THE LABYRINTH OF GRIEF:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF TURNING TOWARD LOSS

by

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the Existential Analytic grieving activity of turning toward loss. Four bereaved women, each bereaved of either a parent, spouse, child, or sibling, participated in one hour interviews. The guiding research question for this study was “what is the lived experience of turning toward loss?” In order to understand how participants encountered and engaged with their grief as it is lived through, a hermeneutic phenomenological method was employed. Through the participants’ lived experience descriptions, eight thematic meaning structures were revealed: (a) an encounter with death, (b) surrendering to grief, (c) choosing community, (d) permitting and pursuing grief, (e) transformation of self, (f) rooting in relationship, (g) embracing life, and (h) the ground of faith. From the thematic meanings emerged the metaphor of a labyrinth of grief, which represented the various paradoxes that participants experienced while grieving. The metaphor of labyrinth also signified that turning toward loss was essentially deeply spiritual and transformative for the participants. In describing how they turned toward their losses, the participants highlighted the inherent relational and dialogical nature of grieving. In turning toward their losses through dialogue and relationship with themselves, others, and the Divine, the participants moved from devastation and surrealism to a place of authenticity and wholeness.

Keywords: Turning toward loss, Existential Analysis, grieving, grief work, grief encounter, hermeneutic phenomenology, lived experience, labyrinth, paradox, metaphor
PREFACE

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Liz—If only every word could be loaded with a million others, so that no words get left behind, so that everything there is to say has a space for it … only then would words be enough. I will leave it with this: you, my soul friend, are the very breath expired from the union of light and life and love.

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DEDICATION

Dear Dad,

You used to sing these words to me, and I never doubted for one second that you meant them. Now it is my turn to sing them to you:

For the morning sun in all its glory
Greets the day with hope and comfort too
You fill my life with laughter
And somehow you make it better
Ease my troubles that's what you do

There's a love that's divine
And it's yours and it's mine like the sun
And at the end of the day
We should give thanks and pray
To the one, to the one

Have I told you lately that I love you?

(Have I Told You Lately by Van Morrison)

This is for Ron Wells.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When someone we love dies, a part of our own self dies too. There are no words deep enough to describe this time of sadness ... it takes time and a thousand tears to accept the death of someone you love. Stay with this sadness. Your tears are holy water from the deep place of your loving. You may receive great comfort from people who have been in the place of sadness, where you are now. They will be friends, family and even people you have not known before. In our sorrow, we are all connected.

(Florence, 2002, pp. 1-2)

I was 13 years old when my father died.¹ I did not stay with the sadness. I did feel that a part of myself had died along with him, and that there were no words to describe the agony. I rejected the notion of time and tears as crucial to grieving. I had grown tired of crying. Instead, I chose to allow myself one year to grieve because at the point of my father’s death, I was exhausted. He had suffered from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) for three years, so I felt obliterated by the time of his death. It seemed it would take somewhat of a whole person to muster the energy to cry, and my shattered self could not do so. I did receive great comfort from family and friends, but such comfort passed through my hollowed self.

To deal with the pain, I chose to turn away from my grief. I did not see how crying or expressing my pain would do anything useful; it certainly would not bring my dad back to life. Grief felt hindering, and I wanted to escape, flee, be free from its grasp. I wanted to come back to life. I chose to lean into my ambition and turned toward scholarship as the remedy to my suffering. For nine years, I remained this way. No matter the amount of knowledge I had accumulated, I was left wanting. At times I would experience anger for my father’s death or desperation for his return. This confused me because I assumed I was finished grieving. Despite this confusion, nothing seemed as baffling as the ‘taste of nothing’: periods of time I named as

¹ In this study, I will be referring to myself as the researcher in the first person. This is consistent with the hermeneutic methodology utilized in this study. A main tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology is the recognition that the researcher impacts and is impacted by the research process, and through the dialogue with the participants, meanings are co-constructed; thus, I become intimately connected with the research.
such where I felt misery, despair, and utter boredom. When I tasted nothing, I was enduring moments, hours, and days of meaninglessness. It seemed the grief was mostly gone, but the emptiness was gripping. That emptiness, that black void was stuck within me, and I trapped within it. It was not until graduate studies, where I was introduced to existential psychotherapy, specifically the school of Existential Analysis (EA), that I began to attend to my being stuck.

**Existential Analysis**

EA is a “phenomenological-personal psychotherapy” where EA psychotherapists aim to help individuals make authentic decisions, deal responsibly with the world and others, and experience their lives freely on “spiritual and emotional levels” (Längle, as cited in Längle, 2005, p. 5). In EA, four fundamental conditions or existential motivations are required for experiencing a fulfilled existence, namely: a connection with reality, life, one’s person, and meaning. The focus of this thesis lies within the EA psychotherapeutic framework, and more specifically, with the second fundamental motivation of life. Längle (2005) stated that in order to lead a fulfilled existence, one must experience the goodness of life. We experience life as good mainly through relationships and in connection with values. When we lose important relationships, or become disconnected from values, life no longer feels good, and we experience loss of vitality. When this happens, according to EA, it is important to **turn toward where the loss is felt** in order to relate to the loss, integrate the loss in one’s life, and experience life as good once more (Längle, 2013). In EA, this activity of turning toward loss is the essence of grieving.

Coming across these teachings during my Existential Analytic training, I realized how little I turned toward the loss of my father. This concept challenged my view of grief that it was something that should be encountered rather than avoided, suppressed, or forgotten altogether. This led me to wonder if the feelings of being stuck that I endured were a consequence of my
turning away. I continued to wonder that if I no longer wanted to feel stuck nor “taste nothing”, if I was going to have to taste something I had long evaded: grief.

**Current Study**

This wondering served as the ground for phenomenological inquiry into this topic. Although the activity of turning toward loss emerged from Existential Analytic understanding of grieving, it spurred numerous questions that caused me to pause and reflect on what turning toward loss means on an experiential level. I specifically wondered what it means to turn toward loss and how people engage in this activity. Van Manen (2014) stated that “theories that explain human problems and processes through psychological theories may actually be enriched by having these psychological concepts translated back into experiential realities” (p. 67). The aim of this study is to do just that: to explore how the phenomenon of turning toward loss is lived through in order to reach a deeper, inceptual understanding of this grieving activity.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to situate the phenomenon of turning toward loss within the field of grief and bereavement research. Researchers have provided rich theoretical and empirical findings on grieving that have had noteworthy impacts on clinical practice. Because of advancing research, the grief literature has undergone a significant paradigm shift over the course of the century, particularly in regard to the relationship between the deceased and the bereft (Russac, Steighner, & Canto, 2002). Consequently, grief theories and models have changed, expanded, and some have been scrutinized due to recent developments in the field. This chapter first clarify the key terms in this area of research, and then it will explore theories and models of grieving together with the relevant empirical findings. In addition, I will provide an outline of Existential Analysis and the concept of ‘turning toward loss’. Within the context of the current grief literature and the theoretical and empirical limitations, the rationale and research question for this study will be presented.

Key Terms

To provide a richer understanding of the findings, the terms bereavement, grief, and grieving will be explored and described. Bereavement is defined as “the objective situation of having lost someone significant through death” and this loss is often marked by “intense distress” for many people (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008, pp. 4-5). An individual who has lost someone significant is referred to as being ‘bereaved’ or ‘bereft’, although bereaved is the more specific term when referring to the loss of another person. Attig (2011) stated that bereavement “happens to us”, addressing the fact that being bereaved is not something many people choose nor control, thus making death one of “our most wrenching experiences” (p. 32).
Typically, bereavement refers to the state of being deprived of someone, rather than the emotional experience of it (Christ, Bonanno, Malkinson, & Rubin, 2003).

Grief often results when one is bereaved, but may also be experienced due to many types of losses, including non-death losses. Examples of this would be anticipatory grief, where one may be grieving someone who is alive and terminally ill (Christ et al., 2003). This means that grief is a widespread phenomenon that is experienced in more circumstances than death; however, in this study, the felt grief is a result of a death-loss.

Some researchers consider grief as its own emotion, or one specific emotional state, whereas others reflect on its complexity in which it simultaneously encompasses a range of emotional states (Weiss, 2008). Grief may be felt more than just emotionally because it also impacts individuals cognitively, physically, and spiritually (Christ et al., 2003; Klaassen, 2010; Stroebe et al., 2008). To further illustrate the complexity of defining grief, Weiss (2008) remarked that grief seems to be better defined by its cause rather than its expression, which is different than other affective states, such as joy or anger. It may even be difficult for researchers to provide a universal description of grief, as it seems to vary in expression, intensity, and duration for different individuals and cultural groups (Christ et al., 2003; Klass, 2015; Walter, 2012). For the purposes of this study, I will use Stroebe et al.’s (2008) definition which states that grief is a normal, “primarily emotional (affective) reaction” which manifests psychologically and physically, and varies from individually, culturally, and across time (p. 5).

As complex as grief is to define, grieving can be even more difficult to define. In bereavement literature, grieving is often used synonymously with grief; however, for some researchers, the terms are distinguished (Granek, 2010). For example, Attig (2011) differentiated the emotion of grief from the process of grieving, where the latter is a means of coping with the
complexity of grief. From his perspective, grieving is an active, rather than passive, process with which we choose to engage. Attig elaborated on this by cautioning people from viewing grieving as something we cannot choose, like bereavement, because adopting such a notion limits one’s ability to “come to terms” with the loss (p. 33). He also stated that by grieving, “we will cope intellectually and spiritually, emotionally and psychologically, behaviorally, socially, and biologically with the major losses in our lives as long as we live” (p. 46).

Existential Analysts also consider that grieving is an active process; however, in EA, grieving is differentiated from coping or, coping reactions (Längle, 2004, 2013). Existential Analysts view turning toward as the essential activity of grieving where individuals exercise their agency by choosing to encounter their felt grief personally. Conversely, coping reactions are viewed as automatic, reactive behaviour to turn away and protect the self from threatening stressors (Längle, 2004). In contrast, numerous researchers in the field of thanatology have studied coping processes as responses to bereavement or have used the term “cope” to describe grieving (Attig, 2011; Bonanno, 2001a; Folkman, 2001; Stroebe et al., 2008). Stroebe et al. (2008) define coping as “processes, strategies, or styles of managing (reducing, mastering, tolerating) the situation in which bereavement places the individual” (p. 11). It is unclear if researchers who used the term coping interchangeably with grieving were referring to coping as dealing with grief to the best of one’s abilities or as a reactive behaviour to avoid one’s grief. In this thesis, the term coping is used to refer to the latter.

In this study, loss refers to the death of a loved one, bereavement reflects the state of being permanently deprived of a loved one, grief is the emotional, cognitive, and physical expression of this state, and grieving is the active engagement with grief. In this study, I focused

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2 The term loved one is use throughout this thesis because each participant would consider their deceased to be loved ones; however, it is important to note that not all bereaved considered their deceased ‘loved ones’.
on grieving, specifically on exploring the experience of turning toward loss, rather than on the expression of grief itself. Naturally the expression of grief was explored, as it manifested when the participants were engaged with their grief, but the emphasis was on the experience of the engagement with the loss, rather than on the expression of grief.

**Theoretical Underpinnings and Empirical Findings**

The purpose of this section is to situate the phenomenon of turning toward loss within the field of grief and bereavement, including the relevant theories, models, and empirical studies of grieving. Various grieving theories and models will be outlined, including the psychoanalytic theory and grief work (Freud, 1917; Lindemann, 1944/94), attachment theory and the phase model of mourning (Bowlby, 1980/98), continuing bonds theory (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), task model of mourning (Worden, 2009), the dual process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), the meaning reconstruction model (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), the existential-phenomenological relearning the world model (Attig, 2011), and the Existential Analytic grieving model (Längle, 2014). The empirical findings regarding these models will also be reviewed and critiqued.

**Psychoanalytic Theory**

It is not surprising, considering Freud’s widespread influence in psychology, that one of the most influential descriptions of grieving appeared in Freud’s (1917) *Mourning and Melancholia*. Although grieving has been artistically captured through mediums such as theater, poetry, art, and narratives throughout history, Freud was the first to try to systematically study the grieving process (Stroebe et al., 2008). In doing so, he made the universal, normal experience of mourning a psychological phenomenon (Granek, 2010). The premise of his paper was to differentiate between mourning, which is the expected reaction to loss, and melancholia,
which is a pathological reaction to loss (Freud, 1917). Freud specifically differentiated these two constructs by explaining that people who are mourning experience deprivation in their worlds, whereas people with melancholia have deprived egos. Freud laid the groundwork for the concept of grief work by stating that individuals must do their mourning work to free their egos. Freud heavily influenced others’ work, such as Deutsch (1937), who pathologized grief and emphasized detachment from the deceased, and Lindemann (1944/94) who further developed grief work and asserted the importance of psychiatric intervention (cf. Granek, 2010).

Freud contended that grief work occurs when people remove their libidinal energy from the dead (process referred to as decathexis) to place their libidinal energy in those who are living. When people are initially bereaved, their bond with the deceased is intensified, known as hypercathexis, but eventually the mourner realizes that the death is permanent and detaches libidinal energies from the deceased (Noppe, 2000). It seems Freud has been misinterpreted on two accounts. Firstly, he did not view mourning as a pathology, rather as a normal process which takes time and is never finished (Granek, 2010). Secondly, Freud’s emphasis on decathexis is not the same as detachment where the former is based on the psychoanalytic perspective of drives, which are “more expendable, or more fluid” than relational bonds seen from an attachment perspective (Field, 2008, p. 115). Regardless of these misinterpretations, his contribution to research is well noted through past and present literature, as he significantly impacted the trajectory of bereavement research (Hagman, 2001). One trajectory he heavily influenced is the concept of grief work, or as Granek (2010) stated, “Freud put grief on the map, Lindemann … charted the territory” (p. 57).

**Grief work.** While Freud was highly influential in the development of the grief work concept, various researchers attributed much of the ensuing contributions to the psychiatrist
Erich Lindemann (Granek, 2010; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Lindemann (1944/94) used the term ‘grief work’ in his writings and described this as the desired way to grieve. He defined grief work as “emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships” (p. 190). He came to this formulation by observing 101 patients which including his own patients, who had lost relatives during treatment, relatives of patients who died in the hospital, bereaved survivors of the Cocoanut Grove Fire disaster and their relatives, as well as relatives of those in the armed forces. Along with a description of pathological grief, he described a normal grief reaction which could be worked through by doing one’s grief work. He contended that it is not enough for one who is mourning to be comforted, but one needs to “review his relationships with the deceased”, work through feelings associated with the loss, “find an acceptable formulation of his future relationship to the deceased”, and find others to pursue new activities (p. 199). Essentially, this concept hinges on the premise that grievers should confront their emotions to work through them and reorganize their relationships with the deceased to assume new roles and to form new relationships (Lindemann, 1944/94, 1963).

Contrary to Freud, Lindemann (1963) stated that if the grief work is done well, mourning can be resolved within a short period of time. He also emphasized the need for psychiatric intervention for those who are mourning to ensure their grief work is done thoroughly (Lindemann, 1944/94). According to Lindemann, individuals who do not do their grief work will not adjust socially and may acquire a psychiatric/medical condition. This paved the way for mourning to be pathologized, hence the need for psychiatric and psychological intervention (Granek, 2010). In summary, Lindemann (1963) referred to grief as adapting to the loss of a
loved one by means of doing one’s grief work. This was a strongly held view until researchers questioned the empirical support of such claims (Bonanno, 2001b; Stroebe, 2001).

Empirically, the evidence for supporting grief work is mixed and inconclusive. Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) developed a study to test the efficacy of grief work. They defined grief work as a “a cognitive process of confronting the reality of loss, of going over events that occurred before and at the time of death, and of focusing on memories and working toward detachment from the deceased” (p. 479). They interviewed 30 widows and 30 widowers at three points: four to seven months, 14 months, and two years following the death of their spouses. The researchers measured grief work in terms of confrontation and avoidance, where confrontation would be considered working through the loss. Their results were mixed. The bereaved widowers seemed to have better adjustment by doing their grief work, but there was no difference in adjustment for the widows whether they confronted or avoided. They found that widowers who were depressed were more likely to suppress their loss and that as time went on, individuals avoided their grief less. Their results did not disconfirm grief work, but did not fully support the concept. They concluded by stating that the grief work hypothesis may be an oversimplification, but more research is needed.

Bonanno et al. (2005) conducted a quantitative study to assess whether doing one’s grief work led to better adjustment. Like Stroebe and Stroebe (1991), they found conflicting results that supported and disconfirmed grief work. One of the most notable findings was that grief processing and grief avoidance were uncorrelated suggesting they are not on the same continuum, as researchers had assumed. These assumptions may emerge due to different conceptualizations of grief work due to researchers’ theoretical orientations. This has led to the confusion surrounding the current definition of grief work and what it means to the field of
thanatology today (Worden, 2015). Despite its different conceptualizations, the concept of grief work has been pervasive during the twentieth century and has been heavily criticized within the last few decades.

**Critique of grief work.** The psychoanalytic concept of grief work has undergone numerous critiques (cf. Hagman, 1995, 2001; Stroebe, 1992-1993; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1996; Wortman & Silver, 1989). After thorough review of the psychoanalytic and contemporary literature on mourning, literature on cultural and historical influences, and his own clinical observations, Hagman (1995, 2001) highlighted a few shortcomings of the psychoanalytic theory of mourning. Firstly, he stated that this model is unsuitable to be generalized, as it does not account for individual and cultural variation. Secondly, he pointed out that the standard model does not recognize the relational aspects of mourning. He went on to state that certain distress characteristic of grief is not always present and individuals seem to be able to engage in social activities following the death of another. Hagman also stated that a relationship with the deceased, through dialoguing with the deceased, is common following bereavement and that any relinquishment that occurs may not be consciously chosen.

Other researchers have highlighted similar shortcomings of grief work. Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) questioned the difference between grief work and rumination, where the former is acceptable but the latter is not. Rumination was defined as “passively and repetitively focusing on one's symptoms of distress and the circumstances surrounding those symptoms” (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride, & Larson, 1997, p. 855). Proponents of grief work did not address this possible contradiction. And similarly to Hagman (1995, 2001), Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) asserted its failure to account for interpersonal processes of grief and gender and cultural
influences on grieving, as well as researchers’ failure to produce empirical support and their unclear explanation of the framework (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991).

Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) also critiqued that grief work does not account for the effortful nature of constantly processing pain; however, Ihrmark, Hansen, Eklund, and Stodberg (2011) explored individuals’ experiences of grief following participants’ attendance to the Swedish Institute for Grief Recovery (SIGR). They described this program as being a clinical implementation of the concept of grief work. Their findings supported the formal application of grief work where most participants indicated the course positively impacted their grief. The participants indicated they felt relief, which was the most significant impact, followed by being more present, and feeling less fear and stress. Those participants who felt the course negatively impacted them attributed this to being disappointed in not being able to rid themselves of grief as well as becoming aware of the amount of grief work ahead of them. The researchers also noted that those participants who were bereaved longer found the course more satisfying than those more recently bereaved, suggesting that grief work may be more beneficial after the first year.

In addition to various critiques, there have been two components of grief work which have been largely contested and have led to recent developments in the field. The first component is the emphasis on detachment (Stroebe et al., 1996) and that failure to do so is pathological (Klass, 2006). This has resulted in a paradigm shift in the field of thanatology, where many researchers have shifted perspective from emphasizing the importance of relinquishing bonds with the deceased to the importance of continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996; Russac et al., 2002). From this emerged the continuing bonds theory, which will be expanded upon in this chapter. The second component of grief work which has been questioned is the emphasis on working through the loss without consideration of the role of denial and avoidance
in adjustment to loss (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Zhang, & Noll, 2005; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) critique of grief work led to the development of the dual process model of coping with bereavement, which along with continuing bonds, is widely accepted in the field of thanatology. The dual process model will also be explored further.

In summary, although the grief work theory has been criticized for its shortcomings (Hagman, 1995, 2001; Wortman & Silver, 1989), there is evidence that supports its tenets of expressing emotion and working through the loss (Bonanno et al., 2005; Ihrmark et al., 2011; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). In light of support for grief work, there is still room for further development and refinement of this theory. Perhaps one of the most important considerations today is a “clearer definition of ‘working through’” (Worden, 2015, p. 101), because as Wortman and Silver (1989) have ascertained, “assumptions about the grieving process” impact the way researchers consider loss reactions and outcomes (p. 389).

**Attachment Theory**

Following the psychoanalytic theory of mourning came the advancement of attachment theory and its application to bereavement studies. Bowlby’s (1980/98) theory of attachment and his series, *Attachment and Loss*, have been one of the most significant contributions to bereavement research and have heavily influenced current models of grieving (Meier, Carr, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2013). Bowlby proposed a biological model attachment where humans seek proximity to attachment figures as a mode of protection and survival (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Bowlby originally studied infants’ attachments with their mothers and noticed that infants had different attachment styles (Bowlby, 1969/89). The infants would cry and search for their attachment figure, which is necessary for their survival (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). His theory was then expanded to include adults, and further
expanded to explain the impact of attachment on the grieving process (Bowlby, 1980/98; Noppe, 2000). When people lose attachment figures, it is no longer possible to be physically close to them; therefore, people cannot pursue this closeness, which causes great distress (Field et al., 2005; Noppe, 2000; Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). Attachment theory is highly influential because it explains how deep bonds are formed, and thus the reason intense emotional reactions ensue following the loss of such bonds (Worden, 2009).

In light of his attachment theory, Bowlby (1980/98) proposed a phase model of mourning where he drew upon numerous studies of widows and widowers. Two of these studies included those in London and Boston, headed by his colleague, Colin Murray Parkes. From this data, Bowlby identified four phases of mourning between which an individual oscillates. The first phase is numbing, which is the shortest phase. He asserted that this phase may be disrupted by intense emotional reactions, such as panic. The second phase is yearning and searching for the deceased. This phase is considerably longer, taking months to years. In this second phase, individuals begin to come to terms with the reality of their loss and feel intense pining for the deceased. Bowlby described a tension in this phase where the individual yearns for reunion with the deceased, but because this is painfully impossible, the individual may wish to rid themselves of reminders of the deceased. The individual may also experience anger, weeping, and even sense the presence of the deceased. The third phase is disorganization and despair and the fourth phase is reorganization. Bowlby described these phases together, stating that if the second phase could be withstood, recognition and acceptance of the permanence of the loss can lead to a reshaping of life. The individual can pursue new situations and relationships as the future is considered.
It is important to note that Bowlby’s phases of mourning have also been scrutinized for emphasizing the importance of relinquishing bonds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008); however, other researchers contended that this is a misunderstanding of the term “reorganization” (Field, 2008; Peskin, 1993). Bowlby (1980/98) did not assert that the bereaved should relinquish all ties to the deceased, but rather accept that the deceased will not return and considering this, learn to live and pursue other relationships. He even discussed the normalcy of the sense of presence experience, which is considered a continuing bond that will be expanded upon further (cf. Klugman, 2006). Another important consideration is that the phase model has been critiqued for its linear pattern (Attig, 2011; Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). Parkes and Prigerson (2010) now refer to the ‘phases of mourning’ as the ‘grieving process’ to accommodate the nonlinear nature of grieving. Despite these critiques, Stroebe (2001) stated that attachment theory’s tenets, such as attachment style and internal working models, impact the way people grieve. These impacts may provide a greater understanding of the reasons why some bereaved people adapt to loss easier than others; therefore, attachment theory is still prominent in the field of thanatology.

Most notably, there are many studies on how an individual’s attachment style may influence adaptation, or maladaptation such as complicated grief, to bereavement (Meier et al., 2013; Schenck, Eberle, & Rings, 2016). In the last decade, it seems there have been more studies centered on the influences of attachment styles on bereavement adaptation than there have been on Bowlby’s (1980/98) phase model of mourning. Attachment styles include secure attachment and insecure attachment, where the latter is divided into three styles: dismissing or avoidant, preoccupied or anxious, and disorganized (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010). Secure attachment is marked by being close to others, both depending on and being depended upon by others. Dismissing styles find closeness with others uncomfortable. Preoccupied styles would
like closeness with others but worry about separation. Disorganized styles are afraid of rejection and are mistrustful, but they would like closeness with others (Stroebe et al., 2010).

Researchers have found that anxious attachment styles are linked with prolonged grief symptoms (Field & Sundin, 2001) and emotional disturbances (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2007). According to Meier et al. (2013), individuals may have an anxious attachment if they are dependent on others and worry that others will not be present during crises. Conversely, avoidant attachment styles prefer to be emotionally distant from others out of mistrust.

