore this closely. On the other hand, arts offer a safe space for women to express their feelings, create new realities, expand their understanding, and transcend painful events by unearthing new meaning when words fail.

The present study aims to explore the baby-loss experience from one Saudi woman's perspective. Although the study does not represent all Middle Eastern women's experiences, my personal experience of baby loss could overlap with many women's losses. The fact the present study's finding may be generalized across cultures does not diminish its potential benefits. Due to our common humanity, it has the potential to reach a wide audience, giving voice to bereaved women's concerns and needs across cultures and eliciting emotional and intellectual responses.

Such experiences deserves attention due to scant scholarly literature on Saudi Arabian women's experience of baby loss in general, but also particularly within various communication fields. As well, healthcare providers need to gain a new perspective of how women of the millennial generation in this culture perceive the trauma of baby loss, handle the suffering, and recover from it. Looking at the experience from a different cultural lens will enable the reader to comprehend how certain cultural factors—ranging from beliefs and values, to rituals and traditions, to superstitions and myths—can influence and contribute to both the suffering and healing processes.



Understanding the baby-loss experience from a different sociocultural perspective is particularly important for family, cultural, and health communication. However, it is hard to collect data about such a topic, as it is taboo in many cultures, including most Saudi Arabian cultures. Aside from the fact that such a topic is a taboo, exploring it involves risk of exposing participants to heavy and painful emotions. Since art-based practices, including visual narratives, can function as a safe container for painful emotions, I decided to take an autoethnographic approach to authentically reflect on my personal experience of baby loss by voicing my own perspective as a woman from a different culture who endured the hardship of loss and grief.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to provide a meaningful avenue toward exploring the baby-loss experience from the perspective of Saudi Arabian women through autoethnography and art-based practices. I try to convey their perspectives, concerns, and hopes through me as a woman who belongs to this particular culture and experienced the baby-loss trauma. I hope I can creatively and effectively reflect on my experiences such that I leave an insightful impact on the reader. It is “important that my account resonates within others,” so it can lead to “a better understanding” of women’s feelings and struggles in the aftermath of loss (Flippo, 2018, p. 17). Through embodying my personal experiences of grief and loss, and weaving it with previous scholarly literature, I intend to reveal a uniquely new and evocative intellectual, emotional, personal, and cultural account that adds to current literature, informs readers and professionals, and creates a difference in many communities.

## **Literature Review**

Different cultures maintain various beliefs, traditions, values, and attitudes toward many aspects of life. Cultures also vary in the way they view and respond to death (Buckingham & Howard, 2017). Knowing how a particular culture views death is important to understanding women's experiences and their roles in mourning and healing within that cultural context. For some cultures, death is accepted as a normal part of life; but for many, death is "hidden and denied" (Buckingham & Howard, 2017, p. 83).

Conducting a literature review concerning the grief and loss experience of Eastern women, four themes emerged from the literature: blame and lack of compassion; emotional expression vs. emotional suppression; re-membering, reconnection and continuing bonds; and lastly, other cultural beliefs, rituals and religious traditions. In this section, I discuss each theme. I first highlight specific cultural norms and practices in which women experience lack of compassion such as Ukuzila, and cleansing rituals. Then, I discuss the grief and mourning practices in terms of emotional suppression or emotional expression in certain cultures. Third, I shed lights on reconnection, re-membering and continuing bonds, providing two main cultures as evidence of such phenomena. Lastly, I discuss how rituals and beliefs can play a role in healing, linking them to the importance of expressive and compassionate communication. I conclude with an overview of the healing power of compassion and art—the objective that the present study aims to prove through a valid theoretical lens.

### ***Blame and Lack of Compassion***

Some cultural attitudes and norms oppress bereaved women. Oppression of bereaved women is illustrated through a study in which several authors explored 100 rural hospitals in a very poor area in central India. Based on the results of interviews and two focus groups on women's experiences of stillbirth, they found out that when a woman loses a baby, she becomes subject to abuse, abandonment, and loss of status and power within her in-laws. A health professional participant states: "They (the family) blame them (mothers of stillborn) and used bad words against them" (Roberts et al., 2012, p. 191). The study shows that women's grief "was not something that observing health providers (formal and informal) dealt with compassionately or therapeutically; it was simply noted as a fact" (Roberts et al., 2012, p. 192). For instance, a 21-year-old interviewee says that her mother-in-law told her that she is a bad wife. That is why she had a dead baby.

Additionally, health providers rarely express frustration over the lack of compassion toward these bereaved mothers, since they accept that as the status quo. Although some of the nurses could express compassion toward these grieving mothers, generally, the medical community avoids recognizing the psychological issues facing these rural mothers (Roberts et al., 2012). Being isolated, dependent on their husbands, and dictated by social norms, when going through stillbirth, they lose their sense of self as they become treated as a lower group (Roberts et al., 2012).

When a woman loses a child in Japan, she might also lose her sense of self-worth. This could be due to the fact that, "In general, contemporary Japanese women see their

primary role in the community as mothers.” Motherhood is the most important aspect of their life (Klass et al., 1996).

It’s not only Eastern cultures that practice oppression and social pressure over women. Such behaviors are also present in some Western cultures. During the Victorian era in England, guilt-inducing social pressure was common, including a daunting list of forbidden activities. For example, women used to be warned against:

Overreaching to hang a picture, taking a warm bath, riding a bicycle, sleeping with arms above the head, having a tooth extracted, being excessively happy, running a sewing machine by foot, lacing a corset too tightly, washing clothes, bathing in the ocean. (Seftel, 2014, p. 133)

Despite this plethora of advice, pregnancy loss was not considered an event worthy of public bereavement (Seftel, 2014). In general, pregnancy loss in traditional cultures is blamed on a poor relationships or as a result of female misconduct (Seftel, 2014). Hence, almost all religions have a ritual of expiation. For instance, the Catholic confession provides opportunities to seek God’s forgiveness—regardless of whether the fault is real or imagined (Seftel, 2014, p. 131).

What’s more, some of the common cultural practices highlighted in a study exploring mourning practices in South Africa clearly demonstrated a lack of compassion toward bereaved women. In fact, many culturally authentic mourning practices are used to oppress women. The sitting, Ukuzila, and cleansing rituals are a few examples of oppressive practices.

The sitting is a tradition that is held before a funeral. Based on this tradition, the furniture is removed from the house, and the mother or the widow of the deceased is expected to sit on a mattress or a mat and face the wall (Kotze et al., 2012). She is

prevented from any entertaining activity such as watching TV or listening to the radio, and is not even allowed to stand (Kotze et al., 2012). Bella, a participant in the study questioned this practice saying, “What is the meaning of this? ...Why am I supposed to do this? How am I going to see people coming to comfort me whilst facing the wall?” (Kotze et al., 2012, p. 754). She resists this tradition and continues narrating a story of a woman whose two children passed away, but she never sat on the mattress. People who came to comfort, instead warned her that another member of her family would die because of her reluctance to maintain this practice. No one died. Bella stated that she prefers the practices of cooking and serving a widow, since it sustains a sense of community (Kotze et al., 2012).

Another practice is called Ukuzila, which refers to a traditional practice of mourning lasting for a year. Adhering to this practice, the widow shaves her head (Kotze et al., 2012). Further, mourning widows are expected to give way to pedestrians when walking down the street; they may even be expected to bow as a sign of respect. People fear crossing widows tracks, out of fear of bad luck or contamination (Kotze et al., 2012). The widow is not expected to expose her back to people, so she must sit at the back of a bus due to the possibility of “a bad omen” (Kotze et al., 2012, p. 755). Customs associated with widowhood depict women as witches, evils, or even killers of their husbands (Kotze et al., 2012). While some women take a political position believing that rituals are intended to show respect to the deceased, other women experience these practices as oppressive, causing stress and isolation (Kotze et al., 2012).

The third oppressive practice is associated with cleansing rituals. Widows, as mentioned previously, tend to be perceived negatively or “contaminated with bad luck” in this culture (Kotze et al., 2012, p. 758). Thus, they might be expected to undergo cleansing practices involving taking herbs to neutralize the omen or bad luck. A professional participant described being cleansed by a mixture of cow dung and water. She ended up wearing the cleansed clothes during the weekend but wearing her clean outfit to her profession. Another woman described how she was cleansed by an elderly woman saying:

She killed a white-feathered chicken, mixed its blood with muti ‘a traditional medicine,’ poured the mixture into a large tin tub filled with water, and told me to strip and get in. She scrubbed me all over, until she was convinced that all the bad luck had been removed from my body. (Kotze et al., 2012, p. 759–759)

### ***Emotional Suppression vs. Emotional Expression***

In some cultures, emotional reactions are considered rituals. In other cultures, expressing emotional reactions is not appropriate (Aksoz-Efe, et al., 2018). For instance, in some developing countries, such as Ethiopia, people tend to suppress their feelings. There is no time for grief. Additionally, grieving in some of these countries is believed to cause more sadness and health problems. It can be viewed as meaningless, since it cannot bring the deceased back (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018). Further, researchers found that in South Africa, when people were trying to survive, grief was pushed aside and seen as a “luxury” (Kotze et al., 2012, p. 747). Additionally, because of the stigma associated with AIDS-related deaths, many family are not allowed to grieve (Kotze et al., 2012, p. 747). Though, in some urban areas in South Africa, traditional funerals have been replaced by lavish funerals, a site where wealth and progress are paraded (Kotze et al., 2012).

A study done by a British doctor, Kilshaw (2017), comparing the experiences of miscarriage between European and Arabian women revealed that some women in the U.K. talk about their grief openly, while other British women feel it is not necessary to disclose. Infertility issues and miscarriages are considered taboo topics among British women, who are met with silence and discomfort. Many British women share their miscarriage experiences to combat this cultural tendency. They want to demonstrate that they have lost something meaningful by expressing themselves through posting on social media, wearing symbolic jewelry or certain outfits, and using tattoos to mark their bodies. However, Kilshaw (2017) found that miscarriage is not taboo in Qatar, when compared to attitudes in the U.K., since giving birth and reproduction are essential parts of women's lives in Qatar.

However, not all women in Eastern cultures talk about their miscarriage or stillbirth experiences openly. For instance, it appeared that grief over stillbirths is hidden in some poor areas in central India for social and cultural reasons. In fact, women in India tend to internalize their grief, suppress their feelings, and keep their stillbirth experiences secret (Roberts et al., 2012).

By contrast, emotional expression can be encouraged as a religious ritual of certain Eastern cultures. This can be seen in one of the two main branches of Islam: Shia. Remembrance constitutes an important part of Shia's identity; they (re)negotiate a "collective memory" and engage in "collective remembering" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 89). Karbala epic tragedy and its literature shape most of the Shia's collective identity.

Shanneik (2014) conducted a study based on 27 in-depth interviews with Iraqi Women aged 18–60 living in Ireland. In her study, she provided a detailed description of the function of remembering history among these Iraqi women. The women who were interviewed had been displaced and lost loved family members and the protection of them. Many of them were forced to leave their families and husbands who were either killed, imprisoned, or became refugees in other countries. Historical figures like Lady Fatima and Zainab provide these women with the strength to endure the hardship of loss and diaspora (Shanneik, 2014, p. 100).

Shanneik (2014) suggests that “such meetings provide these women with a space to find meaning to their lives and situations in both the Middle East and the European Diaspora” (p. 90). She maintains that language, narrative, and other forms of expression make a “cultural tool kit” for remembering the past due to their role of evoking emotions. The ritual of gathering to remember can be called “*Majles*” It consists of reciting from the Holy Quran, saying prayers, and retelling specific historical events, either in prose or poetry (Shanneik, 2014).

The text in the poetry recited during the *majles* is very visual and detailed when describing the torture of Imam Hussain and his family (Shanneik, 2014). For instance, one of the emotional descriptions of the narrative of the epic is the killing of Imam Hussain’s breastfeeding infant (Shanneik, 2014). The mother’s breast milk had dried out and the baby was nearly dying of thirst. Thus, Imam Hussain took the baby to the enemy requesting they spare him, saying: “If it is my fault, punish me. But what has the baby to do with all this?” However, the enemy had shot the infant with an arrow, “cutting his



throat from vein to vein” (Shanneik, 2014, p. 93). The narrative of Karbala can describe these women’s loss or remind them of recent experiences of grief, war, or displacement.

Another study of Iraqi women living in the Netherlands suggests that religious rituals can facilitate the healing process for emotional wounds caused by wars and exile (Shanneik, 2014). Shanneik (2014) argues:

these religious rituals possess a quasi-psychotherapeutic function in which the women can express their range of feelings of sorrow and anger about the traumas caused by the two wars in Iraq: the political oppression and torture and their subsequent displacement. (Shanneik, 2014, p. 94)

Such expressive rituals seem to play a profound role to endure loss and cope with suffering. According to Buckingham and Howard (2017): “not only women but also their families, communities, and cultures construct meaning by integrating the experience of grief into their larger cultural and religious narrative” (p.78).

### ***Re-membling, Reconnection and the Continuing Bonds***

In a study about Turkish women’s experiences of grief and the meanings they assign from rituals and beliefs, participants’ linguistic choices relied on linguistic metaphors to describe experiences of grief. Some of these metaphors are: collapse, puzzle, domino, and earthquake. These metaphors demonstrate that these women viewed the family as a whole unit before death (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018, p. 582). However, the wholeness and the pattern of the family got corrupted with death. They also pointed out that the bonds within the family became weakened because the deceased were important figures in the family. For instance, one of the participants named Selma defined death as a puzzle, saying “when a piece is taken off, we need another piece or the picture is not whole” (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018, p. 582). Death is like a domino; someone would hit one

of the stones, and the rest of the stones would fall. Participants report an awareness that the loved ones left them forever, which makes them empty, sad, and angry (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018).

However, while the bonds of family were weakened due to death in general, causing bereaved women to feel empty or angry, there are some Eastern cultures that believe in continuing bonds with the deceased. The concept of continuing bonds is still evolving in the West. According to *Continuing Bonds*, Japanese people believe that “the deceased remain individual spirits, available to living for 35 or 50 years” (Klass et al., 1996, p. 59).

Continuing bonds can be illustrated through ancestor worships in Japan. Rooted in Buddhism, ancestors’ worship is a vital feature and a central part of the Japanese culture. It is supported by a well-established theory, “by which those who are living maintain personal, emotional bonds with those who died” (Klass et al., p. 59). Klass et al. note, “At its core, ancestor worship is an expression of the human community that cannot be separated by death” (p. 59).

To maintain these connections, there is a major summer festival celebrated in Japan is called O Bon. The purpose of the ritual is to welcome the spirits. In some places, temporary shrines are built outside the house as a shelter for the spirits. Family members gather in the evening to welcome and greet the returning spirits. On the second day of O Bon, people visit the graves. The spirits are believed to leave on the third day, in which a large gathering takes place to express the regret of the departure (Klass et al., 1996). The

person's status in the Japanese family is associated with the person's ancestors: who they are, and the ritual duties the person has to those ancestors (Klass et al., 1996).

Though, the meaning of ancestor worship became ambiguous after WWII, when a series of radical changes took place in society. Japanese people believe that the departed are close by (Klass et al., 1996). Spirits of ancestors are available for interaction and can be contacted at the graveyard, the household, or elsewhere. The Japanese believe that when ordinary people die, they become Buddha (Klass et al., 1996). Their ancestors are believed to be living in peace in the Pure Land or Western Paradise of the Amida Buddha (Klass et al., 1996, p. 62). According to Klass et al. (1996), they are "thought of as at the grave or on the altar where they are venerated. So the spirit may be contacted in this world by addressing the stone or tablet" (p. 62).

Yamamoto and his colleagues (1969) give us a sense of the living tie in ancestor worship: the family altar would be your "hotline" (to the ancestors). As such, you could immediately ring the bell, light incense, and talk over the current crisis with the one whom you have loved and cherished. Furthermore: "When you were happy, you could smile and share your good feelings with him. When you were sad, your tears would be in his presence. The connection would be continuous from the live object to the revered ancestor" (Klass et al., 1996, p. 66). The dead care for the living by sharing the joy of their families' accomplishments. Not only do the dead support, but they also can be a potent force in guiding behavior (Klass et al., 1996). For instance, when children misbehave, rather than being sent to their room, they would be sent into the room with

the Buddha altar and asked to reflect on their behavior in their ancestors' presence (Klass et al., 1996, p. 67).

As mentioned earlier, remembering also constitutes an important part of the Shia's identity; they (re)negotiate a 'collective memory' and engage in "collective remembering" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 89). Spirituality and memory play a central role in shaping and influencing the identity of Shia's women during the aftermath of loss.

In Ireland, just like what Shias all over the world would do during the first ten nights of the month of Muharram, Shia's women gather and engage in a collective remembering of the epic of Karbala. Shanneik (2014) suggests that "such meetings provide these women with a space to find meaning to their lives and situations in both the Middle East and the European Diaspora" (p. 90).

The *majlis* or the *ma'tam* is a religious gathering where Shia people remember and mourn the death of Imam Hussain and his family. It takes place in the first ten days of Muharram annually. Some of Shia women make religious vows to hold *majles* and feed the community or the poor (Shanneik, 2014, p. 92). During the *ma'tam*, historical events are made personal through personal connections and by addressing the women directly. For instance, the reader would say something like: "you all have babies, imagine one of your babies being killed in such a brutal way" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 93). Women can relate to the text of Karbala's tragedy and connect it to their suffering and loss.

### ***Other Cultural Norms, Rituals, Beliefs and Religious Traditions about Grief and Loss***

Grief style can be restricted and shaped by religious authorities. Religious beliefs and rituals influence the grief process and reaction. Further, they are rated among the most important sources for comfort and meaning-making.

In Turkey, many grief-related rituals are deeply influenced by Islam and Shamanism (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018). In the pre-Islam era, some of the grief rituals included: cutting the bereaved spouse's hair to put it into the grave, wearing clothes on the reverse side during the funeral, cutting the ponytail of the deceased's horse, giving and getting food on certain days after the event, and placing some possessions such as clothes or guns with the deceased in the grave so that the deceased could use them in the afterlife (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018). Current rituals include reading stories and poems about the birth of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), and praising him on the third, seventh, fortieth, and fifty-second days, as well as the anniversaries of the death. Other current rituals include closing the eyes of the dead, opening the windows of his or her room, serving food, and not having fun (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018).

Relatives and friends meet at the deceased's home, pray, and read the holy Quran for seven days in a row as well as on the seventh, fortieth, and fifty-second day. They refrain from having fun or watching TV; they wear dark-colored clothing; and they turn on the light of the room where the deceased died (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018). These visits continue for 7–40 days to show social support and meet the family's needs such as cooking and cleaning. Certain phrases and wishes are used to calm the bereaved down

such as what translates into “may God have mercy,” “may the deceased rest in peace”, and “may God forgive their faults and sins” (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018, p. 583).

Associating faith with comfort was obvious in the grief experiences of Turkish women. Researchers found that thinking that their loved ones will be in heaven is helpful (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018, p. 584). Some participants emphasize the importance of faith to feel comfortable. Others adhere to Islamic practices to feel peaceful (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018). However, some participants mentioned loss of religious beliefs or having doubts. Some reported feeling that life is meaningless and questioning beliefs appear to be universal reactions (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018).

Regarding miscarriage in Islamic countries, Seftel (2014) noted that while Islamic traditions differ from country to country, generally it is believed that 120 days after the conception, the soul is breathed into a baby. According to Seftel (2014), when parents wish, a funeral ceremony would be performed. However, women are not allowed at graveside rituals in some cultures, but this prohibition is not due to Islamic law.

In Hindu tradition, within the framework of reincarnation, there is no attempt to place more value on the fetus in later stages, nor to discuss the degrees of the humanity of the embryo. The mother could be thought of at fault in Karmic sense if a pregnancy is lost (Seftel, 2014). In Belfast, the Catholic Church has an annual Mass of Remembrance. Arts and paintings visualize scores of cherubs in the sky, which represent the spirits of babies who died before baptism. There used to be a belief that unbaptized infants are barred from Heaven, but this belief has been challenged. Nowadays, artists “depict a lost baby tenderly cradled by God’s hands or watched over by Jesus” (Seftel, 2014, p. 131).

On the other hand, Native American cultures tend to consider unborn children to be human, and treat the remains of miscarried babies in the same manner as for adults (Seftel, 2014).

Faith, certain practices, and beliefs can play a role in comforting bereaved women in miscarriage experiences. In a study by Susie Kilshaw (2017), she compared the miscarriage experience between Qatari and European women. She found that in the perspective of Qatari women, miscarriages are God's will and something of his plan. Some also think of the possibility that the lost baby could be disabled, corrupted or disobedient; that Allah planed the loss wanting the best for the parents brings relief and strength. The primary difference between cognitive representations of baby loss stories in both countries is the perception of control and agency. British women tend to wait until they are secure in their careers before they start a family. Most of them are in their 30s, and prepare their bodies by taking vitamins and by exercising. They usually name their babies from the early stages of pregnancy. For British women, miscarriage appears to cause a sense of losing control and envisioned future. In Qatar, female's narratives evidence that things are left in God's hands while control is ceded. The grief, therefore, is not as deep and intense as it is in the U.K (Kilshaw, 2017).

Moreover, Susie Kilshaw (2017) maintained that in Qatar, families, friends, and medical doctors regard lost babies as “birds in heaven” and believe that their mothers will meet them again in paradise. One of the participants said that her doctor told her when she had her fourth miscarriage that she was lucky because there is someone that will protect her on Judgment Day.

In Hawai'i, people place the miscarried fetus in a running stream or in the sea to be cared for by ancestral Gods (Seftel, 2014). However, in traditional societies in China, the miscarried infant is regarded as a "ghost baby," implying that the baby is not a real child, rather a disgruntled spirit (Seftel, 2014). Elders instruct mothers not to mourn such losses (Seftel, 2014).

In traditional Japanese culture, grieving mothers used to write the name of the lost pregnancy or the child and set it on the river. They believe that it would float in the mythical River of Souls in which the lost spirit would be cared for and watched over by a deity regarded as a guardian angel. According to Seftel, when it comes to pregnancy loss situations, "if the loss is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially accepted, the relationship is not recognized. Thus, the griever and her loss are not recognized" (Seftel, 2014, p. 57).

Seftel (2014) argues that these beliefs act as psychological protection in communities with a higher rate of infant mortality by allowing detachment from the lost pregnancy and transforming hope. She noted that most of the modern and ancient rituals tend to include a sensory element, something to see, to hear, or to hold. She concludes that modern and past ritual leaders are aware of the power that visual imagery, song, movement, or storytelling can bring to the suffering mothers (Seftel, 2014, p. 131). More details about the power of expressive communication and compassionate communication are highlighted in the next section.



### *Grief, and the Communicative Healing Power of Compassion & Expressive Art*

Cases of disrespect, neglect, and indignity are not unusual even when facing death. Ron Paterson (2011) mentions case that occurred in New Zealand as evidence of the lack of compassion in health care institutions. The story begins when the mother received a phone call informing her that her son (Peter) was seriously ill and suffering from brain bleeding after having been found in a motel while being away on a work trip. Because the hospital where her son was is located at the very end of New Zealand, the mother got immediately on a flight and was at his bedside within a few hours. According to the mother:

On arrival...we were informed by my other son that Peter was on life support. We were treated with respect and caring by the staff. At 7 pm there was a change of staff. A new doctor introduced himself—a big man, brusque and arrogant. Shortly after he introduced himself, we were informed that very shortly staff would be disconnecting the life support. (Paterson, 2011, p. 22)

According to Paterson (2011), “The withdrawal of life support was then bungled, and the family witnessed a horrific scene before being ushered away” (p. 22). Peter's family stated that none of them can forget the incident. They felt that the doctor showed no respect for him. Paterson (2011) emphasizes the importance of teaching healthcare providers about the nature of suffering, as well as the value of empathy, kindness, and understanding when dealing with trauma. Paterson (2011) notes that “professional regulators can and should provide significant leadership in relation to compassionate care” (p. 23). Paterson (2011) maintains that in order to develop compassion in public life, humanities and arts should be given a large place in education. In fact, various curricula in communication studies, such as interpersonal communication and health

communication, have the potential to incorporate and cultivate effective and therapeutic communicative skills for future professionals. When talking about compassion, it is important to distinguish between the following concepts: sympathy, empathy, and compassion.

### *Sympathy, Empathy, and Compassion*

Compassion differs from sympathy and empathy. “Sympathy” arises when the emotions of an individual evoke similar feelings in another person. However, such shared feelings could be at “arms length.” It suggests more “mind than heart at work” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 216). However, “empathy” implies identification with someone’s feelings and emotions. Kearsley (2011) notes that empathy is “your pain is in my heart” (p. 216). Empathy means an understanding of someone else’s distress.

Compassion, on the other hand, can be defined as “a deep awareness of the suffering, coupled with the wish to relieve it” and “a sense of shared suffering, most often combined with the desire to alleviate such suffering” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 216). It is suggested that compassion is an unnatural passion because it “asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into a place of pain, to share into brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 216).

According to Gilbert, compassion’s “essence is a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and other living things, coupled with the wish and efforts to relive it” (Williams, 2018, p. 24). Williams (2018) notes, the “concept of compassion is central to many of the world’s great religious traditions” (p. 24). No matter how compassionate we are, we cannot comprehend how a grieving person is feeling.

Though, at any given moment, all the grieving person's feelings are valid from fear through anger and hostility to sadness and despair:

We grieve not only for the person who has died but, to a large extent, we grieve for ourselves after the loss of someone we love. We grieve for ourselves as people who have been left behind and who must now pick up the pieces of our lives, face the pain of loss, and rebuild our future. (Puchalski, 2006, p. 11).

The person experiencing trauma not only can receive compassion from others, but also can extend compassion to the self. Kristin Neff is a pioneer researcher in this field. Additionally, Paul Gilbert is a clinician who developed a group-based therapy model named Compassionate Mind Training (CMT). CMT depends mainly on the practice of self-compassionate imagery to foster feelings of warmth and combat self-criticism: "Our fears and self-judgments are like blinders that often prevent us from seeing the hands that are being held out to help us" (Neff, 2011, p. 65).

When we treat ourselves with caring, kindness, and compassion, we alleviate insecurity, anxiety, depression, and self-judgments (Neff, 2011). Neff maintains that "we are surprisingly brusque toward ourselves when the more general circumstances of our life go wrong through no fault of our own" (Neff, 2011, p. 81). Further, our brains are sensitive to negativity, giving more weight to negative facts than positive ones; once our minds latch on to negative thoughts, they tend to repeat over and over again like a broken record player. This process is called "rumination," and involves a recurrent, intrusive, and uncontrollable style of thinking that can cause both depression and anxiety. Women tend to ruminate more than men. Although people don't have control over circumstances, they can control their critical self-talk by using sympathetic language rather than judgmental

language (Neff, 2011, p. 51). One can deal with grief by integrating compassion into his or her therapeutic approach.

### ***An Overview of the Therapeutic Usages of Compassion and Art***

Lives of people experiencing grief seem to be shattered. They “become like broken pottery” as grief can result in shattering of the past, present, future’s hopes and dreams (Kearsley, 2011, p. 218). Puchalski (2006) describes people as companions on the life journey who should provide a safe place for others to mourn, be present, and help them navigate their feelings. Speaking about the healing power of compassion, Kearsley (2011) maintains that “[b]y communing, we empty ourselves and we create a space wherein patients can begin the reconstruction of putting the shattered and broken pieces of their lives back together again” (p. 218). She believes that compassionate individuals move from the stage of interpersonal communication to the stage of being a companion.

By being a compassionate person, one fosters a relationship that allows people in distress to tell stories that should be told, and redefine themselves (Kearsley, 2011): “Suffering ascribes from the meaning ascribed to events” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 218). With compassion, suffering individuals can find acceptance and peace as they incorporate their pain into a new meaning, a new sense of self, or understanding of how they relate to the world after the trauma (Kearsley, 2011).

There is a strong correlation between compassion, expressive art, and healing. Through compassionate communicative skills, bereaved individuals can assign positive meaning to themselves after trauma. Compassion means entering the world of suffering. For instance, by actively listening to the laments of the bereaved, by encouraging them to

tell their stories, and by helping them redefine themselves and casting them into a positive light. Such stories play an essential role in the healing process: “Stories help us to make sense of that which is not sensible, to explain our view of the world. Storytelling can be regarded as one of the oldest healing arts” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 218). According to Graham-Pole and Lander (2009), we are “transformed through our telling of the story, whether that telling is in word, visual image, bodily gesture, musical rhythm” (p. 84).

We define who we are through our stories and personal narrative. Thus, through compassionate communication, the art of redefining the self can occur. Kearsley (2011) maintains that in the context of profound loss and distress, our stories may be all that we have, the only thing about ourselves that cannot be taken from us (p. 218). Healing connections can be created through stories so that individuals can move from suffering to a sense of well-being. Hence, helping bereaved people to discover a healing narrative by infusing new meanings can transcend suffering (Kearsley, 2011).

Kearsley (2011) maintains: “meaning is not an end in itself, but the by-product of a relationship experience. There is always a new way of seeing things, a new interpretation of the events in our life’s stories. There develops a new hope, and the possibility of a new future” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 219)

The way we cope with the painful emotions of grief is to talk about them and bring them to light (Puchalski, 2006, p. 3). Thus, through listening to people's narratives, we validate their experiences and feelings: “When we listen to people’s stories, we make room for mystery and healing to occur” (Kearsley, 2011, p. 219). Thus, embracing bereaved individuals' expressive communications and reflections can foster healing. On

the other hand, ignoring them and walking away from them can prolong the state of suffering (Kearsley, 2011, p. 218).

What is more is that providing the bereaved individuals the capacity to listen to them, and the opportunity to express emotions and tell their stories with all of the layers, colors, and textures should have a therapeutic effect. Creative methods provide an appropriate channel to communicate painful emotions, while compassion acts like a big heart that can contain them generously, process them gently, and reflect them gracefully in a form of soft emotions, thoughts, and meanings. Therefore, creative methods along with compassionate treatment “can provide an oasis of safety to communicate anxiety, fear, and stress that direct conversation may not permit” (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 177).

Aside from the healing effects of narrative arts, creativity, in general, offers a space for expression and healing during or after trauma and total devastation (Soulsby et al., 2019, p. 1). For instance, communicating traumatic-memories in a non-verbal way enable survivors to distance themselves from experienced emotions and help in the process of meaning-making (Soulsby et al., 2019). Additionally, making-art could be therapeutic because it contributes to providing a sense of control over the situation, and knowledge about how to deal with it (Soulsby et al., 2019).

Since the present study aims to explore how employing the two communicative tools: compassion and arts, can contribute to healing from grief, I will demonstrate how this claim can be supported to inform the study through a couple of theories, one of which is a well-established framework called Neimeyer’s Constructivist Theory, and the

other one is an emerging theory called “sense-making.” Both theories are used in the interpretation phase of the data analysis. Before introducing these theories, I provide a brief background of some historical models of grief.

### ***Historical Models of Grief***

**Freud: Mourning and Melancholia.** The first theoretical framework for grief was explored and established by Freud in psychology (Tetterer, 2018). Freud stated that mourning the loss of a loved one and melancholia are similar. They differ in that there may be a loss of identity. However, “once the loss is accepted, the ego has accommodated the loss” (Tetterer, 2018, p. 14). There is no lowered self-regard in mourning. On the other hand, symptoms of melancholia include painful dejection, loss of interest in the outside world and activities. According to Freud, the reason why mourning was not pathologized is that it is familiar and easy to understand. Lack of interest during the mourning process is caused by the fact that the ego is busy and fully absorbed in the loss.