Some researchers have found diverging results from previous studies, namely in how avoidant styles respond to bereavement. Wijngaards-de Meij et al. (2007) found that avoidant styles led to a vulnerability of negative consequences of bereavement, whereas Fraley and Bonanno (2004) found that avoidance can be adaptive and a sign of resilience. In a study to explore the impact of attachment styles of grief reactions, Wayment and Vierthaler (2002) found that individuals with anxious attachment styles were more likely than those with secure and avoidant styles to experience grief and depression. People who were secure did not experience grief more so than the other styles, but were less likely to experience depression whereas people who were avoidant experienced more somatic symptoms. In summary, attachment theory is still prominent in the grief and bereavement field, as attachment styles continue to be integrated with other theories and models such as continuing bonds and the dual process model (cf. Stroebe et al., 2010).

**Continuing Bonds Theory**

A significant shift in grief research began when Klass et al. (1996) proposed the continuing bonds theory. The main premise of this theory is the hypothesis that individuals hold onto their ties with the deceased after death, rather than relinquishing their relationships. In this
way, attachment to the deceased is maintained in a new way and this is called continuing bonds (Worden, 2009).

One of the first empirical studies of continuing bonds was by Klass (1993) who conducted a ten-year ethnography of bereaved parents who were members of the Compassionate Friends group. His data consisted of interviews, newsletter writings by members of Compassionate Friends, and notes from meetings with bereaved parents. He found that parents continued meaningful relationships with their children by incorporating an “inner representation” of their child (p. 345). This inner representation gave them solace. He also found that these inner representations with the deceased children were not only individually determined, but were also maintained by others. He concluded his findings by describing three ways the inner representations are maintained which include, objects that linked the survivors with the deceased, religious ideas such as the child being incorporated into something larger, and memories of the deceased children.

Klass (1999) has written extensively of continuing bonds as a result of his ethnography of bereaved parents. He stated that the bereaved parents locate themselves within four schemes: (a) newly bereaved (b) into their grief, (c) well along in their grief, and (d) resolved as much as it will be. As bereaved parents move through the course of their grieving, the bond with their children evolves and integrates into their lives. Silverman and Nickman (1996) stated that continuing a bond with the deceased is “normal” and even “interactive” (p. 349). Survivors can continue living while bringing the deceased along with them. For some researchers, this assertion is the main point of departure from the psychoanalytic perspective of mourning, specifically the concept of grief work, with the aim to relinquish ties (Russac et al., 2002). Although some researchers stated that Bowlby asserted the importance of relinquishing bonds
when he described the phase of reorganization (Klass, 1993), it seems he stated the opposite (1980/1998):

For many widows and widowers is precisely because they are willing for their feelings of attachment to the dead spouse to persist that their sense of identity is preserved and they become able to reorganize their lives along lines they find meaningful. That for many bereaved people is the preferred solution to their dilemma has for too long gone unrecognized. (p. 98)

Further yet, Parkes and Prigerson (2010) referred to continuing bonds as compatible with yearning and searching where continuing bonds would be a finding response to the searching component of grieving. In light of this, Field (2008) has asserted the need to nuance working through grief and continuing bonds with the deceased, rather than viewing these two perspectives as conflicting paradigms.

Continuing bonds theory was a much-needed departure from the overemphasis on relinquishing ties with the deceased, but what exactly does continuing bonds mean? There are numerous factors that influence how bonds are developed, such as the type of bond the survivors had when the deceased were alive, survivors’ level of development, personality and attachment style, culture, religion, and family systems (Klass & Walter, 2001; Silverman & Nickman, 1996). Researchers have also attempted to identify types of bonds with the deceased. Individuals may maintain bonds by talking about the dead to other people, talking to the dead, or using the dead as a moral compass (Klass & Walter, 2001). Field and Filanosky (2010) divided types of bonds into two categories: internalized continued bonds and externalized continued bonds. An example of an internalized bond is thinking about the deceased whereas an externalized bond is seeing or hearing the deceased. The latter is commonly referred to in the literature as sense of presence,
usually by those who conceptualize this phenomenon as normal, accepted, and even spiritual (Steffen & Coyle, 2011). Even Bowlby (1980/1998) used the term “sense of continuing presence” (p. 96); however, it is unclear whether Bowlby was referring to such a presence in the way it is conceptualized today.

Sense of presence is one of the most controversial types of bonds, as some researchers have considered this phenomenon to be hallucinations and indicative of complicated grief (Field & Filanosky, 2010). Klass and Walter (2001) explained that the people in modern Western cultures do not have the framework to incorporate the sense of presence experience as a part of life. If this is so, sensing the presence of the deceased may be viewed as pathological. Following a study of post-death contact, Klugman (2006) asserted that the sense of presence phenomenon is more pervasive than once believed, which contrasts with the pathology standpoint. The Western framework of the medical model is often used in exploring types of bonds; however, Klass et al. (1996) did not view continuing bonds theory as compatible with this framework. In adopting the medical model, researchers have begun to classify certain types of bonds as either adaptive or maladaptive (Boelen, Stroebe, Schut, & Zijerveld, 2006); however, findings from studies of varying cultures and religions have identified continuing bonds as a normal and accepted way to grieve (cf. Hussein & Oyebode, 2009; Klass, 2014, 2015; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006).

One such study was conducted by Suhail, Jamil, Oyebode, and Ajmal (2011) where they explored Pakistani Muslims’ relationships to their deceased relatives and the ensuing impacts on their religious and cultural beliefs. They found that culture helped facilitate continuing bonds through rituals, which also enabled the bereaved to talk about the deceased. They also found that religion was helpful in the bereaved individuals’ coping processes and adjustment to their losses.
The researchers identified various continuing bonds, such as sense of presence, communication with the deceased, holding on to the deceased’s possessions and reliving their relationship with them. They also found the bereaved would talk about the deceased with others, find meaning from the deceased’s lives and continued their legacy.

Along with findings which support continuing bonds across cultures, the continuing bonds theory has also been integrated with other grieving models, such as attachment theory (cf. Currier, Irish, Neimeyer, & Foster, 2015; Field et al., 2005), and grief work (cf. Russac et al., 2002). Stroebe et al. (2010) explored how individuals’ attachment styles impact their bonds with the deceased. They found that individuals with secure attachment styles are the most adaptive in their grieving and could continue a relationship with the deceased. Bereaved individuals with insecure preoccupied attachment would continue their relationship with the deceased in a maladaptive way and would benefit from loosening their ties. Conversely, they found that individuals with insecure dismissing styles would benefit from working through their loss and continuing their bonds. Lastly, bereaved individuals with insecure fearful styles would benefit from help in continuing their bonds with the deceased.

Another influential area of research is the comparison between the grief work and continuing bonds theory. Based on the assumption that grief work involves relinquishing ties and continuing bonds involves maintaining ties, Russac et al. (2002) explored whether these seemingly oppositional theories could be integrated, or if there are grounds for continuing bonds theory to replace grief work. To do so, they recruited 60 psychology students who were actively grieving losses. They then matched a control group of non-bereaved participants according to age, gender, and relationship to the deceased. The participants who were grieving were required to evaluate their grief status via questionnaire. Their results supported both grief work and
continuing bonds theory. The participants experienced strong grief regardless of the amount of time since the death of their loved ones. Many participants continued their relationship with the deceased, but did perceive less closeness with the deceased overtime. They concluded that neither grief work nor continuing bonds theory could completely alone capture participants grieving experiences, as both theories seemed to be present. They suggested that integration of these theories may be useful. In summary, the continuing bonds theory seems to be well supported across cultures and can be integrated with other grieving models.

**Tasks of Mourning Model**

Worden (2009), who was informed by the concept of grief work, posited that mourning involves attending to four tasks to adapt to the loss of a loved one. The four tasks in his model included (a) accepting the reality of the loss, (b) processing the pain of grief, (c) adjusting to the world without the deceased, and (d) continuing connection with the deceased and connecting to life once more. Worden claimed that denial would be failing to accept the reality of the loss intellectually and emotionally. His task of processing the pain of grief involved working through the loss by choosing to feel the pain. He stated that failing to do this may result in somatic symptoms or abnormal behaviour. Worden divided the third task into different types of adjustment including external, internal, and spiritual adjustment. The mourner may need to adopt new roles and meet different demands, they may experience a change in sense of self, and may need to adjust to different a different worldview because of the loss. If individuals are unable to do this task, they will not be able to adapt. The fourth task is similar to continuing bonds theory in which the mourner continues a relationship with the deceased in a way that allows the mourner to build new relationships with others. Failing to do so may prevent the mourner from reconnecting with life.
A strength of Worden’s (2009) task model is that he addressed specific factors that impact an individual’s grieving, which he refers to as the mediators of mourning. Some of these mediators included the nature of the death, the relationship with the deceased, and personal and social variables. However, Worden’s model has been critiqued for the use of tasks due to the suggestion that tasks refer linear activities that can be completed (Attig, 2011). Worden (2009) has clarified this, when he stated that the term ‘task’ reflects the active nature of mourning, and that the tasks of his model are more fluid and may be pursued simultaneously.

**Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement**

The dual process model of coping with bereavement (DPM) was developed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) in response to their dissatisfaction with grief work and their unanswered questions with attachment theory. They specified that the grief work hypothesis does not account for multiple stressors related to bereavement, the benefits of denial, the influences of interpersonal dynamics, outcomes apart from health such as well-being, and gender and cultural differences. They also indicated that attachment theory is only centered around one stressor: the loss of an attachment figure. They asserted that there are multiple stressors that come with being bereaved that need to be addressed. Due to their unanswered questions, they explored coping theories. One which largely informed them was cognitive stress theory. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the cognitive stress theory, asserting that stressors are assessed as either stressful or challenging, and then one decides whether problem-focused coping or emotion-focusing coping is suitable in dealing with the stressor. The former is used for changeable situations and the latter in unchangeable situations. They defined coping as one’s thoughts and behaviours that help to manage the internal and external stressors of a given situation. Folkman (2001) later revised the theory to include positive affect alongside problem-focused coping,
which emerged from her study of caregivers of partners with AIDS and their coping. On the other hand, Lazarus (1999) radically changed his approach to coping, suggesting emotion as superordinate to coping and stress.

Stroebe and Schut (1999) found that the cognitive stress theory did not translate completely with the grieving process since bereavement included multiple stressors, such as the loss of another and the stressor of the emotion grief. They also asserted that the cognitive stress theory failed to address “approach and avoidance between the various stressors associated with bereavement” (p. 211). As a result, they developed the dual process model which is comprised of loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping. Loss-oriented coping is in response to loss-oriented stressors which encompass the pain associated with the death. When people are in loss-orientation, they are doing grief work (Stroebe et al., 2005). Conversely, restoration-oriented coping is a way to avoid one’s grief and to respond to other stressors that occur due to bereavement, such as taking on new roles. Stroebe and Schut (1999) clarified that restoration-orientation is not directed toward outcome, but rather encompasses the stressors and the ways individuals deal with them. Another major premise of the model is that the death of a significant other elicits these stressors simultaneously, so one needs to learn to cope with both loss and restoration. They do so by oscillating between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation.

In response to the growing body of empirical studies of the DPM, Stroebe and Schut (2010) outlined some guidelines for empirically testing the model. They asserted the importance of differentiating between stressors, coping, and outcome, as well as cautioning researchers the challenge of studying the dynamic process of oscillation. They stated that further research on the DPM is necessary, specifically in advancing the framework, specifying specific processes, and
assessing the DPM in its “power in predicting good versus poor adjustment to bereavement” (Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 287).

One study which explored the DPM and adjustment was conducted by Bennett, Gibbons, and Mackenzie-Smith (2010) who used interviews of 46 widows and 46 widowers from a previous study. They coded the interviews by identifying loss orientation (LO) and restoration orientation (RO) stressors and the frequency of their appearance. They found that grief intrusion (LO) and new roles/identities/relationships ([RIR], RO) were associated with well adjustment whereas denial/avoidance (RO) and distraction from grief (RO) were associated with poor adjustment. They also found that those with new RIR led to better adjustment than those who simply do new things. Like other researchers studying the DPM (cf. Richardson & Balaswamy, 2001), Bennet et al. (2010) noted the influence of time on adjustment and the need to incorporate this factor into future studies of the DPM.

In their phenomenological study of the DPM, Fasse and Zech (2016) identified other important considerations, including participants’ resonance with the model and how participants experienced LO and RO in their grieving. Many of their participants found LO and RO less distinct than the model suggests, and upon analysis of the interviews, the researchers found that LO and RO were interdependent categories. They expanded this by stating that the participants did not distinguish between LO and RO because coping with these stressors were reported as mixed and were “practically one and the same” (p. 221). The researchers also found that not all coping is conscious and intentional, especially with LO coping. Furthermore, some participants did not consider themselves coping per se, but rather choosing to live. The participants also pursued activities of respite, and it was unclear whether these were RO coping mechanisms in response to grief or if they were activities that had little to do with grief. The researchers
suggested an expansion of the model that would include not only oscillation between bereavement stressors, but also everyday activities apart from bereavement.

Coping theories have gained prominence in bereavement research, and the DPM’s unique framework is pervasive in the literature (cf. Parkes & Prigerson, 2010; Worden, 2009). Some researchers even contended that it is a possible replacement for grief work (Russac et al., 2002); however, researchers have also highlighted areas that need further study (Bennet et al., 2010; Fasse & Zech, 2016). Carr (2010) raised important questions, such as whether individuals oscillate actively or passively, what the ideal balance between the two stressors are, and at what point people need to engage in one versus the other. There is still a need for research to validate this model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

**Meaning Reconstruction Model**

Along with the growing body of research in support of continuing bonds and coping processes, models of meaning-making theories have been influential in conceptualizing grieving. Hibberd (2013) stated that amidst people’s grief is a felt sense of meaninglessness. One model centered on the significance of meaning-making is the constructivist model of meaning reconstruction (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). The first dimension of this model is sense-making in which individuals ask questions surrounding the death in hopes of making sense of the loss. There may be a bidirectional relationship between distress and sense-making where higher levels of distress may prompt sense-making processes and sense-making may lessen distress. Hibberd (2013) described sense making as either fitting with one’s pre-existing worldview, or changing one’s worldview to incorporate the loss. Finding benefit to the loss involves “building new meaning structures” and this may not occur until a considerable amount of time following the loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 37). There is also a close relationship with identity and
meaning where reconstructing meaning impacts people’s sense of selves. One’s worldview before the loss may provide meaning after the death, or the worldview will be altered to incorporate the death.

Some researchers, like Hibberd (2013), have highlighted the importance of life significance in addition to sense-making. The premise of life significance is “transcendent” where “making sense of” provides “connection” with life (p. 679). She distinguished these two constructs by the questions they invoke, as sense-making is concerned with ‘why’ and life significance is concerned with purpose. She stated that individuals may be able to make sense of the loss but still find life not worth living, and therefore, there is a depletion of life significance. In summary, the meaning reconstruction model is a more recent model to bereavement research and is continuing to grow as people gravitate toward meaning-making mechanisms of grieving.

**Relearning the World Model**

An additional grieving model is Attig’s (2001, 2011) existential-phenomenological model of grieving. Having a philosophical background, Attig (2011) drew upon his teaching and writing of death and dying, as well as his clinical experience with the bereaved and formulated the holistic model of relearning the world. He posited that individuals are required to learn their worlds in “all facets of their being” following the loss of a loved one (p. 106). Attig went beyond a biological approach to mourning like attachment theory, or a cognitive approach like the DPM, when he stated:

As we grieve, we appropriate new understandings of the world and ourselves with in it. We also become different in the light of the loss as we assume a new orientation to the world. As we relearn, we adjust emotional and other psychological responses and postures. We transform habits, motivations, and behaviors. We find new ways to meet
biological needs. We reshape our interactions and connections with others. And we change understandings and interpretations and alter spiritual perspectives. (pp. 107-108)

In relearning the world, bereaved individuals actively choose to grieve on many different levels—emotionally, physically, cognitively, biological, relationally, and spirituality. Relearning the world consists of relearning one’s physical surroundings, oneself in context, one’s relationship with other survivors, and one’s spatial, temporal, and spiritual place in the world. Relearning our selves means that we reintegrate with others and restore life patterns, build resiliency in engaging with and moving beyond the pain, undergo self-transformation, transcend suffering, restore our shattered beings, connect to a new direction and sense of purpose, and reshape our communities and relationships with others. Much of what encompasses relearning the self has relational consequences. The essential component of relearning our selves is that we do not exist as completed beings in isolation, but rather we are constantly becoming and intertwined in a network of relationships. Relearning relationships with the deceased means that “as we grieve, we learn to live in separation” (p. 170). Individuals connect with the deceased in a new way, holding on to memories or what the deceased cared about, but letting the reality of their absence be as it is.

In addition to describing the ways in which individuals grieve by relearning the world, Attig (2004) also distinguished between the grief reaction immediately following bereavement, and the active grieving response. He described the grief reaction as an emotional reaction that happens to the bereaved whereas the grieving response is chosen. He wrote of the bereaved who choose to grieve their losses:

We engage with the loss, come to terms with our reactions to it, reshape our daily life patterns, and redirect our life stories in the light of what has happened. We respond as the
multi-dimensional beings we are: We exert physical energy. We work through and express emotion. We change motivations, habits, and behavior. We modify relationships. We return home to familiar meanings in life. We stretch into inevitably new meanings. And we change ourselves in the process. (p. 343)

Attig’s model of grieving is an extension of grief work, where he expounded the importance of engaging with one’s grief to deal with loss. He also aligned with the continuing bonds theory; however, he stated that although continuing bonds has gained prominence in the field of thanatology in the last few decades, the concept is not new as people have been maintaining ties with the deceased for centuries (T. Attig, personal communication, June 11, 2016). Attig’s (2011) holistic model remains a significant contribution to the field.

**Existential Analysis**

Currently there is much emphasis on grief work, attachment, continuing bonds, and mechanisms of coping in the bereavement literature. In their model of grieving, Existential Analysts include tenets of the aforementioned theories and models, such as allowing oneself to experience grief, maintaining relationship with the deceased, and coping with the loss. This section will provide an overview of Existential Analysis (EA), specifically exploring the concepts of turning towards, the grieving model, coping reactions, and emotional processing.

**Existential Analysis psychotherapy.** EA is a phenomenological approach that aims to support individuals in leading a fulfilling existence by helping them live with an inner ‘yes’ (Längle, 2005). Längle (2005) described EA as consisting of four fundamental realities of existence: (1) the world including the physical structures that support human existence, such as one’s own body; (2) life, which is comprised of relationships, values, and emotions; (3) “being oneself” as a unique individual (p. 6); and (4) the future, shaped by our choices and actions.
Every individual’s motivations are situated within these realities, which are representative of the four fundamental motivations or conditions for existence.

The first fundamental motivation (FM1) addresses the reality that every living person exists, and therefore is (Längle, 2004). Each person asks the question, “can I be?” There are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled for a person to fully be in this world, which are protection, space, and support. Having these conditions satisfied makes it possible for the individual to actively endure and accept circumstances in their life.

The second fundamental motivation (FM2) brings up another question, “do I like being alive?” (Längle, 2013). This question requires the individual to reflect on what makes life worth living or valuable. The three necessary conditions to answering this question are: relationships, time, and closeness. For an individual to connect with life, one needs to turn toward life and engage with it. This will be described in more detail as it pertains to grief in the following section.

The third fundamental motivation (FM3) is directed toward the individual’s own personhood and asks, “may I be myself?” (Längle, 2005). Individuals who answer ‘yes’ to this question can embrace their own uniqueness, despite their essential aloneness. To develop this fundamental capacity of be one’s unique self, individuals need attention, justice, and appreciation, and fulfilling this condition allows one to be authentic. This condition also requires individuals to actively accept themselves through encountering the self and others. To encounter oneself is to stand by, with, or alongside oneself.

Whereas the first three fundamental motivations have addressed the individual’s relationship with the world, others, and self, the fourth fundamental motivation (FM4) is self-transcendent, as the individual goes beyond oneself and asks, “for what purpose do I exist?”
The three conditions required to answer this question are “a field of activity, a structural context and a value to be realized in the future” (p. 11). In other words, individuals need a place to belong where they can connect with the larger context and work toward realizing more in life. To fulfill this fourth existential motivation, an individual must adopt a phenomenological attitude of openness to what life is asking of the individual.

These four fundamental existential motivations address the individual in the context of the world, relationships, self, and the noetic or spiritual realm. When people are bereaved, questions of capacity to be, value, self, and meaning arise. According to Existential Analysts, bereaved people grieve by turning toward their losses.

**Turning toward.** To understand grieving from an Existential Analytic perspective, it is necessary to explore the activity of ‘turning toward’ as the personal activity of the second fundamental motivation. Turning toward is defined as “entering a relationship, taking time, and creating closeness while being connected emotionally with oneself” (Längle, 2013). It is an active process of movement in which individuals focus their attention and create bridges between themselves and the people or objects they are turning toward. This bridge creates the space for movement to take place, which allows each individual to encounter the other. When people are turning toward, they are making a statement about what they value. Their attitude reflects their willingness to connect with others, devote their time, and create closeness. Turning toward others also requires the individual to turn toward oneself. In doing so, individuals become more intimately acquainted with their own emotions and their capacity to be close with themselves. They also experience an inner freedom and sense of fulfillment.

**Coping reactions of FM2.** By its description alone, turning toward seems like an activity that is easier done when individuals like what they are encountering. However, life is
full of circumstances that individuals strongly dislike. Often in these situations, individuals turn to coping reactions as a means of dealing with their dislike. In EA, coping reactions are defined as automatic behavioural reactions aimed at protecting the self from situations experienced as dangerous or harmful whereby the behaviours use the least amount of effort with no intent of resolving the problem (Längle, 2004).

Längle (2013) divided the coping reactions of the FM2 into four types: (1) basic movement; (2) paradoxical reaction; (3) aggression; and (4) resignation by feigning death. The first coping reaction requires the least amount of energy and it is the newest to evolve, whereas the last coping reaction requires the most energy and it is usually very primitive. When people are faced with an undesirable situation, they may first attempt to retreat, avoid, or withdraw from the situation. This may manifest as distancing, detachment, procrastination, or daydreaming. When this type of coping is not an option or proves insufficient, individuals may become hyperactive (i.e., paradoxical reaction). This could be a tendency to over-achieve, complain, compare oneself with others, or attempt to regroup by using distractions. When individuals are faced with intense dislike in relationships, they may become aggressive by using rage as a protective mechanism. This may seem counterintuitive, but rage is a final attempt to hold onto the value of the relationship. It is referred to as the “surging of life” that requires much energy in the effort to “shake or wake the other up” (Längle, 2013). When these coping reactions are insufficient, the fourth coping reaction is used, which is aimed to preserve the self. In essence, it is at this point where individuals give up and numb their feelings. They may develop apathy with little hope for restoration, or worse, resignation where they lose all hope. Resignation results in exhaustion, leaving individuals in a state of paralysis. The result is often the death of relationships with others and with oneself.
In EA, the activity of turning toward and the coping reactions are closely related to grieving. For many bereaved, grief may be disdained, something to be coped with by activating a plethora of coping reactions; however, it is important to turn toward one’s loss and engage with the felt grief. In EA, this is essentially what it means to grieve.

**Grieving.** Längle (2013) defines grieving as “the personal dealing with the loss of life which is now felt” and the change in state of being “requires a new relating to life” (p. 46). The connection of life is brought to the forefront as individuals suffer the loss of what they value. For individuals in this study, they are suffering the losses of their deceased loved ones. When people grieve, they are turned toward themselves and in doing so, have created closeness with themselves (Längle, 2013). This is done through the process of “letting be” in which an individual allows themselves to experience their feelings of loss. By letting be, the individual is not evaluating feelings or keeping busy, but being present to the surfacing emotion.

Emotionality is crucial to one’s existence in the world (Längle, 2011). Without feeling, fulfillment cannot be fully experienced. Emotionality is especially central to grieving considering the range of feeling housed within one’s grief. Emotions originate from something drawing close and touching the person, at which the person is moved within and feels a certain energy, which leads to the experience of an emotion. In this way, emotion emerges from turning toward and relating to something, such as being bereaved. In EA, emotion is considered in two ways, namely primary and integrated emotion (Längle, 2013). In the context of grieving, primary emotion is the immediate feeling which arises as a result of being bereaved. It is an affective reaction and a spontaneous impulse that cannot be avoided, which may emerge consciously or unconsciously. Integrated emotions are integrated into the person and the
person’s worldview. Integrated emotions are stable, reflecting individuals’ values, and have an element of inner resonance.

In EA, emotions are closely related to values and this is important in the context of grieving. In this study, the deceased are referred to as loved ones. The description of the deceased as loved reflects how deeply the bereaved valued the ones they lost. Emotions, many of which are painful, then arise as a result of the lost value of the other. Essentially, in turning toward loss, the individual is turning toward one’s emotions. This attunement with the self creates closeness and informs the individual that although there is suffering, the relationship with self persists. The individual can begin accepting their relationship with their loss, which connects the individual to the “flow of life”. This in turn once again results in emotion. Längle (2011) describes the intimate relationship between life and feelings when he states, “it is life that evokes feelings and wakes up within feelings” (p. 45). Emotions are central to grieving, but it is important to note that an individual cannot remain in a constant state of grief. Contrary to Lindemann’s (1944/94) assertion of working through grief until it is finished, Existential Analysts recognize the need for individuals to seek respite from feeling grief, which may include coping.