In melancholia, the cause behind the ego preoccupation is unknown, which makes it harder to be understood. Further, in mourning, the bereaved might feel that the world is empty without the person they love. However, during melancholia, the ego itself becomes empty resulting in the lowered self-regard (Tetterer, 2018). Freud maintains that the griever must pass through several stages to move on from the loss. During the initial stage of resistance, the griever cannot accept the loss and tries to avoid reminders of it. Working through a series of day to day confrontations, such as taking over the

responsibilities of the lost loved one, can be helpful in terms of passing the resistance phase (Tettermer, 2018).

**Kubler-Ross: death and dying.** Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief theory is the best-known theoretical models for loss and grief (Tettermer, 2018). It was originally used with hospice patients to better understand their experiences of illness and passing away. Since then, it has been used to illustrate how bereaved people deal with a loss (Tettermer, 2018). According to this model, there are five stages of grief: denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Tettermer, 2018, p. 15). It was thought that these phases occurred in order. Now it is understood that there is not necessarily a chronological sequence of them. In other words, "they do not necessarily have to occur in a particular order" (Tettermer, 2018, p. 15).

Also, different people might experience different stages, and not every individual experiences them all. These stages are not necessarily linear. Some stages may not be experienced by certain individuals at all, while others could be repeated (Tettermer, 2018, p. 16). The first stage, denial/isolation can occur in any case, but it is more likely to happen when the news of a loved one's passing away is told by a person they don't know. The second stage, anger occurs when denial cannot be maintained anymore. Questions like "why me?" develop, as well as feelings of bitterness. For people surrounding the bereaved, the anger stage is considered the hardest stage to handle because the anger tends to be misdirected (Tettermer, 2018).

The third stage is bargaining. In this stage, the bereaved attempts to understand their roles, adapt, and adjust. It involves looking at the trauma from a different



perspective or behaving differently and making efforts to achieve the desired outcome (Tetterer, 2018). The fourth stage, depression, can be a response to different triggers within the previous and new environments of the bereaved, such as hospitalization, hospice care, loss of functioning, physical pain, and changing life roles (Tetterer, 2018, p. 17).

The last stage, acceptance, occurs when the bereaved realizes that no amount of emotional reaction can change the reality. It is not indicative of happiness; rather, it is indicative of a recognition that the situation may not change (Tetterer, 2018, p. 17).

**John Bowlby: Mourning Stages.** Bowlby's theory has four stages and it is rooted in attachment. It compares the loss and grief of a loved one to the feeling a child gets if separated from the mother. According to Bowlby, the goal of grief work is to confront all feelings associated with the loss and work through the reality of death and loss to be able to move on. This model establishes the notion that the bereaved will continue to suffer and experience symptoms of mental and psychological discomfort if the person held on to the attachment and didn't confront the loss. The first stage is called "numbing" rather than denial.

However, it is similar to denial, in that the bereaved experiences disbelief and lack of emotional displays. The second phase is "yearning and searching," in which the bereaved starts to experience intensified emotions such as anger and frustration. These emotions can be misdirected at the bereaved or people around them (Tetterer, 2018, p.18). Further, the bereaved person becomes aware of their loss, yearning for the loved one and may desire to be with them.

The third stage, “despair and disorganization” is when the bereaved person starts to accept that life will never be the way it was prior to the loss. In this stage, the bereaved individual could experience overwhelming feelings of anger, depression, or questioning their beliefs (Tettermer, 2018, p. 18).

The final stage is known as “reorganization and recovery” (Tettermer, 2018, p. 18). In this stage, the bereaved person finds new roles in life and starts to move on from their experience by pursuing new goals and creating daily routines for themselves (Tettermer, 2018, p. 18).

**Worden’s Tasks of Mourning.** J. William Worden (1982, 2009) suggests that a static set of “phases” or “stages” is an inadequate framework to describe how mourning people work through the emotional, relational, cognitive, physical and spiritual difficulties of loss (Hoy, 2016, p. 23). In his mind, grieving people work at the accomplishment of psychological tasks (Hoy, 2016, p. 23). Based on this theory, in order to move through the grieving process, a bereaved person must go through tasks. Once the bereaved moved through these tasks, they can recover and move on. The first task is called “accept the reality of the loss,” which means acknowledging. Just like Kubler-Ross (1969) and Bowlby (1969), the acceptance task involves feelings of initial emotional numbness and disbelief that the loss occurred. Worden describes this phase as if the bereaved feels like they cannot wake up from a nightmare. Acceptance is important to begin the healing process (Tettermer, 2018, p. 19). According to Hoy (2016): “When someone dies, even if the death is expected, there is always a sense that it hasn't happened” (p. 24)

The first task of grieving is to come full face with the reality that the person is gone and will not return” (Hoy, 2016, p. 24). The second phase is to “process the pain and grief.” This stage includes all the intense emotional reactions that accompany grief such as anger, frustration, hostility, sadness, and loneliness. Such emotions are physically exhausting with the manifestation of symptoms like lack of focus, weight gain, and sore muscles (Tettermer, 2018, p. 20). The third task is to adjust to a life without the deceased. The last task is to find an enduring connection with the lost one.

**The Compass Model of Bereavement.** Another simple tool for thinking about grief is the Compass Model of Bereavement. This model conceptualizes bereavement through four interrelated adaptive processes, all of them begin with the letter “R.” These four processes are situated around a quad-directional compass: remembering, reaffirming, realizing, and releasing (Hoy, 2016, p. 26).

The model establishes that *remembering* is essential to the grief process. The mourning person shares stories and reflects on the values underlying these stories. Storytelling is an important tool to share the details of the relationships, values, and lives of those who died (Hoy, 2016, p. 27).

*Reaffirming* is also fundamental to most bereaved individuals. For bereaved individuals, reaffirming is considered “a process of adapting their spiritual and/or philosophical anchors in the context of making meaning in the loss” (Hoy, 2016, p. 27). For instance, spiritual matters, beliefs, and worldviews often don't remain unchanged in the face of loss. They could be challenged or reinforced. For instance, a person’s belief in a “loving God” can be solidified by the care received from compassionate friends (Hoy,

2016, p. 27). Hoy (2016) notes, “[i]n other cases, even deeply held beliefs don’t seem to endure when tested by the apparent vagaries of loss and must be negotiated in the context of life’s experience” (p. 27).

*Realizing*: is the third element of this model. While the initial response tends to be disbelief, a person would rarely persist for many months on the idea that their loved one is returning. When the bereaved individual lets go of the physical connections with the lost one, they are making the adaption for *realizing*.

*Releasing* is the last element of this model. Seeing the body might be important when religious and cultural customs permit that (Hoy, 2016, p. 27). However, this is not considered a “closure” or “moving on”; instead, “it is a gradual loosening of ties to the physical presence and the gradual process of thinking of the dead in terms of *psychological memory* rather than *physical presence*” (Hoy, 2016, p. 29). One of the shortfalls of this model is that it relies on metaphors related to the journey, which implies a fixed destination. However, bereavement is depicted as an ongoing pilgrimage with no destination—a reason why the notion of stages are not appropriate to describe it (Hoy, 2016, p. 32).

### ***The ONEBird model***

The OneBird model provides the theoretical grounding that supports the integration of mindful self-compassion with art intervention, establishing that creativity can be a means for enhancing the acquisition of self-compassion skills and resources (Williams, 2018, p. 1). It relies on the metaphor of a bird to depict the elements of compassion, mindfulness, and creativity. Compassion which is equally important to

mindfulness is represented by the two wings of a bird, while creativity is represented by the bird's symbolic heart. The integration involves verbal processing of the visuals and the process experience.

### ***Sense-making Theory***

Before introducing Neimeyer's Constructivist Theory, I will discuss Karl Weick's (1979) theory of sense-making. Tracy (2020) notes, "Karl Weick's (1979) theory of sense-making emphasizes meaning-making, ambiguity, and identity" (p. 58). People seek certainty, meaning, and explanations. They want to make sense of the world on most of their experiences (Shukla, 2020, p. 1).

They tend to use religion, spirituality, cosmic power, Karma, etc., in order to reconcile negative situations and explain confusing events. Weick (1979) defines sense-making as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing." In other words, sense-making is "a continuous mental activity that tries to interpret everything we have already experienced in ways we can accept or believe" (Shukla, 2020, p. 2).

Sense-making manifests in chaotic situations and it is useful to study how groups react in emergency crises and disasters by focusing on how people lose and regain their sense of self through talk and action (Tracy, 2020, p. 58). Methods that include participants' interviewing and observation are suitable for applying this theory. It is made up of three unrelated stages: enactment, selection, and retention (Tracy, 2020, p. 58).

Researchers interested in using this theory would consider the following questions: "What parts of the scene are marked by paradox, ambiguity, and identity

threat? What do participants say and how they act in such situations? How do participants define themselves in the face of their actions and environment?” (Tracy, 2020, p. 58).

While the sense-making theory is concerned with issues of identity and meaning-making in the face of chaotic situations in general, the Constructivist Theory is developed to address issues of identity and meaning-making in the aftermath of a death.

However, there is a difference between sense-making and meaning-making:

Meaning making goes beyond sense-making. While sense making is a process in which you make sense of experiences retrospectively with plausible explanations, meaning making is a process that attempts to make sense of the now and the future in ways that give you purpose and a desirable existential context. (Shukla, 2020, p. 3)

Thus, one of the biggest predictors of happiness is having a sense of purpose.

Another difference is the social element. While sense-making tends to involve interaction or people, meaning making can be totally isolated and take place with one’s mental efforts independently (Shukla, 2020).

### ***A Modern Theory: Neimeyer’s Constructivist Theory***

Neimeyer (2006) believes stage models theories, which were demonstrated above, offer little help to the bereaved individuals. He states that traditional views can be damaging and disempowering because they may give the mourning person feelings of hopelessness or they could raise questions like “what’s the point in engaging if the grief will never go away?” (Tettermer, 2018, p. 21). Hibber (2013) notes:

In the last several decades, a “new wave” of grief theory has emerged that acknowledges the ways in which grief changes the griever permanently, resulting in long-lasting (and potentially positive) changes in identity, worldview, relationship, and values. (Hibberd, p. 670)

This theory is called Constructivism. Neimeyer's Constructivism theory challenges the universality of stages theories in favor of a more diverse and individual grieving process. His theory is based on the notion that human beings are meaning-makers and naturally seek out meaning. They tend to thread everyday experiences together to create narrative, stories, and themes about their lives (Tettermer, 2018, p. 21).

Constructivism believes that personal narrative contributes to identity, and understands human identity as one giant narrative (Tettermer, 2018). When a loss occurs, personal views can be shaken, and the bereaved person might start questioning their reality, self-concept, spirituality, and relationships (Tettermer, 2018). Bereaved people struggle with a flood of emotions resulting from the absence of their loved one, and they experience a sense of bewilderment and meaningless (Hibberd, 2013).

Finding meaning involves two significant issues for the bereaved: "a need to make sense of the loss and a desire to find benefit in one's experience with loss" (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, p. 727). Theories of meaning-making propose that:

meaning-making plays a central role in the process of adjusting to loss and trauma because it serves to maintain two aspects of our sense of self that are most threatened by loss and trauma: our sense of self-worth and our most fundamental beliefs and assumptions about how the world works. (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, p. 727)

Constructivist theory suggested:

that finding meaning and the reconstruction of maladaptive meaning are the principle tasks following a loss because completion of these tasks allows for reconstruction of narratives and new identities to be formed. (Tettermer, 2018, p. 22)

Thus, finding meaning is at the heart of understanding the human experience (Hibberd, 2013).

Neimeyer's model identifies three ways in which bereaved reconstruct meaning: "sense-making, identity change, and benefit finding" (Hibberd, 2013, p. 676). With regard to the first element which is "sense-making," his theory emphasized meaning reconstruction, such as through developing a narrative within which the loss could make sense (Hibberd, 2013). Benefit-finding is similar to sense-making in that it involves efforts to reappraise the loss in a way that is less threatening to belief about the self and the world (Hibberd, 2013). Additionally, Neimeyer's model considers identity change as another form of reconstruction. A difficult loss could "result in a new view of the self as 'sadder but wiser,' simultaneously strengthened and softened by the experience of grief" (Hibberd, 2013, p. 678). Identity change is also similar to sense-making and benefit-finding in that it needs a coherent narrative (Hibberd, 2013).

Therefore, the tasks of finding meaning and reconstructing identity are important and correlated. Finding meaning allows for the reconstruction of narratives so that a new identity can be formed (Tettermer, 2018, p. 22). Tettermer (2018) argued that "one way to support integration and meaning-making is to collaborate and encourage the bereaved to continue his or her bond with the deceased" (p. 22). Reconstructing of meaning can also be achieved through altruistic activities such as fundraising or other activities dedicated to a cause that mattered for the deceased (Tettermer, 2018, p. 22). By being an active participant in something that mattered to the loved one, rather than being passive in a mourning state, the bereaved creates a new meaning for himself or herself.

Based on Neimeyer's (2001) view:

developing a new identity can be seen as an achievement from a narrative lens. Constructivism recognizes that themes that are drawn upon by the bereaved are



influenced by old narratives, one's personal experience, cultural belief systems, and many overlapping factors that serve to produce an individualized meaning-making. (Tettermer, 2018, p. 23)

Further, Constructivist theory supports the idea of practicing rituals such as funerals, memorials, imaginary therapeutic dialogues as a means of closure or re-narrating (Tettermer, 2018). The ability to find meaning predicts the ability to positively adapt whereas the inability to find meaning comes with feelings of chronic grief (Tettermer, 2018).

Neimeyer (2001) breaks the search for meaning down into three levels: practical, relational, and spiritual/existential: "Most of what a bereaved person questions after a loved one's death fit into one of these categories" (Tettermer, 2018, p. 23). While practical questions include semantics such as planning a funeral or money issues, relational questions involve the bereaved asking themselves who they are now after the loss. Spiritual questions might challenge the bereaved person's faith and beliefs.

Dreams, nightmares, or speaking aloud to the deceased should not always be pathologized (Tettermer, 2018). Previous theories suggested that the bereaved were recommended to cut ties with the deceased. Modern theories, on the other hand, maintained that the bereaved person's efforts to continue bonds are recognized as a necessary part of the grieving process (Tettermer, 2018). Continuing bonds is viewed as an important part of the meaning reconstruction, and it can take form in many ways such as storytelling, keeping belongings, or even internalizing the deceased beliefs and value systems (Tettermer, 2018).

The following section is devoted to demonstrating how the constructivism can support the study in more detail, and to introduce the two research questions:

### **Constructivism as a Main Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The importance of Constructivism in this study is that it offers a framework to provide possible solutions to suffering from loss. Constructivism is directly connected to the topic, and there are already a variety of useful practices and validated applications developed by its founder and other experts. Further, it can function as a focal point that focuses our attention, while conducting the study. For instance, it can help in the process of filtering, clarifying, and reading the data. Additionally, it informed the analysis phase of the study. For instance, interpreting data and identifying common themes could be mainly based on this theory.

It aligns with the study objective, which was to ascertain the beneficial roles of expressive arts and communicating compassion. Constructivism theory lays the foundation for explaining the causal relationship between expressive arts, compassion, and healing. Its concepts, statements, and explanations can help us comprehend the legitimacy of promoting arts and compassion as interventions in the face of loss. In other words, it can demonstrate the power of using expressive arts and compassion to handle the suffering of loss. The reason is that many of the beneficial roles of compassion and expressive arts are rooted in concepts of Constructivism. Finally, it can be considered as a standard to be tested by the study; the study's findings will confirm the theory, contradict it, or add to it.

Constructivism and other modern grief theories do not imply the linear notion of stages. Further, recovery does not seem to be exactly the right word to describe the goal of bereavement (Hoy, 2016). Thus, they justify the need to look for a more accurate term to describe coping with bereavement such as well-being or healing. Existential wellbeing is defined as “a sense of coherence in viewing the world, as well as purpose, value, and significance in life” (Hibberd, 2013, p. 672). Healing can be conceptualized as “reordering an individual’s sense of position in the universe” (Hibberd, 2013, p. 255). It is also defined as “a process in the service of the evolution of the whole personality towards ever greater and more complex wholeness” (Hibberd, 2013, p. 255). Healing can be defined as “relief from overwhelming emotions, crises, or trauma” (German, 2019, p.5).

Particularly, Constructivism and sense-making theories validate the study through the notions of meaning-making and identity reconstruction they emphasize. They both suggest strategic ways to address existential questions and deal with the ambiguity and confusion that result from the loss:

It could be argued that a search for meaning comes out of the perturbation caused by a death. The status quo is upset. Existential questions are raised. The struggle to find answers to these existential questions, which is the search for meaning, is central to the grieving process. In the families who inspired this study, the ability to attach meaning and to share these meanings within the families and with others greatly affected how the families coped. (Hoy, 2016, p. 27)

### **Rationale for Research Question Design**

The constructed life narrative is essential in conducting an art-informed autoethnographic study due to the following reasons:

The evocative autoethnography is evaluated based on its potential to illicit emotional and intellectual responses from the audience, so that it could influence how the audience feels, thinks, and acts. Many of the experiences, emotions, and feelings I have been through—whether during my childhood or adulthood—are universal due to our common humanity. I aim at eliminating some cultural boundaries by creating an emotional tie and intellectual connection with readers, so they feel like they know me personally, understand me, and that they can relate to me. One way to achieve this goal is through engaging them in chapters of my life narrative, with a variety of emotional details.

Meanwhile, I need to merge the personal with the cultural and to place myself within the larger social context. Additionally, I aim to integrate my personal experience of baby loss with larger cultural narratives, so that the reader might gain a sophisticated understanding of how certain cultural beliefs and affiliations, such as the narrative of the tragedy of Karbala' was integrated in the way of how I was raised since my early childhood. I want the reader to comprehend how certain cultural and spiritual beliefs facilitated the meaning-making process, and the way I made sense of my experience.

Additionally, constructivist theory suggests that the constructed life narrative could lead to meaning making, coherence, and purpose. Scholars maintain that revisiting key live events could facilitate a change in the self-concept. Meaning-making could be defined as the reflection of the love we have for the people we have lost. It manifests in our attempts to sustain this love of them while we move forward with our lives.

Although, the study was particularly about baby loss, there are factors that made my loss

harder and contributed to my suffering, such as the coincidence of losing both my baby and my grandfather in the period, with whom I spent the first five years of my life.

The study circulates around coping with grief and healing. It is an attempt to highlight the basic needs for bereaved women, such as empowerment, emotional expression, and meaning making. It validates existential questions that naturally arise from the trauma of loss and through searching for meaning. Additionally, it advocates combining both art and compassion due to the beneficial roles that they can have in alleviating suffering and facilitating healing. Based on the previous objectives, the main research questions include:

**RQ1:** What meanings emerged through writing the constructed life narrative writing about my experience as a Saudi Arabian woman who has been through baby loss?

**RQ2:** What meanings emerged through art-making about my experience as a Saudi Arabian woman who has been through baby loss?

**RQ3:** How do compassion and art facilitated my healing as a Saudi Arabian woman who has been through baby loss?

## Chapter Two: Method

*Grief can be the garden of compassion. If you keep your heart open through everything, your pain can become your greatest ally in your life's search for love and wisdom*

-Rumi

### Introduction

The present study is a qualitative inquiry with a multi-method design, combining auto-ethnography with arts-based research (ABR) practices. According to John Brewer & Albert Hunter (1989), “social science methods should not be treated as mutually exclusive alternatives among which we must choose and then passively pay the costs of our choice” (p. 16). The pragmatic use of the multimethod approach is built on the insight that combining methods allows us to gain their strengths and compensate for their specific flaws and faults or limitations (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

Autoethnography is defined as “a genre of writing, research, and clinical work that merges the personal into the cultural, placing the self within a social context” (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016, p. 436). Patton describes autoethnography as “combining an autobiographical form of narrative with ethnography, the study of cultures and subcultures, to creatively express phenomena from both a personal and cultural point of view” (Hering, 2014, p. 99).

Autoethnographies are considered “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purpose of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21), uniquely contributing to research across multiple disciplinary fields (Flippo, 2018, p.10). The present study is “consistent with the methodological technique of ‘purposeful sampling’, in which an information-rich case (or cases) is chosen for in-depth study” (Crossley, 2007, p. 547).

Matthews (2019) states that weaving personal experiences with academic research can reveal an understanding of complex, painful issues, such as death, grief, and traumatic loss (p. 1).

An autoethnography gives the researcher tools to explain differences from the inside and provides an opportunity to explain self to others. Characteristics of an autoethnography include:

The use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher’s vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate details; the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral ethical, and political consequences; encouragement of compassion and empathy; a focus on helping us know how to live and cope; the featuring of multiple voices and the repositioning of readers and ‘subjects’ as co-participants in dialogue; the seeking of a fusion between social science and literature; the connecting of the practices of social science with the living of life; and the representation of lived experience using a variety of genres—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. (Lewis, 2007, p. 99)

Patton and Richardson (2000) suggest the integration of art, literature, and social science to join the creative and critical sides of inquiry (Hering, 2014, p. 100). The various hats an autoethnographer can wear include author, artist, and researcher. The

process of roaming the complex labyrinth of memories and personal experiences and putting them together to evoke the reader's emotions is essential (Flippo, 2018, p. 23). As an artist, poet, and researcher, I am well situated to conduct this type of inquiry. My autoethnographic account was constructed upon personal and visual narrative. Patricia Leavy (2020) argues that arts-based practices can serve three crucial parts of the research endeavor: data generation, data interpretation, and data (re)presentation (p. 20). According to her: "ABR offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be out of reach" through enabling the viewers to see and think differently, and feel more deeply (Leavy, 2020, p. 21).

I used different mediums and strategies to collect data—one of which is called emotional recalling—to relive events and write about them. Data was obtained from recollection of memories, artifacts, photos, and artwork such as poems and journals. These items functioned as sources for my field notes, enriching data collection, producing narrative, and enhancing reflection and analysis. Some journals and art work were taken from assignments and projects accumulated from various communication classes I took in the previous three years at DU. For instance, in Dr. Erin Willer's course, "Grief and Loss," we created visual narratives during weekly death cafes. These visual narratives awakened me to memories I had forgotten and elicited explanations that had not come to mind before. Other narratives were taken from my Facebook and Instagram pages, where I document some of my prose and poetry.

The present project was an experiment wherein I investigated the meanings of my experience and why I think compassion and expressive arts are essential factors in my



recovery process. In answering my research questions, I sought to expand my understanding of the trauma of going through the baby loss experience twice by finding new meanings of the experience.

Further, art and compassion were essential elements in my recovery process. When I write or engage in visual narrative or artwork, I often consider it an act of compassion to myself. I treat myself kindly by taking time and space to process the trauma I have experienced. Sometimes, humans need stories more than food. People tend to put stories in each other's memories because this is how they care for themselves (Bertman, 1999, p. 7). I write or make art when I am under pressure or when I experience stressful events for a significant amount of time. Self-compassion leads me to make art, to discover meanings, and transcend reality. At the same time, making and consuming art provides me a safe haven to extend compassion to myself, be kinder and less judgmental, and gain new insights about my lived experience.

Exploring my artwork can evoke my memories, emotions, and unconscious feelings. It is an essential task to answer my research questions because such mediums function as a source of meanings and evaluation. For instance, I can compare my sense of wellbeing before and after engaging in artistic activities, and identify reasons behind their therapeutic effect. Further, narrative and artwork provoke powerful thoughts associated with the experience. Thus, visual narrative elicits critical meanings related to my experience of baby loss.

The experience of baby loss, including suffering and recovery, is associated with my personal cultural context—the “coherent set” of beliefs, norms, traditions, rituals,

values, and superstitions I learned in early childhood. Engaging in such a project allowed me to recall the history and cultural backgrounds that influenced my personhood and shaped a profound part of my identity. Such process is essential to understanding what elements, might be rooted even in my unconscious mind, and contributed to my grief experience by intensifying my suffering and threatening my identity or the opposite.

Culture plays a central role in determining how we live our lives, view the world around us, and experience trauma. The autoethnographic process allowed me to see my experience through the multiple lens of different cultural influence, from my nuclear family, through my extended family, and to my immediate community. Meanings associated with trauma and recovery were even drawn from early childhood. For instance, writing or thinking about fragments of the story of my childhood, I inquired how perfectionism was a part of my identity as a student since my early childhood and contributed to my grief and suffering as an adult experiencing baby loss, especially in a culture where the word choice “fail” can be used to refer to both failing at school and miscarriage in the informal language in my culture.

Further, aside from the meanings that can be drawn from my individual experience, I examined the role compassion and art played in my recovery process and why I believe they are essential to the healing process. When it comes to exploring why I believe “compassion” was an essential part to my recovery, exploring field notes and writing the narrative allowed me to revisit and process many events again. For instance, I identified certain events and encounters in which I was cared for or witnessed insensitivity and a lack of compassion—whether from healthcare providers, the social

network, or even from myself. Recalling such events, I provided in depth-descriptions of the necessity of compassion in improving my feelings and overall-wellbeing in the aftermath of baby loss.

When it comes the role “expressive arts” plays in finding meaning and recovery, I meditated on the poetry and artwork that were associated with the loss experience to figure out why I valued these pieces; in addition, I analyzed the healing effect of engaging in the process of conducting the visual narrative of the autoethnography itself in light of pre-existing literature. Finally, Sandra L. Bertman (1999) defines creativity as:

a unique mental process leading to the expansion of experienced reality beyond the already established categorization and classification of it. It is a state of discovery, a new understanding of reality offered to others in an unrepeatable fashion. (p. 219)

Thus, because visual research involves a certain level of creativity, it offered me a safe platform for self-expression through which I answered my questions and confirmed my hypotheses.

Since grief is not a cerebral problem but a subjective experience, we understand it only and entirely as we filter and interpret it through our own experience. Initially, it captures us. But, we can capture it back and reshape it; and the expressive arts and therapies function beautifully as vehicles to help us reshape grief. Ultimately, the potential for healing in the midst of suffering exists because grief is about creating and transforming bonds of attachment (Bertman, 1999, p. 15). Scholars argue that because the researcher is the subject of the study, and has been through the painful personal experience, the researcher can:

Examine, evaluate, and analyze the experiences from a different perspective than someone outside the situation. The more perspectives we can gather, the better equipped we will be to understand our future losses and respond helpfully to those around us suffering loss. These methods also add the benefit of engaging readers in our stories, compelling a response from them (Holman, 2005), connecting readers to our stories both emotionally and intellectually. (Matthews, 2019, p. 9)

Autoethnography offers “a platform” to convey “lived, day-to-day, intimate experiences and insights” which “traditional research methods” cannot (Flippo, 2018, p. 18). It acts like a mirror, reflecting the authentic self to the self and the reader, thus benefiting both by raising self-awareness and creating a difference through informing and advocacy. I selected autoethnography to

delve into my grief and loss experience using self-narrative writing exercises, drawing from my journals, photographs, additional artifacts, and lived experiences to provide a rich storytelling tapestry filled with dialogue, reflection, and epiphanies in the present tense to convey my configured knowledge and reality. (Flippo, 2018, p. 18)

In my study, I shed light on how painful life experiences of grief and loss are

best expressed through narratives that inform and connect lives through the power of language. I will focus on the purpose of narrative and the storied nature of identity, institutional and public life, narrative [and arts] functions, and health and healing, along with a different view of [Grief and loss] literature. (Lewis, 2007, p. 10)

## **Data Analysis**

Flippo (2018) asserts that data analysis for autoethnographers starts with an emotional journey as the author/researcher re-visits the painful events. Recalling painful experiences mandates bravery and patience (Flippo, 2018, p. 24). Flippo (2018) maintains that there is no one-size-fits-all methodology or format in autoethnography. Autoethnographies are created in a way that is best suited for the researcher’s requirements (Flippo, 2018). Hemingway advised F. Scott Fitzgerald in a letter May 28,

1934: “We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get the damned hurt use it—don’t cheat with it. Be as faithful to it as a scientist” (Flippo, 2018, p.10).

Designing an autoethnography requires focus on the emotional details of each narrative, while infusing research and literature. Within such a design, the analysis of data is a fluid and ever-evolving process, constantly crystallizing while forming the dissertation (Flippo, 2018, p. 24). According to Matthews (2019), insights can be uncovered by weaving personal and analytical exploration of painful subjects that other traditional methods may not be able to reach. Analytical processes are not unilateral; rather, they are dynamic and fluid (Flippo, 2018, p. 25). According to Frankhouser and Defenbaugh (2017): the data in autoethnography are both internal (memory, observations, and reflections) and external (literature reviews, other scholarly written studies).

The researcher’s stories, or internal data, are derived from personal memories. The researcher also draws on external data—such as interviews, artifacts, and previous literature and research—to provide a framework to analyze and interpret the stories. This systematic investigation of weaving one’s personal story with other data provides the framework for analyzing and interpreting the central story within a larger cultural context (Frankhouser & Defenbaugh, 2017).

The process of moving toward autoethnographic data analysis is described as “moving back and forth between self and others, zooming in and out of the personal and social realm, and submerging and emerging out of the data” (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016, p. 452). Working with narrative inquiry means:

listening to at least three voices. First, one must listen to the voice of the narrator, as represented by the text. Second, one must listen to the voice of the theoretical framework that provides the tools for interpretation. Third, one must reflexively monitor the act of reading and interpretation, being mindful of self-awareness regarding the decision-making process when interpreting. (Hering, 2014, p. 116)

As Hering (2014) did in her autoethnography analysis, in order to preserve the authenticity of the storyteller's voice, I did not alter my previous journal entries or artwork; like her, I looked for factors contributing to healing and coping.

I took an interpretative approach. As some researchers have done when performing autoethnography analysis, I questioned what I learned about myself and the experience by writing and analyzing the narratives and the larger cultural connections of beliefs and ideals. I also questioned: "How did this happen? How did I feel about it? What lessons can we draw from this experience?" (Crossley, 2007, p. 548).

Further, I looked for recurring topics in the narratives to obtain "categorical labels" with which "data may be fractured and organized" (Frankhouser & Defenbaugh, 2017). Such analysis revealed multiple themes within the collection of personal and visual narratives. Following the first analysis of the narratives, I explored the grief journey in relation to personal and cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values to learn about factors contributed to my recovery process.

Flippo (2018) maintains that the process of data collection and data analysis is dynamic and story interpretations are interconnected to one another. According to Flippo (2018), "it is through each re-reviewing of my personal journals, re-writing of recollected memories, and re-examining of artifacts that the study becomes more enriched with meaning as themes emerge and are examined" (p. 25). To evaluate the result of the

ethnographic research, one can think about how it elicits emotions from the readers that are imaginable, relatable, and empathic, while also helping the audience connect with others different from themselves and providing ways to better the lives of others (Flippo, 2018, p. 26).

For a formal analytical approach, I employed a *data analysis cycle*, by going back and forth between different forms of data collected through the project until I reached saturation. That is, I moved between my personal narrative and my field notes (art forms, journal entries, and social media posts relevant to the topic of baby loss or the overall autoethnography) to discern repeated themes and patterns. I analyzed how I my new perspective on identity after the baby-loss experience, and my perspective of what factors contributed to the healing process.

In her book, *Narrative Methods for Human Sciences*, Catherine Kohler Riessman states that: “Visual representations of experience—in photographs, performance art, and other media—can enable others to see as a participant sees” (Adams, 2008, p. 142). She continues: “[p]ictures not only restore feeling, but also the capacity to feel... [transforming] what was previously a private experience of the patient to being a shared comprehension” (Adams, 2008, p. 142). Thus, samples of unique visuals narrative will be included in various sections of the study to allow the reader to enter the realm of the experience.

## Chapter Three: The Narrative

### Introduction

*She wakes up; I wake up. My mother dresses her and gets her ready to go to her preschool. Anxious, I hurry up to follow her. I run after her with my short hair. I find my mother's "black shoes" in my way. I put them on quickly and get onto the school bus. My short successful attempt doesn't last long. I soon realize that I am "the outsider," when the teacher who typically accompanied the kids in the bus, grabs my hand, and escorts me off the bus. My grandfather takes me back to our home.*

My mother used to tell this story over and over, as evidence of how much I loved school, even since an early age. Kids usually start preschool when they are five years old. I started before then. My parents decided to register me in preschool from the earliest possible age because of my early interest in school.

I've read that kids cannot recall any memories before the age of five. I don't remember all the details of the above story. I do remember, though, wearing my mom's black shoes, and I do remember the "mean" teacher who escorted me off the bus. Are these memories in my imagination of reality, or are they the truth? I don't know.

Fox argues that "memory is a slippery beast. Philosophers and scholars have compared memory to prison (Freud), religion (Margalit), computers (Bowman), and cultural mosaics (Fisher)" (p. 8).



In his article “Remembering Daddy,” Fox states that Fisher believes that “people increasingly construct their sense of self out of pieces that come from many different cultural environments” (8). The tesserae and the component pieces are the real beauty of a mosaic. The ability to connect certain people, places, and times enables us to create and see the big picture. This is what Fox continues to explain: “mosaic metaphor speaks of how the parts (i.e. seemingly disparate memories) and whole (i.e. unified memories, or memory) work concomitantly to frame understanding and shape interpretation” (8).

### **The Beginning**

*There is a garden in every childhood, an enchanted place where colors are brighter, the air is softer, and the morning more fragrant than ever again*

– Elizabeth Lawrence

### ***Early Childhood, Lovely Memories, Pure Innocence and Bright Adventures***

*We live in a town that is located by the gulf. Our ancestors used to work as farmers, fishers, or merchants. Pearl trading was well-known in the gulf. Ships depart the town for fish and in search for pearls. But after discovering the “black gold,” the oil, everything has changed, even the sky! We have a permanent cloud that can be seen when we look at the town from the highway: pollution.*

*Our home is old compared to nowadays homes. No wonder. It is my grandfather’s home, and it is in “The Deerah”—an old town that resides in the center of the city. Almost all my generation’s grandparents’ homes were in the Deerah or nearby. Not only is it home for our grandparents, but it is also our traditional heritage.*

*Although our home is old and simple, it contains some of the loveliest and brightest memories. Our home has many rooms; some of them belongs to my uncles. We also have a big farm in the middle. The farm space is equal to three of the house rooms. There is also a small pool beside the farm and near the kitchen. The one who built it, did not paint it.*

*There is an L-shaped empty space between the farm and five of the house rooms; I think it is considered a hall. The two other sides of the farm face the “mejles.” which is a room for men, and an abandoned room that belongs to uncle Radi (hence its name, “Uncle Radi’s room”). The room is amazing, like an antique storage or museum. It is opened and filled with precious stuff. For instance, there are several barrels of paints that remained after painting my uncle’s new home, I think. Although they seem dried and solid because of the passing of time and the hot climate, when you push your finger inside them, they moved like a dough. And, the garden: I am in love with one of its trees.*

I’ve forgotten all the garden’s trees, except one. It was located by the entrance of the garden, as if it greets the garden’s visitor! That tree used to bloom some white flowers, resembling Jasmine. My sister and I would play around it like two little butterflies. Each time we enter the farm, we would happily go around it, select a few of its flowers and suck their stems, and laugh. We loved that sweet taste, and called it honey.

Once we took them to my grandma to try the taste. She tried one of them, too, and then she blamed us because we made her forget that she was fasting. My grandma was

nice and used to play interesting games with us. One game we loved to play was when she tied our legs using plastic bags, so we couldn't move unless we jumped.

*In the other part of the home, facing another side of the farm and the pool is the kitchen. At lunch time, it is usually my mother who is there. Well, she is the only young woman here. The refrigerator always has soda bottles, some are black, Pepsi. Others are orange, Mirinda, and the rest are the reddish, Shani. Each bottle has at the bottom either a circular or a rectangular symbol. If I got the rectangular shape, it means I am a queen, if I got the other one, I am a princess. Who made this rule? I don't know.*

I always wanted to be a princess, not a queen. It is not that I was able to distinguish between the two. I might love the Arabic sounding of the word "princesses" in Arabic, which is "Ameerah" more than the sounding of the Arabic word "Malekah" which means queen. Or, I liked the shape of the circle more than the rectangle.

Those bottles were not my favorites. There used to be a car that sold these drinks to us children. We would get those drinks inside transparent little plastic bags, make a hole in the corner and drink them. Beside these drinks, there used to be an old man who went around downtown with a green cart selling sweet fruits that we called "Lawz." The man usually yelled, announcing his arrival, and children would go out to buy from him.

When I turned four and started pre-school, the first place I would head to was the kitchen. *I like when my mom uses the small grinding machine and tries to play with me and scares me by its sounds when I go to the kitchen while she is cooking. I like when she peels a little bit of the butter cube by the fork and give it to me to taste.*

*Although I don't like milk in general, I like when she prepares "Nido," a popular brand for a traditional dairy product; there is something I heard about our generation from the older generations. We are called "the Nido generation."*

The person who used this term used it in a context to differentiate our generation, believing that we are a more soft and indulgent generation. She was using it to talk about the Hajj, while also talking about how her daughter struggled emotionally while performing it.

Anyway, another habit of motherhood I like is when my mother would use the lotion and put two aromatic chunks of it in each of my cheek. It is not the cream that does moisturize my skin, it is the touch moisturizing my soul.

As a child, I understood that although my mother seemed to care about my beauty, she refused that I use any of her makeup products. She would keep them on the highest shelf of the cabinet. We used something to support the back when we set that is called "*mesnad*." Sometimes they are used like a pillow when we lie down to watch TV for instance. It is like a pillow but stronger. I remembered that I once rested my head beside my father using them. He told me not to use it.

Alaa: "Why Dad? You are putting your head over it."

Father: "I am older than you, my neck is stronger."

Looking at my father's face closely, I had another question:

Alaa: "Why do you have fine lines on your forehead?"

Father: "Because of thinking. Thinking too much."

*I don't have many toys because most of our toys are inside a certain cabinet that is usually locked. When my mom opens it, we see many colorful toys, and we become joyful. Do these toys belong to a time when we were younger? Mom keeps her cosmetics products on the highest shelf of her cabinet.*

I invented my own ways of playing. One day, while my mom was busy in the kitchen preparing the lunch, I decided to try out some of her lipsticks. I gathered some of those “*mesnads*,” put them over each other so that I can climb them and reach the highest shelf. My plan went well. The cabinet had a mirror. I looked at it. I used the lipstick as I wished. Unfortunately, I heard my mom calling my name. She needed me!

I quickly ran to the other side of the home, near the “*majles*.” There was a mirror and a sink. I quickly figured out that this messy lipstick color should go away. I used my grandfather's toothbrush and toothpaste to brush the color. Unfortunately, I spread the color more. I took a Kleenex tissues to cover my face, went to my mom holding the tissues over my mouth. She wanted me to take some of the trash outside the home. I don't remember how we handled the messy face later.

### **Some Other Memories**

I remember once I saw a boy drawing on a wall. I stopped to look at him. After growing up, I realized he was one of my cousins. My father is the youngest son. All my three uncles and two aunts had left the house before I was born. There was a big empty area with a wooden ceiling in the home. When I grew up a little more, I learned an interesting game from my cousins. We would dabble colorful tissues and through them toward the brown wooden ceiling, and they would stick over there.

When we go out, we only need to go straight and walk a little bit to arrive to my aunt's home, who is my father's sister. My sister and I had a strong relationship with two of her girls. One of them is at my sister's age, "H", and the other one is only three days older than me, named "Fatimah." Fatimah had brown skin and dark straight hair.

"H" came once to us, to her grandparents' home. She has candy lollipop. She told my sister that the lollipop has a "jinnyah" inside it. *Jinnyah* is the feminine noun of "Jini." I am not sure if my cousin "H" heard about Aladdin's story back then. I have not heard about it at that time, but it seems similar. According to "H", "if we blow inside the stick of the lollipop, the *Jinnyah* will come out and chase us!" It's a pretty scary idea for a kid.

One of them blew inside that lollipop. I heard my cousin "H" telling Nada that we should run, because the *jinnyah* got out now and it would chase us. They ran, and I ran after them. I think no matter how I tried to run fast, I could not catch up and I was behind them. My hope to survive was ruined by "H" warnings to Nada: "Your sister is a little kid, she cannot run very fast, the *jinnyah* is going to arrest her! Did she?!"

*Fragment: Pink, yellow, and other colors*

*I am with my father in a nice big shoes store. Or at least, that is how I see it. He bought me nice new sandals. Now, I am setting with my older sister on the small water ball. Happy, showing her my colorful sandals my dad has just bought me. She is asking me to try it out. I hear my mother telling me it will get cut off. Though, I did not listen to my mother. Kindly, I gave it to my sister to try it out. To my surprise, it got cut off! My mom's prophecy becomes true. Sadly, I have not enjoyed it.*

Once we went to our uncle's home, which was my mother's oldest brother. Our oldest cousin is called Ranya, and she was around five years older than me. Women were inside the home; we were playing outside. Rania told us that we will pretend that Nada has passed away. She lay down, and we told my mom that Nada died. To some extent, I think we were good actors because although my mom did not cry, her face turned yellow, and she came out to check.

In another visit to the same home, the children were spinning ourselves around. I was imitating them. My mom, who was setting with other women, warned me that I will hit the wall. I did not stop and continued spinning until I hit a corner. How come her prophecy turned true again? All of a sudden, the world got distorted. There was blood erupting from my forehead and spilling all over my face. I found myself crying in a hospital, surrounded by many people wearing green. It was not the pain, it was the suffering of the fear. The fear of these people and their needle. They were stitching in my forehead.

*I have a reward, a very tiny yellow toy!*

I am not sure if I earned it from that mini-forehead operation or from a visit to the dentist. Anyway, I got a small yellow toy. It is a tiny cute duck! *I am playing with my sister, holding it.* We lost it when it fell behind our parent's heavy bed. It was impossible to move a giant bed to get this little bird.

*Now, I am with my father, sitting in the car. I am sitting beside him in the front seat, holding a bag that has many holes on it. The frequent movement and the sounds are a little bit disturbing, but when I open the bag slowly and look inside it, I feel so blissful. I*

*am in love with my new soft yellow creature! No, I am not fearful of its movements, neither of the sounds my chick would leave on the little bag with its beak. Those frequent clicks make my heart beat with excitement and happiness, and be filled with the love of my new little creature. What a great new experience!*

Yes, this time, dad bought us two actual yellow birds! A smart compensation, isn't it? Unfortunately, this happiness did not last long. After a while, we saw a cat eating one of the chicks in front of our eyes. I once felt so guilty about walking on little plants on the farm that I asked my mother if it is ok to walk on them. As a child, it is not just deep guilt. It was fear and sadness, as I saw the little bird between the cat's jaws. The cat was facing us, staring at us, like a monster. We were helpless. We could do nothing to help the bird. Our bird! We felt guilty that we could not protect the little bird from death in this horrible way. I was sad at losing the little bird. I was angry at the cat.

### **Sadness and Happiness: Special Days**

Nada was almost two years older than me. My mother got pregnant with me when Nada was one year old, so she is one year and ten months older than me. My Mom always tells the story of Nada peeling blue paint from the wall and putting it over my eyes while I was sleeping.

She also talks about how Nada started walking in a wierd way. When she tells this story, she ends it up with the following: "Nada felt jealousy, she wanted attention. I should have contained her and give her more affection rather than getting mad at her." Well, there is some other stories about coming to the world. Doctors thought I had a twin. Doctors thought I had a serious heart problem, and I would not make it. I don't like the



story comparing my birth to my sister's who was born in the states. My mom praised the treatment she received when she gave birth to my sister, but complained about a nurse she had when she gave birth of me. This makes me feel ashamed.

In Arabic, "Nada" refers to the drops that form on flowers in the mornings. It also means generosity. "Alaa" is a Quranic name, and it means a bliss or a gift from God. My parents had four names from which they wanted to select to name me, so they wrote them in small pieces of papers and choose one randomly. It was Alaa!

*As a little kid, I listen carefully to my sister Nada. I also admire her and believe her. If it was rainy, and we saw the reflection of our world on the remaining of water stains, she would tell me, "Alaa, this is a deep hole on the earth, be careful not to walk on it, otherwise you will fall down." I would believe her! We would jump every time we find a stain of water, a hole to another world, to avoid falling down. Apparently, we liked our world too much that we did not want to leave to go anywhere else.*

*Not only do I believe her, I also obey her. Why would I not? She is older than me and must know better than me. At the same time, she is just a child. Her interests should be similar to mine.*

In the *Eid's* mornings, people wear new outfits and celebrate. My grandfather's *majles* gets filled with many relatives. My grandfather is called "Mulla." It is an admirable status for someone who reads the holy Quran in Ramadan, and read the tragedy of Karbala, as well as the births of Imams. I think he was well-known because he even used to be asked to go to Kuwait at certain times. He was also one of those who were believed could help sick people heal.

During Ramadan, families of relatives would gather at every weekend at his home. We used to stay up until midnight, eat another meal called “Al-sahour.” Each weekend would be assigned as the turn for at least two families to prepare those meals. The home would get crowded and filled with people, with life.

At the *Eid*, we wear new dresses. There were many water cartons at the entrance of the *majles* where men gathered. Along with other little girls, I would set on these cartons, waiting men to come out. When they come out, we would greet them saying “*Eid mubark*,” which means something similar to “Merry Christmas.” They would give us money. At *Eid*, grocery stores are filled with new kids’ toys, so it was hard to save money.

Aside from the *Eid*, there is also another special occasion called “*Nasfa*” or “*hallowad*.” It is like Halloween. Kids go from door to door and are given treats like candies and peanuts. When Nada attended school, she apparently had new friends outside our relatives’ circle. In one of these *Hallowad* occasions, when I was four, my father instructed that we were allowed only to go until my mother’s sister home Huda (the one who gave us the two bears). We arrived over there. However, we did not return. Nada had another plan.

Alaa: “Let’s go back now.”

Nada: “No, we will visit my friend’s home.”

I am not sure how much I insisted that we return home, but since she wanted that we continue to her friend’s home. Why not! I had no choice. We went to my sister’s friend’s home. We continued walking until we arrived to an open market. We got our

treats from the sellers. But we also kept walking until we arrived to the new town where my sister's elementary school is. Near that school, there was my father's friend's home, and my uncle's home. We visited both of them. Thus, my father got information about our location.

It was evening. He came to us. We got a lot of treats, but we got our first punishment. He asked us to open our hands and hit them with a small stick! Although, I believe it was unfair to punish me. I could not defend myself. My mom used to say that my father's punishments were pointless. Only moments after doing so, he would feel guilty and put us in his lap.

### ***Ashura's***

*In this time of the year, my mother made us wear black outfits. It is the month Imam Hussain got martyred. We go to a place where women gather, listen, and cry. Anyway, I like my black outfit that has something like silver glitters on it. These glitters sparkle as if they were stars on a night!*

*I like to see other kids there. Some of the kids wear hair hoop with some written words on their heads such as "O, Hussain".*

*When it is the first month of the year, Muharram, people practice some special rituals. In our neighborhood, or to be more accurate in front of our home, there is a place called "Hussainya." where women gather there to listen to the story of Kabala. We, kids, have one more reason to go.*

As kids, I would go with my sisters and peers at least twice. In the entrance there used to be a host woman who would pour a sweet drink, Vimto, from a golden Jug to

serve visitors. We would wait in line until it is our turn to be served. That cold sweet drink deserves waiting too long and going several times.

There is another Day of Ashura that children like. Each day, people listen to a narrative of a hero in Karbala. On the sixth day, women light candles, through candies, as if they were celebrating a wedding ceremony. It is the night of al-Qasim, when Imam Hussain's fourteen year old nephew got killed. Women celebrate his death as if he was a groom. I think I was 10-years-old, when I listened carefully to the story of Karbala. It was also the tenth day, the real day of the tragedy, when all the shiny stars of the tragedy of Karbala sparkled right before they fall down!

The tenth translates to Al-Asher or Ashura in Arabic. I listened to the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, heard that his killers hit his nicks twelve times until he separated the head from the body, I felt the first tears falling from my eyes, at the same time I felt comfortable that I was able to cry just like other women.

Overall, our environment was safe. But there was a boy who lived next door, named "S". Although his name means "goodness," "S" was a trouble-maker. Once we were walking nearby in the street in front of our home, and he threw plates at us from above. I once went to the top of our home, where I can get some fruits of a big tree. I tried to take some of its fruit. All of a sudden, a big stone was thrown toward me. I saw "S" staring at me. I got scared. Thinking about the incident now, I recall that the tree, though had some branches on our home, belonged originally to Salah's home. It was theirs, not ours.

It was safe. We don't have predators other than cats. Why, once I dreamt of a wolf eating me only to wake up and find my aunt, Huda, calming me down. It was safe. We don't have ghosts, but we have a fun cousin, named Bushra who was around seven or eight years older than me. Bushra used to take white baby powder and cover her face with it. She would take the powder bottle in front of us, enter a room, and come out with a scary look. Putting her black "abaya" on her head, and coming with that white powder covered face, chasing us, we would get scared and run from her, although we knew she was just our cousin Bushra.

Bushra's home was in the same area of our home. She had an older sister, Fatima. I remember visiting their home once. I learned that because they were grown up, they could get a shower anytime they wanted. I envied them this privilege. Back then, when I was not even at school, it was up to my mother to decide when we should get us to have a shower.

*I am sitting on the wide three or four steps stair, drawing something like a car in a notebook, when I asked my mom about how she liked my drawing.*

*Mom: "I like it so much. You are an artist, we will register you in a pre-school soon."*

*I am a student formally*

*Now, I enter preschool. I am four years old, I believe. We are still living at my grandfather's house. That mud-made home opened into the blue endless sky through a farm inside its center, and a little pole with the farm view. Now, I have the privilege to enter a new boundary. Now, I am entitled to get onto the bus.*

My first preschool was not very enjoyable. I was four-year-old, too little, and the space was very large and crowded. I also did not like the uniforms: blue t-shirts and pants, which made you feel like a prisoner. We would stand in lines every morning with a bunch of children, and I did not get why or where should I go.

*It is easy to feel lost, especially when my mom left me here for the first time, with my sister. Even my sister left me, but after a while, I knew where I can find her. Whenever I needed the bathroom, I would go to my sister's classroom first. She is the one who knows where the bathroom is, and who would volunteer to take me all the way through it. She will take care of me, wait for me when I enter until I finish. I feel secured when she is with me, especially that this building is a little bit scary. How cannot be a scary if there is a 'rat's room' inside it? This is how that always angry teacher tend to threaten us, the children. There is a "rats' room" to which she claims takes kids who annoy her.*

*Meal time is the worst because I have to drink milk. They bring us sandwiches and cups of milk. I do not like the taste of that milk. It makes my body tremble. They teach us to sing:*

Oh, beautiful kids... Drink milk

For health and strength. Drink milk... and ask the physician!

*I reluctantly drink mine because a good child is expected to drink all the milk. Or, this was how I thought. A year later, when the bus stops at my grandfather's home, and kids start to get from it, I remember them jumping to the floor instead of going down on the steps. I stop for a moment or two, thinking of jumping like them.*

But I never did. I knew it is dangerous.

I transferred to a new preschool. My teacher when I was five, complained to my mom that I cannot write zero. Zero in Arabic is just a small dot. However, according to her, I draw a circle, and I color inside it. She was also annoyed because the child sitting next to me would talk to me. Although I tried not to interact with him, he would keep talking, and the teacher will blame both of us.

In our room, I remember two pictures. One pictured my dad with two American girls. It was taken in United States before I was born. The other one—a big poster—had a picture of a fascinating home. Dad claimed that these two young girls were his daughters in the States. If we don't act politely, he would leave us and go to them. Of the fascinating home picture, Dad said it was our future home.

If the poet's imagination is broad, the child's imagination is limitless. Not only did I dream of moving to that beautiful home, I believed we would have something like an amusement park, a city of games, or even a Disneyland inside our home. I even proudly told one of my classmates at the preschool, "My dad built a new home. We are going to have a city of games inside our yard."

The little girl was a little bit rude to me. She replied, "No, you won't." I could not wait until I return home to ask my father about this. I knew he is going to assure me that we are going to have a city of games because my dad is an unusual man, a hero, a superman—and he is capable of that. To my disappointment, he said, "no, we cannot have an amusement park inside our home."

## **New home! New life!**

*“Home is where love resides, memories are created, friends always belong, and laughter never ends”*

—Unknown

*This is my last year in preschool, and we just moved to the new home, a big beautiful one. There is a blue swing in the yard, and colorful flowers are disseminated everywhere in the margins of the yard. Life is beautiful. I then enter a nice school in our neighborhoods.*

After moving to the new home, I moved on to a new preschool, too, a much closer and smaller one. With the new home, comes new people and new stuff: new computer device, new television, new blue swing, which I think was my dad way to make my dream to come true. What is more was that I had a newborn sister. We would play with kids who would join their mothers on visits to our home. Our guests welcomed my new little sister, Zahra, to the world.

The new preschool was interesting. I felt more independent, and more secure. I remember three kids. One of them was called Mohammed. He was a handsome and gentle boy. He once held my hand, raised it a little bit to the level of his face, and kissed it. He had brown skin and straight soft hair,

The other one brought two bottles of juices. One of them was for him, and the other one was for another kid. All of kids gathered around him, but I stayed at my desk. I am not sure if I did not like the juice, or it was my dignity that prevent me of doing what



other kids were doing. Or, perhaps I was calm because I felt it is ridiculous to beg him. While I was sitting calmly, I heard him say that he decided to give the juice to me!

The last boy is a character inside a story narrated by my cousin Fatimah. She said she tried to get my attention that day, so she threw sand on me when I went to Mustafa—our neighbor and my brother-in-law nowadays. I complained to him about her, so he threw sand on her. Apparently, I did not recognize that Fatimah was trying to get my attention when she threw the sand on me.

At home, life was interesting. Sometimes we would play computer games. I enjoyed a game where there were a frog trying to cross the street avoiding cars. I also loved a game where there were some sheep, a sheep keeper, and a wolf. I also enjoyed watching cartoons. My dad's friend's family would visit us from time to time.

One day, kids were watching cartoons. We watched the story of the mermaid who wanted to be a regular human to marry her love. She needed a help from a witch to be a regular human being. When she missed her family, the witch told her that she cannot visit them unless she kills her husband. The mermaid thought about the issue, was about to kill her husband, but then she threw herself in the sea. Colorful pebbles appeared soaring from the sea! I was only five years old. I did not get what happened. What did these bubbles stand for? Why were they rising? Mervat, my father's friend oldest daughter, who was four years older than me, told me, "it is her soul." I did not understand what she meant by a "soul."

## **Elementary School**

*“You will never be completely at home again, because part of your heart will always be elsewhere. That is the price you pay for the richness of loving and knowing people in more than one place.”*

The first day of elementary school was special. We sat near a big theater, filled with girls accompanied by their moms. Fatimah and her Mom was there. I was told to hold Fatimah’s hand. Perhaps we could be placed in the same classroom. To our disappointment, we were in different classrooms. In fact, we had never been in the same classroom, except the last year, and that was because I made an effort.

I loved my teacher so much. She was affectionate—a perfect young mother for little kids. On the first day, I returned home happy, because we were served candies. The school was huge for me. I also needed my sister’s help at the first days to help me in finding my classroom.

When my sister’s friend became at a higher level, which meant they were released from school at a later time, there were still another student, older than me, who just did not like me. Once, I think I was holding a plastic school’s lunch bag when I was returning home. She took it and hit me with it. The girl took the white hair ribbons from my pigtails. Lucky for me, our neighbor, Mustafa’s mother, witnessed what happened and rescued me from that child. She took me to my mom and asked her to go to that child’s home and complained to her mother.

## **The Gulf War**

The greatest early lesson that taught me the world was not safe was The Gulf War. I was five or six years old when all of sudden, I heard people talking about the war, and the “*Kemawi*” or *chemicals*. And, above all, I learned a new name: Saddam Hussain. I saw my father distorting our new home’s windows by pasting tape on their margins because he was afraid that chemicals could leak to our home.

A few days later, he brought us scary green masks with small openings to breath. I feared the day we would have to wear those ugly masks more than the chemicals everyone was talking about. I did not understand what the chemical was until one day when we were watching the news, I saw an image of a swimming duck. That duck was polluted. Its soft white feathers were not white anymore. There was a black layer all over it. My father said, “It is the *Kemawi*.” I got that now! I also almost got what it meant to explode a field of oil. I then, started to realize the danger of the *Kemawi*.

My sister’s and I were not passive. We learned that Saddam Hussain was a dictator and a criminal. Thus, my sister and I trained ourselves on ways we could defend ourselves and attack the soldiers in case Saddam entered our home.

What I liked about those days is that sometimes we would stay up at our dad’s friend’s home if we hear the warning siren. Even though we seemed to understand that the world is not a safe place from an early age, and that Saddam was a dictator who could kill us at any time, what we did not realize was that even if war did not kill us right then, it had the ability to bring our demise later.

### **Travelling to Syria, Visiting Lady Zainab**

The war ended, and we decided to travel to spend a few weeks of the summer break in Syria. The kids needed passports, so my mom took us to a photographer in our hometown. I had few childhood pictures, and I lost a lot of these few pictures. My mom said that my dad got excited when he had his first girl, Nada, so he bought a new camera and took pictures of her. However, by the time I was born, the camera got broken, that is why I almost did not have any pictures.

In the first passport's picture, we are all really cute. I think I was delighted in the photo for two reasons: first, I was going to travel somewhere for the first time; and second, the photographer told my mom I needed to wear Hijab for the passport picture. The photographer went inside the room for a while and came back with a black scarf. Few moment later, she captured this unique moment.

**Figure 3.1** *First Passport Picture*



The first time we went to Syria, we travelled by bus. Some of our extended family were with us, and other folk had preceded us. When we arrived to Syria, the first feelings

following the scene was unforgettable. We got out of the bus. It was late night or early morning. It was cold, but the scene warms the heart and feelings. When I sent my eyes to the horizon, I saw pretty and soft lights, minarets, and a golden dome. It was Lady Zainab mosque, or to be accurate: this is where she sleeps peacefully. Visiting Lady Zainab's shrine deepened my attachment to her, especially after I read two books about her life upon returning home.

We arrived to a house with some of our relatives, including my grandmother and my aunt. I was a polite kid most of the time, though I was a scientist. An idea came to my mind after I opened the refrigerator. I found eggs there were different than eggs I used to see at my home country. They were brown. I had not had a new chick since we lost the little one to the cat. I decided to protect one of these eggs and grow a new chick. I took an egg and placed it behind a broken door. Nobody would eat it now. How could I make sure that the chick would have a proper environment? I brought a sock and put it over it as if it were its mother chicken sitting over it, warming it. How could the chick know the sock was not his mom?

I waited, and waited, and waited, but the chick never emerged. It was not the only project that did not thrive. We had another school project where we were supposed to grow plants from seeds. The teacher asked us to put some beans in a plastic plate of either soil or cotton and bring the plate to the classroom. We need to water our plate daily, so that the bean will grow into a plant. I wanted to put my beans in cotton. It looked soft and pure. My mom helped me by offering me the material I needed. Though, I saw other students' plants growing up amazingly, my plant never emerged. New little feelings of

doubt grew in its place—doubt in myself and guilt for not watering my plant properly.

These feelings emerged in my heart and grew later in life.

***To a World of Endless Imagination, Musical Words, and Singing Birds***

*Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

*One of our most exciting times is when we travel to Bahrain with family's friends. Older kids tell me that soon our car will go up on the bridge. When we arrive, we go to restaurants, visit parks, a traditional museum, and a swimming pool. We also visit an open Iranian Market with a variety of stores. It is evening now, and everyone is tired after a long day of touring. My family enters a store where we find two little dolls hanging near the ceiling. They look pretty. Dad asks the seller to bring them down*

When the man brought them to us, we discovered that one of them had a defect. Her head is tilted a little bit toward her neck. My sister got the normal doll. We asked them if they have another doll. They said it was the last one. They gave it to me. Her neck was crooked, they convinced me, because she was singing. I liked the idea.

When turned eight years old, my uncle asked me to write some poetry. A few verses about Lady Fatimah. He said he read something by me before and liked what I had written. It was true. I had written something and threw the paper at my grandfather's home. I picked the pen and wrote a few lines. He came out, read it, and took the paper to the *majles* where men set. When we left home, in our way to the car, I heard my father

talking to my mother about my poetry. He said: “When he read it to me, I thought her poetry had been written by an adult.”

### **The Balloon Surgery**

When I turned ten, I traveled with my parents to Riyadh to have the third Balloon operation. I think I had it twice before this time. I understood in my early childhood that I had a heart issue because whenever we visited the park museum, my dad wouldn't allow me to get play certain games.

In fact, they allowed me once to try a game: the giant nice green octopus. I was younger than seven, I think. I insisted I wanted to try it, and my parents accepted my request after my dad's friend offered to protect me. Riders would sit in little cars at the ends of the octopus's tentacles. When it started, the giant octopus raised its limbs to the sky. It looked cool. I wanted to try it.

I sat in one of its tall arms, excited with my dad's friend. However, my happiness did not last long. Once the octopus started, it acted wildly. It was moving its hands high, quickly and aggressively, shaking us, as if we were willing to throw us. It moved in every direction in a random manner. Once you are in the air, no matter how much you cry, how high your voice is, no one seemed to be able to hear you or rescue you.

I felt pain because my body was moving randomly with the wild quick movements, slipping right and left, hitting something, or tossed with each movement. Looking how far from the ground we were, it was easy to realize that I could fall anytime to the ground and die. My dad's friend tried to calm me down.

Before that, I did not understand why we went to Riyadh. I loved getting on the airplane, looking at the cloudy sky, and listening to my mother's stories that she would read from a little book. I felt happy that I was the only child in the apartment, and I could eat as much as I wanted without being asked to stop! What I did not know was that those candies were mine because I was sick.

At the age of ten, I quietly understood this operation, and knew that if it did not go well, I would need an open-heart surgery. At the night prior to the operation, my father was with me at the room, explaining to me how easy it would be.

I was absent from school for three days. When I returned to school, my teacher asked me why I was absent. She also asked me if I had a "hole in my heart" as a student said. My dad never mentioned a hole to me! The rumors spread and it hurt. One of my friends told me that her father always compared her to me, saying, "look at Alaa, she is sick. She has a heart issue, but she is excellent student at school." When she said that, I had mixed feelings. I was proud, but also hurt. I was proud that her father had chosen me as an example of an excellent student, but I also felt sad for myself.

When my brother "Ahmed" was born, I was ten. My mother, along with my aunt, who also happened to have a baby boy, entered a gloomy depression. I had to start depending on myself on many tasks. I hated those times when my mother would have to go to visit the clinic. The hospital was located outside of our town. We would need to stay at one of our relatives' houses every time they go to the hospital. I preferred my grandmother's home, but we had to stay at our uncle's home a couple of times.