**EA phases of grieving.** The Existential Analytic model of grieving involves descriptions of inner and outer poles of grieving, in which the inner pole describes the personal grieving experience of the bereaved and the outer pole describes how the bereaved is accompanied by others in their grief (Längle, 2013). I will first provide a description of this inner pole of grieving, which is divided into three phases that are unique in duration for every individual (Längle, 2013). The first phase is facing the loss and letting be all that comes with it. Central to this phase is the ability of the bereaved to give up resistance to the grief. It is only until this is
accomplished that the individual can begin grieving and healing. Existential Analysts also address the function of crying in response to grieving. Crying is the evidence that life is still flowing within the surviving individuals in spite of their tragic losses. Lamott (2014) recalled her experience of grieving her best friend when she stated, “the more often I cried in my room … and felt just generally wretched, the more often I started to have occasional moments of utter joy” (p. 34). This statement reflects the healing nature of allowing oneself to feel the pangs of grief.

Once the bereaved allow the reality of the death to be felt, they can enter into the second phase of grieving: inner dialogue (Längle, 2013). Talking with oneself provides closeness, warmth, and care. The felt closeness is the result of empathizing with oneself and allowing feelings of pity to emerge. Although staying in self-pity is detrimental, it is healing to acknowledge the woes of losing someone significant. Warmth is created through consoling oneself. The bereaved individual cares for oneself by turning toward the self, which allows the individual to become attuned to one’s needs, whether it be solitude or relationship.

The third phase of grieving is the orientation phase in which the bereaved orient themselves toward the future and contemplate its value (Längle, 2013). This phase also involves the transition into a new way of being and into new relationships with self and others. In congruence with the continuing bonds theory, the individual transforms their relationship with the deceased. They may consent to their life circumstances and place value in their newfound relationships. To reiterate, the inner pole of the EA model of grieving involves three phases; however, this study explores one specific activity of grieving and how it is lived through: turning toward loss.
The outer pole of the EA model of grieving is referred to as grief accompaniment (Längle, 2013), where bereaved individuals are accompanied by others as they grieve. This accompaniment closely resembles the phases of the inner pole, where individuals who are supporting the bereaved: (1) provide presence through being there, with an emphasis placed on presence with wordlessness; (2) turn toward the bereaved by coming close, being empathic, and offering encouragement, comfort, and care; and (3) help the bereaved consent and reorient to life and work on their relationship with the deceased.

In summary, EA is a psychotherapy aimed at helping individuals live freely and authentically (Längle, 2005). The basic activity of FM2 is turning toward, which involves opening oneself to engage in relationships and one’s values. From an Existential Analytic perspective, grieving is viewed as the personal dealing with life’s losses, with the essential activity being turning toward these losses. Existential Analysts view grieving in terms of an inner and outer pole, where the inner pole involves three phases in which the griever accepts the reality of the loss, engages in inner dialogue, and reorients to life, and the outer pole involves accompanying the bereaved through these phases.

**Summary**

The field of thanatology is ripe with theories and models of grieving, from the psychoanalytic theory where grief work originated (Freud 1917; Lindemann 1944/94, 1963) to Bowlby’s (1980/98) attachment theory to the more recent continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996). There have been notable shifts in approaches to grieving. One of the most significant changes upon the turn of the twenty-first century is the paradigmatic shift from the emphasis on relinquishing ties to continuing bonds with the deceased (Russac et al., 2002). Many contemporary researchers recognize the importance of maintaining connection with the deceased.
and have consistently emphasized this (cf. Attig, 2011; Klass, 1999; Längle, 2013) and some researchers, such as Worden (2009), have changed their models to incorporate this theory.

Another shift has been away from stage models of grieving such as Bowlby’s (1980/98) phases of mourning or Kübler-Ross’s stages of dying which were translated to stages of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). The stage model poses a theoretical limitation because these models suggest that there are distinct, linear stages in grief (Klass, 1999). The stage model carries false assumptions such that people grieve predictably by moving through these stages in succession and that individuals grieve passively and uniformly (Attig, 1990). An approach to grieving which is not well known in the field of thanatology is the Existential Analytic model of grieving where individuals personally deal with their losses by turning toward them. In consideration that the aim of this study is to explore individuals’ lived experiences of grieving, specifically turning toward loss, certain theoretical limitations will now be explored.

**Limitations of Extant Literature**

After reviewing the theoretical approaches and integrative models, there have been areas of focus in grieving research that have both advanced and limited the field of grief and bereavement. Arising from a paradigmatic shift away from the concept of grief work, which has been pervasive in the last century, there is presently an emphasis placed on coping with bereavement, particularly spurred by the DPM of bereavement (cf. Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Wortman & Silver, 1989). There have been many studies conducted on the DPM since its formulation, and there is a steadily growing body of research on this model (cf. Stroebe & Schut, 2010). One potential limitation of this area of study is the overemphasis on the role of coping in bereavement, which raises the question of the relationship between grieving and coping. Often
these terms are used interchangeably in the literature (cf. Attig, 2011; Worden, 2009), but it is unclear if these constructs are identical or distinct.

Another limitation that arises from the emphasis on coping in bereavement literature was stated by Bonanno (2001a) when he asserted that there is a lack of empirical studies on the role of emotion in bereavement. It is curious that there is a paucity of literature on emotions in grieving, given that many researchers agree grieving involves largely an affective component (cf. Stroebe et al., 2008). However, the coping literature in bereavement has been heavily influenced by cognitive theorists; therefore, emotionality has been seemingly overlooked in its role in grieving. It seems that in some way, the question of how people grieve following the death of a significant other has been replaced by question of how people cope with their bereavement.

Another limitation is that many empirical studies have been focused on pathological grieving (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001). As mentioned, there is much research available on complicated or traumatic grief, but less so on a normal course of grieving. One reason for the growing body of literature on pathological grief may be that specific symptomology of grief is easier to measure. There are numerous quantitative studies that employ grief scales and self-report questionnaires aimed at measuring complicated grief (Baker et al., 2016; Diminich & Bonanno, 2014; Latham & Prigerson, 2004). However, some researchers lobbied for a more holistic view of grieving that allows for the complexity of grieving to unfold (Attig, 2011; Granek, 2013). Qualitative studies seem to be able to provide this, and Neimeyer and Hogan (2001) stated that the strength of qualitative studies is that they “begin to paint a picture of bereavement that is far more complex and less tidy than that suggested by the artificially simplified and controlled canvasses of quantitative questionnaires” (p. 113). Overall, the grief
bereavement field could benefit from more qualitative studies on non-pathological courses of grieving.

In addressing the need for further research on grieving, Bonanno (2001b) posed numerous questions, one of which was, “what happens when people grieve?” (p. 720). Granek (2013) expounded that grief research has been “framed within a medical, scholarly, scientific model”, which limits the very nature of “grief and loss in its complexity and its depth” (pp. 266-267). Therefore, to answer a question like Bonanno’s (2001b), there is a need to take seriously the consequences of remaining in the medical and scientific frame when researching grief. Consequently, a question about the nature of grieving would benefit from a certain openness and sensitivity to the unique experiences of those who are willing to share. Granek and O’Rourke (2011) conducted an informal survey of people’s lived experiences of grieving. Granek (2013) discussed the results of this survey and identified the need for further phenomenological studies of grieving which give space for people’s “existential understanding”, which many scientific methods do not (p. 282). Granek is not the only one calling for phenomenological studies of grieving, as Attig (1990) has argued its importance in the field of thanatology for many years. He stated:

None of us is a statistical or average person. We are flesh-and-blood individuals whose experiences vary considerably from any general tendencies captured in statements of probability. We live and grieve in those variations. The stage and phase and medical ideas of grieving provide no clues about the ranges of such variations in our living and grieving that others must come to know and appreciate if they are to respect the uniqueness of our experiences. (p. 44)
It is beneficial for researchers to draw close to the complexities of grieving when studying it to better capture the personal nature of another’s grieving and how it is experienced. Authors of the Center for Advancement of Health’s ([CAH], 2004) bereavement and grief research report stated that one of the challenges of research is “maximiz[ing] its ‘experiential proximity’ to providers” (p. 513). In the context of bereavement, one of the goals in research is to inform practice in caring for those who are bereaved. The hope is that this phenomenological, qualitative research will in turn impact how grieving individuals are supported on a personal-relational, societal, and clinical level.

**Rationale for This Study**

Essentially, this study emerged from my personal experience of being moved by a sense of wonder about turning towards loss as a fundamental, shared human experience. As I engaged with the research literature on grief, I became aware of several important limitations that strengthened my personal desire to conduct this study. Thus, this project is born out of my deep, personal experience related to grieving, and it is grounded in the extant grief research as it strives to address some significant limitations in the field, such as: the need to explore the phenomenon of grieving, particularly active grieving (i.e., turning toward loss), and the lived experiences of the grievers; the need to understand the experiential nuances of coping and grieving; and the urge to adopt a holistic perspective on grief to complement the dominant medicalized, pathologizing stance.

Whereas the reviewed theory and empirical findings served to situate the phenomenon and to outline research gaps in the area of grief research, this thesis primarily stemmed out of my own personal experience of having turned away from my own grief, and from learning about the concept of turning toward loss from my EA clinical training. From this place, questions of
grieving emerged, such as: how do people grieve and what does it mean to do so? In essence, I chose to pursue once more “the deep engagement we had with the sheer humanness of mourning and the transformative power of grief” (Granek, 2013, p. 280) by using a hermeneutic phenomenological method to explore the question, what is the lived experience of turning toward loss?
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

There is still room for advancement in knowledge and understanding to enhance the growing body of bereavement research. Numerous research methods could potentially address the gaps in grief literature, but the results may vary depending on the methodology and its assumptions. As mentioned, grief and bereavement research has undergone a paradigmatic shift from the grief work hypothesis to continuing bonds and coping theories (Russac et al., 2002). This has led to many recent developments in the field, such as new theories and models that address grieving; however, as Husserl (1911/80) has famously stated, there is a need to go back “to the things themselves” (p. 116). It is important amidst these new developments to continue considering the lived experiences of those who are grieving. More specifically, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of turning toward the loss of a deeply valued relationship. The key phrase in this section is *lived experience*, which is an integral element of phenomenological studies. This section outlines the paradigmatic assumptions, methodology and analytic procedure of hermeneutic phenomenology.

**Research Paradigm**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) have described paradigms as “set[s] of basic beliefs” and “worldviews” that influence the way research is conducted (p. 107). They go further to describe certain paradigms as inquiry paradigms which answer three basic questions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Ontological questions ask the researcher to consider the nature of reality and how it can be measured. Questions of epistemology are oriented toward what can be known and its relationship with the knower. Methodological questions require the researcher to consider how to research or measure what can be known.
There are various paradigms, but some researchers have narrowed the paradigms to four, which include positivist/post positivist, constructivist/interpretivist, transformative, and pragmatic (Mertens, 2014). Phenomenological researchers have debated whether phenomenology is best suited under the post positivist paradigm, whereas other researchers have considered the interpretivist paradigmatic assumptions to closely align with phenomenology (Finlay, 2009). As a result, variations of phenomenology answer the three fundamental questions differently. Many of the paradigms are also influenced by eras of thought, namely the modernist and postmodernist era. Phenomenology is not exempt from these influences.

Where modernists may argue that reality is objective and can be measured, some postmodernists oppose an objective truth to be discovered apart from each individual (Finlay, 2009). This impacts phenomenological studies, as phenomenology is often divided into descriptive or interpretive phenomenology. The former reflects a more positivist orientation and the latter aligns more with the constructivist orientation (Laverty, 2003). Both phenomenological approaches are systematic ways to explore the human experience, but they differ in their responses to the basic questions. Many phenomenologists have transitioned to adopting a postmodern perspective, as this allows for the subjectivity of the human experience to emerge; however, this creates difficulties when developing a phenomenological method, as the boundaries of “construction and deconstruction” are difficult to establish (Finlay, 2009, p. 16).

Hermeneutic phenomenology aligns with interpretivist/constructivist paradigmatic assumptions (Laverty, 2003). Many researchers who use hermeneutic phenomenology answer the ontological question by supporting the idea of multiple realities, as opposed to one absolute reality. These realities are constructed by the knower, and the best source of knowledge is through one’s experience within the world; therefore, the knower and the would-be-known have
a close relationship. The ontological and epistemological questions are answered differently by two of the most influential thinkers in phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl was more concerned with the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and what can be known whereas Heidegger focused on the ontological nature of being (Koch, 1995). In other words, Husserl was focused on the “knowledge of the phenomena” whereas Heidegger was interested in the “meaning of … being” (van Manen, 2014, p. 105). Both thinkers emphasized the importance of lived experience when researching phenomena. Proponents of hermeneutic phenomenology emphasize the importance of interpretation, which arises from the co-construction between the researcher and the participant. This is reflective of the constructivist paradigm, where knowledge is created as the knower and would-be-known interact (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

**Phenomenology**

Thus “phenomenology” means to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 58)

Phenomenology originated in Germany as an influential philosophical tradition before it was adopted as a psychological research method (Dowling, 2007). Finlay (2009) described phenomenological research as “involv[ing] both rich description of the lifeworld or lived experience, and where the researcher has adopted a special, open phenomenological attitude” (p. 8). The phenomenological attitude is an important aspect of conducting phenomenological research. This attitude is challenging and contrary to the way individuals are accustomed to engaging with the world. This is often referred to as the natural attitude, where individuals take-for-granted what they are experiencing on a moment to moment basis (Finlay, 2008). Contrarily, the phenomenological attitude requires the researcher to step outside one’s presuppositions and
engage in a sense of wonder about the world. This requires the researcher to be open and reflexive, which allows that which is being studied to impress upon the researcher in its own way, apart from one’s predetermined understanding. Integral to conducting a phenomenological study is exploring the phenomenon “in the way it occurs, and in its own terms” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 12). All phenomenon that can be explored is available to the conscience because it is through consciousness that people relate to their lived worlds (van Manen, 1997).

There are different forms of phenomenological research, each with varying assumptions and approaches of studying phenomena. Two said types are descriptive and interpretive phenomenology, where hermeneutic phenomenology would be a form of the latter. Husserl is considered the founder of descriptive phenomenology as a method for practicing human science (Jennings, 2000). Husserl aimed to describe the essence of the phenomena by going back “to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1911/80, p. 116). Staying true to this method requires that the researcher not deviate from the nature of the phenomenon, but uncover the essences of the phenomenon (Finlay, 2009), without theory or interpretation (Jennings, 2000; van Manen, 2014).

Where descriptive phenomenology is concerned with the way a certain phenomenon appears apart from interpretation, interpretive phenomenology goes this beyond by considering the meaning of its Being (van Manen, 2014). Heidegger, a student of Husserl and a hermeneutic philosopher, questioned whether knowledge can be known apart from interpretation (van Manen, 2014). Since human beings are constantly interpreting their worlds, any knowledge pursued will be influenced by their pre-understandings. People find meaning from the world around them, but also construct their own worlds as they experience life and operate in their way of being (Laverty, 2003). In interpretive phenomenology, it is important for the researcher to explore how the individuals construct their own world and the meanings of their pre-understandings.
(Finlay, 2008; Koch, 1995). Interpretive phenomenologists also highlight the close relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the lived experiences (Finlay, 2009). The researcher and the participants co-construct meanings together. Essentially the researcher interprets the participants’ interpretations of their lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). This requires that the researcher be reflexive throughout the process, as it is difficult to determine the boundaries of researcher subjectivity (Finlay, 2009). In this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach is taken by use of the hermeneutic phenomenological method.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method**

Hermeneutic phenomenological researchers recognize the ingrained nature of their language, culture, and ways of being that impact their interpretations of the participants’ lived experiences, thus making “suspension of belief” difficult (van Manen, 2014, p. 222). The line of co-construction is challenging to determine because it is easy for a researcher to become a participant; however, the researchers use reflexivity to ground themselves in their research role (Laverty, 2003). The researcher is involved with the participant on an intersubjective level and influences the research process with the interpretations brought forth throughout the analysis. Some researchers have summarized the nonlinear phenomenological research process as gathering the first-person accounts of the lived experience, attending to what appears of this lived experience, and identifying the essential features from an open stance (Finlay, 2008, 2009; Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenologists would also use the hermeneutic circle as a means of achieving depth in the analytical interpretations while being reflexive of their own experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenological research does not have a prescribed method, as there are numerous ways to conduct phenomenological research; however, some researchers have created guidelines in conducting such a study (Laverty, 2003). In this study, I will be using
van Manen’s (1997) methodological guidelines for conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research.

**Data Collection and Analytic Procedure**

Van Manen (1997) provided an outline for conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research, which consists of methodological themes researchers can use as a guide. He identified six themes which include: (1) turning toward a phenomenon of interest; (2) exploring the lived experience of the phenomenon; (3) unveiling and reflecting on the essential qualities of the phenomenon; (4) engaging in a writing and rewriting process of describing and interpreting the phenomenon; (5) remaining oriented toward the phenomenon; and (6) considering the phenomenon in the context of its parts and the whole. In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the data collection and analytic procedure often overlap. The data is the participants’ descriptions of their experiences lived through and the analysis occurs throughout and following data collection. This is because during the interviews, the researcher and the participants are co-constructing meaning and “knowledge is created through interaction between and among investigator and respondents” (Racher & Robinson, 2002, p. 469). The dialogue serves as data collection and as the means by which the researcher becomes acquainted with the essence of the phenomenon.

In this study, I interviewed participants of their lived experiences of turning toward loss using semi-structured interviews for 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews began with open questions about their relationship with the deceased individuals and the nature of their deaths. The interviews evolved to descriptions of how the participants engaged with their grieving by turning toward their losses. The following section describes how each of van Manen’s (1997) suggested methodological themes were applied to the phenomenon of interest.
**Turning toward loss.** The phenomenon of this study is the lived experience of turning toward the loss of a loved one. This grieving phenomenon raises other questions such as what is essentially meaningful to the experience of turning toward one’s loss? How does this transpire over the course of their grieving? What was it like to be a person who has lost a parent, spouse, child, or sibling? Other questions this study addressed is *if* or *how* engaging with grief impacted the participants.

As a way of orienting myself within the context of turning toward loss, I connected with other bereaved individuals and those who work in hospices and counsel the bereaved. These people were not participants but rather served as informants for the data collection process. The goal was to better situate myself with others who have experience in this area. I also conducted a pilot interview of my final interview where a research assistant interviewed me as the participant. This placed myself in the position of the participants, which opened me to the experience of answering my questions and gave me perspective on what needed to be revised. I identified questions that were difficult to answer, unclear, leading, and those questions that did not elicit elaboration of the lived experience. This allowed me to refine the interview to ensure that participants could provide rich lived experience descriptions.

**Exploring the lived experience.** The process of exploring lived experience via interviews was intersubjective, but the focus was on the lived experiences of the participants and not myself. The lived experience was not a single event in time. The participants perceived their grief as an overarching phenomenon. As a result, the participants elaborated on their turning toward loss experience over time. The participants recalled specific examples of turning toward loss and described their experiences in detail. Although the lived experiences were of the past, the goal was for the participants to bring them into the present; however, it was not fully
possible for the participants to recall their experience in the exact way it happened. This was especially true when describing the first year following their losses. Van Manen (1997) referred to this as transformations, where the experience is transformed by the participant through their description. Therefore, the study is interpretive: the participants interpreted their past experiences as they described them. The interpretation happened as the participants described what it was like to attend to their grief, and interpretation also took place as a function of language. Some of the participants had written extensively throughout their grieving experiences, whereas one participant was articulating her experience of this phenomenon in a new way. Their use of language inevitably shaped their description of their lived experiences.

Van Manen (1997) provided direction when asking participants about their lived experience. He claimed the goal of phenomenological research of lived experience is to further understand the meanings of those experiences through the accounts of others. In order to do so, the researcher may ask the participant to thoroughly describe the experience without interpretation. The aim is for a detailed description of the phenomena, which allows the researcher to come close to what is appearing. In this study, the participants were asked to describe the ways they turned toward their losses as thoroughly as possible, with specific examples. Their descriptions spanned the course of many years, each starting with the initial impact of the loss and ending with where they are at present.

The focus was less on the cause of the grief, as that is already established, but rather the experience of living with the grief and attending to its presence. It was also important to gather a description of the experience as it is felt in mind, body, and spirit. The participants all reflected on their emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual states. Not only did the participants discuss their intrapsychic processes, but also the impact of the experience on their lifestyle and
relationships with others. Participants described what they experienced on a sensory and intuitive level. Questions could arise of whether the details the participants share are true, but van Manen (1997) distinguished between “accuracy” and “plausibility” (p. 65). He stated that it is more important that the sense of the phenomena holds true, rather than the specifics of the account.

**Reflection of the phenomenon.** Once the interviews were finished, I transcribed them into textual representations. The researcher uses the text as a means of finding essential themes of the phenomenon. Van Manen (1997) described themes as being points of meaning, simplifications of the phenomenon, and “aspects of the structure of lived experience” (p. 87). Themes may appear in each participants’ descriptions, but also across participant descriptions. These commonalities direct the researcher to the essence of the phenomenon, providing an opportunity to go deeper with the experience. Although there may be overarching themes throughout the descriptions, single themes are not comprehensive enough to depict the essence of the phenomenon. The analysis is not complete once themes have been identified, rather themes serve like way points on a map to provide the researcher a sense of direction toward the essence.

Van Manen (1997) highlighted three different ways themes can be identified:

1) Taking a holistic approach to the text, by reading it as a whole and formulating a phrase that captures its essence.

2) Reading the text and identifying different sentences or pieces of the description that reveal significant aspects of the phenomenon.

3) Analyzing the text sentence by sentence and identify what each sentence is signifying. I adapted these guidelines to better explore the participants’ lived experience descriptions.
After the interviews were transcribed, I noticed that the textual representation of their experiences of turning toward loss seemed to be diluted. What were vibrant and rich descriptions during the interview seemed to fall flat on paper. This was because the textual descriptions were missing emphasis: the vocal intonations, expressions, and fluctuations as well as the distinctness of the pauses and the silences. This led me to question how I was to immerse myself in their experiences as they are lived through if the descriptions remain two-dimensional within the text. To remediate this dilemma, I listened to the interviews as I read the transcripts. This improved my ability to identify the lived experience descriptions within the text, which would serve as my basis for uncovering themes. I combed through the interviews and selected the parts that provided detailed descriptions of turning toward loss, and in doing so, this helped me stay oriented to the phenomenon. The parts of the interview where participants shared “personal views, perceptions, perspectives, or interpretations” were left unused to the extent it was possible in order to only analyze the pre-reflective descriptions (van Manen, 2014, p. 314).

In addition, I collaborated with other researchers, at least one additional researcher per interview, who assisted in identifying themes and the essential structures of the phenomena. Dialoguing with other researchers allowed for a more thorough examination of the participants’ descriptions, adding fresh insight into what was appearing. This collaboration was also integral in ensuring that I remained open and in a state of wonder toward the phenomenon.

Once the lived experience descriptions were collected, I primarily used the second and third suggested approaches to identify themes. I read the descriptions line by line and questioned, ‘what does this sentence say about what it means to turn toward loss?’ If the sentence was a part of a larger whole, such as multiple sentences or a larger sample, I asked the question of that section in its entirety. I also identified specific statements of the participants that
encapsulated the essence of their lived experience as a whole. As I worked through the text, I articulated themes and expanded these themes through written and artistic expression. I used these two mediums, namely journaling and painting, to adopt an attitude of wonder and openness to what was emerging and impressing upon me. Adopting the attitude of the epoché, or openness, also meant that throughout the data collection and the analysis, I practiced reflexivity of my beliefs and assumptions. I did so by critical reflection of how my behaviour, actions, and questions impacted the dialogue with the participants. I also maintained a journal throughout the research process where I identified assumptions and knowledges with which I became familiar, such as theories and bodies of literature. In making these assumptions transparent, I was able to suspend my beliefs to the extent I was capable. For the sake of succinctness in this section, refer to Chapter 6 for specifics on my reflexive process, including the journaling and creative endeavors. Along with expressing how the research was impacting me, I was also reflecting and interpreting the lived experiences through writing and rewriting.