My uncle has a daughter who is my sister's age. Although they were nice to us, I didn't like to go there. I was attached to my mom and did not feel secure when she went to the appointments. There was one thing I loved about going to my uncle's home: he had a library, with so many books. I once told his wife about how I liked the library. I wanted to borrow some of his books, but according to her, he said if I want to read something, I am welcome any time to come to his home and read whatever I want to read.

My uncle, who had a master's degree, was not only interested in owning books in a variety of topics, but he was savvy in electronic devices. He was the one I consulted to get my first camera after the Eid where received enough money to buy one.

I learned that my mom got depressed shortly after my aunt, Huda. I heard that my aunt first thought that led her to post-natal depression was "if I passed away, who is going to look after my infant?" Did this idea seemed reasonable to my mother so that she slipped in other dark ideas? Did they scare each other and deepen their fears by talking about the topic? What other ideas and beliefs made them depressed? They had not only to visit hospitals to discuss their concerns, they also visited religious men.

I woke up once, and my mother was not home. Mustafa's mother was in our home taking care of us. She once told my mother that it could be "jinn" who caused her depression. Both my gramma and Mustafa's mother thought it could be an "eye."—that some people could have a strong or hot eye. When they liked something and did not mention God's name, they could cause harm to the person, especially if they envied them. Mustafa's mother suggested to scare him by a sudden loud voice.

After my mom started taking medications for a while, her concerns became when she would be able to quit them. When I heard it would be only two more weeks, I felt very happy. Worries of death found their ways to me. Each night, in the darkness, I was scared of sudden death, as if there was a correlation between death, darkness, and night. All of them seemed scary because of the unknown aspect of them. We fear what we do not know. It is a legitimate and reasonable fear. We also fear being lonely. To face her fears, my mother started some spiritual practices. She recited prayers every morning and taught me to recite them while she combed my hair before school. Her relationship with God became much stronger.

One of my joyful moments was when my mother recovered. How did I know that she recovered? She started to smile and play with her kids. We would do a circle holding each other hand singing “O flower, open” and we get far away from each other, making the circle wider, as if the flower had opened. “O flower, close,” we would get closer to each other as if the flower closed itself. I am certain that I felt secure and thrilled when my mom’s smile finally returned.

When turned twelve, I had a little sister with me at school. I was in sixth grade when Zahra became a first grader. Now, the task turned to me to care for a younger sister at school. For instance, when she wanted to come with me to my class, I would bring her with me.

### **School Life**

Elementary school staff and kids had some rituals and practices. One of those rituals is that some of the teachers would paste stars on our notebook if we did a good

job. They also used to give excellent students ribbons. Our uniforms used to be navy blue with white collars. If you are an excellent student, they would put a green one in your collar. When you become an outstanding student, you are entitled for a red one. It is an ecstatic moment for a child to stand before the teacher to receive one. However, sometimes, regardless of if you are an excellent student or not, teachers might punish an entire loud class. For instance, one day, our teacher was absent and another teacher came to substitute for her. We students were loud.

A teacher that I will call “B,” came to our class and punished us all. She asked each student to open both hands, and hit our hands by strong wooden ruler. It was one of the hardest moments to wait to be punished by the ruler. ‘*Areefa*’ is a status through which the class can be kept quite even if there was no teacher. If you are *Areefa*, you will stand in front of the class, and be responsible of writing loud students names on the board or in a piece of paper, so that the teacher can handle that later. I had first thought that such a status is a good one. Nada teased me because when I was eight, she heard me praying, asking God to be *Areefa*.

I discovered that this role was not like what it appeared to be when I was twelve. Once, I was practicing my role while our teacher was absent. I came up with an idea that we would review the book because the exams are coming. I wrote some students names on the board because they did not keep quiet. One of the administrators came and a student complained about me, claiming that I wrote her name differently. Well, I looked at the board, and it can be seen as she thought. Her name was “Warda” which means flower. However, over it there were two dots belonging to another student’s name which

was written on the upper line, which made her name to be written as “Qurda,” which means monkey. I realized then that Areefah status is not a good. Because, no matter how special it made you, ultimately students will dislike you.

### **Last Year of Elementary School**

*I am twelve years old. It is the first day of school. Luckily, I had one of my friends in this new class. I have never been in the same class with many of the other students here, or maybe most of our close friends were in another classroom. What is worse is that we found our teacher is B! She had long, straight black hair. B was a scary name based on my older sister stories and one of my past experiences. Her reputation was terrifying at least for me. I knew I could not stay at this class.*

What I heard seemed true. During the first class, she gave us an introduction about herself: how strict she was. She also said proudly that we might have heard about her previously. In my mind, I thought that I had no choice but to transfer from this class to another one. Well, there were a plenty of classes, three other classes. Any class we would go must has a nicer teacher than B. When I told teacher “B” about the fact that I want to transfer, she asked me to go to the principle room to tell her. Luckily, the principle, who was a wise mother-like principle was walking around, checking on each class and stepped by our classroom. When she came nearby, teacher B said, “Alaa! Ask the principle about what you want.”

I stood up and asked her, “We want to transfer to a new classroom.” The Principal answered, “No problem, take your stuff tomorrow to the classroom to which you want to transfer.” Our dream became true! She gave us a permission not only to change the class,

but to choose the class we wanted! We felt relief. Needless to say, we chose a classroom where most of our friends were, including my cousin Fatimah.

We also sat in the front chairs. However, teacher B maybe thought we were not going to move on even if the principal allowed us to do so. Knowing that the principal had a final word, we were brave enough to change our class. Teacher B came to our new classroom, threw a bag on my friend who transferred with me, and was setting next to me, stared at me and insulted my soul. I felt hurt, but did not say anything.

Destiny had another plan. We had to return to teacher B's class when our teacher's son had a surgery and she took a leave. However, this time, with our entire classroom as if we were refuges. Perhaps teacher B felt guilty about the way she treated me and my friend at the beginning of the school year. Thus, she assigned the task of looking after the students' homework to me. Because of my exceptional luck, I myself forgot her textbooks the next day.

I worried if I forgot my textbooks. When I was at the fifth grade, I forgot my Arabic language textbook. I went to my teacher who was standing writing on the board to tell her, and I was crying. She looked at me and said it was ok. At the end of the year, I got a nice gift from her. A rosy nice container that had school's instruments inside it.

Now, with B, I was not only sad, but fearful. I was the one who she assigned to look after my classmates' textbooks and homework. How could I forgot her class textbooks? I was frightened. I did not know what to do, and tears started falling. I had to tell her I was tired. My friend took me to her at the beginning of the class. She was

willing to help me, perhaps she was worried about what could happen next if I said I did not bring my books.

My friend: “Teacher, Alaa is feeling sick. She needs to go to the clinic.” She looked at me. Tears were still falling.

Teacher B: “Alaa, our lesson today is important, why don’t you try to stay here.”

Fearfully, I responded: “I cannot teacher! I cannot!”

Teacher B: “Ok, you can go.”

Holding my hand, my friend took me out of that classroom. I survived!

I lay down in that comfortable bed. The teacher who worked there brought me a sugary doughnut. I ate it, and slept. I got up when my friends came to wake me up because it was the end of the school day. It was time to go home!

### **The Bird in the Hat**

It was morning, and I was playing around the house. All of a sudden, I heard a strange sound behind me, something moving. I turned back only to see it was a little sparrow. A sparrow that learning to fly. It was a little sparrow that fell from a tree. I told my father about it. My father came and looked at it, he told me that the little sparrow was learning how to fly. I brought my younger sister’s hat, but it inside it. I thought I created a safe home for it. My father brought some milk and got the sparrow drink some of it. The sparrow threw up the milk and passed away.

## **The Ghost of Death**

During breaks from school, kids would join summer clubs. These clubs are found by activists in our community. They taught us different subjects. What was exciting for me as a kid were two things: there was a huge library, with many child magazines and books. They also arranged a variety of trips to the beach and some farms.

In one of our trips, I got to know the club's founder's sister. Her name is Qudseea, which means sacred. She helped in preparing the dinner that day. She was asking about someone who could wash the dishes. She was a fun woman.

A few months later, we were at my grandfather's home, when we heard the man calling people to go to the cemetery. At that time, this was the way people in the town learned that someone passed away. However, that man had a scary voice. When someone die, he would announce the death, and ask people to go to the funeral. I got scared, even terrified when I learned that the woman who died was Qudseea. She was returning home from the mosque at the evening. Crossing the street, a car hit her. Hearing about her death, I was shocked. I told my mother that I saw her. I know her. The death of Qudseea was preparing me to a much closer type of death.

My cousin Fatima's oldest sister was sick. Her name was Sawsan. In Arabic, Sawsan is a kind of flower. She had an issue when breathing. We went camping once, and I saw her sitting on a hill, struggling to breath. Sawsan had an operation at the capital city. She had not recovered. I remember our family criticizing the physicians, saying that her body became a field of experiments for them. It was night, when we heard the phone ringing. My aunt, Sawsan's mother, answered. I heard her saying: "really! They told you

she passed away?” She was shocked, confused. I got scared every time I heard a ringing phone for a while. A few moments later, we were at my aunt’s home. There was a big circle of crying women. I heard that one of Sawsan sister was holding a toddler. She dropped the toddler when she heard the bad news.

My aunt was sitting, crying, surrounded by other women. Two aesthetic moments happened that night. While women were crying, and I was watching, my mom took my head and laid me down in her lap. Embraced inside my mother’s “black Abaya,” I felt so safe that moment. The second was when it was time to sleep. My kind, bereaved aunt asked if we needed blankets to sleep. Even though she lost her 27-year-old daughter, she was worried about our blankets.

### **Life in Middle School and High School**

Transiting from elementary school to middle school was not easy. There were many new rules that we had to follow. Although the administrators were kind to call us “Mama” when they spoke to us—like they were our moms—the assistant principal was strict about student uniforms and hairstyles.

Once all the teachers had a meeting, so they left their room empty. All of a sudden, some girls entered and wreaked havoc in it. They even wrote “donkey’s room” on the door. I know someone who was challenged to open the bag of her favorite teacher, and she did so. She even used her perfume to demonstrate her braveness. There was an investigation later into the incident.



In high school, we had more freedom, as compared to the middle school. Students engaged in many religious arguments with teachers who taught religious studies, and made fun of some of the history we were taught.

The extent to which they had fun during classes depended on factors like the teacher age, and whether she was strict enough or not. We had a young miss who taught us history. The naughtiest student was sitting in the front of the class. She once asked her to point out the location of a certain city on the map. The map was on the board. The student moved with her desk until she arrived to the board. At the day when she was supposed to be observed, students decided that they are not going to participate at all.

I was shy compared to many other students. I was called “the angel” by my favorite teacher. Many of the students liked her that they would compete in order to clean the board in the beginning of her classes while nobody would volunteer to do so during other classes. She liked to analyze personalities. She was telling students about their characters. When it was my turn. She said: “Alaa, is a dreamy girl. She is an angel walking on the earth.”

The second year of the high school was hard, too. My sister Nada got married after she graduated from high school. Thus, I was adjusting to life without her in our home. It was not only me. One of my classmates also would come wiping her tears each morning because she was missing her sister for the same reason. When I was 17, someone proposed to me. I think his family saw me at my sister’s wedding and liked me. My mom told me, “I am going to tell them that you are still young to get engaged.” I agreed.

There was a student who claimed that she could read hands and make prophecies about our futures. We had fun taking turns to listen to her prophecies. When it was my turn, I sat near her. Holding my hand, she said that “I will marry someone who would love me, but I will have complicated issues!” What! Complicated issues! Why! Worrying about her words, I told my mom. I thought I forgot that girl’s words. Although her words have been buried in my mind since that time, they were not dead.

In the second year of high school, we had to choose between two tracks, either arts or science. The only subject offered in the art track I liked was poetry. The science track was known for excellent students. Our school was very small and filled with students who wanted to study science. That year, the school had to have a policy to select certain people who would be eligible to take science classes based on their GPAs. Many students who were not allowed to take a scientific track transferred to another schools.

However, we had a class that was called “feminine raising.” They taught us topics related to household tasks such as cooking and mothering. Some students in the new science class invented a new type of cake. We served all our dishes to the principal. Apparently, they did not know they would be asked to serve her. Our teacher, who did not like that small kitchen, sometimes left students after explaining the recipe and go out until the end of the class.

After they baked the cake, she asked them to serve the principal, and they were reluctant. The truth was that they baked a different kind of cake. They put Tide powder—laundry detergent!—rather than flour in the cake. It looked magnificent. They refused to take the poison cake to her. Otherwise, she would not be at school after that.

## **An Early Motherhood**

*Is solace anywhere more comforting than that in the arms of a sister?*

—Alice Walker

I knew that my mother's last pregnancy was unplanned because she was sad at first. When the doctors told her it was a boy, the family decided to name him Ali. They prepared for Ali's birthday by buying blue colored stuff. To our surprise, when my mom gave birth, it was a girl! Although my mind was set to believe that I will have a third brother, it was not hard to adjust to the idea of having a little sister.

Soon, I loved the new baby girl as if she were my own. I stayed up with her at night, and sang for her until she fell asleep. I would sometimes shower and dress her in the morning. Day after day, she became very attached to me. When she started walking, we would stand opening our arms to her, and say "hahla, hala" which means "hello, hello," and she would pass everyone else to come between my arms. I felt like little mom when Hawra' was born.

Before I got engaged, nine men proposed to me. In my second year of college, two men proposed—both of whom were relatives. I felt torn between the two of them. I consulted close friends. Some said I should follow my heart. Others said that feelings are not that important.

That summer break, we travelled to Malaysia. We were five families. During nights, women got together, ate snacks, and drank Turkish coffee. One of them claimed she was a fortunate teller. She claimed she could read coffee cups. Thus, every time women finished drinking their coffees, they gathered around her, ready and excited to let

her read their cups. She would ask them to make a wish, stare at each one's cup and read the future. I felt that what she said was based on some of her guesses and perceptions. She would get more information from the person who believed in her.

This fortune teller practiced this habit as a fun way to enjoy time with other women. However, there are fortune tellers who consider the practice their profession. I remember travelling to Egypt with my aunt's family. My aunt was in college back then. An old skinny fortune teller told my aunt, "You will fail in your final exams." She told my father he had a green car. Our car was green. She took three of his gray hairs and told him other worrying stuff. I remember that my mom said that he was not able to sleep that night. She asked for money because it was her profession. My aunt was mad at her because she predicted that she was going to fail her exams, so she refused to pay her. The fortune teller threatened my aunt that she either pay, or she would let her return home crawling on her stomach.

### **Life in Bellingham**

*I am in the bus, returning from school. My head is leaning on the window. My eyes look through it while my mind swims in the ocean of thoughts and memories, questioning the reality.*

Within two months of getting married, I left with my partner to Seattle area, particularly, to Bellingham. The night I left was special. My family was with me in the airport. When it was time to depart and say goodbye, Hawra', who was 4 years old, I think, started crying and screaming. My other sisters were shedding tears, too.

We headed from Seattle airport to Bellingham. I loved everything about Bellingham: the forests, the ocean, the mountains, and the very friendly people. It was a heavenly and nicely quiet piece of earth. I attended WWU English institution to study English. I liked our new life in the States. There was only one other Saudi girl in the institution. At that time, most students were Korean.

I woke up once, missing my little sister. I went out from the bedroom to the living room. I sat on the floor, I thought about her beautiful eyes, and her innocent smile and broke into tears. I felt emotionally overwhelmed, and wrote a letter for her, posted it the next day in a social media platform.

When she started writing, she wrote letters to me. My mom would take a picture of them, and I would read them via the screen. Sometimes, I would wake up, to find that she left messages for me, like “I love you.”

After he got his master's degree, my husband got an internship. I returned to my home country by myself. It was wonderful to be home again. My family was waiting for me with flowers and gifts. We travelled for tourism together. I liked how my little sister got more and more attached to me. We were four families who travelled that year together. If Hawra' happened to be in a car that I was not in, she would ask them to stop in order to join me. My aunt once said, “maybe she thinks you are her mom.”

**Figure 3.2** *Hawra' in Indonesia*



After returning home, I slept once with Hawra' on the same bed only to wake up feeling that her lips are on the back of my hand. She was kissing my hand when I was sleeping. I looked at her wonderful deep eyes, smiled, and I returned to sleep peacefully.

### **The Way of Hardships**

*You are not the darkness you endured, you are the light that refused to surrender*

—John Mark Green.

I returned to the States and pursued a master's degree. I was very busy with school. I was diagnosed with a benign tumor that caused me extreme pain, and I had to have it removed. While in the hospital, I dreamed of having a baby girl and entering the hospital for such a reason. I bought a red dress I liked, and hung it where I study as a reminder of my other dream in life: mothering a baby girl. Years passed, and I did not get pregnant. I thought, regardless of my circumstances, I will get pregnant just like any other lady.

A baby girl seemed a good inspiration that could motivate me to overcome my fears. I heard about certain diets women could maintain so that they get pregnant with a baby girl. I made an appointment in the university clinic to consult a nutrition professional. I think she was around 60 years old. When she heard my desire, she did not approve it. She suggested me to forget about these diets and gave me wise advice, “the most important thing is to have a healthy baby.” Thus, she decided to write down a healthy balanced diet for me. For me, her diet program was impossible to follow given my extremely busy schedule. At that time, I barely find a break to eat.

I took her suggested diet paper politely, thanked her, and went home. After almost five years of being married, I got pregnant! My whole family was happy for me. My younger sister and my sister-in-law were both pregnant. My brother, Mohammed, said to the three of us “Alaa’s baby would be really beautiful.” In the third month of my pregnancy, the doctor told me, “the baby looks a girl, but we have to wait until the fifth month in order to confirm that.” She also prescribed vitamins, calcium pills, and folic acid. The worst part of the pregnancy was the morning sickness. However, I was in the peak of my strength, health, and beauty.

At first, we did not announce that I was pregnant. Most pregnant women announced their pregnancy after the first trimester. There are others who would keep that secret until you notice their bodies or hear about them. The reason behind not announcing pregnancy could be related to fear from what is called “the hot eye.”

After the third month, I ate so much that even my mom noticed. I would justify it by saying I am eating for two. It was hard to feel full. I also became obsessed about

watermelon. If I went to my parents' home and found the fridge empty of it, I would order a new one. I did not take the vitamins in a daily basis, and I intentionally avoided the calcium sometimes because it was hard on my stomach. Once during my pregnancy, I became full of fear and worry about becoming a mother. I cried. I was aware that mother's sadness and emotions could affect the baby's health, though I allowed myself to cry.

It was not that I was not happy. No, I was dreaming of having a baby. But I also had worries. I used to stay up, window shopping online at nights, making a favorite list of outfits I liked so that I am ready to buy them once the baby's gender was confirmed.

### **A Nightmare, or What?**

*I cannot wait to enter the fifth month. The hospital is located near a big mall in the city. My plan is that I will go straight from the hospital to the mall and enjoy shopping for the baby. I am so excited. Finally, it is time to see the baby on a 3-D screen. We are inside a dark cold room with Doctor Rana, who started using the ultra sound.*

“She is a girl,” the doctor confirmed the baby's gender, and my heart danced with joy. The doctor added “Look at her little hand, she is waving at you, she is saying, ‘Hello, mama!’” I looked at the screen, and I saw a beautiful golden hand. I smiled in contentment. The doctor took a long time screening me, and I was impatient to go to the mall. She asked me again about how long I had been pregnant. She called in another doctor, and they began talking about something I didn't quite understand.

She patted on my shoulder and asked me to follow the consultant to his room, “He is going to explain everything,” and she left. I was shocked. My husband went right away



with him. I went out of the room, feeling dizzy and lost, as if the world is moving like that octopus—except that I could not scream. I tried to maintain my composure and act ladylike. However, tears started falling as I navigated my way to the consultant office.

At the consultant office, I learned about hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS) for the first time. I was told I would need surgery, and that I needed to give birth in a major hospital in Riyadh. In the car, my husband and I cried. That night, if I slept, I slept with tears and a broken heart. The bed was filled with tissues the next morning.

The next day, I had planned to take a trip with some of my high school friends that I had not seen for a long time. I was one of those who arranged it, so I felt it would be inappropriate not to go. I took my camera, and went to the farm. They noticed that I was sad. I told them about my baby's illness.

I had promised one of them that I would take pictures of her little child, so I went with her to swimming pool. My friend's sister, who was in the pool, begged me to come and swim. I did not want to, because, unconsciously, I preferred to swim somewhere else. I wanted to swim in negativity that flooded and flooded until it covered my ears. I wanted to soak in self-criticism.

### **Between Hopes and Worries**

During later appointments, the doctors told me that the heart appeared normal, or couldn't be really seen. They were not sure if the baby had HLHS. Everything would be clear after I gave birth and they conducted an X-ray. A sense of hope grew inside my heart. I remember my mom saying that the doctor thought I had a complicated heart

problem when I was born, but then it appeared that I only had a tight artery. I thought, the first diagnosis could be wrong.

Concerning the heart issue, it seemed easy after I learned that there was a probability that the child would have Down Syndrome. There is a considerable correlation between HLHS and Down Syndrome. It is possible to determine whether the baby could have Down Syndrome by testing the amniotic fluid surrounding the baby.

During a hospital's visit to Riyadh, I had an ultrasound screening, when doctors in residency seemed very excited to discern an issue in my baby's heart—as if they made a new discovery. They appeared very proud to name it to their senior doctor. Either they did not realize that I understood English, were grossly lacking in empathy, or just ignorant of how their discovery translated to my suffering.

In the doctor's office, she explained that the baby can live normally as long as she is inside my body, "Once she is born, she will need a surgery." She also explained the probability of having Down Syndrome, and the procedures of the testing. If the baby had Down Syndrome, then we have the choice not to make the surgery and the baby will die naturally shortly after birth. According to her, "if the child is 'expired', then you can leave her without treatment after birth, and she will die naturally." The word 'expired' seemed to be used to justify letting the baby die and minimize feeling of guilt. It was dehumanizing and professional.

The idea that I could be raising a child suffering from Down syndrome was scary for me. My fears escalated, and I faced an ethical dilemma. When I told my sister about

the doctor's opinion, she said that the baby has a soul, meaning that I should try to save her life as much as possible regardless of what illness she had.

When the appointment came, I was very nervous. They inserted a needle to take some of the amniotic fluid and test it. Then, when it was time to get the result, the doctor played with our emotions for a while, pretending she was sad. Her facial expressions changed to happiness when she finally announced that the baby didn't have Down syndrome! I was relieved.

Months passed, and I adapted to the new reality of the baby's illness. In fact, I was glad the baby does not have another issue. One day, I felt the baby move her hand, that golden hand I once saw through the 3-D ultrasound screen. She was moving her hand softly inside my womb, as if she was treating the wound where the needle was inserted, or as if she was saying "don't be sad, mom."

My brother in law, a religious man, told me to read certain verses of The Holy Quran in hopes that the baby would be normal. I did it. It was the end of the month of Ramadan when I started having pain on my back. It was the ninth month of my pregnancy. I visited the doctor, who recommended I leave for the capital city because I could be in labor at any time. I don't remember if we packed our stuff or not. We headed to the capital and rented a hotel room.

After a week, I could not tolerate the pain anymore, so we went to the hospital. I was messaging some of my friends, asking about their labor experiences when a nurse came to me asking to follow her for my room. I arrived to my room. I felt thirsty, so I

asked the nurse if she could get me some water. She pointed to a tap “you can drink from there” and she left.

The next morning, I had an extreme pain that felt like my back was dividing into two parts. I decided that I should take the Epidural. I was also not confident in my ability to give birth. I had to go through an unimaginable pain, until I was allowed to have the Epidural. The doctor was trying to explain the side effects of it, while I was terrified of the waves of the intolerable pain, begging him just to insert the needle in my back.

Shortly thereafter, I gave birth. We named her Leen. Before they handed her to me, she was moving her eyes until she found me. Her eyes settled on me. I felt she was looking for me. I held her, kissed her cheek; I noticed that her lips were not pink. They were bluish. They took her from me to the x-ray room. I told the nurse that her lips seemed bluish, and she nodded her head as if she was agreed.

When I was in my room, my partner came and informed me that the baby indeed had HLHS, and she needed an open-heart surgery. My heart broke, and I cried again that night. I felt sad because my baby’s delicate body will be distorted by a surgery. It hurt me to see how she was breathing fast and not comfortable. I felt I was the one who brought her to the world of suffering. I thought a lot about my new responsibilities, and how I would be able to meet them and look after my child. Was she going to live normally? Play normally? How about taking medications on time? I felt afraid how I would be able to raise her. I was a sad, frightened mother.

My partner was not allowed to stay with me because it was a ladies’ department. Being far away from our city, I was alone at night. I used to visit Leen at midnight when

she was sleeping. I would sit near her and put my finger inside her closed hand. A doctor saw me and told me I should get enough sleep. I woke up once, browsed my cellphone, and read some sad news. My grandfather had passed away that morning!

That night, I woke up feeling as if my heart stopped beating. I called the nurses and told them. Two of them came and measured my blood pressure. They found I had a very high blood pressure. Looking at the device, one of them told the other one, "It is unusual for someone at her age." I felt worried, and I tried to have a conversation with them. One of them just got mad at me, and said, "There is nothing we can do for you now!" They left without another word. I was in darkness, broken, with my sadness and fears. One of them returned after only a few moments to find me crying. She hugged me and apologized about her peer's mistreatment.

"Don't worry; you will be fine. I don't know why she said that!" There was also another Saudi doctor who was compassionate and asked me if I might have someone from my family be with me during this difficult time.

Doctors were able to have the high blood pressure under control after several days by some medications, though, I think it caused me to have a fast heart rate. I felt that my heart was not beating normally. I felt its movement inside my chest, and it was uncomfortable.

When I returned home from Riyadh, my mom slept in my room. One night, all of a sudden, I woke up with my heart racing like a fast train. I thought it was the end of my life. I thought it would stop beating, and I would die. But it slowed down again. Complaining about the fast heart rate to another doctor, he prescribed a certain

medication. I used it. It changed how I experienced the fast heart rate. It still raced, but I didn't feel it was so difficult anymore.

After two months of being hospitalized, my baby, Leen, got a deadly infection at the hospital. I was told it was only a matter of time before she would pass away. Later that day, I felt something move inside my heart. I told my sister.

That evening, my dad came and asked me to sit down. He told me that my baby had passed away. I turned to Nada and said, "Didn't I tell you I felt my heart stop?" Although it was expected that Leen would pass away that day, it felt strange and hard. I cried.

*The End:*

There was a bird, a little sparrow,

That all of a sudden, fell from the sky!

It was trying to learn how to fly!

I sat near it, on my knee.

I put it into a hat, on a branch of a tree.

In a secret nest, a secret garden, that no one can notice or even see.

We fed it, but the bird, turned into an angel.

With soft wings, soaring so high. Toward the sky

Because it belongs to heaven, and to heaven, it wanted to fly.

## Chapter Four: Art-Based Activities for Baby Loss and Compassion

*I paint flowers so they will not die*

– Mirko Ilic

*I know that I had a dream that transformed into a nightmare.  
I know that I had to walk lonely on paths with no body to share.  
I long for people and times that I cannot get back.  
I know life seems sometimes black and dark.  
You long for them, you hear ‘move on’, ‘don’t look back’  
Alaa*

Like me, bereaved individuals often experience heavy emotions resulting from longing for the lost person. Aside from heightened emotions and yearning for the deceased, mourning individuals might suffer from symptoms of depression, anxiety, and cognitive disorganization (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018). Such symptoms are collectively identified as negative symptoms of the grief and “can catalyze a myriad of functional complications, including decreased academic performance, job productivity, and quality of life” (Weiskittle, & Gramling, 2018, p. 9).

### **Baby Loss and Child Loss**

One of the most difficult losses is the loss of a child. It is unnatural and thus makes no sense (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 30). Further, a sense of failure, powerlessness for not being able to save the child from harm, and guilt for being alive while the child is dead all impact the parent’s identity, challenging their role and lowering self-esteem (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 30).

Thus, parental loss is different than other losses. Feelings of anger, guilt, separation pain, longing, sadness, deprivation, and loss-of identity are more intense, making it hard to face life (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 30). The survivor struggle is to forgive self or others. Unresolved guilt and regret can be difficult to work through. The words, *if only I had or had not...if only he or she had or had not...I wish...* run constantly through the mind (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 30). It is a loss of “very special love source—someone who needs, depends upon, admires, and appreciates you in a unique and gratifying way” (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 30).

## **The Reconstruction-model as a Theoretical Framework**

### ***The Theory and Meaning-making***

Niemeyer’s model suggests that grieving can be depicted as a process of reconstructing a world of meaning that has been challenged by the loss. The loss of a relationships with the intimate deceased is a loss of a source of shared memories and even identity (Neimeyer, 2000, p, 552). Viewed through this theoretical lens, the death of a loved one can undermine the basic storyline of our lives, leaving us with attempts to make sense of the suffering and questioning who we are after the loss (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 12).

Further, meaning making in its different forms is considered a coping resource that is associated with positive healing outcomes in many populations (Thompson, & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 12). Neimeyer’s model not only does advocate that meaning making is a part of grief, but also does emphasize that meaning-reconstruction is the focus (Lister, Pushkar, & Connolly, 2008, p. 249). According to him, scholarship findings carry



important implications for grief therapy, suggesting that a quest for meaning plays a *central role in grieving* (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 549).

### ***Reconstructing the Continuing Bonds***

Niemeyer's model encourages the bereaved person to find ways through which he or she can integrate the deceased person into the bereaved person's life (Lister et al., 2008). Reintegration efforts can lead to growth and finding meaning (Lister et al., 2008). Thus, Niemeyer along with other scholars believes that continuing bonds with the loved one rather than breaking them can be an element of healthy grieving (Neimeyer, 2010). However, current scholarship has suggested that reorganizing a continuous sense of attachment to the loved ones can be rigorous process (Neimeyer, 2010).

One way to begin the process of meaning-reconstruction is to "refocus the emotional tie into a bond that acknowledge the separation but symbolically represent the time together" (Lister et al., 2008, p. 249). Assisting the bereaved to transform the relationship to the deceased from concrete to symbolic is a unique goal for grief therapy (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 547). For instance, a useful intervention could be through some form of guided encounter with the symbolic "presence" or the memory of the deceased such as through drafting letters to the loved one (Neimeyer, 2010, p. 69). The literature indicates that visual-art therapeutic application is tied to positive changes. Art can facilitate meaning-making and continuing bonds with the deceased (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018).

### ***Meaning-making Model Approach and Expressive Arts***

A constructivist theory of bereavement suggests that grieving involves an active effort to reconstruct a world of meaning that has been shattered or challenged by the loss

(Neimeyer, 2010). The meaning reconstruction model is considered an approach to grief therapy. People who are able to find meaning, make sense of the loss, or find some benefits or life lessons adapt better (Neimeyer, 2019, p. 81).

The model encourages grievers to focus on two key dimensions to grapple with the burden of loss. The first one focuses on *processing the event story of the death* so that one can make sense of it and its impacts. The second one concerns *accessing the back story of the relationship* with the deceased to restore a sense of attachment security (Neimeyer, 2019). To address these two main objectives, we can rely on the techniques of expressive arts modalities (Neimeyer, 2019).

Although Niemeyer (2019) is not an art therapist, he advocates for creative engagement with grief arguing that poetry, visual art and journaling can be effective ways to communicate feelings, especially those that words cannot fully capture. Expressive art techniques have many therapeutic applications for grievers. They are perfect to externalize the problem and separate the bereaved person from the problem. In fact, Niemeyer (2010) argued that research has documented bereaved-therapist exchanges that are high in the use of imagery and metaphor are “far better recalled by bereaved” people than are prosaic rational exchanges and that such images play a significant role in the therapeutic progress (Neimeyer, 2010, p. 73) According to Lister et al. (2008), “many of our constructions of reality, including our emotions, are verbally inexpressible and thus, are not amenable to logical articulation” (p. 247).

Unlike traditional grief theories, the meaning-reconstruction model believes that there is no linear path for grief (Lister et al., 2008). There is no magical year after which

bereavement ends; rather, bereavement is a life time of reworking the death, the bereaved identity, and the relationship (Lister et al., 2008). Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) argue that with the emergence of modern theories of grief such as the constructivism theory, creative processes evolved as a type of grief therapy to help people find new meaning and orientation in the experience of loss.

In the constructivist theory's perspective, people are considered meaning makers (Neimeyer, 2010). Neimeyer (2010) emphasized that grieving is something we do, rather something done to us, highlighting the fact that there are always choices in how to respond either through denying or engaging through "grief work".

#### ***Further Justification for Artistic Techniques***

One needs to restore and develop healthy ways to overcome and tolerate distress and pain of the trauma (Hornbeck, 2004). Dewey placed art at the center of the development of the self, insofar as art is an exemplary form of experience that optimizes our sense of meaning (Roald & Lang, 2013, p. 15). Neimeyer's (2010) model describes grieving as a process of reforming a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss. In this constructivist-rooted perspective, people "create and maintain a system of beliefs that permit them to anticipate and respond to their surroundings" (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 10). Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) "have recently published a clinical manual containing more than fifty expressive art interventions suggested for bereaved individuals" (Weiskittle, & Gramling, 2018).

Across cultures, funeral rituals of mourning and grief tend to employ visual art to express love, loss, and remembrance (Weiskittle, & Gramling, 2018, p. 21). Additionally,

families and communities of the deceased often create visual memorials for documentation, remembrance, and healing (Weiskittle, & Gramling, 2018). While memories in the early stages of grief can be a bittersweet reminder of what one's lost rather than of what we still have, later in the grieving process, memories can be comforting (Hornbeck, 2004). However, the effectiveness of implementing expressive art practices with the bereaved has been only recently studied in certain populations. Thus, I attempted to study the impact of using art practices on my own experience for achieving some of the following objectives:

### **Overall Objectives of Expressive Art Activities**

In this chapter, I offer several expressive art activities I've undergone to evaluate the process of engaging in them, and to explore their efficacy in facilitating healing and meaning making. Whether the activities listed in this chapter are from my own design, or borrowed from others, they were selected to serve specific purpose.

Some of these activities were selected to express love, enhance the connection between the bereaved individual and the deceased person through utilizing items onto which we hold to remember the loved ones. Nancy et al. note, "The spontaneous creation of art, poetry, and performance offers a way to memorialize the relationship with the deceased and facilitate continuing bonds" (p. 11). A type of art that can be used for remembrance, honoring and expression of love is photography and memorabilia:

A photo in your wallet, a trinket in your pocket, words you speak in the morning, a song you listen to every night, a shirt hanging in your closet, a message on the answering machine – if you think holding onto these things make you pathological, think again. These aren't the pathetic acts of someone who can't let go and they're not the symptoms of a person gone mad; these simple objects, small gestures and everyday routines are how we continue to live life surrounded

by our loved ones and how we continue to say *I love you* long after a person has gone. (Haley, 2014)

Other objectives are to facilitate processing the experience and making sense of it. Inspired by Dr. Erin Willer's way of writing the chapter "At a Loss For/words Studio: Practicing the Art of Mad Grief," I used a similar approach of structuring and describing the art activities, including "Supply", "Make", and "Collectively engage" through sharing the products with my audience, allowing myself to witness, and critically reflecting on my experience of making some of these activities on the last chapter of the dissertation (Willer, in press). Furthermore, I selected Islamic calligraphy of a verse to incorporate my belief system to serve the need for making sense as a form of spiritual care.

What is more is that engaging in making art can enhance the sense of self and help to reframe the identity. Roald and Lang (2013) maintain that the self is not a thing; rather, it is a dynamic experiential process. Thus, someone's identity could be tied to his or her experience of art. According to Roald and Lang (2013), the self "can be dramatically influenced by art, which is a culmination of intensified, unified, and harmonized experience" (p. 15).

Aside from identity reconstruction, this chapter also sheds light on the benefits of a different type of activities, such as is coloring. Coloring aids meditation. Although coloring therapy does not encompass all elements of either art therapy or meditation, it may help encourage a state of deep engagement brought about through artistic expression and thus may help to decrease experiences of anxiety (Nancy et al., 2005, p. 81). Meditation, cultivating mindful compassion, awareness, and anxiety reduction are all

believed to be beneficial influences of coloring. However, “coloring therapy has not been empirically tested or widely discussed in scholarly discourse” (Nancy et al., 2005, p. 81).

In summary, these objectives involve: (a) providing a safe and empathetic space to express emotions and share experiences of grief; (b) offering an opportunity to honor, reconnect, and acknowledge the baby as a person; (c) providing an opportunity to reconstruct the identity and reframe the self-concept; (d) making sense and find meanings from the experience of loss; (e) providing an opportunity to redirect thoughts, relax, and meditate; and (f) providing an opportunity to evaluate the effect of engaging in these activities.

### ***Compassion-focused Art Therapy Based on the ONEBird Model***

Buddhism defines compassion as “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others, with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it” (Haeyen, 2020, p. 1). Neff established that being mindful, friendly, nonjudgmental and open to your suffering are some important elements of compassion (Haeyen & Heijman, 2020). Compassion is considered a universal human characteristic. Though, it needs an effort to be cultivated since developing its aspects does not come naturally (Haeyen & Heijman, 2020). Thus, Psychologist professor Paul Gilbert designed Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT), which aims at developing safety, inner warmth, and soothing through compassion.

### **The ONEBird Model**

The OneBird model provides a theoretical ground that supports for the integration of mindful self-compassion with art intervention, establishing that creativity can be a

means for enhancing the acquisition of self-compassion skills and resources (Williams, 2018).

The ONEBird model relies on the metaphor of a bird to depict the elements of compassion, mindfulness, and creativity. Compassion and mindfulness are represented by the two wings of a bird while creativity is represented by the bird's symbolic heart. The integration involves verbal processing of the visuals and the process experience.

Rooted in the integrative approach of the ONEBird model and inspired by scholarly and empirically validated methods developed by pioneers in their fields—such as Neimeyer, Neff, and Gilbert's CFT protocol—a special set of art activities were planned, selected, or designed to integrate concepts of mindfulness and compassion in order to achieve the following objectives:

1. **Exploring emotions in the present moment mindfully:** Experiencing emotions with focused attention in the present moment mindfully can be achieved through learning mindfulness skills and its non-judgmental-nature. Practicing focused attention such as in the case of coloring mandalas can provide an access to inner wisdom leading to more self-compassion and decreased in criticism, stress and depression (Haeyen & Heijman, 2020).
2. **To regulate the emotions constructively:** I aimed to develop compassionate art practices based on leading theoretical foundations in order to strengthening compassion skills and compact feelings of shame and worthlessness (Williams, 2018). A key rationale for compassion-focused art practices is to enable the person to express emotions and handle them in a direction that is

constructive, soothing, helping, and reassuring (Williams, 2018). Guided imagery can be used in art practices to improve the mood and foster healing since the mental images can have the same effect of real images (Williams, 2018). The griever use artwork that resonate with his or her calming inner-feelings and make them visible.

3. **To improve compassion and self-compassion skills:** Although it is not the people's fault that his mind is dominated by the threat system, it is their responsibility to change it (Williams, 2018). Compassion can mean facing the self-criticism seriously (Haeyen & Heijman, 2020). When suffering become visible in papers, it can be regulated. For instance, compassion can be increased through linking it to materials and silencing the self-critical side ( Haeyen & Heijman, 2020). The person can be self-observing and self-accepting instead of being self-critical through using compassion skills to reassure, protect and sooth themselves (Haeyen & Heijman, 2020). Themes of compassion can be integrated through means of guided imagery assignments such as imagining and depicting the ideal compassionate self.

Informed by Neimeyer's approach and grounded on his contributions to the field of grief therapy, along with the ONEBird model and a few other empirically based methods, I offer the following artistic practices. I used the following artistic inquiry along with my autoethnographic account as a method of research itself to find new meanings in my experience and to address the impact of expressive art and compassion to answer the following research questions:



RQ1: What meanings emerged through writing the constructed life narrative writing about my experience as a Saudi Arabian woman who has been through baby loss?

RQ2: What meanings emerged through art –making about my experience as a Saudi Arabian woman who has been through baby loss?

RQ3: How do compassion and art facilitated my healing as a Saudi Arabian woman who has been through baby loss?

To answer the two research questions, in addition to writing the constructed life narrative, I performed art practices and provided examples of the experience of artmaking in an effort to determine meanings gained from my baby loss experiences. Adams et al. (2021) note, “For meaning-making, an important preparatory activity begins with reviewing data holistically. Reviewing may mean reading textual data, examining art crafts, and listening to and watching recording” (p.116).

To answer the third research question, I will rely on the exciting literature as well as my experience of art creation taking a theoretically grounded approach to prove my argument that arts and compassion are two essential forces that facilitate the healing processes.

### **Activity 1: Calligraphy**

#### ***Part 1: Calligraphy about loss***

**Purpose:** To process the loss and make sense of its experience.

**Supplies:**

- A personal computer

- A software containing different types of Islamic fonts such as Photoshop, Illustrator, or Word.
- Books containing Quranic verses, poetry, or traditional sayings related to grief and loss.

**Instructions:** Look for inspiring and calming verses in your culture related to the topic of loss or death. Use a software or a calligraphy application to *make* an Islamic calligraphy to re-write the verse. You can use any religious or spiritual sources such as the holy Quran, the Bible, a poetic volume for a well-known poet, or words from empowering quotes written in social media platforms. *Share* your work with an audience and explain what the verse means in English. Print it out and hang it so that you can see it in a daily basis as a reminder of the importance of extending compassion and kindness to the self.

**Share:** Share the result and reflect on its meaning with the audience through answering the following prompt:

- “The reason why I selected this specific verse because...”
- “The way I interpret the verse is...”
- “Meditating in the verses meaning can foster compassionate feeling toward the self because...”



**Supplies:**

- A personal computer
- A software containing different types of Islamic fonts such as Photoshop, Illustrator, or Word.
- Books containing Quranic verses, poetry, or traditional sayings related to grief and compassion.

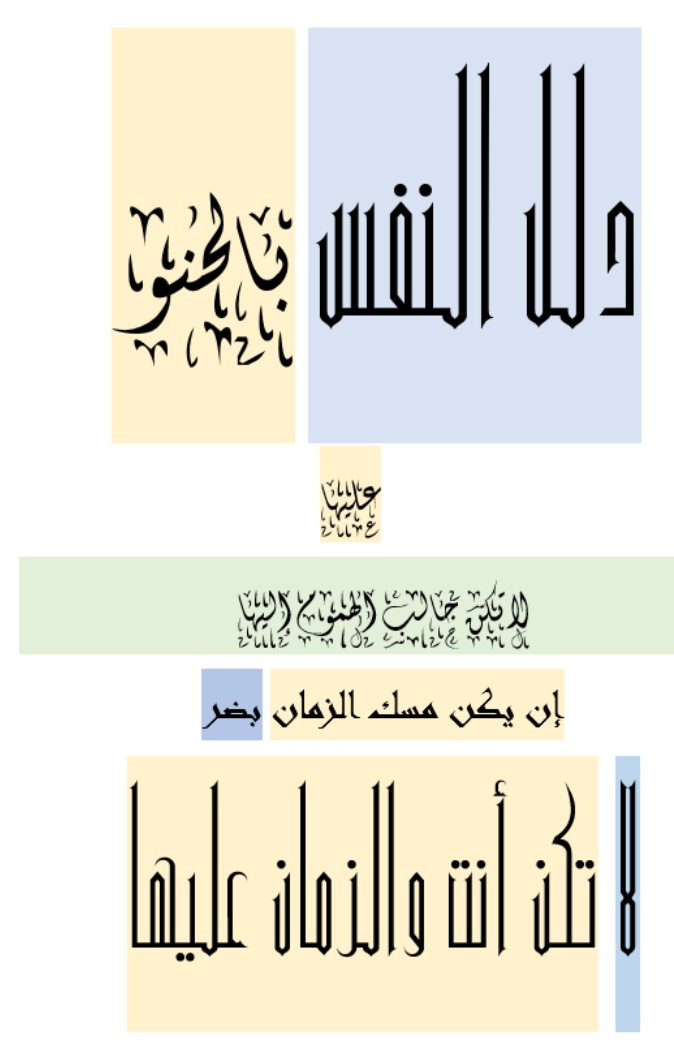
**Instructions:** Look for inspiring and calming verses in your culture related to the topic of self-compassion. An example of self-compassion can be illustrated by considering how Kristin Neff defines self-compassion. Kristin Neff defines self-compassion as having three components—each of which has a positive and negative pole representing compassionate versus uncompassionate behavior: self-kindness versus self-judgment, mindfulness versus over-identification, and a sense of common humanity versus isolation (Williams, 2018, p. 25).

Use a software or a calligraphy application to *make* an Islamic calligraphy to re-write the verse.

**Share:** Share your work with the audience, explain what the verse can be translate to in English answering the following prompts:

- “I chose this specific verse because...”
- “What the verse means to me is...”
- Print it out and hang it so that you can see it in a daily basis as a reminder of the importance of extending compassion and kindness to the self.

Figure 4.2 Activity 1: Calligraphy - Exercise 2



**Caption:** The Arabic words I selected are considered a verse from a poetry that translates to:

*Indulge yourself by being affectionate toward yourself.*

*Don't bring worries to it.*

*If life hits you with pain or sickness, don't be with life against yourself.*

## **Activity 2: Collage**

**Purpose:** To promote identity-building and sense making, and to construct meaning from the experience of baby loss.

### **Supplies:**

- Scissors
- Images
- Heavy papers
- Envelopes

**Instructions:** Look for calming verses or messages related to the experience of baby loss in your own faith. Browse the internet for some artistic images related to your loss experience. Set out some materials to create a collage about your motherhood experience.

Pick out images, media, and words that call you. You can cut them or tear them further.

Arrange them on a heavy paper.

**Share:** Share the results with the audience.

**Figure 4.3 Activity 2: Collage - Exercise 1**



Figure 4.4 Activity 2: Collage - Exercise 2



### Activity 3: Photography

#### Purpose:

- To record and document the memories
- To retain and restore the bond with the deceased.
- To reconnect with the baby. For instance, the box is considered a container of emotions and memories. When the box is opened, it fosters remembrance. When the box is closed, it symbolically contains the loss.



**Supplies:**

- A digital camera
- Loved one's belongings and items
- Memory box that holds special items or mementos of the deceased.

**Instructions:** Buy a medium sized memory box or create it by covering any box you have such as a shoe box with papers or textures. Decorate it by using any additional symbolic materials you like such as flowers, feathers, or images or words as a reminder to treat yourself as a good friend who is struggling or suffering (Williams, 2018, p. 28). Bring your decorated box filled with belongings and artifacts of your loved one. Open it.

**Share:** Share some memories about you and your loved one. Make visual memorial in a type of photography created by you using the loved one belonging to immortalize the baby. Describe the deceased focusing on his or her qualities, stories, and how the deceased could continue to future in your life answering the following prompts:

- “My loved one made me feel special because...”
- “An unforgettable story/memory/ moment about my loved one was...”

**Figure 4.5 Activity 3: Photography - Exercise 1**



**Figure 4.6 Activity 3: Photography Activity - Exercise 2**



## **Activity 4: Meditation Coloring**

### **Purpose:**

- To relax and meditate.
- To find meanings from the aesthetic choices and reconstruct the motherhood's identity and the life after death.
- Correspondence with the loved one can create a sense of communication and contact between the bereaved one and the deceased.

### **Supplies:**

- Personal PC
- Powerful motherhood coloring pages
- Internet connection
- A printer
- Colors

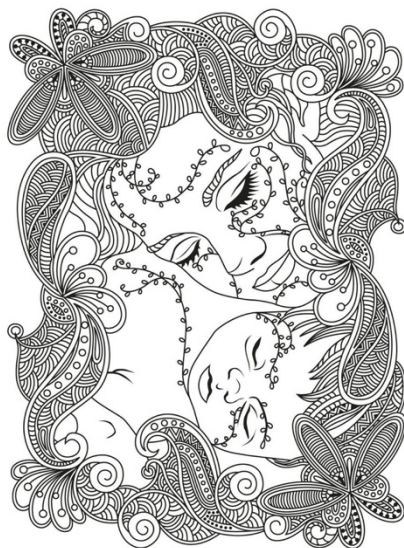
### **Instructions:**

- Browse the internet for some coloring pages you consider them to be powerful motherhood coloring pages. Download them as PDF files and collect them in a single folder. Sit in a relaxing place and color one of them each day.
- Write a response letter after coloring each page addressing prompts you create to start an imaginable conversation with the deceased such as:

- “The one thing I have wanted to ask you is...” (Neimeyer, 2019, p. 87), or
  - “What I need you to know about me is...” (Neimeyer, 2019, p. 87).
- After coloring each page, give yourself a reward by extending compassion to yourself through choosing any of Kresten Neff’s self-compassion exercises presented in her website such as:
    - Giving Yourself Compassion for Failures and Mistakes:
    - [mindfulnessexercises.com](http://mindfulnessexercises.com)
    - Forgiveness meditation
    - [Meditation Script Forgiveness Meditation | Mindfulness Exercises](#)

**Share:** Share your art product with the audience. Read your letters answering the prompts to the audience loudly.

**Figure 4.7 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 1**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.de/pin/323977766948777347/>

**Figure 4.8 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 2**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/719942690406828432/>



**Figure 4.9 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 3**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://ar.pinterest.com/pin/361906520054154276/>

**Figure 4.10 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 4**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/529454499938538843/>

**Figure 4.11 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 5**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/570620215285962391/>



**Figure 4.12 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 1 Colored**

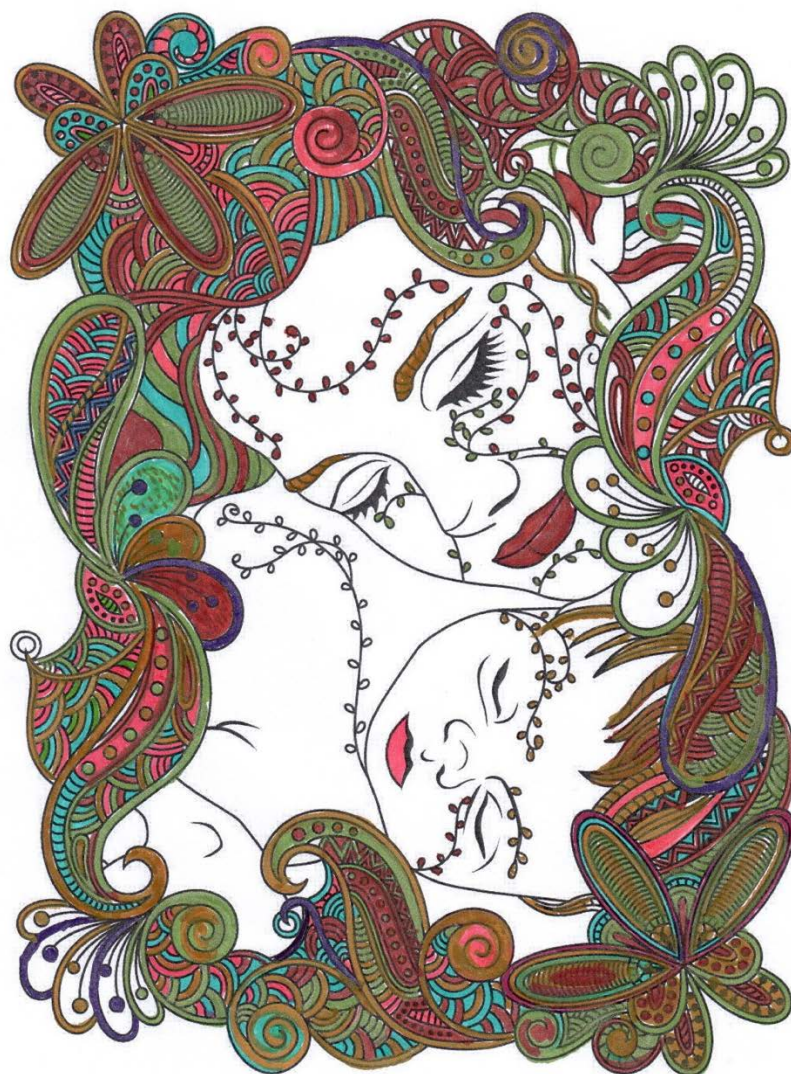


Figure 4.13 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 2 Colored





Figure 4.14 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 3 Colored



**Figure 4.15 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 4 Colored**





**Figure 4.16 Activity 4: Meditation Coloring – Exercise 5**



**Activity 5: Mindful Compassion Mandala**

Purpose:

- To relax, and meditate

- To activate the soothing system and regulate the emotional threat system (Williams, 2018, p.29).
- To foster mindful compassion and facilitate healing through aiding moment-by-moment, non-judgmental attention (Williams, 2018, p.29).

**Supplies:**

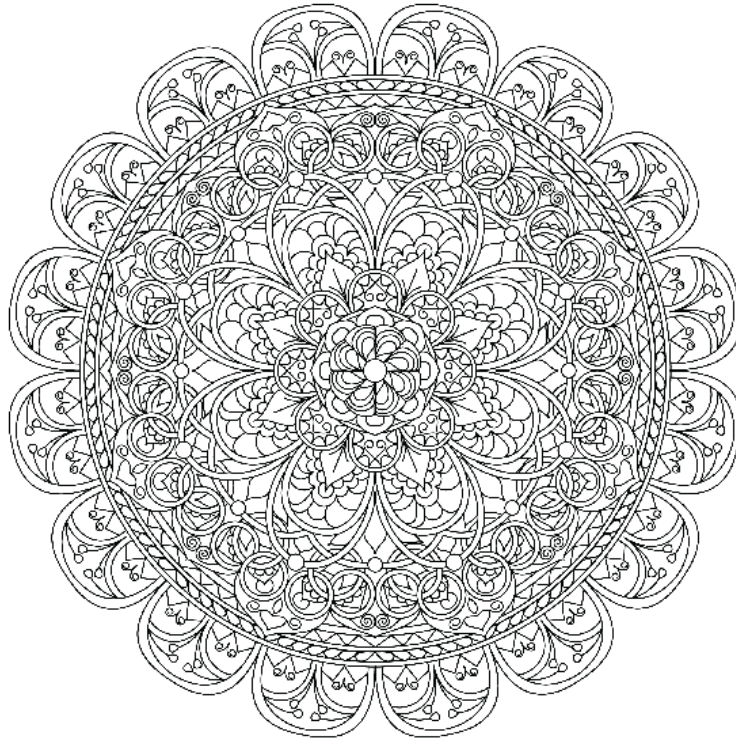
- Personal PC
- Powerful mandala coloring page
- Internet connection
- Printer
- Colors

**Instructions:**

- Visit MondayMandala.com. Print out a copy of a mandala called “mindful compassion”. Sit in a quiet place and take your time to color it.
- Take a break from coloring the mandala by visiting Kresten Neff’s website and exploring it
- Choose any loving kindness exercise you feel comfortable doing
- Suggested exercises are:
  - [Loving Kindness Meditation Script - | Mindfulness Exercises](#),
  - [Self Kindness – Part 1 - Guided Meditation Script | Mindfulness Exercises](#)
  - [Mindfulness Exercises For Loving Kindness And Compassion](#)

**Share:** Share the mandala you have colored and reflect on your experience of coloring it. Write a compassionate letter to yourself and read it loudly to the audience.

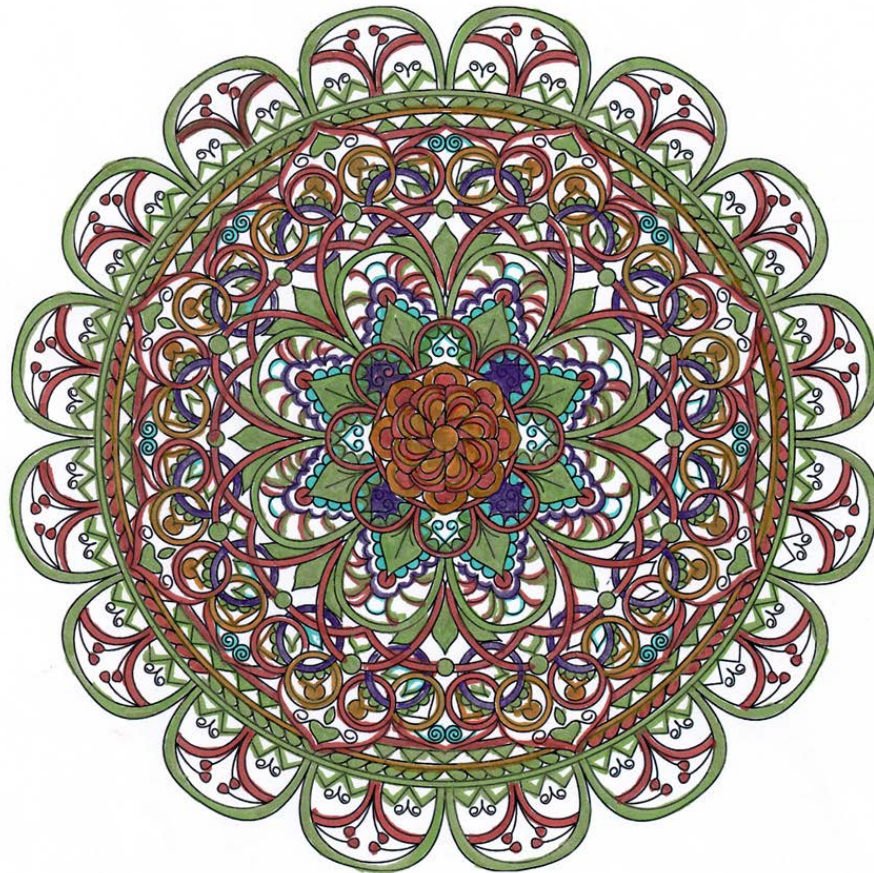
**Figure 4.17** Activity 5: *Mindful Compassion Mandala – Exercise 1*



Mindful Compassion  
More coloring pages at  
[mondaymandala.com](https://s.mondaymandala.com)

Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from  
<https://s.mondaymandala.com/i/m/p/mindful-compassion.pdf>

**Figure 4.18 Activity 5: Mindful Compassion Mandala – Exercise 1 Colored**



Mindful Compassion  
More coloring pages at  
[mondaymandala.com](http://mondaymandala.com)

Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from  
<https://s.mondaymandala.com/i/m/p/mindful-compassion.pdf>



## **Activity 6: Painting the Self in Place of Healing**

### **Purpose:**

- To transform negative patterns of emotions associated with fear and anxiety
- To construct identity and continuing bonds

### **Supplies:**

- Acrylic colors
- Canvas
- Color plate
- Pencil

### **Painting Instructions:**

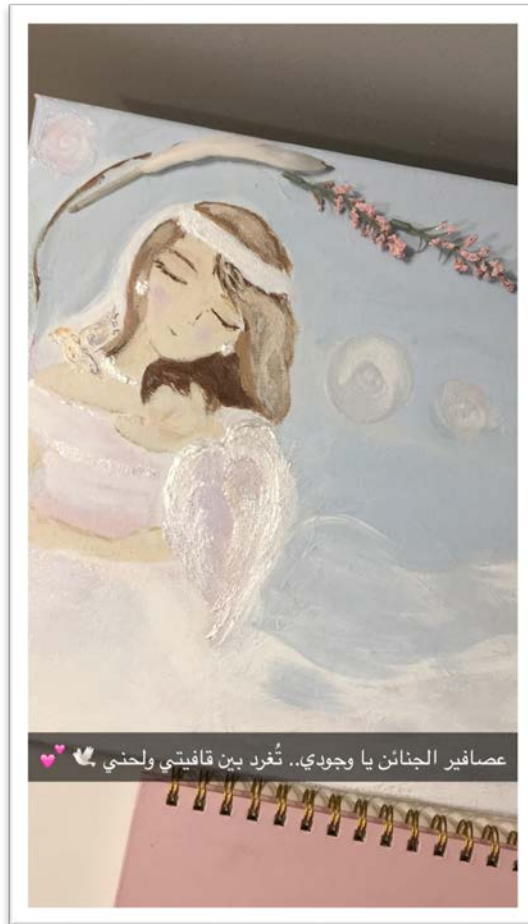
- Imagine a place of healing, which could be a garden, beach, or any other calming and peaceful place
- Mindfully explore your art materials
- Draw a complete picture of yourself from the healing place
- Open your journal and reflect on your experience and the impact of the deceased on your life under the title “chapters of my life”
- Using your phone, take a picture of your artwork and look at your place of healing every day until you feel better.

**Share:** Share the result with the audience and expand on the details of the place of healing. For instance, answer the following prompts:

- What makes it a safe place?

- Who are the people with you?... etc.
- “I feel better when...” (Carter, 2018)
- “What I am remembering about you today is ...” (Carter, 2018).
- “I felt calmer today when...” (Carter, 2018).
- “I wish you...” (Carter, 2018)
- “Things are different now because...”

**Figure 4.19 Activity 6: Painting – Exercise 1**



## **Activity 7: Mixed Media and Guided Imagery of the Compassionate Self**

**Purpose:** This activity is inspired by a session from the compassion focused art therapy (CFT) protocol designed by Gilbert, and the following are some of its objectives:

- The activity is intended to regulate emotions constructively.
- To be mindful aware of and open to your suffering
- To define the threat system, and the self-critical thoughts
- To silence the self-criticism and compact feelings of shame and transform problematic patterns of emotions such as anger and sadness.
- To promote compassion/self-compassion skills.

### **Supplies:**

- A Canvas or two of them.
- Colors (pastels, oil colors...)
- Papers and cards.
- Any other free materials of choice that you want to use to represent two opposite situations:
  - Situation one: materials to represent harsh moments and inner critic such as shapes, words, and colors to be placed on the first layers on the background.
  - Situation 2: Other symbolic choices of colors, words, and materials such as soft silk and bright colors suited for changing the previous

situation through imagining and listening to the compassionate self.