**Writing and rewriting processes.** Writing and rewriting a description of the emerging themes is essential to the analytic process. Van Manen (1997) stated that “a description is a powerful one if it reawakens our basic experience of the phenomenon it describes, and … we experience the more foundational grounds of the experience” (p. 122). The act of writing brings the researcher into a reflective state, where depth of interpretation can be met. Van Manen commented on the dual role of writing, as it separates the researcher from the phenomenon of study while allowing the researcher to become more intimately acquainted with its essential meanings. Writing allows the research to reveal what may be hidden, and to reconnect the researcher with what is already known in a deeper way. Van Manen stated that the research text should be “oriented, strong, rich, and deep” (p. 151). A meaningful phenomenological
description will have levels of depth beyond what the participant provided. The researcher needs to write in such a way that readers will be instantly connected with the experience. In this study, readers should be able to connect to the activity of turning toward loss through the rich description of the phenomenon, and if the essence is captured, the phenomenon will be easily recognized. Fundamentally, the results of this research study are the phenomenological writing.

**Research Participation**

Phenomenological researchers aim to “make contact with life as it is lived” (van Manen, 2014, p. 353). This means it is important to gather data that will serve as examples of the phenomenon in question, and such data may derive from a multitude of sources. In this study, I recruited four participants to described their lived experience of turning toward loss via interviews. Van Manen (2014) cautioned phenomenologists from viewing participants as part of a sample representative of a greater population, but rather as those who provide examples of a given phenomenon. I employed purposive sampling in this study with the aim of gathering lived experience descriptions of the specific grieving activity of turning toward loss. The sample was purposive because the participants all experienced this phenomenon and were selected on the basis they could articulate their experience.

**Recruitment.** The main method of recruitment was through poster advertisements, emails to various organizations, and word of mouth. The study was advertised on Facebook where an electronic copy of the recruitment poster was uploaded (refer to Appendix A). Posters were also distributed at Trinity Western University, and were emailed to various hospices and counselling centers, as well as the Compassionate Friends chapter in the greater Vancouver area.

**Selection.** Participants were selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria which included being 19 years of age and older, as well as the type of bereavement and the time
since death. Once the individuals expressed interest in the study, they participated in a screening interview. Selection criteria and the screening interview are described below.

*Type of bereavement.* Participants who are bereaved of either a parent, spouse, child, or sibling were recruited. I aimed to recruit one of each type of loss. I chose to explore more than one type of loss since the phenomenon in question is turning toward loss, which can be experienced with many types of losses. In this way, the experience can be explored across different relationships.

*Time since death.* The participants were required to have been bereaved for at least three years, but no more than ten years. It was important for the participants to be familiar with the phenomenon in question in order to describe their lived experience (Wertz, 2005). This criterion allowed the participants to have grieved for enough time that the loss is not acute. The set range also maintained homogeneity among the participants.

*Screening interview.* Individuals who were interested in participating were required to go through a screening interview, which was 20 to 30 minutes in length. The purpose of this interview was to gain a broad description of the individuals’ grieving with the intent of looking for ways the individuals have turned toward their losses (refer to Appendix B). In addition to selecting participants on the basis of turning toward, the interview also served as an indicator of the participants’ verbal skills. This reflected their ability to dialogue and provide rich descriptions of their lived experience during the final interview. Individuals who were not selected to continue to the final interview were informed their information was securely discarded.

*Participants.* The participants recruited include four women between the ages of 34 and 75. Participants’ cultural backgrounds are Canadian (two), Dutch, and British. The women
described their religious affiliations as Christian (three) and Unitarian Universalist. Each of the participants have suffered different losses: Shirley is grieving the loss of her sister to cancer who died nine years ago; Victoria is grieving the loss of her mother to cancer who died four years ago; Maureen is grieving the loss of her husband to cancer who died nine years ago; and Leslie is grieving the loss of her son to drug overdose who died eight years ago. The following describes the interview process and the ensuing validity checks.

**The final interview.** The women were emailed the demographic information form (refer to Appendix C) and informed consent form (refer to Appendix D) to review before our first meeting. They were asked to meet in a confidential setting to be interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes. The first interview was conducted at Fraser River Counselling Centre, and the subsequent three interviews were conducted in each of the participants’ homes. Upon the participants’ arrival, we reviewed the informed consent together where the nature of the study, the risks and benefits involved, and their right to withdraw at any time were explained to them. The participants then signed the informed consent and completed the demographic form. They were given the opportunity to choose pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. After completion of the interviews, the audio files and transcriptions were password protected and paper copies were securely stored.

The interviews were semi-structured using the Personal Existential Analysis (PEA) method as a structure for the interview (Längle, 2003). PEA involves four steps, which include (1) a description of the facts of the event; (2) the impressions and sensations that arise from the facts; (3) the reached understanding; and (4) a response or action (Längle, 2003, p. 44). I have chosen to use PEA as a structure for the interview because this method complements hermeneutic phenomenology due to the emphasis on openness, description, and dialogue. In
respects to the “dialogical nature” of PEA, the method views personhood as “always in a process of exchange with the world and in mutual exchange with itself and the world” (Längle, 2003, p. 39). The interview dialogue became an encounter between myself and the participants. This encounter “allows my own to be touched by the other, and adds my own to the other”, which is evident as the meanings of turning toward loss emerge between myself and the participants (Längle, 2003, p. 40). Using PEA as a method for the interview structure deepened the level of discourse from interviewing to encountering, which added to the richness of the data.

**Iconic validity checks.** Although empirical member checks are often use in qualitative studies, this is not so in hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2014). Instead, iconic validity checks may be conducted (M. van Manen, personal communication, October 16, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenologists are more concerned with the depth and insight of the phenomenological writing and how it resonates with the readers, rather than its accurate reflection of specific details. In this study, the purpose of the phenomenological writing is not to highlight the specific lives of the participants, but to provide a deeper understanding of turning toward loss (van Manen, 2014). After the completion of the phenomenological writing, the text was provided to the participants, research assistants, and to colleagues with no relation to the study. Each person was asked whether the text induced a sense of wonder or resonated with them. For individuals who have turned toward their losses, they were asked if the text captures their experience of such. For those who have not had this experience, they were asked if they had a deeper understanding of what it means to turn toward loss after reading the text. Two participants provided feedback, as well as four members of the research team, and three colleagues. Each individual indicated that the phenomenological writing resonated with them and deepened their understanding of turning toward loss.
Methodological Rigour

The validity of a phenomenological study has to be sought in the appraisal of the originality of insights and the soundness of interpretive processes demonstrated in the study. (van Manen, 2014, p. 348)

Methodological rigour is a crucial component of conducting a qualitative study. There have been guidelines developed for qualitative studies in general, but phenomenological studies often demonstrate rigour in ways that other methods do not (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Van Manen (2014) addressed ways to assess the validity of phenomenological studies, which differ from other qualitative methods and quantitative methods. He asserted that it is important phenomenological researchers meet validation criteria by having strong phenomenological questions, analyzing rich, detailed descriptions, and not focusing on causality and theoretical explanations. Phenomenological researchers do not aim for their studies to be reliable, as the goal is to provide new and deeper insights into a particular phenomenon, even if it has been explored before. Van Manen also asserted that the evidence of phenomenology is “intuitive-based” where findings provide understanding and meaning of the phenomenon, as opposed to empirical evidence which is related to generalizability and quantifiability (p. 351).

Generalizability in phenomenological involves holding the tension between the uniqueness of the phenomenon in question as well as the universality of insight. Van Manen (2014) described two types of generalizability: existential and singular. The former refers to the recurring thematic meanings which are essential to a phenomenon, where the latter refers to the universal uniqueness specific to a phenomenon. In light of these validity criteria specific to phenomenological studies, the next section will provide an overview this study’s rigour and adherence to hermeneutic phenomenological principles.
Two of the commonly recognized types of rigour include credibility and confirmability, which are the qualitative equivalents of the quantitative internal validity and objectivity (Mertens, 2014). De Witt and Ploeg (2006) stated that it is difficult to apply these criteria to hermeneutic phenomenological studies because of their subjective and interpretive natures. They explained that because phenomenology methodology incorporates its philosophical principles, it is difficult to use generic qualitative rigour criteria that have been influenced by other schools of philosophies. As a response to this challenge, de Witt and Ploeg (2006) provided a framework for conducting a rigorous interpretive phenomenological study, which is as follows:

**Balanced Integration**

Researchers conducting phenomenological studies need to be mindful of incorporating their philosophical foundations into the research study, but not at the expense of the participants’ accounts. In other words, I was mindful of balancing the philosophical underpinnings of this study with the research methodology, by bracketing theoretical assumptions during data collection and the analysis process. Once the analysis was complete, I integrated the phenomenological writing with the current body of grief and bereavement literature and the theory and practice of Existential Analysis.

**Openness**

Along with balanced integration, openness is an expression of rigour found in the research process (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Openness is described as being attuned to what is appearing. Van Manen (2014) stated that “the measure of openness needed to grasp…something is also a measure of its depthful nature” (p. 355). Openness requires a position of wonder. Wonder was described as “that moment of being when one is overcome by awe or perplexity” (p. 360). In hermeneutic phenomenology, it is assumed that individuals have preunderstandings of
their world that lead them to perceive it in a certain way. This would seem to prevent researchers from adopting an open attitude toward their topic of inquiry; however, placing oneself in a position of wonder and engaging in the process of reflexive orientation allows the researcher to adopt a phenomenological attitude. In this study, I practiced reflexivity to remain in a stance of openness and wonder towards the phenomenon (refer to Chapter 6).

**Concreteness**

Concreteness situates the reader *concretely* within the phenomenon in question. This has been done by providing the reader with examples from the participants’ narrative to support the research findings. De Witt and Ploeg (2006) referred to van Manen’s ‘lived throughness’ and Madison’s contexuality to describe concreteness. Lived throughness connects the readers to the experience of the participants’ lifeworlds, and in this study, their experience of turning toward loss. Contexuality provides the readers with an understanding of contextual factors such as history and culture. The participants were asked to provide detailed descriptions to explore how turning toward loss was lived through, and their specific cultural and religious backgrounds were explored prior to and during the interviews (as it arose in dialogue).

**Resonance**

Do the research findings resonate with the reader? Resonance is an essential component of phenomenological rigour. Just as van Manen (2014) encouraged the researcher to remain in a state of wonder, he also stated that researchers should be able to induce wonder in those who are reading their study. This study explored a component of grieving, and as most people know, everyone will be bereaved of someone at one point throughout their lives (Winokuer & Harris, 2012). By its universal nature, grieving should resonate on some level with the readers; however, many people may not have experienced the act of turning toward their loss and thus,
this phenomenon may be unfamiliar. By conducting the iconic validity checks, this criteria for rigour has been met thus far, but my hope for this study is that the phenomenological writing will continue to move readers toward a deeper understanding of what it means to turn toward loss.

**Actualization**

This final expression of rigour from de Witt and Ploeg’s (2006) framework is difficult but important to measure. Actualization is described as the realization of resonance in the future. Will the study still resonate with the readers when read years from when it was written? This text will continue to be read and interpreted over time, and the findings will continue to evolve with others’ interpretations. Hopefully a depth of understanding of turning toward loss has been achieved, but there is always need for further interpretation as this theory develops and as our understanding of grieving changes.

De Witt and Ploeg (2006) provided a helpful framework for researchers to conduct a rigour phenomenological study. There are certain unique elements of a phenomenological study that need to be addressed, which other qualitative expressions of rigour fail to do. In summary, I achieved rigour by gathering detailed descriptions of the phenomenon and by attending openly to the essence of the phenomenon of interest (van Manen, 1997). While uncovering the essential structure of the phenomenon, I remained oriented to that of which is of interest (Finlay, 2008; van Manen, 1997). This was especially important to practice during the writing and rewriting phase in which I became closer with the phenomenon whilst also distancing from it with a fresh outlook.

I invite the readers to consider the following critical questions, proposed by van Manen (2014, numerical list added, pp. 355-356) as you read the phenomenological text in Chapter 4:
1. **Heuristic questioning:** Does the text induce a sense of contemplative wonder and questioning attentiveness—*ti estin* (the wonder what this is), and *hoti estin* (the wonder that something exists at all)?

2. **Descriptive richness:** Does the text contain rich and recognizable experiential material?

3. **Interpretive depth:** Does the text offer reflective insights that go beyond the taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life?

4. **Distinctive rigor:** Does the text remain constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the phenomenon or event?

5. **Strong and addressive meaning:** Does the text “speak” to and address our sense of embodied being?

6. **Experiential awakening:** Does the text awaken prereflective or primal experience through vocative and presentative language?

7. **Inceptual epiphany:** Does the study offer us the possibility of deeper and original insight, and perhaps, an intuitive or inspired grasp of the ethics and ethos of life commitments and practices?
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

A high-quality phenomenological text cannot be summarized. It does not need to contain a list of findings—rather, one must evaluate it by meeting with it, going through it, encountering it, suffering it, consuming it, and, as well, being consumed by it. (van Manen, 2014, p. 355).

In exploring the lived experience of turning toward loss phenomenology, I have opened myself to the shared human experience of grieving as a researcher and fellow griever. I hope to instill a sense of wonder and resonance in you, the reader, as I invite you to also open yourself to this phenomenon. I will begin by providing an overview of the thematic meanings which serve as a structure for the phenomenological analysis. I want to remind the reader that the themes provided are not themes of generalizations, but rather serve as springboards for depth. As van Manen (1997) describes, phenomenological themes are like stars of a constellation which connect to make a greater, meaningful whole. The whole, in this case, is the lived experience of turning toward the loss of a loved one.

I interviewed four participants who have chosen to turn toward their losses. They each provided rich descriptions of their experiences of engaging with their losses and allowing themselves to be touched by their grief. In dialogue of their experiences, the following descriptors were used repeatedly:


Are these not evocative words? They were used throughout the interviews to articulate the intuited. They have a nonspecific, open quality, revealing the experiential which cannot be grasped through words. Only when the participants opened themselves to that which they could not comprehend and dared themselves to look, could the unknown make itself graspable. This may be why many of them used imagery and metaphor during the interviews to describe their

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3 Hereafter referred to as themes.
lived experience of engaging with their grief. In doing so, they pulled themselves deeper beyond their everyday experience and were provoked to face that which they described as bigger than them: grief. In honour of the participants’ experiences and the rich descriptions they provided, I have also dared myself to open to, and look at, that which seems bigger than me. In doing so, I have found the use of imagery and metaphor indispensable, and so these are used throughout this section. More specifically, I will refer to the overarching metaphor of “the labyrinth of grief” throughout the thematic descriptions. I will now describe how this metaphor emerged from the results and outline the derived themes of this phenomenon, which will then be elaborated.

The Paradoxical Nature of Grieving

One participant stated that we must find our way through grief. We cannot go over it, under it, or around it. We find our path through grief by learning from the many who have grieved before us, among us, and with us. I have interviewed four such women who have all chosen to turn toward their losses and encounter their grief. In analyzing the lived experience descriptions, the paradoxical nature of grieving revealed itself. As I immersed myself into the participants’ lived experiences of turning toward loss, it became apparent that the participants were holding many tensions. A number of the themes derived from the lived experiences were composed of concurrent opposing elements, suggesting that turning toward loss is a paradoxical process. For example, many of the participants highlighted the tension between encountering grief alone, yet also with others; feeling fundamentally separated, yet a part of a shared human experience; feeling the sensation of the surreal, yet being grounded in reality; dying to themselves, yet transforming anew, and so on. Many of these tensions the participants described

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4 The pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘our’ are used throughout this section to highlight the universality of grieving, as an essential human experience.
seemed to be parts of larger wholes, and thus, the themes were summations of these paradoxical parts.

These smaller paradoxes coalesced into themes, and suggested that the phenomenon of turning toward loss is a paradoxical experience as a whole. This larger paradox then served as the basis on which to map the themes. As I explored the paradox further, the metaphor of the unicursal labyrinth\(^5\) seemed to encapsulate the lived experience of turning toward loss considerably well. The imagery of the labyrinth is used throughout the thematic descriptions as a means of immersing the reader into the experience of turning toward loss.

\[\text{Figure 1. The 11-circuit, unicursal labyrinth of Chartes Cathedral, France.}\]

The labyrinth serves as a metaphor for grief, with death being the activating event which brought the participants into the ‘labyrinth of grief’. The lived experience of turning toward loss is represented as the active process of walking through the labyrinth, and as such, the themes of this phenomenon are experienced within the labyrinth. The themes are points of meaning within

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\(^5\) For further elaboration of the labyrinth, refer to chapter six.
the experience of turning toward loss as a whole, so as a reminder to the reader, the themes are as tangled as the experience of grieving itself. During an interview, one participant commented on the strangeness of her crying as we were dialoguing. She stated, “I can put myself back there”, indicating that grief can be expressed regardless of the amount of time that passes. This suggests that because the participants continue to process their losses, the experience of turning toward loss is a living, moving phenomenon. As such, these themes are not linear stages, but rather, these themes are parts of every living moment of the experience of turning towards loss. In summary, these themes are not stages which come to an end or require completion. Rather, these themes reflect different aspects of the experience of turning toward loss. There are no rules nor guidelines that one theme precedes the other, nor is it true that two or more themes cannot be experienced concurrently. In reality, many of these themes are all present, at varying times, and are re-experienced over the course of grieving.

**Themes of the Lived Experience of Turning Toward Loss**

Eight themes were derived from this phenomenon of turning toward loss. Each theme throughout the text is presented as ‘The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as’ followed by the specific name of the theme. The eight themes include the experience of turning toward loss as: (a) an encounter with death, (b) surrendering to grief, (c) choosing community, (d) permitting and pursuing grief, (e) transformation of self, (f) rooting in relationship, (g) embracing life, and (h) the ground of faith. Each of these themes was experienced as a result of the participants’ choices to turn toward their losses; however, two themes also extend beyond this particular lived experience. These include *an encounter with death* and *the ground of faith*.

The theme of an encounter with death describes the death event and the experience of becoming bereaved. The participants’ encounter with death served as the activating event, which
set in motion their experience of turning toward loss. In this sense, the loss precedes the choice to turn toward the loss, but the loss itself should not be excluded as it is integral to this phenomenon. In turning toward their losses, the participants turned toward the pervasive, ongoing grief they felt as well as the death event. The second extending theme is the ground of faith. This theme encompasses the participants’ relationships with faith and the Divine. This theme does not appear as a passive consequence of this phenomenon, but rather as an active response to it. The ground of faith is described as that which is bigger than grief that the participants could rely on, which existed before the loss occurred. Therefore, the ground of faith is a theme which exceeds this phenomenon, but nonetheless appeared as a crucial part of it. In summary, the encounter with death precedes this phenomenon and the ground of faith exceeds this phenomenon, but both were described throughout the participants’ interviews, and as such, are fundamental to their experiences.

**The Phenomenological Writing of Turning Toward Loss**

Below is the phenomenological text of the experience of turning toward loss, which is organized into the eight themes described above. These themes encompass the descriptions of the participants’ experiences (i.e., direct quotations from the interviews), as well as the interpretations of the research team to deepen readers’ understanding of, and resonance with, this phenomenon. I invite you, the reader, to lean into your own questions, insights, and experiences of loss as you read through the meanings embedded in the phenomenon of turning toward loss. And before we venture forth together, I would like to honour the silence, for as many words as I give to the phenomenon of turning toward loss, there is still much I cannot say.

**The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as an Encounter with Death**

Death is part of our reality, but death does not truly exist to us until we encounter it in the most intimate fashion, until it approaches us far too closely than we would allow of our own free
choosing. Up until this point, we have learned to live within our finiteness. We busy ourselves with the things of this world, and in doing so, we place a veil between life and death so that death is hidden from our forward gaze. This eases our anxieties of the inevitable until that thin, futile barrier begins to dissipate and death comes for those around us, for those endeared to us. We suffer in our powerlessness to stop death from taking hold. We feel the burn of its cold presence. It has touched us, and taken them. Although their bodies remain, they are no longer with us in the way we have always known.

She was so skinny. There’s nothing left. She looks like a skeleton, painted ivory. You can feel the tumors. Along her spine. Along her hair. And I just hugged her … they still feel like them—still feels like your mom, but she’s dead.

As we grapple with their still bodies and their missing souls, the world becomes real. Too real. Beyond real. Surreal. So real that we deny the truth that death has come and pleadingly ask ourselves, the world, the Divine, or anyone or thing who may hear our cry, ‘How can this be?’ We become paralyzed, trapped within our own bodies that house us, but yet we’re spinning, moving at an inhumane speed, unable to bear ourselves. And under the weight of this spinning, we collapse.

I fell to the floor. I was inconsolable.

There was this moment of almost insanity. It felt like, just something in me felt like WHOA.

We become instantly deprived. We are poorer because we lost those of treasured value to us. Now we are forever left longing for the ones who have departed from us.

When somebody passes away it's so surreal. Someone that close to you, it’s so surreal. You just can’t believe it … so at that point, it was like okay, sister, wake up.

We ask for our deceased to wake up, but we know they are dead. We know they cannot. Who really then needs to awake? We think they are the only ones who have died. And surely they have, but we also die in that moment. A part of us ceases to exist, and a part of us begins separating. When we plead for them to awake, it is also a plea for ourselves to awaken.

You feel you can’t breathe, that you just can’t continue. You just can’t continue.

This separation is beyond comprehension. We are divided in ways we have never been before. We are separate from ourselves, and separate from the ones we love. This separation permeates our beings and invades our waking and dreaming. In our dreams, they are alive. In our dreams, they exist with us for an ephemeral moment. There is a strangeness that ensues as we grapple with what is unreal, utterly real, and overly real.

You go through a feeling of disbelief, that surreal feeling of this can’t be true. It invades your dreaming too. You dream that their alive still … you sort of wake up and it’s like wow, that felt really real.

I dreamt about her all the time. I felt very disconnected from the world.
So where does the questioning of ‘can this be real’ originate? Human beings have been dying for as long as we have been living, and yet we ask this question when death comes. Is it because despite the inevitability of death, it is not known by us? We hear of it, we see it, but yet it remains foreign to us. And this foreignness garners something different than the questions of the afterlife. For this end, we are not asking that question. We are simply asking how can it be? How can this person I have intimately encountered suddenly cease to exist on this earth? Completely gone within an instant. There is something in their absence, despite its absolute truth, that still causes us to question the reality of what is. And this questioning is not unacceptance because at its crux, we know that they are dead. If someone was to ask us whether they are still living, we would answer no, they are dead, passed, gone, no longer with us. Death is and can be because we are mortal.

Because we die. We die. We are fleeting. We are temporary.

We know this already, but somewhere in our essence, we reject this. Were we meant to be finite? Our profound rejection of their deaths suggests we were designed to be infinite. Death does not belong to us. So where, what, whom is it within us that leans into this primordial rejection of death and dares to ask, ‘how can this be?’

Because your mind is like, how could this have happened? This hasn’t actually happened. I’m sure it hasn’t. Because my mom couldn’t actually die. But then she’s there … your brain says, ‘No this is impossible!’

If we were meant to be infinite, then would we not exist in this plane of surrealism, since human beings are dying at our every breath? No. Because we do not suffer the feeling of strange surreality because we are human, but rather because of something essential: relationship. We suffer because of our propensity for relationship. The rupture of the intimate relationship thrusts us into this reality–surreality interchange, or rather, the recondite labyrinth of grief. It is here that the dark atmosphere of our confusion overcomes us. We find ourselves disoriented, unable to see in the numbing fog.

That loss, that permanent loss, is so mystifying.

Initially it is so surreal you can’t believe it. You feel numb … you’re just kind of in a cloud for a while. I don’t remember how long I felt … just, not with it.

Amidst the fog that suspends us, we endure the striking flashes of awareness that we will be forever deprived of those we love. We face the ultimate injustice of our loved ones being taken from us, and we have no power to remediate the separation. This is now our permanent reality of being bereaved.

There was this moment, where I was putting on her eyeshadow (at the funeral home), and my brain was like, almost this moment of, I can’t even handle this shit. Whoa.
When someone disappears from your life permanently, and you’ve realized that they’ve not just caught the bus to town. You’re never going to see them again. It can make you question everything in your life … it so knocks you off your axis.

We search for words to articulate our ever-present poorness.

It is almost indescribable, and I’m a writer.

But words do not come to us. No, words are insufficient to describe the devastation we are now living in. They cannot contain our new reality, which is beyond understanding and sense-making. All we have now is our numbness, and with that comes our silence, until the only sound to break the echoing silence of our shocked selves is our own weeping.

I heard someone wailing, and it was me.

We ask of ourselves, who is making that terrible sound? Another flash of awareness. We realize that it is coming from within us, but yet this too feels foreign to us. Not only are we in a new state of existence because we are bereaved, but now we become aware that something else has invaded our beings. Every cell of our bodies, every cavern of our minds, every corner of our souls are permeated with grief. Something much bigger than us is now housed within us. We are changed by our irreparable losses.

Nothing looks the same. Nothing. Not your marriage. Not your work. Certainly not your faith if you’ve got one, if you speak honestly.