**Instructions:**

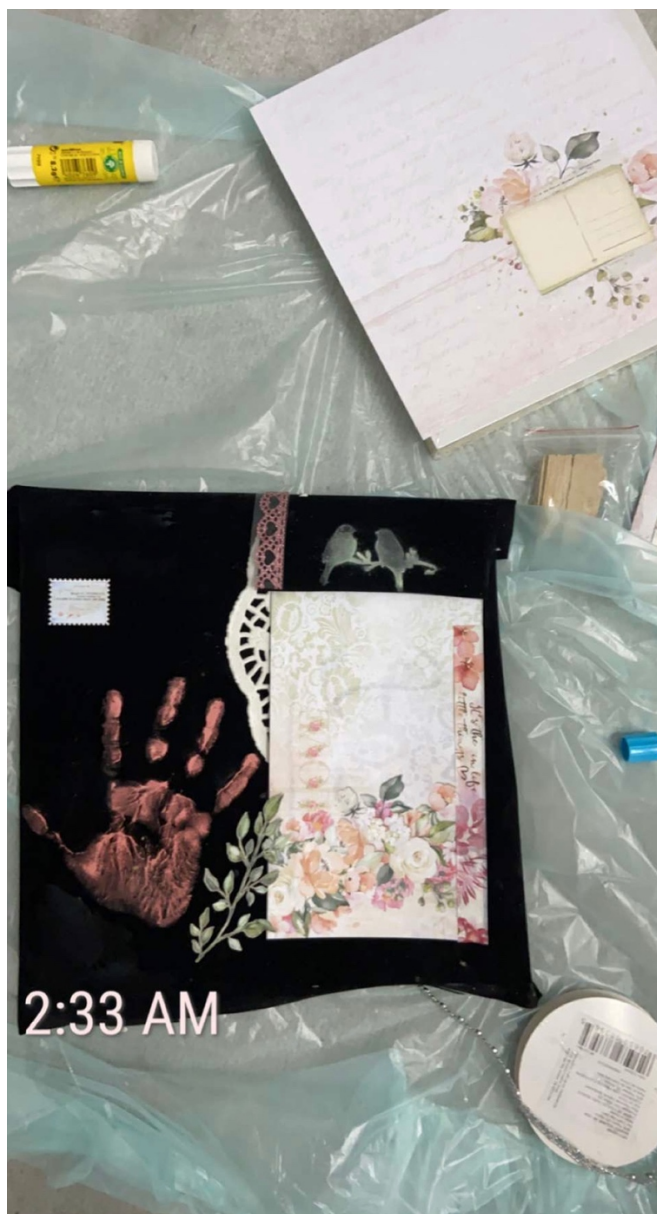
- Start with Kristin Neff’s “Making Room for Pain or Discomfort” meditation, you can find it by visiting [Making Room for Pain or Discomfort | Mindfulness Exercises](#)
- Think about a time when you felt vulnerable
- Work on art product of mixed media consisting of several layers:
  - Represent a fragile moment, imagine your inner critic or a threatening environment using expressive colors, shapes and images. For instance, the self can be represented through using a clay figure or a heart while the threatening environment could be expressed through coloring the background with layers of dark colors.
- Express your anxiety using as many words, shapes, and layers you want on the background.
- You may answer the following prompts and feel free to write on the art product itself: “Since you have gone...” (Carter, 2018), “I worry about...” (Carte, 2018), “I feel sad today because...” (Carter, 2018), “I feel more stressed when...” (Carte, 2018), “I got upset today because...”

- Imagine that you have met your compassionate self, who has a message for you, and gives something to you.
- What would the compassionate self-give you? Think about the compassionate self-message mindfully.
- Based on the imagery, add to the art products what you need as a human being in this situation to make you feel better.
- If you find the exercise to be helpful, repeat the steps whenever you want to create small self-compassion cards.

**Share:** Share about the process of making your art product, and any other safety and security concerns, based on the appearance, composition and characteristics of the art product. Share your responses for the following prompts:

- “A harsh moment I experienced was... and it is represented through...”.
- “My compassionate self-gave me the following... my compassionate self’s message to me was...”.
- “I represented overcoming my insecurity and calming the inner critic voice through...”.
- “My compassionate wish toward myself is..., I incorporated it and transform it to my future through writing and reading the following compassionate letter...”.

**Figure 4.20 Activity 7: Mixed Media – Exercise A**



**Figure 4.21 Activity 7: Mixed Media – Exercise B**



### **Conclusion**

Since constructivist approaches to grief emphasize the role of meaning-making in grieving, I was highly selective for the art activities. I was “left with a frightening sense of meaningless and personal vulnerability,” and my ability to make sense of life was disrupted following the loss of my baby (Sturrok & Louw, 2013, p. 571). Thus, I offered some art practices that could help to restore meanings. For instance, some of these activities were selected in hopes they would influence meaning-making by

acknowledging the baby as a person to be mourned, and a person with whom I have a unique relationship (Sturrok & Louw, 2013). Hence, they were chosen to help in sustaining bonds with the baby and redefining the identity of motherhood: “The notion that continued bonds may play a salutary role came from anthropological and observational accounts from non-Western cultures” (Suhail et al., 2011, p. 37).

Additionally, scientists have proven that activities which can keep our hands busy such as drawing, coloring, and painting can change brain chemistry and allow participants to enter to a state of meditation. Furthermore, “[s]ensory materials such as paint, sand, and shaving cream allow for regression to earlier stages of development when the trauma incident occurred and allows repairing due to disruption in those stages” (Lu, 2007, p. 80).

Thus, some activities were selected to help the bereaved mother feel more positive and resilient about her experience. To the best of my knowledge, this was a pioneering attempt to comprehend the bereavement and healing phenomenology among women in the Saudi society.

Overall, the objectives were to provide a safe space to express emotions, honor, reconnect, and acknowledge the baby as a person. They were also selected to promote identity-building, to make sense of the loss, find meanings in the experience, and to provide an opportunity to redirect thoughts, relax, and meditate; and finally, to provide an opportunity to evaluate the effect of engaging in these activities.



## **Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion**

*Birds sing after a storm; why shouldn't people feel as free to delight in whatever sunlight remains to them?*

—Rose Kennedy, 2019, p. 13

In this chapter, I discuss some of the experiences of artmaking. I define meaning-making, and I list its components. I link the present study to the constructivists' theoretical and sense-making framework. I list themes of meaning-making that I found applicable to my own experience. Furthermore, I discuss how culture plays a major role influencing the experience of baby loss. Then, I demonstrate how art and compassion have unique healing power that can be tied to the theory and interpreted through its lens. The chapter ends by describing the study's implications and suggests directions for future research. The following section is a reflection on the experience of engaging in some of the art activities.

### **Reflection on Art Activities**

#### ***Making the Collage***

As Megan Devine stated in her book, *It's Ok that You're Not Ok*, collecting words and images to first destroy and then create something new from them was a satisfying experience (Devine, 2017). The collages I made are linked to my culture. One of them involves pictures of the tragedy of Karbala, including a baby who was killed there. As

mentioned in a story earlier, the baby's mother's breast milk had dried out, and he was dying of thirst. Imam Hussain took the baby to the enemy requesting them to spare him saying: "If it is my fault, punish me but what has the baby to do with all of this?" However, the enemy shot the infant with an arrow, "cutting his throat from vein to vein" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 93).

The meaning that emerged here is linked to continuing bonds and the transcendence of the event. Remembering icons who have been through a similar experience had a calming effect on me because I could relate to them, and feel I belong to something greater than myself (Arnold, 2021). Using these sacred images allowed for symbolic and empathetic bonds to emerge and resonate in my soul. The images I used helped me reconstruct my spirituality and channel and align my feelings and emotions with other great people. The making process drove me closer to our rituals and ideals—rituals that validate the loss of the newborn, remember him year after year, and honor him. Through this process, I opened spiritual avenues to reconnect with admirable figures and made these paths visible and tangible. I recognized that suffering is linked to and a part of the human experience. If I lost my baby to a random illness, there are people whom I admire who lost their innocent babies to oppression and cruelty.

In the second collage, my materials were a couple of envelopes, a butterfly, flowers, and a Quranic verse. The Quranic verse can be translated: "God will give you and you will be satisfied." One meaning that emerged was in the verse's promising message: hope. To be faithful is to be hopeful and trust God. To trust God is to trust His

plans and have good assumptions about Him. I trust Him because He is a merciful God and all-knowing. He knows what is best for me.

The verse is open-ended. It states that God will give me. I understand that God, who owns everything is making a promise to me. He could give me patience, wisdom, resilience, calmness, and above all, He could restore what I lost. There is always hope, and I will be rewarded eventually. I believe that this world is temporary, and whatever is lost on earth will be restored in heaven.

### ***Coloring the Mandala***

In art, mandala refers to circular forms, meaning “sacred circle” (Malchiodi, 2010 p. 122). In Eastern cultures, mandalas have been used for visual meditation and in healing ceremonies. It reflects one’s psyche and provides a representation of a potential change and transformation for those who are struggling with emotional or physical issues. It can also be related to our need to resolve dilemmas (Malchiodi, 2010). Further, it is associated with a feeling of wholeness, growth, or emergence of something new: “People who are experiencing serious illness or a life crisis may spontaneously create mandala images when they are physically or emotionally healing” (Malchiodi, 2010, p. 123). It seems that the complex structure of the mandala designs could draw the person coloring them into a meditative-like state, which helps to provide a sense of calmness and relaxation (Nancy et al., 2005).

I mentioned in the personal narrative in chapter two that I have liked circular shapes since I was a child, as I preferred to get the mandala on the soda bottle and be called a princess rather than a queen. I chose a mandala called *mindful compassion* in

hopes that it would help me extend compassion to myself. It was satisfying to sit down and color it. Coloring the mandala seemed to have a natural absorbing process. When I relax, I can face my fears and feel hopeful again. The slow and focused coloring process provided me with a state of mindfulness. Silence while coloring enhanced my ability to recognize how I think about myself and my experience of baby loss.

I considered coloring the mandala as a soothing experience or a form of meditation. Meditation is defined as “the practice of calmly limiting attention and thought through the use of mental exercise” (Nancy et al., 2005, p. 81). The mandala has repeating and complex patterns. Coloring these patterns helped inhabit a state similar to meditation (Nancy et al., 2005, p. 81). It is far easier to develop the Compassionate Self, when one is grounded in their soothing system rather than when the person is sitting in his or her threat system (Bennett-Levy et al., 2020, p. 9).

While grief and trauma can have harmful effects on the brain and nervous system, meditation is a powerful way to transform from a state of threat to a state of healing (Cormier, 2018). Hence, the mandala activity is a very effective tool due to the meditative aspect of it.

From my experience of working on it, I think coloring the mandala facilitated self-calming, mindfulness, and surrendering to the present moment. Thus, practicing such an activity can help redirect our thoughts through cutting the loops of self-criticism and deeply concentrating on the experience of coloring. Further, from my personal experience, the flow of coloring gave me an opportunity to reconnect with myself calmly

and patiently. The mandala might reflect the world or a notion of wholeness, and perhaps the act of coloring transformed me into a sense of wholeness as well.

### ***The Painting Experience***

Before painting, I surfed the net, looking for inspiring ideas for my project and came across some paintings that I found very attractive. Viewing them brought peace and comfort to me. Viewing them provided me with a sense of belonging and connection. I felt that we—mothers who have lost children—matter. We are not forgettable, and there is beautiful works of art created for and about us. I looked for the contact information of the artist and found that she has a website where she displays her paintings.

Some of her visuals seemed to reflect the fact that grief is a universal human experience. Further, here use of metaphors was appealing to me. It was really inspiring to attempt soul-moving artwork like the ones I found in my searches.

The painter's drawings are simple, but inspiring, lovely and powerful. They portray intimate relationships such as motherhood, friendship, and sisterhood in a wide range of ethnicities, and through different topics and life stages such as pregnancy, childhood, childcare and breastfeeding, or even baby loss that I discerned to be represented through sparrows. I felt just the act of looking at them and meditating help me to reconnect with myself and my spirit. Art is a means of knowing where the person has documented their experience through the creation process (McNiff, 1998).

Next, I describe the stages of my painting process and provide some features of this fruitful experience. During the painting process, I dealt with the suppressed suffering that is triggered by events from time to time. Drawing my baby with two wings in a shape

of a complete heart was an aesthetic response to unearth my suffering when I heard that the baby had a defect in the heart. Other people's careless treatment deepened my suffering around my baby's heart issue, because I too had a heart issue in childhood.

There is an endless spiritual world to which we can escape and wonder via art appreciation and creation. I imagined a healing safe space of reunion with my baby and painted it. I re-imagined my loss, and my relationship to my baby. Although the lost relationship is changed, it could continue for years or a lifetime (Arnold, 2021). I created something beautiful out of a painful experience: meaning out of wandering, memory out of loss, reconnecting spiritually with my motherhood and lost babies.

I was afraid I would begin and discover that I couldn't do it. However, I persuaded myself that it was just practice, and I can improve. When I drew the sketch, I loved it and hesitated to color it and lose or mess up its beauty. The most calming part was coloring the sky. The flow and ease of coloring it smoothly with bright colors brought me to a very calm state of mind. However, drawing the details, correcting mistakes, such as in the fine lines between objects, helped to foster patience.

I was torn between pink and white. When I colored the dress pink, I felt white would be more beautiful. I colored it again, blending pink, pearl, and white. I made it blurry to be in harmony with the sky and clouds. This represents my longing and love for the sky, as I am a spiritual being. The sky is part of me, since "my baby girl" is also there. I also created wings on the baby in the form of a white heart. This represents the ways I combatted the pain of her heart defect. In an ideal world, which we can't see, she could be an angel with two soft wings forming a pretty, delicate, white heart, which is "too

beautiful for earth.” The painting experience was really enjoyable, and I was quite satisfied with the result.

### ***The Mixed Media***

The mixed-media exercise was a special one. It did not require any advanced artistic skills. It was similar to working with layers in Photoshop, except that it was easier. I think the process of the experience of planning it and thinking about it was empowering and rewarding. It kept my mind busy with many reassuring choices. For instance, I was wondering what empowering or compassionate words I could add to my product, so I needed to revisit a board I created five years ago to cope, which I called “Stay positive.” I reviewed a lot of self-affirming sentences and phrases and identity reconstructing memes such as, “Don’t underestimate a mother of an angel in heaven.” Other phrases I came across were linked to my cultural backgrounds such as some calming Quranic verses.

It was the month of Ramadan. My husband planned to eat breakfast with his friends that day. I took my supplies to my dad’s house where I met my four-year-old niece. I wanted to let her print her hand on the dark velvet. I told her I needed her help and showed her the art supplies. She loves art, so she kept asking me when we are going to start. Working with her was really a fun experience that made me appreciate my relationship with her. We did not get the result we wanted at the first time. Her handprint appeared faded, so we needed to repeat the process again after adding more colors. When I wanted to clean her hands, stains of colors remained wherever we touched. The sink water was hot for her, so we tried the bathtub water. It seemed at first that we were

spreading the color more and more with the spelling water. Then, I admitted that I felt very ashamed and started regretting my choices and my decisions.

While I was trying to clean her hands, and the sink and bathtubs stains, her mother came to pick her up. I looked at her hands and told her that it is ok. I told her that they could clean them later and she should leave because her mom is waiting for her and asked her to use tissues to dry them. Using the tissues, she told me “Alaa, the tissues clean them.” I felt better and cleaned the sink and the bathtubs.

I returned to my apartment and continued the process quietly. I then used pastel colors to print birds or little sparrows. I also put a piece of paper that has the word *love* on it, and allocated this space to write a particular verse from my poetry, which is:

Sparrows of love...O my existence

Singing between my poetry and melody

So that a transparent memory remains

And ‘flowers’ sleep in my embracement

On the other side of it, I put a tape with the words “It is the little things in life”.

Beside the words, there is a shape of a heart. Finally, I pasted a branch of leaves next to the little printed hand.



**Figure 5.1. Activity 7: Mixed Media – Exercise B**



### **Emerging Meanings**

My research question required me to explore the meanings that emerged through narrative writing and art-making as a Saudi Arabian woman who experienced baby loss. My own loss and grief journey circulated around a variety of topics including primary and secondary types of losses reflected in my auto-ethnographic piece that contained different topics in a broad area of loss including: loss of a baby, parental loss, identity loss, and diaspora. However, I consider the baby loss to be the primary loss with which I struggle and from which I need to heal. Theories of loss established that finding meanings can help facilitate the grief process.

Finding meaning can be defined as one's ability to develop new goals and a new, perhaps wiser sense of self (Davis et al., 1998). It also refers to “the active process of

reappraising an events” (Ginneken, 2014, p. 210). Austrian psychiatrist and survivor of the concentration camps believes that the primary motivational force is one’s search for meaning in one’s life (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 45).

According to a previous longitudinal study of people coping with the loss of a family member, there are two construals of meaning: making sense of the event and finding benefit in the experience (Davis et al., 1998, p. 561). Making sense and finding benefit represent two of the most frequently cited notions of meaning in the trauma and coping literatures:

Those who were able to make sense of their loss typically did so by seeing the death as predictable or as a natural condition of life or by suggesting that the death was comprehensible within the context of their religious or spiritual beliefs. On the other hand, those who were able to find benefit in the experience tended to report that they had learned something important from it, about themselves (e.g., that they had the strength to cope with the adversity), about others (e.g., the value of family and relationships), or about the meaning of life (e.g., learned what is important in life). (Davis et al., p. 570)

Some scholars emphasize with the person’s ability to develop a benign justification to make sense of it within their worldview (Davis et al., 1998). Others define meaning as a sense-making: “Meaning as sense-making refers to the issue of whether a particular event fits into one’s conception of how the world is assumed to work” (Davis et al., 1998, p. 562), such as attributing death to God’s will. However, constructivist theories suggest that bereaved individuals engage in three major activities by which they reconstruct meaning in response to loss. These activities are sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 36). Constructivist theories usually represent human experience in terms of our life stories because “We live in stories” (Gilbert, 2002). David Kessler (2019), a bereavement expert and author of the

book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* defines meaning as “the reflection of the love for those we have lost,” so it manifests in our attempts to sustain this love while we move forward with our lives. He argues that “In a way, meaning both begins and ends with the stories we tell” (Kessler, 2019, p. 51). Indeed, “[w]e all have a stock of stories that explain who we are, what we think, what we dream about, what we fear, what family has meant to us, and what we’ve accomplished” (Kessler, 2019, p. 51). As Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) note:

We continually author our own life stories as we reflect, interpret and reinterpret what happens in our lives, and we tell and retell our stories to other people and ourselves. Meaning, then, is embedded in our life stories, and can be evoked by accessing people’s stories in their own words. (p. 38)

Thus, we must answer a “why” question. The “why” we must answer is not why the loved one die, rather why we lived and why we are here. Further, Kessler (2019) suggests using the following questions as a reference to help consider meaning after the loss:

What have you learned from the loss?  
What have you learned to value? What did you value before their death?  
What did they value?  
What was important to you when they lived?  
What is important to you now?  
What was important to them when they lived?  
What do I feel like I need more of?  
What if our loved ones see through our eyes? What do you want to show them?  
What can you do to keep this from happening to others?  
How have you changed?  
How has their life changed you?  
How did the love change you?  
What do you wish you knew before?  
How can knowing it now bring meaning to you or to others?  
What could you do with the information that was left behind in this loss to help other people?  
How could what I’ve learned help others?

What would you like to tell others?  
What would you like to tell others before the tragedy happens?  
What do you know about life that you didn't know before?  
How can we be inspired by their life?  
How can you help people in the same situation?  
What could you do to bring joy to other people's lives?  
How can you bring joy to your own life?

Meanings I found from reviewing my artwork and narratives while considering some of the above questions commonly align with themes of meaning-making reconstruction found in other studies such as in meaning reconstruction themes identified by Bogensperger and Lueger-Schuster (2014) and some other scholars, such as learning about my own strengths, gaining perspective insight into the meaning of life, growing sense of spirituality, and it is better for my baby that it is over. These meanings can be considered subthemes of a larger schemas of meanings or themes. The below section is allocated to elaborating the four primary domains of meanings that emerged from the present study. I discuss them under four sub-headings of each one.

### ***Continuing Bonds and Feeling of Connection***

The term of continuing bonds refers to “the ongoing attachment to the deceased” (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 11). Reconnection through memories, having conversation with or about the deceased ones and writing about them so that they “retain a social presence” is an aspect that influenced my narrative (Letherby, 2015, p. 135). Conducting this study, I found it is fascinating that attachment to our past and reconnection with it is not always negative, but it can be a healthy way of improving. Unlike the traditional viewpoint of grief, modern theories establish that successful coping could involve ongoing attachment with the loved one, which could be adaptive in nature

(Suhail et al., 2011, p. 37). Faith and religious beliefs have a main impact on continuing bonds (Hussein & Oybode, 2009). The Islamic concept of the continuing existence of the soul allowed for a meaningful continued relationship with the deceased (Hussein & Oybode, 2009).

The five stages of grief don't signify the ending of a relationship, and the completion of them does not mean the ending of a relationship or grief: "Just as birth is about a change in the mother's connection to the infant who was once inside of her, so is death a change in our relationship to the person who is no longer here but still alive with us" (Kessler, 2019, p. 220). After death, we are not closing the door for a relationship with the deceased one; we are opening a door for a new relationship. Kessler (2019) asserted that "remaining connected to your loved one is not unhealthy grieving. It is normal" (p. 222).

Continuing bonds with the deceased can be experienced emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally (Weiskittle, 2018). An example of the emotional experience of continuing bonds can be explained through yearning, missing, and feeling strongly connected to the loved one. Continuing bonds cognitively occurs by thinking and remembering the deceased person. Lastly, continuing bonds behaviorally entails keeping loved one belonging, talking to the loved one, and feeling the presence of him or her (Weiskittle, 2018).

Many studies have examined continuing bonds as an outcome measure of treatment effectiveness. Visual art creation process helps with "radical acceptance" of the loss and facilitate the bereaved persons's adaptive preservation of ties with the loved one,

alleviating the pain of loss (Weiskittle, 2018). Talking and writing about the loved one can acknowledge the baby as a person, strengthen the mother-child bonds of relationship and bring life to what seems unalive.

Art-making opened path for a spiritual experience. The art I made about my baby girl was something to immerse myself in. In essence, “I wanted to be immersed in her” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 190). Through artmaking, I was able to deliberately create an intangible world of connection, re-membering my baby girl, redefining our lost relationship, reestablishing bonds, and maintaining her as a part of my family.

I became able to transcend what I had previously not using embodiment, symbolic, and metaphoric meanings (Mishara, 1995, p. 191). For instance, in my painting of the healing place, I transcended the harsh reality of the separation resulted from death that occurred in earth to reunion with an angelic baby in heaven. Such an opportunity cathartic effect works like having a utopian experience, or a beautiful dream from which one does not want to wake up.

### ***Living a New Normal***

According to Clara Hinton (2016), after the reality of child loss settles in our hearts, the new normal is the place where we land (p. 58). Hinton (2016) reflects, “My new normal now is to listen more attentively, and see and feel so much more of the pain of others that I didn’t identify with before my own losses” (p. 63). She notes further, “I know the sorrow of saying good-bye without saying “I love you”; my new normal says, “I love you” often (Hinton, 2016, p. 62).

Thus, my new normal is to be more compassionate toward myself and others. My new normal is to remember and acknowledge the fragility of life, and not take anything for granted. For example, reviewing virtual saved materials for planning the mixed media project brought me to a verse that says: “All that is on earth will perish” reminding me of the fragility of this life. Such a verse along with other verses about concepts of life, death, loss, patience, and after-life assisted me in making sense of my baby loss experiences.

My new normal is to learn to appreciate myself and others. I do that through acknowledging supportive family members and friends, as well as honoring myself. My new normal is to celebrate the very short life of my baby through honoring her and broken heart, volunteering, and carrying on some of our traditions.

Creativity allowed me to have a sense of control to actively distance myself from the horrible experience. I have a sense of agency. Taking hold of an uncomfortable moment that occurred to me and transforming it to a moment I create puts it under my control. This is an act of power (Charon, 2017, p. 221). Hence, “Writing—and making art—didn’t fix me. They let me begin to honor myself, my own experience, and my own broken heart” (Devine, 2017, p. 155).

In the case of experiences that trouble us, these events diminish the space inside us (Charon, 2017). By narrating and artmaking, we create more room where new experience can live (Charon, 2017). Narrative writing and artmaking offered me the capacity to externalize my various emotions and thoughts and gain a new insight and perspective.

Creating a narrative and art about my experience provided me with a space to process my emotions and thoughts closely and mindfully, to be aware of the way I think and feel about myself. As Charon (2017) notes:

by externalizing our experiences, we create literal objects, text on a page, that can then be examined at different angles, as an X-ray can be held up to a light. (Charon, 2017, p. 215)

If I could alter, even slightly, my relationship to the experience, I might find a different kind of “truth.” (p. 221). I have the choice to reconstruct my identity and to view myself from a new lens, a more compassionate and honoring one. I could recognize my pattern of thinking and change my harsh judgmental pattern of thinking by replacing critical thoughts with more kind ones. Per Charon (2017), “Language is the realization of thought—It is how thought comes to be in the world” (p. 251). Although I could not fix the situation, I could cure how I feel about it. Through narrating-and artmaking, I am able to transcend what I was previously not able to transcend through the use of embodiment, symbolic and metaphoric meanings (Mishara, 1995, p. 191).

Completion occurs as the narrative-or the art product is produced, and I had a sense of satisfaction that, for now, the story is over and complete (Mishara, 1995, p. 190). Meanwhile, I gave myself a voice and a trace that will last. I am re-thinking my being in the world (Certini, 2019, p. 154). I am reframing my identity as a mother despite all that has occurred and rebreathing intangible life to my loved one.

My new normal is to view my future as a blank piece of paper. My new normal is to choose to have a positive attitude toward life. As Kessler (2019) argues, our future is



as blank as a white paper. We are the creator of it. We are the writers. It is not our past, not our losses or death, but us (p. 70).

Everything can be taken from the one but one thing: the human freedom: “to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”

(Kessler, 2019, p. 14). Kessler (2019) notes further:

Bad days don’t have to be your internal destiny. That doesn’t mean your grief will get smaller over time. It means that you must get bigger...the most beautiful flower grows out of the mud. Our worst moments can be the seeds of our best moments. They have an amazing power to transform us. (p. 14)

Following are some verses I wrote in one of my grief and loss class:

*I choose not to focus on dark moments in my life. I choose not to remember aggression and disadvantage in my daily life. If my body has to be a ‘site of struggle.’*

*I chose to forget about conflicts and wars.*

*I chose not to see my wounds and scars,*

*I chose to see my tears as stars.*

*If I cannot forget about bad memories. Then, there is a wisdom or a purpose. I chose to hide my pains as treasure, in a hidden place of memory, I will only use my pain as guidance that lead me to my humanity, to feel of the suffering of others.*

*When I remember my life and my country, I choose to see the beautiful coasts, the land of my childhood, the land that carries my home, my schools, and people who loved me. The holy land that carries the city of Meccah, the mosques and minarets.*

*When I think of my body, I choose to forget any painful experience I encountered.*

*I choose to remember moments I was admired, loved, and indulged.*

As Hudson (2015) notes, “I choose to relive those memories, and I will feel a warm surge of joy each time they warm my heart. ‘Goodbye, anger’” (Hudson, 2015, p.127).

### ***Identity Reconstruction***

The identity can be defined as the sense of self, the self-concept, or who we are. Identity crisis can be defined as, “designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation” (Dugan, 2007, p. 41). Because part of our identity can be based on our relationships with another person, when we lose a valuable person, we experience loss in our sense of self.

However, studies suggest that identity loss can a “transformation or metamorphosis that is dynamic” (Dugan, 2007, p. 42). This can be demonstrated through Ginneken’s argument (2014): the narrative approach aims to comprehend how people construct their identity, or their life story, and “how they integrate their (reconstructed) past, (perceived) present, and (anticipated) future” (p. 210). He establishes that while difficult life experiences such as loss may pose an identity challenge, the constructed life narrative offers a sense of purpose, coherence, and meaning. Furthermore, “the process of narrating and revisiting stories about key life events over time may facilitate changes in the individual self-concept” (Jayawickreme et al., 2020, p. 151). The way we choose to

narrate our experience and interpret adversity and challenging life events is considered to our identity, development, and well-being (Jayawickreme et al., 2020).

There are many things that do not make sense to me; for instance, as in the case of many other cultures, mothers are admired. In my culture, people refer to the mother using her oldest child's name through the word (um), which means mother of. I only heard someone calling me "um Leen" once before my baby passed away. After my baby got buried, it was like my motherhood identity was buried with her.

In the case of baby loss, pregnancy is associated with womanhood and motherhood. The meaning of pregnancy and motherhood for a woman affects the meaning of the loss (Sturrock & Louw, 2013, p. 578). They are parts of women's identities as protectors. The baby loss deprives women of their role and identity (Sturrock & Louw, 2013). Losing a child affect how young women view themselves. Thus, some of them turn to adopt other kids or care for children in the family or society to restore meanings for their lives.

Personally, it could be true that my sense of identity was shattered into pieces after the loss of my baby, Leen. Though, my task now is to view these shattered aspects of the self-concept as mosaic in which I discern beauty. By working on self-care and self-development, I put these aspects together and raise again.

Expressive artmaking and narration allowed me to redefine my identity. I am a mother despite the loss of my baby. The fact that I no longer have my baby does not make me any less of a mother. Rather, the longing for my baby fills my heart with warm feelings toward children. I try to sustain my identity as a mother by considering myself to

be a mother for children in the family, converting my love for my baby to them and practicing what is called “social mothering.” For instance, my longing for my baby is represented in my artmaking through photographing babies. In the coloring pages, I chose pages that capture the mother-baby relationships to fulfill a need to redefine and reimagine our lost relationship. For instance, social mothering is embodied in my poetry where I said what translate to:

Sparrows of love...O my existence  
Singing between my poetry and melody  
So that a transparent memory remains  
And ‘flowers’ sleep in my embracement

The word ‘flowers’ in the verse refers to my niece Ward because the Arabic word “Ward” means flowers. At the time when I wrote the verse, my niece was a little baby. Even now, we are still very attached to each other. Beside the space which is left for my poetry, I put a tape with the following words: “It is the little things in life” followed by a symbolic heart which can be an indication of children. On the other side, the word Love is written. Further, I asked Ward to print her hand as a reminder of my social mothering. Her hand reminded me of my baby hand that I saw in the screen when the doctor said to me that the baby is saying “hi, mama.”

**Figure 5.2 Niece, Ward, Two-Years-Old**



However, Ward's hand now is a 4-year-old hand, as if my babies hand got bigger. Beside the printed little hand, I put a branch of a green plant. Above the printed hand, I put a beautiful stamp. I think that a symbolic meaning of the handprint is that Leen's childhood can be embodied in the love and childhood of other children. Above the hand, I put a stamp. It is as if Leen were leaving a beautiful trace behind her that is embodied in other children's lives. Love and social mothering of other children breathe life into Leen's memory and existence. The fun I had with my niece during the process of making the art piece made me realize that by making other kids happy, I feel happy and satisfied.

Not only artmaking helped me to reconstruct my identity as a mother, but also as a mother of an angel in heaven such as in the case of the painting of a healing place. I choose to paint the background as a sky or heaven while I draw two white wings for my baby.

**Figure 5.3** *Niece, Five-Years-Old*



***Loss as Opportunity for Growth***

A change that occurs as a result of adversity is called “post-traumatic growth” (PTG). PTG represents a shift on how we view the world rather than referring to returning to life as it was before (Cormier, 2018, p. 62). It “has been observed in victims of a diverse range of traumas, such as bereavement” (Ginneken, 2016, p. 209).

Cormier argues that PTG is represented by change in several domains notably in a sense of self—“I am not who I was before this happened to me”—in relationships with

others—“I’m choosing different persons to be connected with now”—and in philosophy of life—“I have different priorities” (Cormier, 2018, p. 62). PTG can be described as awakening (Cormier, 2018, p. 62).

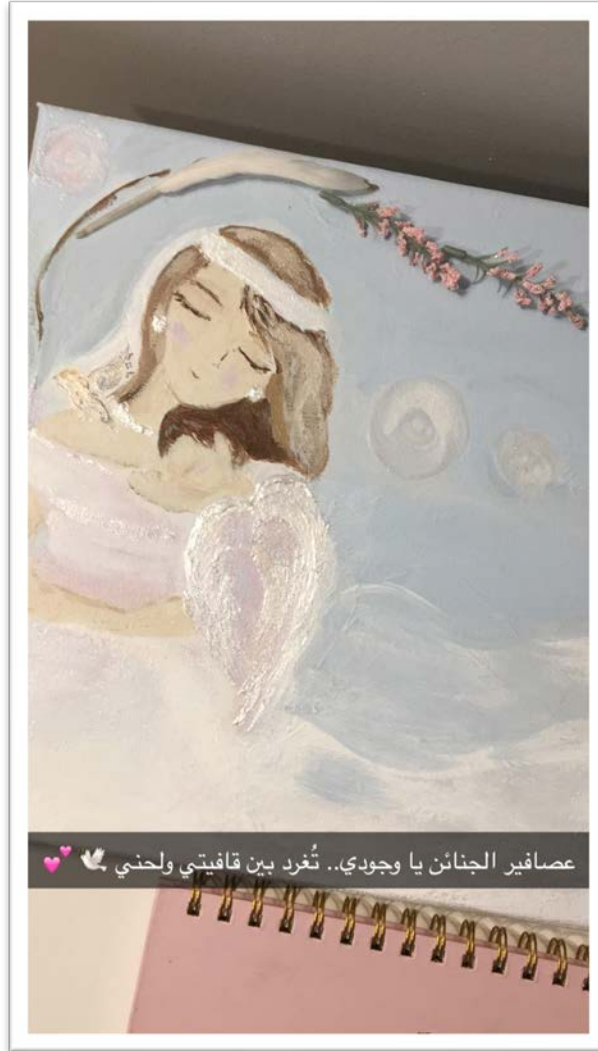
An example that resembles growth from my artmaking is the plant I put beside my niece’s handprint (in the mixed media), or the blossoming branch I put over my head on the painting. Both could indicate a growth.

Another example of growth is appreciating relationships, becoming empathetic, compassionate, or increasing the sensitivity toward others. In my personal experience of baby loss, empathy and compassion were two values I gained. For instance, acquiring the value of compassion can be clear when analyzing this part of my writing:

*If I could not forget about bad memories, then there is a wisdom or a purpose. I chose to hide my pain as treasure, in a hidden place of memory, I will only use my pain as guidance that leads me to my humanity, to feel of the suffering of others.*

Appreciation of compassion can also manifest in my artwork by elements I included and choices I made. For instance, in my painting, I used a feather. The softness and whiteness of the feather could indicate compassion and kindness. When I looked at the mixed media product as a source of inquiry, I noticed I put a piece of paper decorated with flowers and the word “Love,” which can be an indicative act of how I consider love, empathy, and compassion to be unique values. My baby name is Leen, which means softness. It is true lost Leen’s body, but her soul is still with me. Compassion, softness, and kindness are values through which I could breathe life in Leen’s existence.

**Figure 5.4 Activity 6: Painting – Exercise 1**



Further, I could tell that my niece's handprint not only reminded me of my baby girl but also it is a sign of STOP. As if it means stop being hard on yourself. Stop blaming yourself. The one who is telling me to stop is someone who loves me unconditionally.

Moreover, the act of preparing the mixed media in such a beautiful way and leaving a space to write something for the self is an act of self-care itself. The concept of



social mothering I discussed previously can be applied to PTG as well. Words I used in my poetry to be included in the mixed media product like “and flowers sleep in my embracement” indicate affection and compassion.

There is no going back. We cannot escape grief: “[t]here is no moving on. There is only moving *with*: an integration of all that has come before” (Devine, 2017, p. 169). Grief changes us: “We are changed by our new realities. We exist at the edge of becoming” (Devine, 2017, p. 168). However, it has the potential to change us for the better: growth can be evident in being more patient or tolerant; I realized that: “I may hold my scars and my joy simultaneously. I need not choose between bending or breaking but that, through patience, I may be transferred” (Devine, 2017, p. 169).

I think that growth can manifest due to the ability to find beauty while experiencing the suffering in a form of ‘the aesthetic moment’. We have a choice about how to perceive everything. Reframing negative thinking into positive is the most critical step in surviving the loss (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 46). There is a conscious or unconscious decision to be made... to stagnate in sorrow or to grow (Hornbeck, 2004, p. 46). Ginneken (2016) notes, “Among stories of damage and despair, one can also find expressions of hope” (p. 211). Additionally, creativity could assist in developing self-awareness. My awareness of my own suffering leads me to realize, understand, and empathize with other people’s suffering.

It is fascinating how we can find beauty in the middle of suffering and demise, the beauty that comes from humanitarian qualities such as love, care, forgiveness, appreciation, and gratitude. Not only in my own experience, but generally, in the

literature of grief and loss, there are many reading pieces that started narrating the journey of suffering and struggles, but ended up with finding peace, love, and gratitude. Such pieces were eye opening, soul moving, and heart touching.

I consider the concept of PTG to be an umbrella term of a meaning that has the capacity to cover many types of other meanings, benefits and human qualities we can draw from the bereavement or any other challenging experience. PTG can be embodied in five primary domains identified by Ginneken (2016). I believe that each one of these domains can cover endless ranges of meanings and purpose. These five domains are: appreciation of life, personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities or paths for one's life, and spiritual change (Ginneken, 2016, p. 209).

An example of spiritual growth is feeling closer to God. Indeed, “[m]any people describe feelings of greater closeness to God as the result of critical life events” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014, p. 124). An example of the notion of transcendence can be founded in letters I wrote to my sister while I was far away from her:

I am not far away...

I am in the flowers that smile at you

I am in the birds that sing to you...

When you are alone, I will be your sun and your moon

When you go through darkness, through things you can't handle, I will be your candle

Even if I die, I will watch over you from the heavenly beautiful sky

I will be around you...

With angels... or like a butterfly

An example of the relating-to-others domain could be demonstrated through specific moral personality traits and an increase of prosocial behavior following adversity in a form of growth called “altruism born of suffering” (Wiley, 2020). Wiley (2020) establishes that altruism born of suffering extends to members of the out-group and can be explained by greater empathy and compassion. Speaking of finding meanings and the opportunity to grow, Ginneken (2016) maintains:

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into human achievement. When we are no longer able to change the situation... we are challenged to change ourselves. (p. 208)

In the below section, I highlight the influence my own culture has on determining and shaping women’s grief and the meanings we create.

### **Culture: Between Beliefs, Faith, Rituals and Superstitions**

My cultural realms significantly influenced the way I experienced the baby loss. First, gender can strongly affect the psychological distress (Suhail et al., 2011). Women can be more intensively affected by loss. Thus, being a woman is one factor that shaped my experience. Further, language can affect how bereaved mothers feel. In the everyday language of Arabic, the word “fail” refers to either a person who has failed a test, or a mother who lost a baby. I think that such a word choice that is used to refer to someone failing an exam can harm the feeling of the mother by causing her to grow a sense of failing a womanhood task. Sturrock and Louw (2013) note: “Older women play a role in

meaning-making. There is an underlying presence of older women in the lives of all the mothers, giving them advice and comfort, and passing on religious or cultural norms around mourning” (p. 583).

Additionally, older women may pass certain beliefs and superstitions. In my own case, one of these beliefs is called “the follower.” The follower is believed to be a *jinni* creature who causes death for babies and miscarriages for women. I doubt that my cousin who warned us of a *jinni* chasing us heard about it at that time. The follower is afraid of metals therefore, women are advised to wear them to scare her. I personally know a woman who had experienced several baby losses. Thus, her mother’s in law slaughtered a chicken to let the follower go. Interestingly, she had healthy babies after that. In my personal experience, I was advised by a woman who is older than me to wear an anklet of metal, and to ask an old well-known religious person to write me certain Quranic verses to protect me.

Aside from the follower, I think that the practice of fortune tellers can affect women’s health indirectly. What they heard can stay in their subconscious minds affecting their self-concepts, and health and attitudes. Though, the fortune tellers are rarely found. When ordinary people engage in such practices, they do it just for fun.

“The eye” is another belief that can be associated with baby loss. If someone looks at a pregnant woman and envies her, something bad could happen for her or the baby. Thus, some women don’t announce their pregnancy until the last few months when it becomes clear that they are pregnant. In addition to the belief of “the eye,” the *sehr* or

black magic is another belief. It is even mentioned in some verses in the holy Quran. Some people might do it in order to ruin a couple's relationship.

However, not only older women pass beliefs and influence the wellbeing of women. There are people of power such as religious leaders and even doctors themselves. For instance, when the doctor talked about the baby saying "if the baby is expired," she was insensitive to my feelings. Religious leaders can also have a powerful negative impact. There is an indication in the literature that women fear harsh judgments, especially when they receive them from people who they admire such as their religious leaders, friends, or doctors.

Some religious leaders are not aware of how they blame the victims or contribute to the suffering of people. While most troubled people turn to spiritual and worship places seeking healing, the fact that religious people are playing God and making judgments such as using certain phrases like "God is teaching a lesson" is a major issue. If a bereaved mother thinks that God is teaching her a lesson, or that she does not deserve to be a mother, then her mental state will be affected, which could even impact her reproductive health. Such a woman could move in the same cycle with the issue because of the fear that was planted in her heart.

There were moments in which I felt hopeless and felt responsible. I asked myself what if something like *sehr* was made. However, my choices in the art-making shows that I chose to direct my attention to other probabilities. I chose to focus my attention that whatever was behind what I have been through, after all it is a mere test or a trail rather than anything else. In fact, even my fear that resulted from the overall difficult experience

is considered a test. I believe that remembering God causes hearts to attain safeness and calmness. Thus, I chose to work on art products using some Quranic verses that are reassuring and promising. Whatever the real cause of my suffering was, ultimately my worldly losses are considered a test, and I am promised to be rewarded. Below, I explained in more details how my religious and spiritual influenced the way I perceive my experience and make sense of it.

### ***Religious and Spiritual Affiliation: The Influence of Adhering to Islam***

The religious affiliation influences the way bereaved individuals grieve. Sayings of Prophet Mohamed PBUH and verses from the Holy Quran provided me with immense strength to face the loss with dignity (Suhail et al., 2011). Central to the personal development is one's openness to spiritual experiences. For instance, in the Islamic calligraphy I made, I choose a Qur'anic verse that was assuring and promising and helped me to make sense of this hardship as a test or a trial. The verse translates to "And most certainly shall We try you by means of danger, and hunger, and loss of worldly goods, of lives and crops; But give glad tidings to those who are patient in adversity." Thus, a great strength can be acquired from religious beliefs and understanding that death was the will of God.

Furthermore, some Muslims perceive deceased babies as birds in heaven or that they are in the embracement of Lady Fatima. Others believe that children will wait for their parents by the gate of heavens to help them enter. Thinking of my baby as happy, peaceful, and waiting for me in heaven helps to alleviate the pain (Suhail et al., 2011). Muslims believe that death is a natural human condition in life. Within the religious

context of the Islamic teachings and beliefs are concepts like, faith, afterlife, submission, trusting God.

Faith (*Eman*) is strongly associated with tests and tribulations, which can come in many forms, one of which is the loss of loved one (Raduan et al., 2018, p. 244). For instance, it is stated in the Holy Quran: “Do people think that they will be left alone because they say: ‘we believe,’ and will not be tested. And we indeed tested those who were before them so that Allah will indeed know those who are true, and He will know those who are liars.”

Islam teachings emphasize remembering Allah and having good assumptions about Him during distress as a source of calming and peace. It encourages its followers to remember in times of distress that we belong to Allah, and to Him shall we return, and incorporate that in their world view (Raduan, 2018, p. 246). Death, based on this notion, is nothing to fear since it is depicted as a reunion with the origin, the creator (Zare-Behtash, 2016, p. 79).

Love and mercy are values within the faith of Islam. For instance, Allah SWT reminds human being of the closeness of Him and his calming angels: “And we are closer to him than (his) jugular vein.” Believing in the only One, All-Powerful, All-knowledgeable, and Most Compassionate, trusting Him, and depending on Him could definitely help human beings revive from their confusion and misery (Raduan et al., 2018, p. 247), so that they can make sense of adversity.

Patience is known as a quality of spiritual growth in distress (Raduan et al., 2018, p. 247). Allah SWT stated in the Quran: “Be patient and persevere, for Allah is with

those who patiently persevere.” There are many verses that talk about the reward for patient people. For instance, “and those who steadfastly persevere will receive their recompense generously, without limits.”

Moreover, important stories of patience are mentioned in the Holy Quran such as the story of prophet Ayyub (Jacob) who was tested through his family, health, and wealth. Prophet Ayyub never listened to the Satan or gave up, rather he prayed saying “verily, distress has seized me, and You are the most merciful of all those who show mercy.”

### ***The Influence of Belonging to Shia as a School of Thought***

I also belong to Shia’s school of thought, another cultural dimension that significantly influenced shaping the grieving experience. Shia Muslims have “a distinct culture with longstanding traditions, customs, and values alongside strong religious ties” (Suhail et al., 2011, p. 23). They follow a school of thought with unique grief rituals and traditions.

The narrative of Karbala is the cultural heritage that helps to facilitate validating the loss of a child. One of the meaning-making tasks of grief is to validate the reality of the child (Sturrock & Louw, 2013, p. 577). Aguirre (2008) notes, “Meaning-making involves individuals’ attempts to assimilate or make congruent the occurrence of the stressful experience with their pre-crisis or pre-event beliefs” (p. 7). Shia’s school of thought nurtures the development of continuing relationship and translate rituals into mourning practices. Engaging in Azaa ritual year after year and listening to the narrative of the tragedy of Karbala’ represent an opportunity to mourn the lost child, to restore the



meaning by transcending the event and acknowledging the relationship with the love ones.

Remembering constitutes an important part of Shia's identity; we (re)negotiate a "collective memory" and engage in "collective remembering" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 89). Shia Muslims are called Twelver due to their belief of twelve Imams, the first of whom is Imam Ali and the third of whom is Imam Hussain. Imam Husain is the grandson of the prophet, who was murdered with almost his entire family in the land of Karbala, Iraq. The Karbala epic tragedy and its literature shape most of the Shia's collective Identity.

Just as Shias do all over the world during the first ten nights of the month of Muharram, Shia's women gather and engage in a collective remembering of the epic of Karbala: "Such meetings provide these women with a space to find meaning" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 90). Language, narrative, and other forms of expression make a "cultural tool kit" for remembering the past due to their role of evoking emotions (Shanneik, 2014, p. 91).

### ***A Brief Background of Karbala History***

Twelver Shia believes that Imam Ali, the prophet's cousin should have been the successor of the prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Karbala tragedy occurred because Hussain, the son of Ali and the only living grandson of the prophet back then, was the most significant threat to Yazid.

Yazid, who was appointed as a ruler by his father, demanded an official oath of loyalty from Hussain. Yazid believed that such an oath would grant him legitimacy. Hussain refused and received many letters from Kufa in Southern Iraq in which people

asked him to come and lead a revolution against Yazid. On his way to Kufa, Hussain's party was intercepted by Yazid's army in Karbala near the Furat River, prevented from access to water for days. On the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram in 680, the epic of Karbala took place and Imam Hussain was killed.

The *majlis* or the *ma'tam* is a religious gathering where Shia people remember and mourn the death of Imam Hussain and his family. It takes place in the first ten days of Muharram annually. Some of Shia's women make religious vows to hold *majles* and feed the community or the poor (Shanneik, 2014, p. 92). The text in the poetry recited during the *majles* is very visual and detailed when describing the torture of Imam Hussain and his family (Shanneik, 2014, p. 93).

During the *ma'tam*, historical events are made personal through personal connections and by addressing the women directly. For instance, the reader would say something like: "you all have babies; imagine one of your babies being killed in such a brutal way" (Shanneik, 2014, p. 93).

Shia women can relate to the text of Karbala's tragedy and connect it to their suffering and loss. The narrative of Karbala can describe their loss or remind them of recent experiences of grief: "These religious rituals possess a quasi-psychotherapeutic function in which the women can express their range of feelings of sorrow (Shanneik, 2014, p. 94).

### ***Loss and Female Shia's Role models***

Lady Zainab and the women of Karbala are remembered for supporting and nursing men. The notion of martyrdom and hoping to be rewarded in the afterlife form an

important aspect of Shia's identity. Such concepts are highlighted through women's suffering and sacrifices. There are two main sub-narratives that tend to be repeated and covered in the shia's *majlis* ritual. These sub-narratives tend to focus on remembering two female religious figures: Lady Fatimah and Lady Zainab. Lady Fatimah is the daughter of the prophet and the mother of Imam Hussain. Lady Zainab is the sister of Imam Hussain who witnessed the epic of Karbala and transferred the story. These two ladies are considered a source for inspiration to Shia's females because of how they faithfully endured profound loss and hardships. Lady Fatimah is sometimes portrayed as a victim of oppression after the death of her father. Shia holds the narrative of the attack on her house by some people to force her husband to give up his position. She was standing behind the door when someone pushed it to enter and hit her, causing her to miscarry her pregnancy, get ill, and eventually pass away (Shanneik, 2014).

Shia refers to Lady Zainab as 'jabal al-sabr' (mountain of patience) (Shanneik, 2014, p. 100). She is remembered as a role model of resistance, patience, courage, and strength, through fighting for social and political change. She is also remembered for caring for women and children after the battle, and for being fully in control of the situation. After the epic, she and other women and children were taken to Yazid palace. Yazid asked her: "how did you see God treating your brother and young people?" She answered proudly: "I saw nothing but beauty." Shia emphasizes her eloquence when addressing her enemies, believing that it is because of her courage to speak up that the history of Karbala is still alive (Shanneik, 2014, p. 99).

Spirituality and memory play a central role in shaping and influencing the identity of Shia's women during the aftermath of loss. Additionally, such expressive rituals seem to play a profound role to endure loss and cope with suffering. According to Buckingham and Howard (2017): "not only women but also their families, communities, and cultures construct meaning by integrating the experience of grief into their larger cultural and religious narrative" (p.78). Through binding with groups and ideals, spiritual practices and rituals, these women seem to reach transcendence. Mount et al. (2007) reported that meaning-based coping is linked to healing connection with either self, others, or with a higher power (p. 386). They maintained that "the sufferer is not isolated by pain but is brought closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares that meaning" (Mount et al., 2007, p. 386).

## **The Power of Compassion and Art to Heal in the Face of Baby Loss**

### ***The Healing Power of Compassion***

My second research question allowed me to explore how compassion and art have a healing power for bereaved women like me. In the following sections, I argue that compassion and art have a healing power based on the constructivist view and include scholar sayings as evidence of my argument.

The lack of compassion and rude treatment many bereaved women received from key influential members of societies across cultures, as demonstrated as a major theme in the literature review in this study, is what makes me believe that compassion is imperative to facilitate the healing process. The literature review and some of the historical grief models indicated that bereaved people tend to struggle with a variety of

heavy emotions including fear, shame, and guilt. Indeed, “[c]ompassion means responding with care and concern to reactions that arise as shame, unworthiness, and fear” (Liebenson, 2019, p. 82). There are three contexts in which the effectiveness of compassion on negative feelings has been investigated, which are: cultivating compassion for others, receiving compassion from others, and extending compassion for oneself (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015).

A qualitative study concerning the experience of teens losing friends to suicide has reported four main themes found to be common experiences during the experience of loss: meaning-making, feeling guilt, risky coping behavior, and relating to friends (Tetterer, 2018, p. 25). Two themes that were generated from the study, which are "meaning-making" and "feeling guilt", suggest a need to deal with bereavement compassionately. The bereaved person tends to engage in the meaning-making process while also struggling with feelings of guilt. This is critical in determining the well-being of the bereaved. I think that feeling of guilt when combined with the need to make sense of the loss experience can influence the process and outcomes of finding meaning. Feeling guilty can blur the reality, resulting in harsh judgments from the bereaved toward himself or herself.

Tim Desmond states that Western psychology, cognitive science, Buddhist psychology, and neuroscience all have theories about how the mind constructs experiences (Desmond, 2016, p. 16). Guilt, regret, and self-blame are considered the roots of many symptoms of bereavement. The individual's experience with grief work can be defined as:

A person's psychological efforts to work through the reality of the loss of a loved one and the feelings in which the person must (1) Achieve freedom from the feelings of guilt about ways he or she had criticized or harmed the person who died and feelings of regrets for things left unsaid or undone (2) make an adjustment to all the aspects of the environment from which the deceased is missing: and (3) begin to form new relationships. (Tetterer, 2018, p. 1)

In light of the previous statement, we can conclude that a primary condition the bereaved needs to meet in order to improve emotionally is to overcome the feeling of guilt, and liberate himself or herself from regrets. Here comes the importance of compassion, whether received from others or even cultivated for oneself.

In order to explain how compassion can improve our well-being during bereavement, we need to illustrate the relationship between compassion and constructivism. During the aftermath of loss, the bereaved tries to make sense of the experience and re-define himself or herself. Our minds tend to create stories to make sense of our experiences. However, Desmond states that the process of constructing meaning is oftentimes out of our conscious awareness. Meanwhile, these stories we tend to create to make sense of events have a profound impact on us that is deeper than what objectively happens in our lives: “Our stories can be concretized into *core beliefs* about who we are and the kind of world in which we live. These core beliefs, though occur unconsciously, have a huge impact on the amount of suffering and happiness in our lives” (Desmond, 2016, p. 117).

As people attempt to make sense of their experiences, they construct stories, to explain *why* traumas happen in their lives. The individual's automatic thinking assigns meanings immediately and generally unconsciously (Desmond, 2016). Such stories we create to interpret reality could determine how we view or define ourselves and how we

feel about ourselves. Additionally, they could influence also the amount of suffering we experience and our predisposition to cope. For instance, Desmond (2016) argues that adults who had experienced abuse in their childhood may grow up attributing the child abuse issue to themselves, believing they were bad children. Similarly, cultivating compassion toward the self, and receiving it from others during bereavement can also determine the types of stories we construct to process the trauma and eventually affects how we feel about ourselves. Compassion, therefore, through its potential to positively influence how we reconstruct our stories can replace negative core beliefs and harsh criticism with more empathetic beliefs—gently establishing a new view of the self and reframing the identity. Thus, compassion can reduce our suffering and improve our wellbeing.

The harsh nature of traumatic events is by itself sufficient to draft someone into negative thinking, feeling guilty, and creating stories of self-blame and shame. Aside from the harsh reality of traumatic events, there is also another external factor: the influence of our environments and cultures. Stories we create to make sense of our realities can be profoundly influenced by beliefs in our environments or by the kind of treatment we receive from others. For instance, receiving uncompassionate treatment in the aftermath of loss may influence the way a bereaved person views himself or herself, producing more and more feelings of shame, regret ,and guilt—damaging the identity and leading to greater suffering, especially if the person is originally self-critical toward himself or herself. On the other hand, treating a sufferer with compassion can encourage the person to be less judgmental toward himself or herself. It can cultivate self-kindness

in his or her mentality, and eventually help to liberate them from the feelings of guilt and regret.

### **Reasons for Lack of Compassion**

Some cultural factors and core beliefs can influence how we view ourselves and shape our sense of selves and our worldviews: “The meaning-making process is shaped by three elements: the neurological characteristics of the individual, the cultural context, and the intercultural settings (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018). Sadly, most bereaved individuals receive insensitive treatment during the aftermath of a death. Megan Devine explains why people engage in uncompassionate behaviors such as blaming the victim. Devine (2017) states in her book, *It's OK that you're NOT OK*, that when it comes to the culture around grief and death, people tend to judge, blame, and minimize (p. 39). She maintains that “most grieving people have felt judged and shamed inside their pain” (Devine, 2017, p. 40). According to her, blaming others for their traumas somehow soothes our brains. By thinking that the person did something ridiculous; by blaming, we think we become shielded from being in a similar situation. We think that through our good sense we, and those we love, will be kept safe. Devine maintains that blame is a way to discharge pain and discomfort (Devine, 2017).

Because “evidence of someone else's nightmare is proof that we could be the next,” we look for something to minimize our discomfort (Devine, 2017, p. 41). Due to this awareness, “we shut down our empathy centers. We deny our connection. We shift into judgment and blame” (Devine, 2017, p. 41). We don't like to see ourselves reflected in other people suffering, so we deny our relatedness. We hate to acknowledge that many



life devastating events are out of our control. This culture of blame, we think, keeps us safe. There is a sociality acceptable blame structure in which any type of pain of hardship—including grief—is met with shame and judgments (Devine, 2017, p. 43).

Believers are not immune from judgments, too. For instance, they could automatically create stories about why God has not answered their prayers when they asked Him to save the ill person. One might create stories that the trauma happened because he or she is a bad person. Uncompassionate people such as those who are judgmental can deepen such beliefs and increase the suffering of the bereaved individuals when interacting with them. Bereaved people could internalize these blaming and shaming voices and fall into a deep state of depression and suffering.

### **Cultivating Compassion**

While finding meaning cannot change the traumatic events that occur in our lives, it can change how we feel about these experiences. Joyce Rupp indicates that “Meaning does not change the particulars of our lives; it changes our experience of those particulars” (Rupp, 2018, p. 81). Compassionate treatment, I believe, is an essential communicative tool for producing positive meanings, and feeling about these experiences. Compassion can help the bereaved to regain trust and to rebuild his worldview in a peaceful way. German (2019) argues that a significant part of creating a safe space is through the embodiment of empathy (p. 4). German maintains that “Respect, kindness, authenticity, affirmation, and empathy are all seen as compassionate qualities” (p. 4).

Desmond (2016) introduces the concept of modular constructivism. He maintains that different parts of the brain (modularity) could be trained to create more mindful stories, this is what we mean through modular constructivism (Desmond, 2016, p. 163). For instance, through learning how to be kind to ourselves, we can make sense of hard experiences we go through by making stories that are not harmful to our self-concepts, rather we could practice self-kindness and self-compassion by making stories that cast us in a positive light. Thus, we avoid internalizing critical voices that could undermine our sense of selves. Essentially, “The social interaction of others help individuals construct their ‘model of reality’ by language, behaviors, and other symbols” (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018, p. 581). Thus, we need to learn how to embrace ourselves and others with kindness, love, and compassion, so that our brains become trained to create mindful stories rather than harmful ones, especially during traumatic events.

Compassion can be cultivated by acknowledging our common humanity and transforming negative judgments into acceptance and unconditional love. Science assures the potential of brain cells to change through a lifetime (Rupp, 2018, p. 22). Joyce Rupp in her book, *Boundless Compassion* states that “neurons that fire together wire together” (Rupp, 2018, p. 20), and “what we focus on, aspire to, and practice will make a difference in our brains...in other words, we can teach our minds to activate compassion” (Rupp, 2018, p. 21).

Daniel Sulmasy suggests in *The Healer’s Calling*, true healing requires three human elements: “compassion, touch, and conversation” (Coulehan, 2009, p. 594). Compassionate treatment can encourage the sufferer to connect, to talk, and to re-define

his or her identity and reconstruct the shattering reality in a hopeful and peaceful way. Further, Jack Coulehan (2009) illustrates the healing power of compassion and how it could relieve suffering in his article, "Compassionate Solidarity," arguing, "the creation of an empathic connection is in itself a healing action: being present to, listening, affirming, and witnessing are actions that can be accomplished" (p. 597).

Moreover, Neimeyer maintains that central to coping is "to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by the loss" (Steffen, 2019, p. 131). Meaning reconstruction can be deep going in certain cases of loss such as the deaths of children and young people, or the experience of the sudden demise of a loved one. It prompts us to "re-learn the self" and "re-learn the world" (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, Steffen argues that the purpose of storytelling is to achieve a meaningful interpretation:

there is an understanding of meaning reconstruction as involving a narrative process that draws on existing symbols and discourses and that has the goal of arriving at a meaningful account of the events and a reconstructed sense of self via the storying of one's experience (Steffen, 2019, p. 131)

All the above statements prove the importance of reconstructing the self and the reality in the grieving process. Meanwhile:

bereavement is all about relationship, and it is through relationships that people often seek and find comfort in the aftermath of loss, whether this is with family or friends, support groups and communities, or a counselor or therapist. (Steffen, 2019, p. 133)

Thus, connecting with the bereaved through compassion can cultivate a sense of belonging, which in turn, encourages generating meaningful stories. Compassion, therefore, can be viewed as the gate to healing. It can open the door toward creating

meaningful and therapeutic accounts: “Compassionate solidarity is therapeutic in itself. It also serves as an avenue for deep communication” (Coulehan, 2009, p. 598).

Compassionate communication gives the bereaved people a hand to collect the shattered pieces of their life’s story and repair their reality. For instance, Harter (2012) thinks that a traumatic narrative can carry a sense of “being shipwrecked,” repeated storytelling function as “repair work on the wreck” (p. 17). The narrative also has a reconstructive effect. It contributes to developing a new identity and reconstructing the damaged one: “To heal is not only to repair, but to create a new” (Harter, 2012, p. 33).

Compassion is indeed therapeutic because we are humans, after all. Many of the physical symptoms we experience during bereavement are caused by our intense emotions and suffering souls: “Our task as humans is to extend compassion to all beings, large and small, like us or unlike us, those in mourning and those in pain—and to extend compassion to our own self” (Cacciatore, 2017, p. 180). Through compassionate communication and empathetic connection with others, the bereaved gains a sense of belonging, feels safe to open his or her heart, feels heard, and shares stories that help reconstruct his or her identity.

Not only does the bereaved person need to reconstruct his or her identity, they also need to reconstruct the events and the deceased: “There is also a well-reported need for the bereaved to reconstruct the deceased through talk with others who knew the loved one” (Steffen, 2019, p. 133). Indeed, “[s]uch construction is a social endeavor whereby stories about the deceased are shared and continued as a joint narrative process” (Steffen, 2019, p.133).

All in all, through promoting and creating a culture of compassion in which people learn to practice compassion toward self and others, we can empower bereaved people and enable them to reconstruct new meaningful stories and rebuild their identities. Negative core beliefs, guilt, and harsh judgments stand in the way of the healing process. Ultimately, “[c]ompassion is the road out of suffering and toward wellbeing” (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 129), because it has the ability to replace these harsh emotions with self-kindness and respect, in the face of loss. Communicating compassion can help to rebuild the threatened identity and reconstruct the shattered world view in a more peaceful way.

### **Constructivism and the Healing Power of Art**

A growing body of research views the grieving experience as a process of reaffirming or reconstructing a world of meaning that has been shattered by loss (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 4). Meaning-making in its various forms has been associated with more favorable coping outcomes. The role of expressive arts in healing can be viewed through the lens of meaning reconstruction (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 7). A growing number of researches prove that using arts such as narrative can supplement meaning reconstruction (Tettermer, 2018, p. 46). For instance, there is evidence that certain interventions such as journaling can bring about a great reduction in symptomatology of prolonged grief (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, p. 4).

The art activities and narratives I wrote showed their efficacy by leading me to the “areas of grief that have not been resolved” and “to feelings that still need to be

expressed...That is where their work and healing lies—in those feelings” (Kessler, 2019, p. 69).

Expressive arts techniques can help bereaved people to integrate their experiences with loss into their lives narratives. According to Cathy A. Malchiodi (2007), one can rebuild himself or herself after an experience of loss through transforming feelings and emotions into a visual product. She states that art making is an effective way to make hurting and terrifying events concrete, let them go, and release them (Malchiodi, 2010, p.134). Thus, arts can offer relief by liberating the person from the trap of harmful emotions.