Where are we then, if nothing looks the same, if we are thrown off our axes? These irreparable losses have thrust us at the gates of the labyrinth of grief. Every step within this space would be a step toward our losses and all that accompanies them. We step toward the entrance, succumbing to our overwhelming numbness and disbelief, and we ask ourselves, where are we and how could we have ended up here?

I couldn’t feel the sadness. I felt depressed, I think … like I felt grey for a long time. I didn’t feel the sadness for about two years. Just really this deep sort of, is this my life?

As we enter the labyrinth of grief, we leave the bounds of time. Time goes on without us. Let the seasons pass without our presences, let the world continue without our participation. For we once basked in the river of life, which perpetually flowed, moving and propelling us. But the river of life froze over when death came, and now life continues apart from us, under us. And each step toward the gates of grief is as if the ice is cracking beneath our feet. But we will not wade in the river of life like we did before, but be consumed by it. For with it carries the reminders of our losses, and in these reminders we are drowning, as we too in our own way, are dying.

And you’re still just like treading water. Didn’t my ship just sink?

Which was hard for my children and for my husband because I just disappeared.
We disappear into the labyrinth, not knowing what will become of us. We choose to grieve as our way forward. We do not know where we are heading and to what end, but only that we need to turn toward our most devastating reality: the losses of our loved ones.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as Surrendering to Grief

In entering the labyrinth, we cannot find our place nor map our path. Both are hidden from us. We try and comfort ourselves with our own predictions of what will come, but these predictions offer nothing more than blind assurance that the path can be mastered. However, we know from deeper within, that we cannot be sure of this. Prediction suggests we have some control over what will become of us. Our anxieties of the unknown are abated as we walk with this companion we call control for as long as we can. But this is only temporary comfort as we discover control abandons us the second we come to face our grief. Now we are exposed in our bare humanness, standing amidst the threatening presence of our grief, which has taken the form of a shadow which stalks us.

Grief is such a strange thing because it sort of creeps up on you, taps you on the shoulder when you think you are doing just fine. You think this is a good day. And then suddenly either you hear a piece of music or you get a memory, and you’re wiped out.

That feeling is … is life threatening to you.

It is in that moment that we decide how to deal with what feels like our impending demise. Do we freeze, hoping that our paralysis makes us invisible to our stalker? Do we risk turning our backs and fleeing from its gripping gaze? Do we dare fight with what little energy we can muster to rid ourselves of grief altogether? Perhaps we attempt all three. In remaining lifeless and silent, we diminish. We shut down every living part of ourselves, mind and body. We cease to think, reason, or process; we are cut off from life. In doing so, our ability to experience the good of this life is limited: our relationships, pleasurable sensations, our capacity for emotionality, and realizing our values. But we reconcile with these limitations because shutting down also means an inability to experience this terrible reality we now face. This seems to be worth the sacrifice. After all, our grief is so menacingly big, barring our path, that there is little hope for any comfort in this life moving forward. Yes, we say to ourselves, remaining here in our numbing frozenness means we cannot be harmed by the violent touch of grief. So sitting down on the path, we administer our own anesthetic and lose consciousness.

There were times when I couldn’t get out of bed … I watched movies. I would check out through entertainment or read—novel read. Like throw crackers at the kids and just read … I think I just wanted to turn off.

So like I wasn’t showering, wasn’t wearing makeup. I wasn’t spending time with my friends. I just kind of retreated from the world and did what I had to survive.

But some of us cannot sleep forever. Perhaps we would have a better existence if we resolved to flee rather than to remain frozen. Creating distance feels more comfortable, as our eyes are redirected toward other possibilities. Yes, more and more distance. Distance creates space between us and our grief, and gives us time to address the life we were accustomed to living. In
our flight, we busy ourselves with our demanding workloads and our ripening piles of responsibilities. In our flight, we assume the needs of others who are still living and center ourselves around these needs. In our flight, we look to substances and materials to light our path back to normality. In our flight, we do not stop to consider which avenue is safest as long as it separates us from the shadow which seeks to swallow us.

Again, it was doing for other people, that’s—yeah, that’s how I coped. That’s how I coped.

I would drink a little, never getting drunk, but I always felt like … because if you have a drink it’s a natural relaxant. I just felt like, ‘oh I would have a drink’, ‘oh it just calms me down, makes things easier to cope with.’ Then the next day I wanted one. Well then the next day I wanted one. Then the next day I wanted one. Then I just thought, ‘this is an addictive pattern.’

But what of us who cannot freeze nor flee? For something within us cannot stand the reality that our grief exists. We cannot endure the thought of its advancing proximity to us, every approach reminding us that more and more we are deprived, and anguished, and alone. No, this alien shadow must be annihilated. We feel the tears emerging, soon to be released upon our cheeks. We have decided we cannot allow this to happen. We aggressively breathe in so that we completely dry ourselves of the flood of emotion which would surely overcome us. In doing so, we become like the desert ground, barren, hardened, indifferent. No tears come. We do not cry.

I was not going to cry. This is too big.

For what seems like an instant, the shadow of grief has vanished. It almost seems fitting to take pride in our success. Despite our exhaustion, we were strong enough to move grief out of our way. We turn our attention toward leaving the abysmal labyrinth, until we stumble over our dismay at the harrowing return of our shadowy stalker.

If you fight it off, it gets bigger.

I was just kind of restless, irritable, discontent, and I got the sense that I had some unresolved stuff around my husband’s death that I needed to go back and work through.

We are again faced with the decision of how to deal with our grief, but neither of these options seem to guarantee our survival. How can we escape that which knows how to sneak up on us? In our failed efforts, we give pause to consider if there is an alternative way of dealing. The longer we look at grief, the clearer we see it. It is a terrible sight which brings an unsettling revelation. We discover it is not alien at all, but rather very much a part of us. We question how we can disappear from ourselves, how we can escape from ourselves, how we can defeat ourselves. The answers we are hoping for do not emerge, but instead, a voice within us beckons us to surrender to our grief.

I can’t control this process, so I’m going to stop fighting the current.

In our efforts to seek distance between us and our grief, we distance from ourselves. Our grief is within us, a part of who are now because it is a witness to the deep relationships we lost. Our
Turning Toward Loss

Grief is the ever-present testament of our devotion to the other who is no longer here. It belongs to us. We realize that the fight with the shadow is a fight against ourselves. That in becoming a desert, we further deprive ourselves of the very thing which sustains us: our grief. When we think we are barren and poor, forever stumbling around the desert death left us in, grieving provides the puddle from which we drink. Grieving becomes not a friend, not something we feel affection for, but rather a familiar, something we open ourselves to encounter. As we surrender to encountering our grief, we become aware of what was or what could have been. We sense that turning away from our grief may worsen us.

I sometimes feel a little messed up over it, but I think if you don’t deal with the grieving properly, I think you’d be more messed up over it.

So it’s imperative that somehow those of us who have lost somebody, find a way through, find their path, through grief … because you can become bitter. You can become angry and scared and absorbed in it. It can define you.

We say no to entrapment and confinement of embitterment. Instead we relinquish control and choose to engage with our grief. In turning toward our losses, we open ourselves to the unexpected and let come what may. We are no surer of our grieving path as we were before, but we allow it to exist in its foreignness.

I was surprised by the anger. I was surprised by the numbness. I am surprised that four years later I am much more emotional about it. So I think I found grief surprising in its intensity, complexity, and unpredictableness. It’s frustrating. I think like every human being on the planet, I want the magic bullet: Okay so my mom died. That’s really sad. We have the funeral. We talk about it. We cry for two months, feel sad for two more months, and life carries on. And no. It’s just like this: You’ve got this secret closet. You’re not quite sure where it is, but every once in a while a boogeyman sneaks out of it and goes “AGH”, and you’re like ‘I am trying to pay taxes, and have babies, and make pie and you’re just messing with my—’ Yeah, comes out of nowhere, just whenever.

In surrendering to our grief, turning toward loss is not an activity to be mastered, but intuited. It is not a process to be controlled, but relinquished. It cannot be manipulated, but experienced. And our experience of turning toward loss is intricate and labyrinthine in nature.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as Choosing Community

As we begin to navigate the dark, void halls of the labyrinth of grief, we wonder whether or not we are alone. We continue stumbling without a clear answer. We desperately want a resounding no. We want to turn the corner and find a people waiting for us, a people to belong to. We know these people would not be able to take us out of this place, rid us of our grief, nor bring back the ones we lost.

No one can take your path … no one can wear your pain. You want to escape out of it, but nobody can.
We know that being bereaved belongs to us, as much as we wish it never did, but perhaps being with others would ease the terror of the unknown we face. As we stand with a longing look into the darkness, we feel the sting of another separation. We become aware that our separation with the ones we lost is not the end, but rather the beginning of another rupture. Are we alone? We answer our own question with a reluctant, ‘it sure feels this way, yes’. But again, that voice speaks to us and suggests the answer we seek is not so simple, for the question of the other in the labyrinth is both, and answer. We are both alone in our anguish, as by its nature, the condition of being bereaved segregates us from those around us.

It was really lonely, really lonely because that’s not a month after my mom died, it’s a year later or however long later ... I didn’t understand how long it was going to be. I felt alienated, especially having gone through that. You’re like dealing with something so big, and my friends are like, ‘Yeah my mom’s going to babysit the kids,’ ‘My husband and I are going away for our 7th anniversary.’ I’m like, ‘My dead mother’s in my garage.’ It’s very alienating. And that’s not anyone’s fault, but it’s hard. Really hard. And lonely, so lonely.

And we are in perfect union with the shared experience of grief, which is weaved throughout humanity. This is so because death is guaranteed to us, and thus so is grief. When the veil which hides death from us is severed, our eyes are opened to the devastation of death in others’ lives too.

But in front of me was another mom from Compassionate Friends. Two other moms I know lost their children. There are loads of me out there. I’m not unique. It's not just my pain. Yeah, it's everybody's. It's everybody’s pain.

So we walk suspended between these two parallel plights, touching both sides of our present reality. As we continue along our path, we hear whispers of our condemning culture. We are reminded not to look at death, not to touch death, not even to speak its name. But we had no choice. Death made itself known to us, and stole the ones we love. It cannot be undone, and we cannot bear to be silent. We even look at those around us in dismay and disbelief, as they distance themselves from us. The more we speak of our torment, the more we are isolated.

I feel like a lot of people are really uncomfortable with grief, especially touching someone else’s grief. Everybody dies. It’s not like this isn’t happening, but our culture is really stupid and inconsiderate about grief ... You’re like a leper.

We become the representatives of mortality, whose voices are not to be heard. We are countercultural, extra-societal. Our roles are to stand apart and line the outer parameter of our communities. We are to face the opposite direction and cast our gaze downward, outward, upward, inward, any direction but toward the other. We serve, not as relational beings, but as reminders that death is among us waiting for its inevitable encounter with each one of us.

I think our culture is obsessed with immortality, endless youth ... everyone buys into that because it’s cultural.

People do not know in life, do not know how to handle people who have lost people. It’s like a forbidden thing. You do not talk about death ... death is a scary thing to talk about for people.
The silence of our separation reverberates through the space around us. As we wonder how we will continue this way, we find that we are not fully left to our loneliness in the labyrinth. As we lift our gaze forward, we discover that there are those who cross the chasm and come close to us. They have come to witness the work of death’s hand and stand with us in our bereavement. Among these, we see familiar and foreign faces, the faces of our communities and the communities of the deceased. We grip the hands of our friends and family. We are surrounded by people.

People came over, our friends and family, and they kissed her.

We didn’t have the funeral for more than a week. We wanted to give people the chance to come from out of town. Lots of people came.

These people serve as the ground where we bear ourselves when we are thrown off our axes into the expansive realm of surrealism. We speak their names aloud and steady ourselves. We have a feeling for survival. We are strengthened in being surrounded. Their presences assure us we will not perish into the abyss of alienation.

I was like, ‘It’s okay, you got this, right?’ Like, ‘I’ve got faith. I’ve got my husband. I’ve got my kids. It’s going to be okay.’

But as time continues, we learn that there are many forms of presence. We begin to feel the paradox of physical presence and emotional distance. Pieces of ourselves are separating once again from others. The further into the labyrinth we venture, the further away we feel from others. We become observers of our world, drifting in and out of conversations and discourses. Being with others serves as a spotlight for our abnormality. We are not quite right. Death has made us deviants; our deprivation displaces us.

I don’t feel normal. You see everybody else. They’ve got both parents and grandparents involved with their kids’ lives. You see girls getting together with their sisters and stuff like that.

I felt weird … I felt uncomfortable in my own skin. I felt uncomfortable talking to people.

We evaluate ourselves against the social norms and deem ourselves unable to maintain the status quo. The thoughts that become us, the words that hang from our lips seem to not fit where they fall. When do we speak of the ones we have lost? Where can we grieve them? We find ourselves at celebrations, mixers, and social gatherings only to silence ourselves for fear that we would bring death into the room. Why speak of death when others are full of nothing but life and laughter? There does not seem to be an opportune moment to tell of our turmoil. The labyrinth of grief has never felt so suffocating as we sit here in stagnant silence.

Some days you sit in a room full of all your friends, and you’re like figuring out how to just be in the room and not be noticed because what you want to talk about is not socially acceptable right now.
Physical closeness, but emotional distance … perhaps this is an understatement. We are on completely different planes of existence than those around us. As we continue to observe the world we were once a part of, we notice the speed at which it revolves. We wonder how people are able to maneuver under the force of this momentum. They seem to move in every direction but toward us. We shift in the shells of our bodies, no one seeming to notice how hollow we are.

I felt so isolated because people say the stupidest stuff. They are trying, they just … I felt like people were done. For a month for two, ‘Oh that’s sad.’ And then people move on. They don’t want to hear about you saying you’re struggling anymore, at or least, you feel like they don’t.

Others may occasionally inquire about our state of being, offering a cursory opportunity for us to reveal ourselves. At times we choose to remain in our shells, knowing that this keeps us separate but also safe. We consider that holding our own hands may preserve what is left of us, for fear of further estrangement.

I feel like a misfit sometimes. Yeah, because of it … It’s probably a combo. They don’t know how to talk about it, but yet maybe I’ve kind of internalized it too. I didn’t reach out.

How much longer can we endure being estranged, living in a strange place? This is not in our nature. We need relationship. We know that we are not the only ones to stumble about the labyrinth of grief. Where are the others like me, who are also bewildered in their bereavement? We crave community as an antidote to alienation. How can we grieve in isolation when our losses have obliterated us to pieces? We are fragmented, too overwhelmed to pick up the pieces alone and stitch ourselves together. We need a community with us, who will hold and help us. Some to contain the pieces, and some to pick them up and hand them back to us.

It makes me wonder how people without a strong community do it because you’d go freaking insane. I don’t think you can do it without it.

Those we choose and those who are willing to be a part of our community may not be the ones we anticipated. We find that our place of belonging is shifting, for the people who were a part of that place may no longer be able to bear with us. We cannot remain the same as we were, stationary and settled. Now we are like wanderers, walking the path of our grief. We grow distant from those who cannot walk alongside of us. This distance is not what we ever hoped for, but what now needs to be as we turn toward our losses.

Because my place was so clearly somewhere else, so I couldn’t look after my husband and be there for him when my other family needed me. Oh I felt terribly conflicted, terribly conflicted. He was so angry with me, and I just absolutely couldn’t deal with it.

In turning toward our losses, we begin to turn away from those who have already turned from us. We stop longing for their connection nor their comfort. We stop waiting for them to speak the words we need to hold us. We allow the other to be on their own way, and we turn to continue on ours.
I’m not going to not talk about her. If they don’t like that, they can not come over. I love them, but I’m not going to play that game.

We allow ourselves to grieve our losses in full intensity and complexity. This freedom to do so may separate us from those who have not afforded themselves such freedom. This separation is like a barrier through which we relate with one another, filtering our exchanges, and barring that which cannot be encountered: grief. As we continue in our relationship, we learn which subjects are sanctioned, and which subjects are skirted. Our relationships become centered around the comings and goings of daily demands, but our deepest suffering remains a stranger to them.

I said I was melancholy and somebody would ask me what’s going on, and I’d say, ‘Well we are coming up to another anniversary and I’m just feeling melancholy.’ And they’d say, ‘Oh well at least you know where he is and you will see him again.’ I’m just so thankful that not everybody is that way.

We can endure this depth of relating because our suffering is substantiated by others who are willing to stand amidst it.

My daughter and I are completely connected in terms of our losses, but she’s really the only one. I find the others afraid to bring it up in case they might cause me angst when I don’t have any. I don’t really know but that’s my suspicion. And that’s okay.

We release others who cannot endure the tension, who cannot tolerate their helplessness. We lean into those who know they are not life-savers, they cannot revive the ones we lost, but who choose to be life-givers, holding the weight of us and our grief.

I felt very supported … Nobody can wear it for you, but I felt buoyed up and supported.

These people turn toward us as we turn toward our losses. They contain us by providing solidity as we are swept away by our flood of emotion. They are the pillars we hold onto when we feel our grief is taking everything from us. They know we have little to give in return; at times we are completely impoverished. But in spite of this, they remain steadfast and bestow encouragement physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I had a very good friend in Victoria who just wrapped me up, and I slept at her house.

She’d just put her arm around me and give me an extra hug and tell me, ‘We’ll keep praying for you’ and ‘I understand.’ And other people, the same kind of thing.

The kids and my husband all encouraged me to go to church because they knew I needed that to boost my battery and keep my strength. And I did.

We choose to surround ourselves with those who appreciate our labouring through. There is a feeling for the other we share that does not need to be spoken aloud. We are understood by one another. We liberate ourselves in the midst of being understood, and we unarm ourselves in the experiencing of it. Our suffering is grasped by the other, and we hold it together, and so doing, we hold each other.
That night my brother and I walked for hours. We didn’t really talk about it but we walked together, which is not like us. We’ve never done that before. We’ve never done that since. I just wanted to be with him because he understood.

We are faced toward the other in this experience of being understood. We are just being. Our minds are not concerned with social graces; our bodies are not squirming for escape. We are simply here together. We breathe in the air of togetherness. The labyrinth of grief is now not so dark, as looking toward the other provides the soft glow of promise that we will make it through.

I got to be with other parents who really understood, and I saw that my experience could help them. That takes you out of yourself. See, this takes me out of myself.

And what it was, was just being together.

There are those in our community who will contain us in our falling, stumbling, and breaking as we grieve. They support us with their strength and encouragement, and they allow us to emerge as we are in every living moment. This allows us to encounter them intimately, and they come to know us deeply as we come to know them.

I think that it has deepened my relationships ... because I am able to be real. And I’m not, I’m not morose. I’m not depressed. I’m living in reality. I am functioning well, but there are days when I am just sad and that’s the way it is ... Two of them are particularly good at allowing me to be where I am at any given point in time.

They are the ones who peer into the labyrinth and encourage us that it is okay to be where we are. They nurture us as we turn toward our losses, providing stability, stamina, and sustenance. There are also those of our community who will walk into the labyrinth with us. Some of these companions will be in labyrinths of their own, others who are further along or having already made it through.

Talking with other women who have lost their mothers particularly has been beautiful and helpful because it’s four years, and I still feel really sad.

As we turn toward our losses, we realize that to grieve in isolation would be futile. We would remain forlorn, deprived of relationship with the ones we lost, and deprived of relationship with the ones still with us. Grieving together enriches our connection with one another.

Because when you’re grieving, you’re not usually grieving alone ... You’re supporting others who have also lost that person.

So part of the closeness in our family is being able to talk about her.

We grieve with one another through opening ourselves to the other, and sharing our intimate bonds with the deceased with one another. We immerse ourselves together in memories and experiences we cherish. We come close together in allowing our suffering to be felt by the other, and allowing their suffering to impress upon us.
I think with my immediate family, it’s always been easy to talk. I think the door is already open there. We can sit there and reminisce, and look at old pictures together and shed some tears together. My husband is the same. He would be included in conversations like that. Same with our kids. We really felt that.

We have permission to grieve, and with this permission comes the invitation to expose ourselves. We may step into the terrifying unknown and confess our innermost anguish. We unveil our broken hearts for the other to see. This is courage in its truest form. We trust in the other to contain us and come alongside, because we cannot grieve alone.

One of my sponsees from AA, her husband … called and wanted to know how I was. And I dared to tell him the truth that I was not well, not good. And I explained to him some of what was going on, and he asked me, ‘Would you like me to come over?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’

Our grief seems much bigger than we are, but we stand in solidarity with others amidst our suffering. We say ‘yes’ to walking the labyrinth of grief with others. We say ‘yes’ to turning toward our losses together. United, we say ‘yes’ to enduring and encountering all that is to come our way.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as Permitting and Pursuing Grief

In turning toward our losses, we allow ourselves to encounter all that comes with being bereaved. How is it that we do this? Through actively choosing to permit and pursue our grief. When we come to face our grief, we respond to its presence by permitting its touch. This permission is an act of consenting to an encounter with our grief. This means that we surrender to the grief within us and open ourselves to the emerging movement of emotions. Surrendering to our grief is an act of allowing its presence to be with us, but it is still yet to be fully encountered. It is like we are walking in the labyrinth of grief when we become again aware of our shadowy stalker. Opposed to fleeing from its discomforting presence, we permit it to walk alongside of us. In opening ourselves, we undam the flood of fluid emotionality within and through us. There are also other times when we are walking alone, and we become tired, thirsty, and weary. We feel hardened and desolate like the desert, so we call upon grief to meet us. We seek the flood of emotion. We sense the nearness of our grief, so we pursue its presence in the effort to encounter it. In turning toward our losses, we often choose to both permit and pursue our grief.

Yeah just allowing it to happen then, and other times I want to have a good cry.

When we permit our grief, we stop trying to contain and manipulate our emotionality, but rather allow it to remain unpredictably nonlinear.

Then about two years I started feeling. I think anger was next. I mean it’s all tangled.

I found it kind of confusing.
The complexity of feeling is difficult to disentangle. But despite our failed efforts to understand how we can be feeling a multitude of opposing emotions simultaneously, we allow it to come. In doing so, we learn that our grief does not consume us.

I just let it happen. Just like that. You let it happen and then it, it just ebbs away. Just ebbs away.

In permitting our encounter with grief, we take notice of it. We notice that we are not trapped in its clutches but rather released in choosing to give time to the encounter. This time that we give ourselves, and our grief, paves our path with freedom. Freedom to experience our grief fully. We have risked the possibility that we would spend the rest of our living days bound by our grief, but we have found that this is not so.

Just in the past year to 6 months, if I notice I’m feeling, I’ll just sit down and say, ‘Okay let’s think about it and just give myself like whatever.’

If you give yourself time, all you need is like a couple minutes, like ten minutes.

How do we know we need to permit ourselves to grieve? How do we know to take a knee, surrendering ourselves to its presence, and to allow it to move within us? We lean into the wisdom of others who have also been thrown into the labyrinth of grief. The path we walk is a path that has been learned by those before us, and will be learned by those to come. With this knowledge, we teach ourselves how to permit the encounter with the shadow.

I had to really learn how to cry. I had to have help learning how to allow that feeling and the expression of it.

And you get through it knowing that the steps you take are the steps that other people have taken.

In permitting the expression of our grief, something profound reveals itself. When we connect to the grief that is within us in every waking moment, we discover that we can withstand it. Our suffering is met with our strength. Despite our doubts, we bear the anguish. Although nothing within us feels as though we are enduring the great pain of our deprivation, we are doing just that.

Movies do it for me, too. Sitting down, watching a movie … For me, crying through a movie is healing for me. Yeah it’s good therapy.

Our healing does not lie in the conquering of grief, but rather the experiencing of it. There are even moments of enduring our grief where we detect the smallest sense of relief thereafter. This is how we happen upon our experience of good. We do not experience our grief in its totality as good, rather we come to fathom that experiencing grief itself brings relief. This relief feels like a moment of reprieve, where we catch our breath to ensure we have remained alive. And we have, we are still living. It is as if our encounter with grief serves as a reminder of our vitality. Like a distant memory, we welcome the feeling of aliveness. We have experienced the small spark of goodness amidst our grief. We seek this feeling through the pursuit of another encounter with it,
and we make time for it. Our pursuing of the encounter with grief means we evoke it to meet us on our path through altering the atmosphere around us. We do not wait for grief to come out of its closet and approach us, rather we create the opening for it to step through. We intentionally participate in that which evokes our grief, thus giving space to listen to what is deep within us and allow the expression of it.

I’d go into my office and close the door, listen to the music, have a really good cry.

In the pursued encounter, we serve as witnesses to the expression of our feelings, and this liberates us from what was harboured within. Many pieces of the what within which befall us are regrettably familiar. We expect the suffering of our deprivation, which often takes the form of an endless, solemn sadness, saturating our beings.

It’s like wearing a big freaking wedding dress, that’s not a wedding dress. Like a wedding dress of sadness. Just wear it. Do the dishes in your sadness wedding dress. Go shopping in your sadness wedding dress. Just with you.

The sadness is ever so cumbersome, but soon becomes unfathomable as the anguish seeps in.

I allow myself to experience all the emotions that come with that process. Particularly, the pain.

Grieving would be going through the emotions and allowing yourself to feel numb for a while … and when the numbness goes away kind of like having surgery … the numbness, the painkillers are gone. And then the pain and oh, oh boy.

We anticipate feeling the pain, despite reluctance to do so. And this anticipation is shared by others around us, as pain is the assumed consequence following the loss of those important to us. So the pain, although loathsome, is expected, but we also open ourselves to a complexity of emotion which may be unexpected.

So, angry that she basically cut my heart out and then died. I was frustrated with her immaturity and her brokenness. I was relieved that she was dead and couldn’t hurt me anymore. I was relieved that she would never call and scream at me again … She was really hurtful, so I felt a lot of anger. Then shame about that anger. Then people would be like, ‘Oh it’s hard when your mom dies.’ I’d be like ‘Oh, I’m relieved.’ You can’t say that, so then you feel this…

And there’s regret too … maybe I could have helped more when she was sick. I felt regret.

Along with the pain, we experience the emotions we do not voice aloud for fear of scrutiny, but they are real nevertheless. Breathing in the air of relief is not without consequences, for this breath becomes tainted. As it is absorbed, we evoke shame, guilt, and regret in our wake. They are like pits of quicksand along our path, ready to shroud us in darkness. What happened to the fleeting shred of vitality we once held onto? Our hearts are crippled, struggling to circulate life within us. Our lungs are collapsed, no longer any breath to sustain us. We are reminded that grief is housed within us, permeating our every cell. Yes, our grief is embodied.
It is a physical pain. Grief is a physical pain. You actually think your heart will break. You think your heart will break … I felt that. You feel you can’t breathe.

I felt it in my body. My body was always sick. I always had digestive issues. I would vomit. I would have nose bleeds.

Like Atlas who was doomed to bear the earth for eternity upon his shoulders, we too buckle under the weight of our burden: bereavement. We remember that surreal feeling. It is not just the earth we are bearing. It is something far greater: the earth and the cosmos. The labyrinth of grief feels boundless. That voice within us beckons again. Go to sleep. Our desperation for respite is intuited.

I felt tired. I think it was my—I think I just wanted to turn off. I think my spirit just said, sleep, and I did. Feeling the intensity of my feelings, or not feeling, or the effort of not feeling … I don’t know what it was. I just slept.

The need is dire, for if we do not rest now, we will die on this path.

I had gotten to the place where I knew if I did not get away for a break, I wouldn’t be able to finish the journey because you’re on 24/7.

I just needed a break. I needed to get away by myself from everything.

In taking respite, we are retreating to sanctuary. In this sanctuary, we are free to rest and be still, or to roam and be stimulated. We become disencumbered, creating space between us and our burdens. We become weightless, moving without constraint. We become observers, soaking in the scenery.

I was able to sit, and watch nature, and not have any demands on me.

It was a wonderful Christmas because I was away. It was all tango and water. It was lovely, and that was good.

This sanctuary is a place of solace, where our minds rest and our bodies regenerate. We shamelessly release our tears with no fear of ridicule. It is like a homecoming where we experience freedom to nurture ourselves as if we were young innocents.

Something so liberating for me is thinking of myself like one of my children. Would I make my children go without sleep or without food? Or if their hearts were broken, would I say, ‘Shut up and do your work?’ I wouldn’t. So learning to treat myself like one of my children like, ‘Okay, you’re feeling sad about that? Okay why? Why do you feel that way?’ ‘Well I saw that and that reminded me of that, and that makes me think of mom.’ Just sitting down.

We nurture ourselves by attending to what we need without expectation of what we ought to be doing. We recognize that although we can endure our ongoing anguish, we cannot rely on our fortitude alone. We must also cultivate the ability to know when to stop pushing through. We
discern when it is time to attend to our wounds that have been afflicted upon us by the seamy underbelly of grief. When it is time, we seek sanctuary to serve as the ground which holds us, where we are free to come undone.

I needed respite. Friends offered to come stay at their place … I was gone for 24 hours … the 24 hours was a relief. A real, real, huge relief not to have my ear constantly listening. Not to have any expectations on me for anything because it was intense, incredibly intense.

What we have been enduring and encountering has been life changing. It is so significant that we choose to make a written record, to never forget this place. This record serves as a home where we come back to ourselves and give voice to the ungraspable in ways that speaking does not. As we write in this sanctuary, we create space between us and our grief. We remove ourselves from the front lines and heal from our injuries. We distance ourselves to express, process, and resist the temptation to keep pushing, which we know would prove unavailing. As we write, we build a monument to the pain we suffer, never to forget our deprivation.

Writing was a safe place for me to compile my thoughts and also as a way of processing. Sometimes I would write it out and I’d be like yeah, that’s how it feels. And I couldn’t have sat down and talked with you to tell you. When I had time to measure my thoughts and comb through them, I was able to say this is how it feels. And even just reading it, was healing to say yeah, I at least understand me … So I wrote a lot. To process, to make a record, to imbue significance. To put, this is significant.

There is no limit to this monument. We continue to build it, brick by brick, word by word, as a means to seek the ones we lost and rectify our relational poverty.

You just write. Write and write and write and write. Get it all out on the page. I have always written, but certainly after my son died, that was a tremendous help to me. To write. Write poetry.

In our writing, we encounter a perfect paradox. Our writing distances us from ourselves so that we may step back and reflect on all that we have endured. We reflect on the monument we have built, but in creating such a place of remembrance, we have also come close to our ourselves. Writing has deepened our experience of ourselves, which leads us to encounter the grief within us. Not only have we sought sanctuary from our grief through writing, but we have also pursued an encounter with it. Writing serves an activity which undams the flood of our grief and washes over us.

It was … I think the word’s cathartic. I would weep and it was so … a relief. Because I was weirded out when I couldn’t cry. Because I’ve always been a crier my entire life. And now I cry maybe 10% of what I would have in the past, like it just—something like seared shut. Because it’s weird to know there is something really bad down here and you know it should come out, why isn’t it coming out? Normally, I cry. I let it out. And it just wouldn’t. And I would weep while I wrote … there was so much relief that it was coming out.
We feel the heat of our emotion welling up within us, only to come rushing out through our cries. It is as if the earth and the cosmos, which we have been bearing on our shoulders, releases the oceans through our beings. Our hearts uncrippled, our lungs expanding, we feel the weight of our burden is slightly more tolerable. We can sense the nearness of liberation.

It’s kind of a cleansing feeling for me. I feel that any time I cry is—I welcome it … I don’t cry easy so when I do, it feels very cleansing. I feel like I’m getting something out. I’m getting a burden out of some sort. So, for me it’s a good thing.

And as we unburden, we feel this cleansing activity transform the more we engage with it. Crying becomes weeping becomes wailing. We can only serve as witnesses to ourselves, as the echo of our pain seizes our entire bodies. Our eyes are no longer the windows to our souls, but riverbeds for our relentless tears. Our mouths, now serving as stewards of our souls, deliver the true sound of our suffering. Our ears are gripped by the vibrations of our agony. Our muscles, subdued by this force within, are overcome with exertion. No logic nor reason reign our beings, for this is purely primordial. Wailing serves as the ultimate justice to the sacred value we have lost in the death of our loved ones.

I’d go upstairs into my music room, and turn on my music, and lay down on the floor and wail. Just wail. Kübler-Ross talks about primal scream, well that’s what it was like … And it comes right from the depths of my being … Wailed. No, it’s not crying. It’s wailing. My whole being. It’s engaged. I roll. I roll back and forth. There’s a moaning and groaning. My whole being.

In our wailing, our poorness is consummated. In our wailing, our bodies become the vessels of our mourning. In our wailing, we die by shedding all that is not of ourselves. In our wailing, we see we are in centre of the labyrinth, where our transformation begins.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as Transformation of Self

In relinquishing our hold on our inner torment, we abandon ourselves to the abyss. We step into the dwelling of darkness. We have never fixed our eyes on such blackness, the culmination of every shadow we have encountered thus far. We are oppressed by our captors which bind us: our doubt, our exhaustion, our fear. Our wails continue to well up within us, and we wonder if this is the birthplace of death. We have come to the end of ourselves.

You come to the bottom of who you really are, and you think, ‘I don’t got anymore’.

Our loved ones have been stolen from us. We feel we have lost everything. We look upward to the vastness and bellow. We have nothing left. We feel the inhospitable hold of the ground beneath us. The hardness hurts as our lungs wane and our bodies weaken.

You lay there and you’re like, ‘I can’t do this. I can’t do this. I can’t do it. It hurts too bad. It hurts too bad.’

We feel the burn of our exertion, our abdomens erupting. We are completely spent, but despite our depletion, an incipient something begins to emerge. This is not the cold touch of death as we
remember it, but the foreign feeling of pure heat radiating from our core. It is not a flame to consume us, but a spark to ignite us.

And it punches through. And there is a deeper place in you. And it punches through.

We feel a fiery force within us, exploding brilliance against the blackness. Our luminous beings suck the darkness out of the room. Now there is nothing to feed our captors, and no one to confine.

Grief has burned the bullshit off of me.

We are unchained and unrestrained, shedding ourselves of all that is not of us. Our grief has incinerated the judgement, expectations, and perfections we have tried to uphold. All of these are ashes at our feet. We choose to step out from the embers around us and feel the earth anew. We stand fully turned toward our losses, completely one with ourselves.

And then you do it. And you’re like, ‘Okay, I don’t want to do that. That did not feel good. But, I am mighty.’

Here we remain, in the centre of the labyrinth of grief, truly transformed. It is as if we are meeting ourselves for the first time. The unwavering voice of gentle guidance has shown itself in its mightiness. It is unquestionably our authentic self, serving as a well within us—the very source of life sustaining us through our suffering.

And there’s these, these places of depth.

In these places, we move freely without limitations. We welcome the strange sensation of strength. We feel the power in our stride. There is nothing to bar our path nor prevent us from embracing ourselves. We are moving without restraint in this space, and this too is strange. We discover the absence of a disdained, familiar foe we know as fear. We cannot be hindered by it, for these places of depth are boundless in breadth, extending far beyond our anxiety. We have turned toward our most intimate pain and withstood in its presence, what now is there to fear?

Like when my grandchild died, then when the next grandchild arrived, I had fear. And when my daughter died, I had fear for all the rest of my family. For quite a long time … I would fear what was going on in their lives and those kinds of things. I haven’t really experienced fear since my husband died in that context. I think that age has something to do with it, but as well as being able to really honour your feelings, and express them, and not take on the, ‘I’m okay.’ Not allow people to shut you down.

We are in alignment with our truest selves, and in this, we accept our agency. Our transformation has renewed our affinity for living. Fear is no longer a factor in our choice for life, for there is neither the time nor space to be constrained. We have never before so firmly understood the meaning of carpe diem.

I’m not going to be afraid to do this or afraid to do that., because we die. We die. There is a day where I can’t choose anymore so I am going to choose today.
We let go of the beliefs which coerced us to be separate from who we truly are. These beliefs were like immiscible layers pressed upon us to keep our person concealed from us. Now these layers have been stripped away, our person is made transparent. We reach for our restored selves, to hold fast all which we had forsaken. We embrace our temporal beings as they are. We allow the sincere expression of our physicality to emerge.

Losing my son helped me age. You see the white hair? I didn’t use to have that, the white lines. Thank you, son. Aging gracefully with life experience became a treasure. Not something I had to not be.

We cannot identify with the unattainable, with that which is merely illusion. We could never flourish in falseness. In pursuing perfection, we would continue unfilled, foregoing the sustenance of relationship for sake of vain achievement.

And I’m not the perfect mom … I mean I stayed home to bring up my kids. That was my job. That was my thing. And when something like my son happens, you can’t have your nose in the air anymore that you’re pretty good at this because clearly shit happens to anybody.

We cannot deny that suffering is guaranteed to us all, so we stop chasing useless safeguards. Our time is precious, not to be wasted on trivial pursuits. Instead we turn away from that which is not of us, and realize how we are transformed. That voice within us is now distinctly discerned and we discover who we essentially are.

So it just, it changed me deeply, that her death and grieving have, but I think in good ways. They have made me old, but an old spirit I think is a gift. I’m wiser, kinder, better, stronger.

I have a whole new sense of confidence in my competency.

Our capacity to endure the sorrow of our loss has strengthened. Our capacity to embrace all that the world offers has widened. Our capacity to meet ourselves in our true appearing has deepened. We are nothing but capacity, potentiality. We breathe in the air of these places of depth. We were wrong in perceiving this to be the birthplace of death, for this is the inception of life itself. This limitless expanse is the wellspring of our creativity.

It’s like there’s this creativity in me that is just—and I wrote my book and published it. There is just this creativity in me that’s being expressed, and it’s a gift.

It is here, in the centre of the labyrinth, where we are heightened, widened, deepened. In our labour of turning toward our losses, we have birthed our ingenuity. We used to roam the world masking our authenticity, our aversion of rejection motivating us. But now we assert ourselves and voice authoritatively, we are who we are.

Because for so long, I was like a chameleon. I tried to twist myself into what I thought you wanted me to be. No. No. I am who I am. If you like me, that’s fine. If you don’t, that’s fine too.
If others turn away, we are not left to our loneliness. We are with ourselves. We have created
sanctuary amidst our suffering. We have comforted ourselves amidst our cries. We know we
can endure. We know we will not perish. We know that there are those who will stand with us,
and keep us from drowning in the undercurrent of our grief. We know that it is not only others
who turn toward us, but that we too choose to turn toward others. We do not sacrifice ourselves
for sake of acceptance, but rather we share ourselves for sake of intimacy.

Part of it is that I was always—I was first a mother, a wife, and it was always about caring for
and doing for others. And now it’s about me, and my relationship with the Lord and of
course other people, but there’s just—it’s just about me being me and sharing that with
whoever I choose to share it with.

As we look toward emerging from these places of depth, we reflect on the path of our
grieving. It is the same path we have been walking, but it appears peculiar, not how we have come
to know it. Our metamorphosis has altered the way we turn toward our losses. We are sure we are
still grieving, but it feels distinctly different.

It’s like somebody walking off into the distance. You can’t see them as much the further
they get away. So the same thing as time goes on, you never forget that person, but
eventually the pain goes … There is a point where you don’t feel the heaviness, but you’re
still processing it.

We did not expect this to be a part of our new reality. We had surrendered to our anguish,
submitting to the fact that our pain would remain a heavy burden we could barely hold. But this
seems to be shifting. We assure ourselves we do not like our suffering, but we seem to have a
newfound appreciation for our authentic selves who have surfaced in the midst of it. And as we
walk in wholeness, we find we turn toward our losses in new capacities.

To intentionally grieve? No. No, I don’t. It either catches up with me and then I
experience it. But I don’t, no. Maybe very, very early on. I would say very early on there
were pieces of music that I would listen to knowing that they would get me going, but I
don’t do that anymore.

We were told that time could heal, but we do not afford time such an ability. After all, we are
bereaved beings, living in our ever-present poorness. This will not change because we do not
have the power to reverse death’s hand. As much as we despised our pain, we clutched to it
because it was the just response to the losses we have suffered.

As long as I was grieving him, as long as I was upset, it told me that I was still actively
engaged with him … And it’s that I didn’t want to not, to not be terribly sad because it
seemed terrible. And I don’t feel that way now. No, I don’t feel that way now. I cry that
way when I feel sad, but I don’t feel that I have to prove to my son or anybody that I am still
in that state, because I’m not.

We do not stand still in the same place. Our encounter with loss did not change us back to who
we once were, but transformed us anew. As such, healing from their deaths does not mean a
complete reversal of our loss. Rather, healing is much more than an undoing, but an experiencing of movement, a re-immersing of ourselves in the river of life.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as Rooting in Relationship

In turning towards our loss, we have encountered the shadow of grief and have been transformed. We wonder now how we could have been so taken aback when our grief surfaced. How could it not have appeared? For it is the perfect representation of the value we have lost when our loved ones died. Grieving their deaths has brought us back to a principle we have forgotten: relationships are a fundamental source of life. They are the rich earth we root ourselves in, allowing us to grow and flourish. We have been opened to what is most important in this lifetime; our perspective is now fixated on the essentials.

When your child dies, there are no longer any pretensions in life. You can’t pretend to be anybody you’re not. And things don’t matter. What matters is this lot (points to pictures of family). And when you meet somebody, you talk to them and that matters. The rest is fluff.

We can no longer afford to peer over our shoulders and clutch to what is unessential. We can no longer afford to take for granted that which gives us life. We cannot continue this way, for a revelation has come upon us that must be fully realized.

And then brushing up with mortality like that, I think you realize how significant your relationships are.

No, we do not look to the past to be as we were, but set our eyes on those who are with us in the present. We have a newfound understanding of the impact we have on humanity. We have felt our powerlessness at the hands of death, unable to prevent it nor change it. This we know we cannot control, but we are not helpless amidst others. We have the power to bear with, to bring change, to provide hope, to give life.

It’s just shown me what I do is very significant to the people around me.

We can choose to do this, just as others did for us when we were floundering in our fear of death and flood of emotion. There were those of our community who dared to break through the barrier of our grief, who walked into our labyrinth and held us up.

I came back out of it because of the people around me.

There were even those whose mere presences were the embodiment of life itself. Their beings, just as they are, brought us back to the living. It was in their nearness that we learned life beckons life. We looked upon their faces, we touched their hands, we embraced them close to us. We peered into their eyes and saw goodness, in which we desperately longed to bask.

She’s my last grandbaby. She is the reason I think I really came back to life … Yeah, so life brings back life.
Death had dropped us into a dreadful nightmare, but others brought us back to life. They bathed us with love and loyalty. They continually assured us of our worth when we wanted to admit defeat and they backed us when we endured our anguish.

I feel loved and cherished.

Without relationships, we would not have made our way through grief. With this knowledge, comes the wisdom to extend the same compassion for others. We know intimately how heavy such burdens are, how harrowing encounters with grief are, so we too offer companionship.

It has given me such a depth of empathy and grace for people.

We appeal to others in our community to also extend the same mercy, compassion, and kindness. These are the cornerstones of life and healing. We remember what is was like to be pushed to the perimeters of our society, forced to look away in our own pain. We remember what it was like for our deceased, when they were in the midst of their own suffering. Having endured the awful alienation, we cannot allow it come to pass for another. We need to bring those who are burdened into the centre. We need to look them in the eye and remind them they are held. It is no longer our place to separate ourselves from them. Our place is with them, in the thick of their turmoil. Our task is to bring benevolence.

When you see young people on the street, they’re somebody’s son or maybe somebody’s husband. They’re somebody’s somebody, and life hasn’t gone well for them. Don’t judge them, help them out. Keep them alive for one more day. Don’t make the judgement that if I give them money, they’ll go to drugs. Yeah they probably will, so what? They are alive one more day. Keep them alive for one more day because you never know what that one more day will bring … I had the judgement before: pull yourself together, the British get it together, it’s up to you. And we all realized that my son couldn’t.

In turning toward our loss, we close the gap between us and others, and we pursue relationship with those around us. As we continue to walk the path of grief, we begin to restore a special relationship—our relationship with the ones we lost. This restoration is like a rebuilding, or reforming of the relationship in a new regard. When they died, we were left with the memories of their afflictions. These afflictions were so pervasive, that it was difficult at times to separate the person from the pain. In turning toward our deceased, we strip away the darkness which encased them. We embrace them as they were, beyond that which oppressed them. It is as if we cleanse their memory. We burn the disease and we bathe the self.

And so, his dad and I, in tears, cleaned out his room. Which was unspeakable. I hope you never have to witness, never have to see anything like that. The room of despair, and hopelessness, and blood, and end of life. And we did. His dad and I just did it together. We got rid of the mattress. We got rid of everything. Our sole reason was knowing the other kids were coming in and they couldn’t see it. And that was the end of my son’s life. Nothing like his childhood.

We do not attempt to conceal their humanness, for they were imperfect people. We simply allow them to remain as they were in their wholeness, and rid them of that which does not belong to
them. In facing the reality of who they were, we are able to process what was left unsaid and heal from any wounds which remain.

I felt like a lot of people celebrated the wrong things about her. My mom was particular about, just cause someone’s dying you don’t whitewash. You don’t say they were a saint or anything. It’s an insult to the person they were to have to paint them up after death. It’s probably only in the last 6 months that I remember the good.

We give ourselves time to process our relationship with them, and time to open to the possibility of a new encounter with them. We discover the safe ways we can encounter them, and the other ways which remain too painful. We allow this to be okay, as we refuse to become our own oppressors, forcing ourselves when we are not ready.

It does take a while to move from the person you know in the trauma to the person you know who was himself, to have back those memories. I know that I have zillions of photographs. Only lately have I gone through those photographs, not for years would I go through those photographs.

Instead we choose to remember our loved ones according to our readiness and our relationship with them. Remembering our loved ones is an honouring act. We honour our loved ones in ways that are true to who they were. We honour ourselves in ways that respect our own person. We honour the relationship in ways that cherish our memories and time spent together.

So on her birthday I usually make the supper … she would always make … I will set aside and eat her meal. And on the anniversary of her death, I often go shopping. She had a shopping problem … just go shopping … she would approve.

We choose to ritualize our honouring of them on the days where their names are written: birthdates and death dates, anniversaries and momentous occasions. We may make space in our life to grieve their deaths at these times, intentionally taking pause and pursuing an encounter with grief. But we also do not keep them on only these days, but rather allow them to permeate every instance of our lives as they are lived through. We open our eyes and we see them written in everything. We see them in the gentle rustling of the trees, in the roar of the ocean waves, in the stillness of the mountains, in the roaming clouds in the sky, in the brilliance of the blazing sun, and in the vastness of the stars. They are with us in all ways, and we can turn toward them.

I used to write letters to my son. Then I would go halfway up Cypress where there is a little turn off, and I would burn the letters so that the ashes would spread, so that symbolically he would get the message.

We give ourselves to them when we invite them into our lives. We choose to speak with them and acknowledge their presence. We do not need their physicality to maintain a relationship with them, rather we only need the willingness to reach beyond what we cannot see.

Definitely have a relationship with my son. I talk to him. I play golf, and he played a beautiful game of golf.

We know that in relationship with them, we have given them an essence of ourselves. We were once woven together, and in our separation, we took pieces of the other. Our roots grew deeply, lacing together, and although they are no longer growing, they are still entwined with us in the depths of our beings. A piece of us belongs with them, just as they are a part of who we are. We cannot forget them because they reside within us. We belong in relationship with one another.

I talk about my mom all the time because she is a huge part of who I am.

Our cohesion has been ruptured, but only in certain capacities. We relied on our physical beings to maintain connection, but their bodies no longer remain with us. We see glimpses of their faces in the crowd, but these only produce the pangs of our pining.

I’ll see someone who maybe has a similar figure or similar hair, and think, is that her? Oh no, it’s not. I don’t like that feeling. I don’t because it plays a mind trick. You initially get this feeling it is them, and then of course it’s not them. And agh it’s frustrating because you wished it was.

We long for the ones we have lost and wish they would appear before us. We cannot make this happen, so our minds paint their faces where we wander. Our ears replay the words that would fall from their lips. We hear the ringing of their remarks reverberate through our beings. We cocoon ourselves in their encouragement.

She could just make anything feel better. She would understand me. I miss that. She believed in me. She thought I was so talented. She thought I was so beautiful. She thought I was going to be so great. I miss that. Nobody sees me like she did.

We treasure their words to us, and the many intimate encounters we had. As we continue to integrate them back into our lives, we discover they have been present all along. They have been with us as we faced the shadow of our grief. They have been with us as we have stumbled along our path, and they are with us as we continue forward. In our willingness to turn toward our losses, our eyes have been opened to the ways in which our loved ones have made themselves known to us.

When somebody dies, there are gifts that they leave behind if you can find them. It’s like sifting through the rubble. Find what they’ve left behind and my son left behind gifts.

We embrace these precious presents, and we continue on our path. We take them with us in our daily activities, and we bring them with us as we mature. We learn from their mistakes and missteps, and we correct our course. Their memories serve as inspirations for the people we aim to be.