Through the process of making arts, one can transcend the painful experience into a new meaningful understanding of reality. In other words, arts can facilitate healing by transforming pain into beauty. Tettermer (2018) describes Neimeyer’s (2011) approach as one that:

breaks the search for meaning down into three categories: practical, relational, and spiritual/existential. Practical questions involve semantic such as how did my loved one die? Relational Questions ask who the bereaved is without the person they lost, who am I without my mother? Spiritual/existential questions are things like how did God allow this to happen to me? (p. 7)

These categories of finding meaning’s needs which Neimeyer identified can be met through engaging in expressive arts. The reason is that art-making enables people to “express emotions, process events, understand relationships, increase self-awareness, develop self-identity, make meaning, manifest values, and find relief through the creation of images” (German, 2019, p. 5).

Art can be viewed as powerful energy of construction and creation. “Certain things need to break down to achieve renewal” (Mcniff, 2004, p. 214), so does the energy of destruction which can be an introduction of a greater purpose. The energy of art is a creation that counters or responds to hardship's destructive energy. When a crisis happens and a person breaks down because of it, the person's sense of self can be shaken. Art can be used to help this emotionally destroyed person to imagine a new normal, to reframe the person's self-concept and build a new identity. For instance, Charon (2017) notes the healing power of narrative writing, as an effective healing form of art: “By creating a narrative of my experiences, fiction or nonfiction, I alter just slightly my *relationship* to these facts, so that I can find in them a different kind of ‘truth’—not just the truth of facts, but the truth of experience” (p. 221).

Further, Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy stated in their co-edited book *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*:

By writing about a traumatic experience, we discover and rediscover them, move them out of the ephemeral flow and space of talk onto the more permanent surface of the page, where they can be considered, reconsidered, left, and taken up again. Through the dual possibilities of permanence and revision, the chief healing effect of writing is thus to recover and to exert a measure of control over that which we can never control—the past. (Charon, 2017, p. 222).

Art has a powerful healing effect due to the sense of agency it can offer for us. Creativity provides the bereaved person with possible comfortable explanations to the sad reality. Moreover, it offers the person the opportunity to create an intangible world in which the bereaved could reconnect with the deceased through memory and imagination. It is an instrument to reconstruct the person's assumptions and views of the self and the world: “As we manipulate words on the page, as we articulate to ourselves and to others the

emotional truths of the pasts, we become agents for our own healing” (Charon, 2017, p. 222).

Healing after an experience of loss can be defined as a transformation from the psychological shock to a state in which the bereaved becomes active in expressing himself or herself and can connect with others again. Healing is defined as

neither a return to some former state of perfection nor the discovery of some mythic autonomous self...It is a change from a singular self, frozen in time by a moment of unspeakable experience, to more fluid, more narratively able, more socially integrated self. (Charon, 2017, p. 222).

After suffering and loss, we often perceive the world as chaotic, and confusing (Charon, 2017, p. 222). However, “survival begins when we “translate” this suffering into language” (Charon, 2017, p. 223). Hence, art-making provides us with access to exercise control over seemingly uncontrollable destructive situations, through shaping and reshaping our views of self, the deceased, and our relationships with them. Again, it provides us with a sense of agency to actively reconstruct our reality. For instance, Charon (2017) argues that

in the act of making of a poem at least two crucial things have taken place that are different from ordinary life. First, we have shifted the crisis to be a bearable distance from us: removed it to the symbolic but vivid world of language. Second, we have actively made and shaped this model of our situation rather than passively endured it as a life experience. (p. 223)

As noted previously, when a loss occurs, we try to “re-learn” ourselves and the world around us. Shaping, reshaping and reconstructing our sense of self and the world around us is what the constructivism theory calls for. The process of meaning-making consists of three elements: making sense of the loss, finding benefit in the experience, and the identity change. Identity change is similar to PSG (Aksoz-Efe et al., p. 581).



In summary, art-making can facilitate healing because it supplements meaning reconstruction. It provides the bereaved person with a sense of agency to redefine the self and relearn the world. Thus, the bereaved person can rebuild a new identity, and create a new intangible world of connection with the deceased through imagination and memory. Reconstructing meanings of identity and the world happen, as the person acquires an ability to transform painful emotions into beauty, which not only can foster healing, but manifest in a form of post-traumatic growth.

### **Art as a Medium for Compassion**

What was it about art-creation process that led to facilitating compassion? Art creation allowed for compassion because compassion involves an act to alleviate the pain. Essentially, “[t]he reach of your compassion is the reach of your art” (German, 2019, p. 4). Taking the step to engage in art-making and providing myself with a safe space was a deliberate and compassionate act toward myself. I am building a new relationship with myself that is filled with self-appreciation.

Integrating compassion concepts through imagery and words such as meeting the compassionate self, listening to a compassionate message was another act through which I intended to extend compassion to myself. Shaping and reshaping my identity casting myself in a positive light is another manifestation of extending compassion to myself: “Following the creation of the image in one’s mind, the concrete form of the visual arts may help the client actualize and integrate the awareness of a compassionate inner self” (German, 2019, p. 24).

Selecting soothing practices such as mandala coloring and mixed media was another means through which I was able to engage with my emotions in a contained way, and give myself a sense of control, control over my emotions and negative feeling. Stress reduction resulted from such mindfulness practices could be an important process of developing self-compassion (German, 2019). Awareness of the pain and suffering lead to compassion. More compassionate sense of self is developed by learning to be mild and accept my own creative expressions (Arnold, 2021).

Mindful-compassion practices were integrated in and enhanced by the art practices and the concrete products. Art creation was planned to support self-compassion concepts in a customized way and develop concrete imagery (German, 2019). The protocol of various art activities allowed for “an opportunity redrawing and re-narrating the self in the context of recalled, perceived, and imagined resources rather than trauma” (German, 2019, p. 22). For instance, controlling my emotions and regulating them was achieved through intentionally practicing to replace negative self-talk by more kind ones through the process of browsing empowering words using layers in mixed media session.

The process of mentally planning the mixed media project itself led me to review affirmations, envision using some of them, allowing me to see myself from a new perspective (German, 2019, p. 6). Expressing sadness and negativity with a dark color, then covering it with something affirming provided me with a sense of control and allowed for embracing myself and expressing compassion. Decorating it elegantly leaving a space to write something made me relate to myself kindly and respectfully.

Aside from the imagery of the compassionate self and the opening up mindful compassion exercises, working on designing the product itself is an embodiment of working on improving myself. The visuals could be placed in the living space “to be recognized by the brain as a reminder of self-compassion” (German, 2019, p. 2). Further, visuals could foster empathy in the audience by building a bridge with audience, make them to see the experience through my eyes.

I think that based on concepts of Neimeyer’s Constructivism theory, we can conclude that art and compassion can be considered two sides of the same coin. Both are important in fostering wellbeing and facilitating healing. German (2019) maintains that “art and compassion appear to be inextricably linked” (p. 4). I stated that compassion could function as a gate for a healing narrative. On the other hand, Harter (2012) argues that “art-making can open up a dialogue that otherwise might remain dormant” (p. 38). For instance, connecting through compassion stimulate producing meaningful and healing narrative, which can be considered a form of art. Meanwhile, art-making allows for connection and compassionate communication and reactions to occur both from other people and from the self. These two communicative elements “compassion and expressive arts” enjoy many constructional roles. Thus, when combined together, we can have an excellent intervention for improving the wellbeing of bereaved people. The findings of the present study reinforced the view that consider art and compassion as natural partners (Bennett-Levy et al., 2020, p. 9).

I started the chapter by defining the concept of meaning making. I connected the study to the framework of the theory. I listed themes of meaning making that I found

applicable for my own experience. I discussed how my culture influenced the way I grieve, cope, and make meaning of experience of baby loss. Lastly, I discussed the second research question, which is how art and compassion facilitated my healing process based on our theoretical framework.

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

The study strengths and limitation are inherent in the strengths and limitations of performing art informed-autoethnography. It combined “both theoretically sophisticated understandings and artistically inspired images” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 457).

Autoethnography, as a method, has the potential to produce emotionally and intellectually powerful texts that extends beyond the page or the stage, impacting audiences and communities (Adams et al., 2021).

The study is significant for taking up a taboo topic met with silence in many cultures: the experience of baby death and loss. The study is an embodied inquiry that relies on artistic means to create meanings, “identify life lessons, share vulnerable moments of taboo, confusion, pain, and uncertainty” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 143). The study demonstrates knowledge of past research by making explicit references of past research, and advances the body of knowledge by exploring the topic from a unique cultural perspective.

Art is used as both a method of inquiry and a mood of representation (Knowles, & Cole, 2008, p. 45). In designing the activities, I used concepts from three pioneers in their fields Neimeyer, Kristin Neff, and Gilbert. Visuals are produced and they could be subject for further interpretation and research. The artistic images produced carry the

theory elegantly and eloquently through symbols and metaphors (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 45). Visual methods might elicit intellectual and emotional responses, which makes the study more likely to influence how we think and act. Art is powerful in that it could be more memorable than academic texts, has the power to reach wider audience and receive more attention. Artful means forms internal memories that could be hard to erase.

I explained in detail how I could make sense of the experience of loss from a cultural perspective. Thus, it should be notable that a considerable part of the healing process is due to my cultural beliefs and spiritual affiliation. The possibility for change, the chance to understand ourselves more closely, and to re-reflect on what was and who we were—in contrast to who we are now—is one of autoethnography's greatest gifts (Adams et al., 2021).

Artmaking helped externalize my inner-feelings in order to recognize and deal with them. Recognizing my pattern of thinking, I chose to focus on self-care and self-affirmation. Though, I don't think that the spiritual aspect of my study is a weakness, itself, I do think that it is a limitation.

Not everyone believes in God, spirituality, or the after life. Thus, the benefits, findings, and implications of the study cannot be applied to them; rather, they are limited to people with a spiritual background. Therefore, data obtained is centered in my culture as a woman who belongs to the Shia's school of thought. It lacks the multicultural lens to generalize the findings (Arnold, 2021).

Arts might also trigger strong emotional reaction due to memory activating, that is why the component of self-compassion was a vital element in designing the activities. I

did not seek consent from few people mentioned in my story to feature here. One of the difficulties of the reflexivity of autoethnography is that the researcher's life is intertwined with other people's lives: "when we write autoethnographically about our lives, by definition we also write about intimate others with whom we are in relationships" (Adams et al., 2021, p. 76). Writing revealingly about the self is one thing and writing about a relative one "can feel another one" (Adams et al., 2021, p. 76). To protect the identities of some family members or teachers, I kept their names anonymous.

The study is a courageous attempt to push against a taboo topic in an effort "to achieve the gift of love, self-caring; and the gift of empowerment. There is a sense of risk and vulnerability associated with revealing parts of one's personal life, and a fear of criticism and misunderstanding (Adams et al., 2021, p. 139). Monitoring the self during the autoethnographic performance could impact the reflexivity.

### ***The Link Between the Theory and the Islamic Spiritual Background***

The study is distinct because it bridges Western theoretical frameworks with Eastern (Middle Eastern) concepts and beliefs. The openness of the constructivism theory and its humanitarian nature aligns perfectly with my spiritual background and literature heritage as a Muslim who belongs to Shia school of thought. The theory maintains that making sense of the event of death and reconstructing bonds and identity are three main notions of meaning making. Meaning-making is about making sense of the trauma in a way that gives the person purpose and a desirable existential context.

The constructivism theory is not culturally or religiously limited. Rather, it establishes that the person is a meaning-maker, encouraging them to re-learn the self and

the world. It aligns with many creative therapeutic practices across cultures: “The techniques of looking at a problem from a different angle, of re-interpreting it, re-diagnosing and giving it a novel character, have always been part of any creative therapeutic practice” (Mirdal, 2010, p. 2).

Constructivism also encourages people to create and maintain systems of beliefs through which death can be explained. Making sense is possible for Muslims since death is compensable within the Islamic context as a will of God or a test that is linked to faith. Death fits with the assumption of how the world works. For instance, we believe that humans were created for construction on earth, and that they will eventually return to their creator. The prophet PBUH said “If the Day of Judgment erupts while you are planting a new tree, carry on and plant it”. Imam Ali said “Work for your worldly life as if you are living forever and work for your Hereafter as if you are dying tomorrow.” God says: “We have created you from the earth, and We shall return you into it, and from it We shall bring you out once again.”

The theory also encourages people to maintain a relationship with the deceased loved ones and to reconstruct bonds with them to gain an attachment security. One way to do that is through refocusing the emotional tie to a bond that acknowledges the loss but symbolically represents it. Remembering along with the Islamic concept of the continuing existence of the soul allows for a continued relationship to be sustained.

Scholars maintain that meaning-based coping is linked to a healing connection with the self, others, and a higher power. Integrating the personal experience of loss with the larger cultural narrative of the tragedy of Karbala and binding with groups and ideals

annually is a spiritual ritual that facilitates healing. For instance, a seminary of Shia Muslims for example is filled with flags with names of their Ideals such as “Hussain.” When they fall down in submission to God during their prayers every day, they put their foreheads on an object called “Turbah,” which is taken from the soil of Imam Hussain’s grave.

The integrative healing approach of the ONEBird model fits very well with a culture that values compassion and creativity. The Arabic and Islamic literature are rich with a heritage that honor cure, care, and creativity and link them together in a sacred way. The physician poet Ibrahim Naji, for instance, found poetry to be a mercy coming from a sacred and heavenly source. Its therapeutic measure and a healing power helped him to endure life suffering (Sayed, 2018, p. 6). In one of his poems, he stated what translate to:

People ask in bewilderment:  
Medicine and poetry? How could they match?  
Poetry is a mercy to souls. Its secret is  
a gift from heaven, a grant from God.  
Medicine is a mercy to bodies. Its essence is  
coming from that sacred heavenly fountain.  
From the clouds and a source beyond the clouds,  
They both draw inspiration.  
In the introduction of one of his collections, Naji wrote:  
Poetry for me is a window out of which I look at life...  
And observe eternity...  
And what is beyond eternity...  
It is the air I breathe...  
And the remedy with which I medicated my wounds in a time when healers were  
rare.  
This is my poetry. (Sayed, 2018, p. 6)

The cultural intersection of faith, poetry, loss and love will be demonstrated in more detail in the conclusion of the study.



## **Directions for Future Research**

Women's studies have been marginalized in academia (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 557). Only a few researchers have explored the visual and textual experiences of women's issues. When it comes to topics like grief and loss, there is an academic culture that is fearful of emotions (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 559). Because of the sensitive nature of women and the universal denial surrounding the topic of death and grief, more art-based practices could be an appropriate method to approach such studies. Further, there is limited literature on women's grief experiences and coping in the East, especially around undeveloped areas with inadequate resources. New studies could shed light on issues related to gender differences in grief, gender discrimination and power, social norms and control, storying and personal narrative, healing and intervention techniques. When communication studies get a deep understanding of women's experiences of grief and loss, new communitive interventions that align with the local's lifestyles of women could be adopted.

The health communication field, in particular, could aim to study women's grief experiences through a cultural and psychological lens. It could also conduct need assessments for mourning women in a variety of cultural contexts so that affective interventions could be implemented. I am an advocate of taking a polymorphic approach to health communication. According to Dutta (2008), this approach is based on the notion that "various systems of healing that are available to human beings work in harmonious and complementary ways" (p. 145). Dutta (2008) argues that: "for the study of health communication to process to be meaningful, multiple levels of communication from

multiple perspectives engaging multiple contexts of healing and curing need to be simultaneously activated” (p.145).

I am a proponent of relying on using a polymorphic approach to deal with grief and loss due to its openness and flexibility. The openness of the polymorphic approach provides the family and health communication scholarship with the capacity to borrow other knowledge. Moreover, it allows communicators to translate the knowledge, and employ a range of healing and therapeutic practices in their programs and campaigns to deal with issues like suffering. I think that various interventions and techniques concerned with healing and improving well-being are not mutually exclusive, rather they overlap and support each other.

Because grief and loss tend to raise a variety of basic and sophisticated questions about human existence, I think that spirituality can be a rich area to be explored from a health communication perspective. Many theories on which researchers draw to cope with grief rely on finding meanings and making sense of the loss. I think that spirituality, when combined with a health communication perspective, has a strong potential to address our existential questions and provide us with meanings in a way that contributes to improving our well-being. Indeed:

Spirituality is intrinsically tied to health because it asks the fundamental questions of life and death and provides entry points for understanding the meaning of suffering. Offering a window into the nature of human existence and its fundamental basis, spirituality provides a framework for understanding human health, illness, pain and suffering. (Dutta, 2008, p. 145)

## **Implications and Lessons Learned**

The project aims to change the status quo of lacking compassion through highlighting the importance of empowerment, meaning-making, connection, identity reconstruction, and emotional expression for bereaved women to bring about comfort and facilitate healing: “In making ‘things,’ (buildings, paintings, relationships), we also can come to be different persons” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 214). When we produce cultural accounts such as autoethnographic texts, “we can perform or make ourselves anew” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 214).

The following are some powerful notions and lessons learned from conducting the study.

### ***Creativity, the Spiritual Emergence and Wellbeing***

Expressing my grief experience through art appeared “natural cultural fit.” I think that it is fair to say that what really assisted me to make sense of the experience is the spirituality emergence through the opportunity of creativity and reconnecting to the self, which could be articulated on the personal growth or post traumatic growth theme. Creativity opened paths for the emergence of strong spiritual connection with a higher power, the Divine.

In several of activities, such as in the case of the collage and the painting, there were themes that indicate transcendence such as the verse, ideals, and the sky. The embodiment of the verse, “God will give you and you will be satisfied,” enabled a key component of Muslim’s thinking and teaching, which is hope. In addition, art creation gave me a chance to reconnect with myself and my rituals (Raduan et al., 2018).

Openness to spirituality lead to personal growth which is a component of well-being, (Raduan et al., 2018). A vital element to achieve both physical and mental wellbeing is cleansing of one's soul and spiritual realms (Raduan, 2018).

### ***Creativity and Purifying the Soul***

It is only a task that the text be produced on an external medium (Mishara, 1995, p. 185). Bringing what is inside to the outside externalize the impact of the experience leading us to get rid of the stressful details. For instance, “many times when we write something down—or express it—we don't have to think about it any longer” (Mishara, 1995, p. 185). This is called the “vacuum cleaner” effect. I think expression in general can have the vacuum effect. Expressing the internal ruminations only requires an external medium (Mishara, 1995, p. 185). On this medium, we are left with hard memories, harsh thoughts and fragile moments. Facing the mess in ourselves is facing a reality. It is like facing a messy room where dust is everywhere.

Expressive arts and narrative help remove intrusive thoughts from our minds as vacuum cleaner has been applied. I could also use the metaphor of the sponge. Like soft tissues or a sponge that absorb dust from surfaces, the mechanism of expressing our thoughts on a piece of paper or other mediums allows these undesirable thoughts to emerge on the surface so that they can be recognized, absorb, and removed. By means of words-colors and shapes, paths toward healing, recovery, and rebirth are opened (Certini, 2019, p. 153).

*It is about the Calming, Safeness and about Affirming Process*

I am not claiming that the whole experience of art making is soothing. There are times when I felt frustrated. Narrating and art-making about trauma could be hard at first because engaging in them require us to face our saddest memories: “Tapping into past experiences also involves recalling and in essence reliving them (Adams et al., 2021, p. 251). For instance, writing about trauma could make one feels worse at first, but this did not prevent ensuing the long-term beneficial effects (Mishara, 1995, p. 182).

My experience of artmaking in particular was rewarding. It taught me a lot. It taught me to relax, to take my time, and be patient. I felt frustrated many times while trying to wait for the pieces to stick as I wish. A stain of glue could appear when I thought I have sabotaged my work. I realized that I can add another layer to cover the stain, which gave me a sense of control. This is also the situation in our lives, there are layers, and we have a control at least on our attitude toward events, and we can always make a difference. After all, in the case for using expressive arts as a healing intervention, the process of art creation is equally important as the final product—if not more important. Though, turning our sadness into a beauty make us feel special in this world.

For instance, during the process of envisioning and planning my mixed media project, I reviewed some affirming words that led me to attain safety. In the case of the painting project, I first imagined a place of healing in my mind; then I reimagined it on the canvas. The flow and fluidity of coloring the sky, though very easy, was by itself a calming experience. The process of working on the mixed media with my little niece

made me reconnect with her, appreciate my relationship with her, and find social mothering as a meaningful fact in my life.

Engaging artmaking about baby loss can be intimidating. I felt intimidated at the start. I think that one reason why narrating and artmaking are hard is because they require us to face our grief and harsh reality. However, the experience of creativity was helpful in that it assists us in attaining self-awareness. Awareness of our own pain and suffering facilitate understanding and cultivate compassion toward ourselves and others. It made me aware of a vital humanitarian aspect, which is imperfection. Even if I could not do anything to fix a situation, there is a beauty in imperfection. We are just human beings, and no one is perfect.

Meanwhile, engaging in the artmaking taught me not to underestimate my potential and to take steps toward my goals. Further, the process and experience of artmaking taught me that sometimes there are things in life that do not make sense. For example, I visited Andrea Okeson art page on Instagram to view her mixed media work. She said, “Life does not make sense, why should my art make sense?” I thought about her words. I agree that there are things in life that might not make sense for us as humans. I don’t claim that I am completely healed. I still struggle from time to time. I still think about how old my daughter would be now if I have not had lost her. We might spend our whole life not knowing why something bad happened to us.

### ***Art and Compassion Are Natural Partners***

Both compassion and arts are believed to create a safe environment for the bereaved people, and enable them to re-learn themselves and the world around them in a

positive, peaceful, and loveable way. If I would visualize art and compassion healing effects, the model would depict them as two poles of a loop around healing. They could be also visualized as two poles of a planet of healing. The interplay of these two forces, and other helpful forces, is what makes the planet moves so that that light appears again after the darkness.

The study findings reinforce the view that consider art and compassion as natural partners (Bennett-Levy et al. 2020, p. 9). Art making and compassion when viewed as natural partner hold a vital far reaching potentials and powerful applications in family and health communication. Art can be a medium for compassion. Further, art by it is very nature, can provide a focused, mindful state. “When this is combined with the subject matter of compassion, both ‘wings’ of the mindfulness-compassion ‘bird’ are facilitated” (Bennett-Levy & Gilbert, p. 2020, p. 9).

### ***Grief is Ongoing; So Is Learning the Self***

Grief is multidimensional and ongoing. It should not be viewed as something to complete (Arnold, 2021, p. 27). This study findings suggest that there is neither liner path for grief nor a magical year after grief can be ended. It “challenges the assumptions that view grief is an action that bereaved individual moves through or a task one completes” (Arnold, 2021, p. 28). The present study supports the notion that mourning could be viewed as social process rather than internal one (Arnold, 2021, p. 29). Unlike the notion that view grief as private, grief work can be social action (Arnold, 2021, p. 29).

The study opens avenues for re-making the self by sponsoring the notion that one is meaning maker. We learned that there are always choices about how we respond to

grief either by denying or engaging in grief-work. We learned that the self is not a thing, rather it is a dynamic experiential process. That is why a person's sense of self could be tied to his or her experience of art. Additionally, meaning-making can be achieved through developing new goals, a new sense of self, the reflection of the love for those we have lost, and in our attempts to sustain this love while we move forward with our lives.

The study raises several questions that could be used for more specialized studies such as: Are various forms of art are equally effective in dealing with bereavement? Which form/s has/have the most promising efficacy for loss and grief? Would working on art and compassion-focused intervention differ when working individually and working with groups? What is the atmosphere effect of co-creating arts with children and about children for bereaved mothers? Can art creation and viewing deepen faith? What is the influence of combining beauty with faith? Indeed, "How artists express grief, and how their creative avenues may influence or be influenced by personal and cultural realms?" (Arnold, 2021, p. 33). What is the influence of applying the art-compassion model on the experience of loss for Saudi women or other populations, such as men or children? How can we customize and implement Paul Gilbert CFT protocol (Bennett-Levy et al., 2020) through academic settings, health-care settings, or community-based workshops?

I learned about Gilbert protocol during the final stages of finalizing the study by coming across a new study rooted on his methods that was published in 2020. My new goal is to dive into his work to learn new ideas about developing more integrative approach of arts and compassion and practicing new scholarly validated methods to deal



with suffering, handle emotions, and direct them in a constructive way—whether for me personally or for others. A possible workshop I envision is one in which we cultivate compassion by creating cards for segments like women and students. Another workshop could be to cultivate kindness concepts in childhood, such as through painting kindness rocks with teenage girls and children. Utilizing more artistic means and improving digital and software skills or co-working arts with artists to create health and wellness arts such empathetic cards for bereaved people, or empowering cards for those who suffer from disabilities or chronic illnesses is within my future agenda.

Studies with more numbers of people and with a broader demographic and cultural backgrounds from the Shias' Society, Saudi society, or the Middle East is recommended to explore the extent to which findings from the present study could be generalized to other sociocultural contexts. Broadening the demographics to include people with different religious affiliations could yield more comprehensive research findings across populations, affiliations, and faiths.

### **Conclusion: From ONEBird Model to Sparrows of Heaven**

I am delighted to end my dissertation using a picture of the sparrows I printed on velvet using pastel colors. The sparrows are meaningful for me because not only can they resemble children and love, but also, they do resemble children of heaven. They could be a symbol of mornings and light that come after darkness, as well as my identity as a poet who recites beauty from sadness.

Creativity, writing and reading overall are honorable in my understanding of the Islamic culture. God swears with the word “pen.” The first word of the holy Quran was

*read* in the name of your lord who *creates*. I can always read texts whether these texts are knowledge or prose, poetry, or the beauty of the universe around me, or what is created in it.

In that mixed media project, I saw my baby through the handprint of my niece, but also, I saw myself, and I saw humanity. Through the artistic inquiry of the handprint, I can sense a call for of leaving a trace behind us in this world. The trace I want to leave here through my dissertation to the world is to honor my baby and myself, inspired by my cultural background. The trace I want to leave for the world to make my life meaningful is a message of care, cure, and creativity. Though we have weaknesses and flows, we humans are powerful, and equipped with an infinite Divine spirit.

I believe that Allah, the almighty, breathed from his soul in us, human beings.

According to the Holy Quran:

And (recall the time) when your Lord said to angels, ‘I am, indeed, going to create a human being from dry ringing clay (formed) from black mud, mounded into shape. So when I have proportioned him and have breathed My soul into him, fall down in submission for him.

Imam Ali Quotes a hadith qudsi, which is an authentic statement of God saying:

“I was a Hidden Treasure, and I *loved* to be known, and therefore I created the world that I might be known” (Chittick, 2015, p. 23). One attribute of God creating the universe is because of Love. “God desired, wanted, wished, loved to create, so He did.” (Chittick, 2015, p. 23).

Another common attribute that is usually discussed for God’s motivation for creating the universe is mercy. In Arabic, the word *rahma* means *mercy*. It is an abstract

noun that is derived from the word *rahm* that translates to “womb,” indicating that mercy is connected to a mother’s love for her children.

Another Quranic verse states: “And among his signs is that He created spouses for you from yourselves, that you may rest in them, and he placed between you love and mercy.” God created us with love and mercy, so He expects us to act mercifully and beautifully. The Quran opens each Surah (chapter) except one with, “In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful.” Therefore, everyone who reads the Quran will notice the permanent reference to divine Mercy (Chittick, 2015, p. 23).

Therefore, I should admire myself as a human being, who despite the suffering, disappointments and struggling in this worldly life, carries the spirit of the divine within the self. The spirit of a merciful loving God, who created the beauty in this wonderful universe, is within myself. Thus, I shall not underestimate my abilities and potential. Instead, I should be merciful.

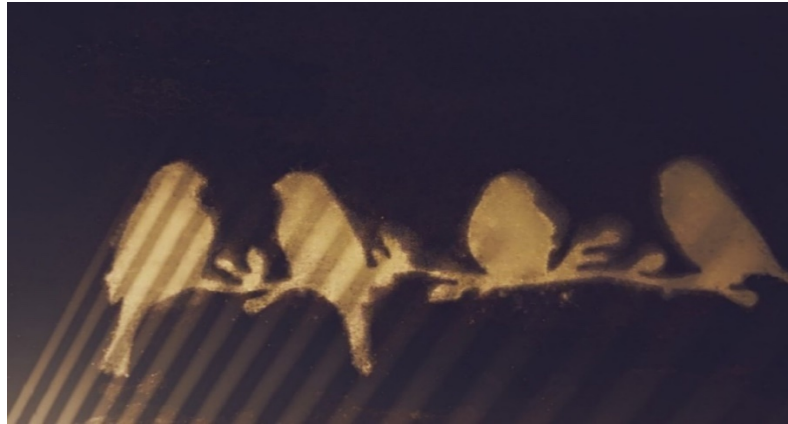
I can create and transform my sadness to beauty. Yes, there were times when I felt like my identity was shattered. Though I am going to re-learn about myself, re-make myself, and reconstruct my identity over and over as if it were a beautiful art-work made of mosaic, carrying the beauty and secrets of the great universe and connected to it. Grief is a journey from worthlessness to wholeness. I have an innate ability to heal. Healing is within myself. In some of his poetry, Imam Ali writes:

Your sickness is from you, but you do not perceive it  
and *your remedy* is within you, but you do not see it  
You presume you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire  
universe.  
You are indeed the evident/clear book, by whose alphabet’s the hidden becomes  
manifest.

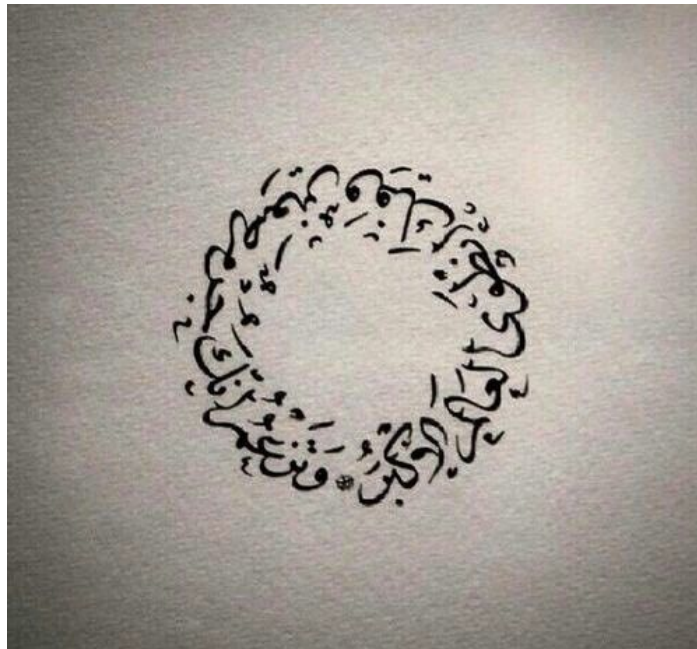
Therefore, what you seek is within you, if only you reflect.

I printed these sparrows to conclude my dissertation with them because of their symbolic meaning.

**Figure 5.5 Sparrows of Heaven**



**Figure 5.6 Imam Ali Words 1**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/323977766924217980/>

Translation: “You presume you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire universe” in the shape of mandala.

**Figure 5.7 Islamic Calligraphy**



Source: [Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/762867624351857606/>

Translation: “You presume you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire universe.”

**Figure 5.8 Imam Ali Words 2**



[Digital image] (n.d.). <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/131097039133577513/>

It is my honor to end my dissertation with these narrative visuals of Imam Ali, realizing that if healing is within me, and it is a sense of reordering the position in the world. A process toward a sense of wholeness and finding purpose, then I can always attain it by reconstructing my identity through such a beautiful notion. Within me is a common humanity, within me is a breath of the Divine, within me is love and mercy, within me is entire universe.

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