I want when I die, them to say, ‘What a mom, what a mom. She believed in me. She loved me. She was selfless. She was kind. When she was unkind she said she was sorry. What a great woman.’ That is what I want to leave.
The deaths of the ones we love prompt us to reflect on our own deaths. How will we be remembered? What will we leave behind? We hope that our legacy reflects relational stewardship. We hope to be remembered for our generosity and compassion, for our ability to value the person and not the possession. For in turning toward our loss, we have turned toward others. Our lives are rooted in relationship, and it was these roots from which our resiliency emerged. It is in relationship that we are able to find healing, and embrace our lives once again.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as Embracing Life

We are not healed from our grief, but rather healed amidst our grief, because in turning toward our losses, we come to a place where we once again turn toward life. We have dwelled in the centre of the labyrinth where we have been transformed. And with this transformation comes much to offer the world, not to hoard, but to gift. We feel a subtle tingling throughout our bodies. Life begins to unthaw us from the thin layer of numbness which sheathed us when death came. We have shed that which confined us, we have encountered the epitome of our agony, and now we absorb our renewed affinity for life. It is time to begin our path away from the centre, and reenter the labyrinth to continue to turn toward our losses. Although the path that led us in is the same path that leads us out, it is distinctly altered. We feel different than how we were before, because now we choose to live with the acceptance that the ones we lost will no longer be with us in the way we knew.

I choose to value my life. That does not mean being absorbed by my son’s death, so I accept his loss. I accept the sadness that comes with it. Sometimes I break down and cry, and that is the grieving part of it.

We continue to feel their absences in our waking and dreaming. We continue to feel the incompleteness in moments of which they should be a part. We continue to live in the reality they are missing from us as we mature and the seasons change. We no longer feel out of time, but a part of it. We notice our aging, and we notice the ones we lost are not. Time serves to measure the distance between us and our deceased. Time changes us, but does nothing to change their deaths. Our worlds became greyscale the moment they died, but with the passing of time, our worlds become slightly more saturated. We welcome the newfound colour, but it will never be as it was before their deaths.

That emptiness of there is somebody missing, it fades, but it doesn’t ever quite go away.

You never get passed it, but you can live through it.

The tinge of colour we recognize reminds us we are still living. We do not appreciate our deprivation, but we choose to live in the thick of it. We do not forget the ones we lost, for they can never be forgotten. They are a part of us, and in holding them close, we open ourselves to experiencing the good in this life once again. We know the risk of this, for in cherishing relationships in this world, we know we will grieve them when they are no longer, just as we are doing now.
It colours, even to now, colours everything. Even when I am in those wonderful moments, I am aware that my son is not. I can’t escape that. I can’t escape that, but for me, it doesn’t stop me from having those moments.

As we dip our toes in the river, life washes over us and welcomes us to wade again once more.

Then life catches back up to you.

We immerse ourselves in the living water, and we cease to fight the current. We know how to exist in the reality of our suffering and all that life will bring. We stop investing energy to escape from it, but rather, we allow life to continue in its own way.

Grieving is a part of life. I mean losses are a part of life. The life cycle continues.

Our new perspective holds more than our once forward gaze, as we cannot turn blindly from the reality that death is a part of the life cycle. It now has a place in our beings, a place where death and life are held together. It is as if death and life are two sides of the same coin, and grieving allows us to touch both sides. Although it seemed we were stuck on the side of death, turning toward our losses has built the bridge back to life. In crossing that bridge, we become enlivened.

I am incredibly blessed with good health, a good mind, the gift of understanding that it’s okay to have a bad day and the ability to express it.

We feel the burgeoning gratitude for life once again. Our emotionality is fully released from the fog, and like an old friend, we embrace joy once more. We feel ourselves open in a different capacity, as the smiles spread across our faces. We feel the familiar sensation of gasping for air, our abdomens aching, but this time, it is not from wailing. We gratefully greet its counterweight, laughter.

Absolute joy. Almost ecstatic moments of appreciation, and that’s exactly what they are: appreciating I have my life.

[Grieving] is as natural as laughing hysterically.

Along with these rediscovered sensations, we view the world through new attitudes. We have foregone any entitlement we harboured toward the world and others. Now we are able to recognize generosity in its essence as it comes to us. In turning toward our losses, we can no longer assume health nor privilege for ourselves, so we are thankful when they are with us.

I can appreciate what I have, and the gifts my son has given this whole family.

I’m just, I’m settled. I’m content. I have an amazing, an amazing life.

We have felt the warmth of kindness upon our faces as we endured the depths of our despair. When we were bound within a dark shroud, others were there to reach for us in that place. We ate the fruit of kindness, and the seed was planted within us. In embracing life amidst our losses,
we are able to give freely to others. We approach them from a gentler place, and we offer them
to partake in the harvest.

Some people are carrying extraordinary burdens that I can’t even imagine the depth of
complexity. So I’m going to be kind. I’m just going to be kind. Because I could have used
kindness, and when I got it, it was so healing.

With the gifts of joy and kindness and our newfound gratitude, we welcome another estranged
friend: understanding. When our loved ones died, we surrendered to the question of ‘how can
this be?’ We faced the surreal sensation of their deaths, which we could not fathom. In turning
toward our losses, we have encountered the disorienting uncertainty death brought. We engaged
with our grief, the embodiment of our despicable deprivation. Now, as we open ourselves to
accept the reality of our bereavement, we discover our ability to make sense of it.

It’s been a much easier grieving process because I have more understanding of the purpose
of it and because of the gift of the time we were given. And knowing my husband was
ready, and that the Lord still has much more work for me to do.

We begin to perceive purpose amidst our suffering. It is as if we are being pulled through the
threshold of life, out from the labyrinth of grief. We stand at the doorway, on the edge of
possibility. The longer we look, the more we take in. We can see life in its abundance, and it is
awaiting our answer.

We don’t wait. We don’t hold back. We don’t live in fear.

In boldness, we step out from the shelter of the labyrinth of grief, into a new one: the labyrinth of
life. But this is not a place to dread nor fear, but a place in which to embrace and imbue beauty.
A place to fill with vision, hope, and imagination. A place to house our affections, longings, and
desires. A place to relish in our relationships and capacity to flourish.

If you are going to dream, you better dream hard and chase after it.

In the labyrinth of our lives, we hold both the suffering and the celebration. This atmosphere is
not stale nor dark, but rich and vibrant. We feel at ease knowing we can exist here. And better
yet, we are confident that when death comes again, not only can we endure it, but we can thrive
thereafter.

My youngest daughter said to me, you’ve lived more in the years since dad’s been gone than
in the years before.

Now I know, life triumphs death … Life comes back, or it does for me … Yeah, because life
triumphs death.

The Experience of Turning Toward Loss as the Ground of Faith

When we were thrown into the labyrinth of grief by death’s hand, we were unable to bear
ourselves. We felt our worlds shifting around us as we stared into the darkness. We felt time
had torn as minutes, hours, and days were lost to us. We had never known bewilderment before our bereavement. We came to encounter the shadow of grief and perceived it to be threatening. What is bigger than our grief, which seeks to swallow us? What is bigger than death itself, which brought us to this place? We surrendered to the paradox, steadying ourselves against something we could not prove was there. When death stole from us, and grief overcame us, we leaned into that which could contain it all. We walked upon the ground of faith.

When you are lying awake at night, and you reach over to touch your partner to see if he is still alive or dead, who do you call out to? If not God?

We endure the surreal, but it is not where we belong, for it is the haunting home of the ambiguous unknown. What choice do we have in this world, if we cannot choose to prevent the inevitable? In response to our powerlessness, we look to our feet. We stand upon the ground of faith and trust that if the whole word dissipated before our eyes, we would be held by that which is greater. Like children who yield to their parent’s protection, we grasp the Divine with all our might.

Well it’s not changed my spirituality. I’ve always had a strong faith. If anything, it made me cling to that.

We cannot tolerate the ambiguous unknown, not when our loved ones reside there. We take assurance that the Divine holds the vastness, and we feel the comfort that our loved ones are in a cared for place.

My comfort was in knowing where he was going when he did die.

When we cannot step on the ground of faith, we look at those who can. We notice the faint covering of comfort around them as they walk the path of grief. We see the glow of hope which lights their way ever so softly. There is something they can throw themselves to when they are in deep despair, which seems to provide a certain goodness in the face of grief. We recognize its value, even if we have doubt that something will catch them. We resolve that we cannot place trust in the ground of faith, so we try to create it with our eyes closed, and dream of its presence.

I envy people who have a faith structure that, that leads them to believe they will see their family again. I really do. I don’t have it, but I think that must be a wonderful thing. In my fantasies, I can have that, but I just spent the last year reading physics. I just don’t think that, I just can't wrap myself around that.

In allowing ourselves to lean into the Divine’s leadership, we learn to hold the tension of life and death. In the thick of our mourning, after death has come, we discover our capacity for celebration. The Divine strengthens us to do the unimaginable amidst the unfathomable. Although the touch of death came up on us and left us cold, the Divine moves within us and melts the ice. This movement allows us to celebrate life alongside our mourning of death. We do not understand how we can do this, but the ground of faith holds us in this complexity. Our souls have been beckoned to give our loved ones one last gift of life.
And when the song started, the Holy Spirit spoke to me that I needed to play my tambourine, so I played my tambourine in the center aisle. And from what I understand, there was nary a dry eye in the place. I just had a sense. And it was the last gift I could give my husband.

The ground of faith sustains us when our encounters with grief expend all our energy. It is our dwelling where we lay down our burdens. We allow ourselves to become undone and unguarded. We seek reprieve in this place, and we long for our return to it when we continue on our path.

If I could just get to Sunday morning, and go to church, and hear God’s voice, and feel His presence, I would be okay.

Before we set out again, we kneel to the ground and breathe in its gifts. We know we are to encounter the shadow of grief once again, so we plea for endurance and perseverance. We crave the stamina of the supernatural. We trust that in walking upon the ground of faith, we are not reliant on our fortitude alone, but also of those who are willing to walk with us, and the Divine who holds it all.

This is the coming reality, so every morning you pray for courage and strength to face whatever challenges come and keep on moving.

There are times when we are despondent as we turn toward our losses. What hope have we if death will come for all we love, and for ourselves? We question if we will ever taste goodness again. The deep darkness of our despair floods our beings. As we fall to the floor, we experience that which is deeper yet: deeper than darkness, deeper than despair, deeper than death. All of these things disintegrate to dust, as our hands clutch the dirt of the ground of faith. It is steadfast amidst our suffering, even when we forget its presence.

These losses are terrible. If you don’t believe that there is a God there, that sees all our pain, and that there is healing, there is a peace one day, just the idea there is peace one day. That one day I wouldn’t feel the way I was feeling.

Its ever-present nature is revealed to us, and we sense it rivals that of our bereavement. For our bereavement is until the end of our time, but the ground of faith is transcendent and exists far beyond us. We have a new understanding of forever. We felt our bereavement was infinite, but we now know it is as finite as we are. We hold hope that one day we will be free from our deprivation.

If that meant heaven, if that meant death, that was so just that I knew that it wouldn’t be forever.

Our hope keeps us on the ground of faith, which leads us back to life. It is on this ground where we encounter the Divine, which revives, restores, and renews us. We feel called to seek this encounter. It is like coming upon a well on our path, a place to lie down and rest, a place to drink and be rejuvenated.
Of course my faith in God, going to church, and spending time in worship, and feeling the presence of God was very healing. Just going.

At any point along our path, in our comings and goings, we can seek an encounter with the Divine. Not only do we receive healing, but our eyes are opened to the beauty within and around us. The encounter serves as light against the darkness, revealing gifts laid upon our path. The ground of faith not only leads us back to life, but also to the goodness in this life. Death’s blackened breath blemished the sun and smudged the sky, but the ground of faith provides us a new horizon. No longer do we deny the reality of death, but its ominous presence reveals the splendor of our world.

I have been given a heavenly perspective of life. And I just view things much differently.

He’s just been so incredibly gracious. I look at my gardens, I look at my yard, and he gifts me with such special gifts even in those areas. It’s just so special.

But the breathtaking brilliance of our earth is not enough for the Divine, for we are also given the gift of relationship. Those around us, who contained and came alongside us as we turned toward our losses, radiate with compassion. We experience the Divine with them and through them as we stand side by side, facing our grief.

I’m very thankful for the way that God answered prayer throughout the journey, and all the angels with skin He’d send to walk with us.

Turning toward our losses has evoked a response from the Divine, and thus our relationship is deepened. We experience that the ground of faith is not only a bridge by which we seek the Divine, but also a channel for the Divine to touch us. We experience such presence in all that surrounds us, and the vastness which extends beyond us. We come to trust that the Divine is not only to be sought, but also received.

I have a more intimate relationship with Him now. A lot of that is because of experiencing so deeply His faithfulness throughout the journey.

As we revitalize through our relationships with the Divine and others, we feel a profound purpose moving within us. We feel called to steward our lives and invest in those around us. Although our bereavement deprives us of those we love, we have reaped recompense in a different capacity.

I have my unique little ministry. I do it, and I am blessed. I believe it blesses others, so what more can you ask? What more can you ask? I know I’m being used by God. That’s my heart’s desire: to love and serve Him, and to bless and encourage others.

In turning toward our losses, we have been transformed, encountered the Divine, and been gifted life anew. We seek the sanctuary once more, but this time to make a record of our time in the labyrinth of grief, for we are living testaments that in turning toward our losses, we can make it through.
In the Bible, people would make a pile of stones where something like a miracle happened ... [writing] was my way of making a pile of stones, this happened. And I'll come back to this place and this is my remembering place, this place I made it through.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study to explore the experience of turning toward loss as it is lived. The phenomenological text was derived from eight thematic meanings, which will be summarized. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss this study’s findings, specifically highlighting how these findings can be integrated into future research and clinical practice. The findings will be explored in consideration of the empirical research literature on grief and bereavement and of prominent theories and models of grieving. Following this, clinical implications of the findings will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with a delineation of the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for future research.

Rationale for this Study

The study emerged as a result of my own grieving experience, particularly in my avoidance of grief, and the deep sense of wonderment that stirred within me upon learning about the Existential Analytic concept of turning toward loss. According to Existential Analysis (EA), turning toward loss is an essential activity of grieving, where grieving is defined as “the personal dealing with the loss of life which is now felt” (Längle, 2013). I aimed to understand what it meant to turn toward loss and how this was experienced. This wonderment served as the conception of this hermeneutic phenomenological study, as van Manen (2014) stated that “phenomenological writing … finds its starting point in wonder” (p. 360). The method of hermeneutic phenomenology was also purposefully chosen to address the importance of and need for phenomenological understandings of grieving (Attig, 2015).

Summary of Research Findings

Four women were interviewed to explore their experiences of turning toward loss following the death of their loved ones. To remind the reader, these participants consisted of
Shirley whose sister died of cancer nine years ago; Victoria whose mom died of cancer four years ago; Maureen whose husband died of cancer nine years ago; and Leslie whose son died by drug overdose eight years ago. The interviews were thematically analyzed according to van Manen’s (1997; 2014) suggested guidelines for hermeneutic phenomenology. Eight nonlinear themes emerged from the interviews, which indicated that turning toward loss means: (a) an encounter with death, (b) surrendering to grief, (c) choosing community, (d) permitting and pursuing grief, (e) transformation of self, (f) rooting in relationship, (g) embracing life, and (h) the ground of faith.

In their *encounters with death*, the participants described their initial reactions following their losses. This included feelings of surreality which arose from a spiritual sense of the wrongness of human finiteness, in which the participants described accepting and yet rejecting the reality of the death concurrently. This theme also highlighted their disembodied grief, where the intense affective reaction seemed to be imposed from the outside of them. The second theme, *surrendering to grief*, encapsulates the participants’ movement away from coping strategies of avoidances of grief. In realizing their inability to escape from grief due to its embodied, pervasive, and unpredictable nature, the participants surrendered to and faced their grief. The next theme, *choosing community*, encompassed the participants’ experiences of choosing those with which to turn toward their losses. This involved discerning who and who not to grieve with. The participants also highlighted the tension between feeling alone and oppressed by their death-denying culture, and yet feeling upheld and embraced by others. *Permitting and pursuing grief* was comprised of the responses to the participants’ encounters with grief. They chose to permit closeness with grief as it arose, often through allowing expression of feeling, and chose to pursue it when they needed to process. They also described
activities of respite to seek reprieve from grief, as well as activities like writing which distanced from and brought them closer to their grief.

The theme of transformation of self captured the participants’ transformative experiences as a result of turning toward. The participants described connecting to their authentic selves, feeling free in their grieving, expressing their newfound creativity, and feeling a depth of wisdom and empathy for others. In rooting in relationship, participants described their evolving relationship with their deceased loved ones, and their appreciation for relationships with others. They described how essential others were in their ability to experience life once again. The theme, embracing life, attested to the participants’ deepened values and their turning toward life amidst their ongoing felt losses. The participants described reorientation and purpose in their lives, and trust in the power of life over death. Lastly, the ground of faith theme encompassed their spirituality in turning toward loss. The participants described their relationships with the Divine, experiencing a sense of hope and being held by something bigger (e.g., God) amidst the devastation. Though not described by the participants directly, the metaphor of the labyrinth of grief and the paradoxical nature of grief emerged throughout the thematic analysis and the phenomenological writing. The themes, along with paradox and the labyrinth, will be explored in the next section.

Discussion of the Findings

The participants’ lived experiences of turning toward loss will be discussed considering the extant empirical grief and bereavement literature. I will draw upon specific components of their experiences that fit well with previous studies which have been conducted on grieving. I will also describe unique findings that add to the existing literature.
Findings That Fit With Previous Studies

Some of the findings that emerged from this study fit with previous studies conducted on grieving. These findings include: (a) turning toward loss as an interpersonal, relational activity of grieving; (b) continuing relationship with the deceased; and (c) necessity of coping and respite while grieving.

**Turning toward loss as an interpersonal, relational activity.** One of the most significant findings of this study is that turning toward loss is a relational activity of grieving. The participants described how they often turned toward the loss with others who were willing to grieve with them. This included family members, friends, people in their church congregations, and other bereaved individuals as part of the Compassionate Friends organization. In her study on how families grieve the loss of a child together, Bartel (2016) found that family members shared one another’s pain, participated in rituals and remembrances of the deceased, created space for one another’s different grieving styles, and found meaning in continuing their relationship with the deceased together.

In this study, Shirley described how meaningful it is for her to grieve the loss of her sister together with varying members of her family. They do so through continual reminiscing and holding the space for one another’s pain. For Victoria, she honours her mom by cooking her mom’s recipe yearly and sharing the meal with her family. She belongs to a group of other women bereaved of mothers who give her permission to grieve. She also described walking with a family member in silence, and feeling a shared understanding of one another’s grief. This is consistent with Klaassen’s (2010) study on relational grieving among bereaved parents, where a joint grieving activity was walking in silence (cf. Klaassen, Young, & James, 2015). The findings of this study are also similar to Klaassen’s findings of the bereaved parents’
relationships with the Divine. Participants in this study described how they turned toward their losses through their relationship with God and leaned on their faith for hope amidst their grief. In this study, grieving with others involved turning toward their losses together and turning toward one another in sharing their pain.

**Continuing relationship with the deceased.** Each participant described maintaining an ongoing relationship with the deceased. This was central to turning toward loss, as described in the theme *rooting in relationship.* The participants maintained a bond with the deceased together with their family, similarly to the way Bartel (2016) found it was the shared bond with the deceased that deepened the family’s relationships with one another. The participants shared their bonds with the deceased with those who respected and understood their grieving. They chose not to share with those who did not allow them to fully grieve. The participants also continued bonds similarly to Klass’s (1999) descriptions of bonds through linking objects, religious ideas, memories, and identification. Some of the participants had objects around their house, such as pictures and the deceased’s furniture, that reminded them of their loved ones. For Maureen, her whole house served as a linking object, since it was the place where she and her husband lived for many years. Three of the participants also indicated feeling comfort in their belief that their loved one is in heaven. This belief often sustained them in their suffering. The participants also shared memories of their loved ones with others through telling stories and sharing pictures.

Klass (1999) described identification as “renewed feelings of competence” and the “decision to live fully in spite of the death” (p. 116). The participants described ways that they have grown and discovered new abilities following the death of their loved one. This came as situational demands in which they needed to assume the role of the deceased, but also through discovering their potential and creativity. The participants recognized their deceased loved ones
within them, and honoured their memory through ways of being. For Victoria, she described her mother as her soulmate, who knew her more deeply than anyone else. She has been able to carry this intuitive knowing with her.

**Coping and respite as necessary.** The participants differentiated their coping strategies from their experiences of turning toward loss. They contrasted their experiences of encountering grief with the ways they tried to avoid their grief. Avoidance of grief included engagement in escapist activities, withdrawal from relationships, using substances, “doing for other people” at the expense of relationship with oneself, and preventing oneself from crying. The participants indicated that avoiding engagement with grief was not good, as Victoria stated, “if you fight it off, it gets bigger”. This prompted them to choose to turn toward. This contrasts with Bonanno et al. (1995) who asserted that avoidance of emotion can be adaptive.

Interestingly, the participants also differentiated coping activities with the purpose of avoiding grief from coping activities that served as a form of respite from grief. The former was for the purpose of retreating from their grief, where the latter was for the purpose of resting amidst their grief. In their phenomenological study of the DPM, Fasse and Zech (2016) explained that it was difficult to surmise whether participants were coping in a restoration-oriented capacity, or whether their activities of respite were separated from the participants’ grief. They also highlighted that it was difficult to distinguish coping from activities of daily living. The participants in this study described similar activities of living. For example, Maureen engaged in two restorative activities of respite. One activity was a purposeful break from grieving where she surrounded herself with friends who cared for her. Another activity was going on a cruise for various reasons, which included preventing herself from assuming a caregiving role of another family member, seeking rest and re-energizing, and adventuring on
her own for the first time. It seemed that Maureen’s intentions in her coping varied, and that some activities were aimed at coping with the grief while others were aimed at coping with relational demands. And some activities were directed toward living fully and freely.

New Findings

Along with findings that support other studies, new findings also emerged. To the best of my knowledge, the findings in this section are new to empirical research. Some of these findings have emerged in therapeutic practice, but are not widely discussed in research studies. These findings include (a) description of turning toward loss through metaphor; (b) turning towards loss as grief integration; and (c) the paradoxical nature of grief.

Turning toward loss through metaphor. In describing their lived experience of turning toward loss, many of the participants used metaphor. The use of metaphor in grief therapy is a meaningful practice and has been well documented (Barrett, 2012; Davies, 2014; Gershman, 2012; Renzenbrink, 2014; Rollo-Carlson, 2016; Witzum, 2012); however, there are few empirical studies that document the participants’ use of metaphor as means by which they experience, express, and understand their grieving. It seemed that it was at times challenging for the participants to explicate their emotional and physical expressions of turning toward loss through words. For example, in describing how grief is ever-present and cumbersome, Victoria used the metaphor of wearing a wedding dress of sadness. Her grief often felt like an overbearing wedding dress, which she would wear while doing activities of daily living. Through the use of these metaphors, the participants were able to capture their affective, physical, cognitive, spiritual, and relational impressions of turning toward loss. It seemed they often used metaphor when words were insufficient to describe the depth of their experience.
They also opted to use silence and sound effects to emphasize their experiences, and in doing so, brought their experiences to life.

In this study, the metaphor of the labyrinth of grief emerged. To my knowledge, the metaphor of labyrinth as it pertains to grief has not been explored in empirical studies. It seemed the participants described their lived experience of turning toward loss in such a way that through the thematic analysis, the imagery of movement, paradox, and weaving emanated. The labyrinth captures the initial devastation of loss, as the participants felt “thrown off” their axes. The labyrinth signifies this confusion and disorientation. The labyrinth is nonlinear, with many weaves and turns, but there is still one path. This is representative of the relationship between life and time in grieving, as life is fluid and changing, but time as it is lived through is linear. As the participants continued to navigate their labyrinths of grief, they grieved with others, processed their emotions, attended to their needs, and sought respite. There then came a time when they stepped into the center of the labyrinth where they experienced an inner resonance with self and emerged as fully authentic persons. As the participants walked the path outward, they experienced an appreciation for others and life one more. The metaphor of the labyrinth offers a unique way to describe the experience of turning toward loss.

**Turning towards loss as grief integration.** Some researchers consider grief to be an emotion (Attig, 2011) or a range of emotional states (Weiss, 2008). Despite the debate whether grief is *an* emotion or *many* emotions, it is often considered as primarily an affective response (Stroebe et al., 2008). The findings in this study suggest that the activity of turning toward loss moves grief from being reactive (cf. Attig, 2004) to integrated into one’s person. In EA, emotion consists of two categories: primary and integrated (Längle, 2003). Primary emotion is what is experienced by an individual as the impulse or immediate feeling which is not yet reflected upon.
Integrated emotion moves beyond such impressions and is incorporated into an individual’s value system. The emotion becomes integrated into one’s sense of self, and there is a feeling of resonance from which one can act authentically (Längle, 2013). The process by which an emotion becomes integrated involves taking distance (perceiving), understanding and making sense of the emotion, evaluating and taking a position towards it, and deciding what to do with it.

In describing their experiences of turning toward loss, the participants moved through this process of emotion integration. First, the death of their loved ones left them feeling the spontaneous, immediate grief reaction. They describe feeling numb and surreal, followed by the intense pain of the loss. It was difficult for the participants to turn toward their losses fully until they chose to surrender to their grief. In facing their grief, or choosing to allow its presence, they were able to perceive what was emerging. This was demonstrated when the participants described the feeling of grief tapping them on the shoulder or the grief boogeyman jumping out of the closet to scare them. Once the participants accepted this, they were willing to encounter grief as it appeared. Through continually permitting or pursuing their grief, the participants were able to make sense of their grief. They did so through writing, which was a continual practice of gaining distance from their grief and simultaneously drawing closer to it. They also made sense of their grief through dialoguing with others about their grief, as well as actively grieving with others.

As they continued to turn toward their losses, the participants experienced transformation of self. They began to know themselves more intimately, and took a position toward grief. Each of the participants stated that it was good for them to grieve. This attitude emerged out of continually choosing to turn toward their loss and experiencing this encounter with grief as good. They learned that they could bear their grief and withstand the pain, thus experiencing their inner
strength and solidarity with others amidst their losses. From this sense of resonance and inner positioning, the participants also discovered new aspects of themselves such as their wisdom, kindness, empathy for others, and their creativity. They also recognized that they would never be rid of their grief, but that it would continue to change and evolve over time. From this place of inner positioning, the participants moved toward action where they rooted in relationship and embraced life. They chose to continue their relationships with their deceased loved ones and they also connected with their newfound attitude of deep appreciation for others. They acted on their creativity through writing, speaking, and artistic expression. For example, Maureen pursued numerous activities following the loss of her husband, as she discovered her capacity and creativity. She referred to herself as having a “heavenly perspective” because she now embraces the life and death cycle. She freely grieves and freely lives. In summary, the participants moved from experiencing the impulsive reaction of grief to integrating grief into their sense of selves and their worldview through the activity of turning toward loss. In doing so, grief became not just an emotion, but personal and intrinsic to who they are.

**Paradoxical nature of grief.** One of the central components of this study was the concept of paradox. Many of the participants often felt conflicting emotions and states simultaneously. This occurred on many levels, including with themselves, others, their lives, and their spirituality. One of the paradoxes they experienced on the level of self was that in turning toward their losses, they were both dying to self and transforming anew. Although turning toward their losses was very painful, it also brought them to the end of themselves where they emerged renewed. The participants also felt the tension of being supported and upheld by others, whilst also feeling like social pariahs. This required them to discern who they could grieve with and who they could not. The participants described the importance of having those who would
care for them as they grieved, as well as those who would grieve alongside of them. At the same time, they also felt distanced from others.

The participants also discussed the conflicting demands between encountering their grief, and attending to the daily demands of their lives. They described how they would often be feeling their grief while they were doing various tasks or taking care of family members. The participants deal with this paradox by allowing time to encounter their grief, trusting that doing so will be better for them in the long term. Lastly, the participants felt the tension between the real and the surreal. On one hand, the participants accepted the reality of their losses and continued to live in their physical worlds. One the other hand, the separation from their loves ones was beyond comprehension and difficult to grasp. Three of the participants turned toward their relationship with the Divine to hold the bigness of their grief. They felt the tension between continuing to live in the world as they always had, but with their reality being drastically changed due to the absence of their loved ones. It seemed like their worlds were turned over, and yet they continued to carry on with their daily living.

Thus, a central component of turning toward loss was learning to live within the various paradoxes that emerged throughout their grieving. In her informal survey of people’s phenomenological experiences of grief, Granek (2013) also highlighted various paradoxes, although she did not refer to them as such:

They had suffered terribly and had learned valuable life lessons. They were still in the grips of their pain even 10 years later and had become better people through the experiences of their mourning. They wanted their suffering to end and they wouldn’t change a single thing about their grieving process. (p. 282)
The participants’ descriptions in this study coincide with what Granek found. She elaborated by stating that the ways in which grief is researched fails to grasp the grievers’ “range, depth, and complexity of their phenomenological experiences and their existential understanding of the necessity of their pain” (p. 282). The findings in this study indicate that these complexities seem to have been grasped. Through the phenomenological exploration of turning toward loss, the participants integrated their grief into their sense of selves and learned to live within the tension of the paradoxical nature of grief. Each participant stated that it was good to turn toward their losses, and that they needed to do so. They each continued forward in their grieving with the firm belief, as Leslie stated, that “life triumphs death.”

**Theoretical Implications**

It is important to consider the findings in light of various theoretical approaches to grieving (CAH, 2004), as these findings lend support for and challenge certain assumptions underlying prominent theories of the grief and bereavement literature. The findings of this study will be explored in consideration of the psychoanalytic grief work concept (Lindemann, 1944/94, 1963), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980/98), continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996), relearning the world model (Attig, 1996), the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), and Existential Analytic theory (Längle, 2005). I will describe specifically how the findings lend support for, challenge, or enhance said theories and models.

**Psychoanalytic Grief Work**

On a theoretical level, it seemed that turning toward loss resembled one of the main assumptions of grief work, working through the loss. The findings of this study lend support for the concept of grief work, although I will suggest a demarcation. Lindemann (1963) asserted that although suppression of grief is possible, it is wise for individuals to do their grief work by
experiencing their losses. In this study, each participant attested to the need to actively grieve their losses by engaging with their grief. This was described in multiple themes, including surrendering to grief, permitting and pursuing grief, and transformation of self.

The participants also highlighted specific activities which were helpful in expressing their grief. These included writing, crying, and wailing. Although crying was not always intentional, writing and wailing seemed to be intentional expressions of their grief. The participants indicated that these activities were “cathartic” and “cleansing” because of the ensuing sensation of a burden being lifted. Lindemann (1963) asserted the importance for mourners to “express the deep emotion” (p. 705). The participants echoed this assertion in describing their own experiences of turning toward loss and highlighted the importance of processing all emotions, “particularly the pain”.

However, in this study, there are three notable departures from grief work as Lindemann (1944/94) viewed it. Firstly, Lindemann surmised that the grief work could be completed in a timely manner. This was not so for the participants in the study. The participants all indicated that their grieving had changed over time, particularly in the ways they turned toward their losses, but that it would never be finished.

Secondly, Lindemann asserted that mourners need the assistance of a psychiatrist. Some researchers surmise this assertion paved the way for the pathologizing of grief (cf. Granek, 2010). Worden (2015) stated that further research is needed to determine which grieving individuals benefit from professional intervention. In this study, particularly revealed in the choosing community theme, the participants indicated the necessity of relational support to turn toward their losses. This was not necessarily professional support. Some of the participants indicated that they may have benefitted from receiving therapy, but they did not suffer from not
turning toward loss. Doing so. In fact, those who have been essential to them in their grieving were family and friends who were able to hold them in their grief or turn toward their losses with them. It was the sense of being surrounded by community that largely contributed to their abilities to turn toward their losses. Lindemann (1963) stated that “continued friendly contact and more opportunities for talking about the loss are then helpful” when a mourner is coping alone (p. 705). According to this study’s findings, relationship and community were more than “helpful”, but rather essential to the experience of turning toward loss.

Thirdly, Lindemann (1944/94) claimed that one must emancipate from relationship with the deceased as a component of doing one’s grief work. As will be described further under continuing bonds theory, this study’s findings support continuing a relationship with the deceased. In turning toward their losses, the participants described how they addressed the pain they experienced in their relationships with their deceased loved ones, which existed before their deaths. They claimed they needed to heal from some of these relational wounds in order to continue a relationship with the deceased. The participants also stated that they needed to come to terms with the reality of who their loved ones were, as opposed to idealizing them, which required them to continually turn towards their deceased loved ones. No participant indicated the need to let go of their loved one, but rather chose to work through the hurt in order to maintain a relationship.

To answer Worden’s (2015) question of “is grief work necessary?”, I suggest both yes and no. I answer ‘yes’ in response to the need for participants to engage with their grief as an essential component of grieving. By studying the phenomenon in question (i.e., turning toward loss), I assumed that the participants would be willing to engage their grief, so to say that this study supports grief work could be considered a circular argument; however, I did not expect the
participants to attest strongly to the necessity to turn toward their losses as a means of adaptation. The question of adaptation is beyond the scope of this study, as the purpose was to explore how turning toward loss is lived through—not the consequences of doing so. However, in describing their experience of engaging with grief, the participants explained their reasons for turning toward. This included experiencing the negative consequences of not turning toward with previous losses, learning from the wisdom of others, observing grief “catch up” 30 years later to others who had avoided it, and feeling the benefits of turning toward (e.g., unburdening, catharsis, strength, vitality, etc.). For the participants, turning toward their losses was not something they happened to do, but was chosen as their preferred way to deal with their losses. They even described the suffering they experienced from trying to avoid or escape their grief, such as maladaptive use of substances. Turning toward loss was an essential activity of their grieving. In summary, I argue that the component of engaging with one’s grief as part of grief work is necessary and beneficial.

I answer ‘no’ in response to certain components of grief work, which include relinquishing ties, short duration of grieving, and the lack of emphasis on respite and relief from grief work. The findings of this study did not support the assertions that mourners needed to emancipate from the deceased. The participants also chose to turn toward their losses by engaging with their grief, and they still considered their grieving as ongoing, thus suggesting that doing one’s grief work does not result in a timely recovery. The participants also discussed the need for rest from grieving, as they could not engage with their grief at all times. This will be discussed further in the DPM section.

In reviewing the grief and bereavement literature, my impression aligned with Stroebe and Stroebe’s (1991) claim that there is a lack of clarity around the conceptualization of grief
work. It seems that grief work carries some ‘baggage’, which makes it difficult for researchers who support the need to process one’s grief to fully align with this concept. I suggest a need to let the term grief work lie with Lindemann, and change the discourse to encounter. In other words, if the term grief work carries certain assumptions, such as relinquishing ties, that contrast with much of the contemporary research in favour of continuing bonds, then perhaps we need to change the language altogether. For the participants in this study, their grieving certainly felt laborious as the term “work” implies, but it also was transformative and life-giving. It seemed grieving was deeply intimate and personal; thus, I propose to change the discourse from grief work to grief encounter, or as Existential Analysists propose, turning toward loss. Turning toward loss better encapsulates the necessity to encounter one’s grief, to continue relationship with the deceased, the ongoing nature of grieving, and the importance of grieving in community.

**Attachment Theory**

The findings of this study lend support for Bowlby’s (1980/98) attachment theory, namely attesting to the pain of separation from an attachment figure. The findings also support elements of Bowlby’s phase model of mourning, particularly the first phase of numbing. Bowlby stated:

> On the one hand is belief that death has occurred with the pain and hopeless yearning that that entails. On the other is disbelief that is has occurred, accompanied both by hope that all may yet be well and by an urge to search for and to recover the lost person. (p. 87)

In a footnote, Bowlby explained that he chose the term disbelief as opposed to denial because denial “carries with it a sense of active contradiction” whereas disbelief is “more neutral” (p. 87). His explanation of the mourner experiencing both belief and disbelief aligned with this study’s theme of *encounter with death*, where the participants described being in a state of surrealism.
The participants did not deny that their loved ones were dead, which supports Bowlby’s refusal to use the word denial. Instead, the participants felt the tension between the reality and their intense aversion to it. Parkes and Prigerson (2010) refer to this as “unreality” (p. 83); however, given the participants’ continual use of the word surreal, it seems that the losses of their loved ones were not unreal in the sense of denial, but rather so real that it was beyond their comprehension.

Bowlby (1980/98) stated that the phase of numbing was the shortest in duration, and the findings of this study support this assertion. The participants did not describe their shock or numbness as a phase, but did often refer to experiencing this most intensely in the first year. They associated their shock with a certain duration, that seemed to be distinct from, and shorter than, their experience of feeling and processing their grief. The first year was described as being one of numbness and shock, which seemed to end when the pain set in. Although conceptualizing grief in terms of phases has been criticized (Attig, 2011; Parkes & Prigerson, 2010), findings from this study suggest that there is a distinctness of the first year post bereavement that the ensuing years do not have. This may not be a phase per se, but rather a distinct state of being from which one moves to a more active state of processing.

Bowlby’s (1980/98) phase of yearning and searching was also supported by this study’s findings. Participants expressed feelings of missing their loved ones and longing for their presences. Bowlby described that “the urge to search and to recover, often intense in the early weeks and months, diminished gradually over time” (p. 87). The intensity of the loss seemed to diminish over time for the participants, but time did not remove the felt absence of their loved ones altogether. In summary, the participants did not seem to move through phases per se, but
they did attest to the first year being unique as they adjusted to their new devastating reality, thus supporting Bowlby’s description of numbing.

**Continuing Bonds Theory**

The findings of this study support the continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996). Each of the participants described how they continued a relationship with their loved one, which included talking about the deceased with others; talking directly to the deceased; writing letters to the deceased; honouring and remembering them on anniversaries, birthdays, and the death date; factoring the deceased into decisions; learning from the deceased’s mistakes and making different choices; assuming their roles, especially in relationships with others; and continuing the deceased’s legacy by honouring who they were.

One of the interview questions (refer to Appendix E), inquired about continuing a relationship with the deceased. Interestingly, the participants were less explicit in distinguishing encountering their grief from continuing a relationship with their loved ones. In other words, in describing their experiences of turning towards their losses, they were also describing how they continued relationships with their deceased. By allowing themselves to engage with their grief and process the pain of the loss, the participants were constantly negotiating and altering their relationships with their loved ones. Some of the participants even seemed surprised that I specifically inquired about an ongoing relationship with their loved ones, since it was such a given in their lives that they would continue one. Many of the participants continued their bonds with others as part of grieving in relationship.

**Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement**

Stroebe and Schut (1999) developed the DPM in which they propose that the bereaved oscillate between loss orientation (LO) and restoration orientation (RO). In LO, the bereaved are
doing their grief work; whereas in RO, the bereaved are coping with the secondary stressors which come with their bereavement. The key component to this model is oscillation between LO and RO, and as time progresses, the hypothesis is that the bereaved will be primarily in RO.

In exploring turning toward loss, answers to two questions emerged in light of the DPM: (1) Do the participants oscillate between loss orientation and restoration orientation? (2) What is the relationship between turning toward loss, coping, and grieving? This study poses some challenges to the basic assumptions of DPM, specifically oscillation between LO and RO. Firstly, the participants described turning toward loss as surrendering to grief and permitting and pursuing grief, as well as embracing life and rooting in relationship. The participants engaged with their grief and reconnected with life simultaneously, suggesting that they did not so clearly oscillate between LO and RO. As Victoria stated, her grief was with her as if she was wearing a wedding dress of sadness while attending to activities of her daily life. Hence, the findings of this study support Attig (2011) and Fesse and Zech’s (2016) assertions that the LO and RO are not isolated from one another.

Secondly, the participants differentiated between (a) different types of coping and (b) coping and turning toward loss. The participants engaged in coping processes when they felt the presence of their grief but did not want to encounter it. This was through focusing primarily on other’s needs and through means of escapism; however, they also described a different type of coping: respite. The purpose of respite was not to escape from their grief, but rather seek rejuvenation and sanctuary amidst their grief. Also at first glance, turning toward loss could be considered a type of LO; however, the participants clearly differentiated between coping and turning toward loss in their descriptions. Both coping and turning toward loss were part of their
grieving, but they were not the same activities; therefore, turning toward loss would not fit in the
dual process model of *coping*, since it seems it is not a coping process.

Because it seems turning toward loss and coping were part of the participants’ grieving, the question arises of the relationship between these three constructs. Based on the findings of this study, it seems that grieving is superordinate to coping and turning toward loss, similarly to Lazarus’ (1999) assertion that emotion is superordinate to stress and coping. Therefore, I question the implications of interchanging the language of coping and grieving in the literature, since language is a form of interpretation and certain words carry certain connotations (cf. van Manen, 2014; Zimmermann, 2015). For example, the DPM is a coping model of bereavement, however, some researchers have referred to the DPM as a model of grieving (cf. Worden, 2009). I encourage researchers to interpret the DPM as a model of coping, not grieving. And because of this, turning toward loss may not be suitable to be integrated with the DPM, since turning toward loss is primarily an activity to grieve one’s loss, not to cope with bereavement. This means feeling and expressing the grief which comes because of the loss. It seems turning toward loss and coping each have distinct elements, which can be experienced at the same time, but does not make them the same altogether. I think researchers and clinicians could benefit from exploring the usage of terms such as coping, grieving, and turning toward loss.

**Relearning the World Model**

The findings in this study support and diverge slightly from the relearning the world model. In his *How We Grieve*, Attig (2011) distinguished between grief reaction and grieving response. The former is an intense reaction to the loss whereas the latter is an active choice to grieve the loss. These participants in this study described how, especially in the first year, they could not turn toward their losses. In this way, they were primarily experiencing the grief
reaction brought on by their bereavement. They moved into grieving response when they chose to turn toward their losses. Essentially, it seems that turning toward loss is what Attig referred to as “sorrow-friendly practices” in which grief reactions are actively engaged with (p. ix).

In the preface, Attig (2011) expressed his wish that he had “discussed ways in which grieving response involves active engagement with grief reactions as well as reengagement with the world” (p. xxxi). The findings of this study support this notion because turning toward loss, as a grieving response, involves surrendering to grief, permitting and pursuing grief, as well as embracing life and rooting in relationship. In engaging with their grief, the participants were simultaneously living in their worlds and functioning in their day to day lives. As they continued to turn toward their losses over time, they noticed their functioning in the world became imbued with more and more vitality, as Leslie expressed, “I really came back to life”. In turning toward their losses, the participants both encountered their grief and their lives simultaneously.

Overall, this study supports the holistic approach of the relearning the world model where the participants described how their encounters with death “threw [them] off their axes” in terms of their relationships with the world, others, and themselves. Thus, in turning toward their losses, the participants did experience transformation of self, which corresponds with Attig’s (2011) relearning the self in which the participants connected to new capacities, motivations, and attitudes within themselves. The participants also embraced life, where they relearned how to live in the world once more, connecting to a sense of purpose and a feeling of vitality in their lives. It was also here that they gained new perspectives and their worldviews were broadened and deepened. The participants rooted in relationship, in a way similar to how Attig described relearning a relationship to the deceased. For the participants, they not only processed through and pursued a relationship with their deceased loved ones, but also with those around them,
especially those who supported them in their grieving. They were able to invest in their relationships as they reconnected to life.

**EA Model of Grieving**

Turning toward loss is considered an essential activity of grieving as it pertains to Existential Analytic model of grieving. The findings from this study describe and deepen how turning toward loss is lived through, and thus support and enhance this model of grieving. In this section, I will describe how the findings contribute to the current model of grieving and also how the findings can be integrated into Existential Analytic theory as a whole.

Längle (2013) described grieving as occurring in three phases, where the first phase involves the attitude of letting be. A crucial component of this phase is allowing the feelings to flow, often in the form of crying. The second phase involves inner talking where the bereaved draw close to themselves by offering empathy, consolation, and nurturance to themselves. The third phase is one of orientation where the bereaved connect to life once more, internalize their relationship with the deceased, and pursue new relationships with others. The findings of this study support these existing components, although not necessarily in phases. Längle (2013) asserted that one is not yet grieving if they have not given up resistance to it. This is evident in the theme *surrendering to grief* where the participants actively chose to stop fighting against an encounter with their grief. It was not until they chose to engage with their grief that they could process their feelings. The participants discussed ways they tried to cope with the loss, through shutting down, using substances, and being too externally focused on others. The participants considered these as ways of coping, which aligns with the Existential Analysts’ assertion that coping is an automatic reaction. It seemed the participants were either blocked on the level of dialogue with self or with the others when coping.
Similar to the EA model, the participants described their experiences of crying and wailing as a way to process their grief. In doing so, they experienced inner movement and relief. The findings from this study enhance the EA model of grieving by describing additional ways the participants processed their grief. The participants described grief as unpredictable, sneaking up on them like a boogeyman. When the participants were faced with their grief, they permitted its touch by allowing themselves to feel the intensity of their grief. There were also times when they intuitively knew they needed to grieve, often due to a felt sense of being blocked. From this, they chose to pursue grief by evoking its presence, through listening to music, talking to the deceased, spending time alone, watching sad movies, and so on.

Another theme which enhances the EA model of grieving is transformation of self. This theme seems to be related to the phase of inner talking, as the participants’ relationships with themselves served as the ground for the transformation. However, it was through their experiences of encountering their grief that they experienced their inner strength of being able to withstand its presence. In doing so, they encountered their person and embraced their authenticity. This transformation allowed them to continue to encounter their grief unapologetically, and contributed to their newfound attitudes towards others, the world, and the spiritual. From this place, the participants were able to reorient themselves, as is described in the EA model. In this study, reorientation was primarily twofold, rooting in relationship and embracing life. The participants were able to deepen their relationships with others, develop new relationships, and continued their relationships with the deceased. The participants also felt an affinity for life once more, as Leslie stated, “life triumphs death”. The participants connected to life again with a deepened appreciation of their lives, pursuing what they felt was the most essential.
This study suggests that relationship with both self and community is essential to turning toward loss. Another theme which elaborates and enriches the EA view on grieving is *choosing community*. The EA model does highlight the importance of accompanying those who are grieving (Längle, 2013); however, the description of grief accompaniment is primarily from the perspective of those who lend support to the bereaved more so than how those who grieve seek community. The findings of this study elaborate on the EA concept of grief accompaniment by highlighting ways in which the bereaved seek community and grieve together with others. Each participant could identify those individuals who were important in helping them grieve, to the extent that those individuals made turning toward their losses possible. The participants’ family, friends, and greater community supported them in primarily two ways. There were those who were able to support and hold the participants, usually through providing meals, a place for rest, financial support, and so on. They helped meet the participants’ needs so that the participants could turn toward their losses safely. In a way, they turned toward the participants, which enabled the participants to turn toward their losses. Then there were those who actively turned toward their losses alongside the participants. These individuals faced and processed their grief with the participants. In this way, the grief was shared. There was a mutual understanding and respect, often without words, of each other’s pain, which also allowed the participants to freely turn toward their losses. The current EA model of grieving could benefit from elaboration of grief accompaniment to include not only how individuals support the bereaved, but also how those who are grieving seek community and engage in shared grieving experiences with those they choose.
Clinical Implications

As a scientist-practitioner, I often move toward the question of ‘so what?’ when reading research. The purpose of this section is praxis-focused. The aim is to highlight central aspects of this study which have certain implications for practice. These implications include (a) the use of metaphor; (b) dialogue as movement; (c) the paradoxical nature of turning toward loss; and (d) accompaniment through turning toward. These implications were derived based on the experiences of the participants’ in this study.

Use of Metaphor

The metaphor which emerged from the thematic analysis was that of the labyrinth of grief. The labyrinth of grief complemented the participants’ experiences of turning toward loss, as it captured the disorienting, devastating, complex, unpredictable, nonlinear, and transformative nature of the phenomenon. The use of metaphor for working with the bereaved is certainly not new. In fact, various clinicians utilize metaphor as a means to help the bereaved process their grief (Barrett, 2012; Davies, 2014; Gershman, 2012; Renzenbrink, 2014; Rollo-Carlson, 2016). Wiztum (2012) stated that metaphors can be beneficial in grief therapy because through them, the bereaved reveal how the loss is perceived, the loss is less threatening to discuss, and alternative responses to the loss may be explored. The participants all used metaphors in describing their experiences of turning toward, often because their experience could not be explicated any other way. This is because metaphors are the “preferred mode of communication for the emotional brain” (Gershman, 2012, p. 205).

In her work with nature-based interventions for grief, Barrett (2012) utilized the Grief Spiral, which closely resembles that of the labyrinth of grief. The exercise of the Grief Spiral consisted of the bereaved walking in a spiral toward the center and outward again as a means of
integrating the loss into their lives. Metaphors can be used in practice through imagery, poetic writing, sand-tray, creative works of art, or embodied practices like the Grief Spiral. It is important to note that metaphors can be quite meaningful for the bereaved, but no one metaphor is applicable to all people. Clinicians may want to encourage the bereaved to come up with their own metaphor before suggesting one; however, metaphors like the labyrinth of grief can be powerful tools especially for clients who cannot create with their own.

**Dialogue as Movement**

As was previously described, the experience of turning toward loss is inherently dialogical. In encountering their grief, the participants were constantly dialoging with themselves, others, the world, and the Divine. This is a meaningful finding for clinical practice because bereaved individuals seeking help are opening themselves for dialogue with a clinician. This may be instrumental in helping the clients experience movement in their grieving. It is important to note that the participants described their grieving as complex, unpredictable, and nonlinear. Turning toward their losses often resembled this erratic movement, as the participants allowed themselves to encounter their grief at often inconvenient times. For a clinician, assisting those who are bereaved may feel defeating at times as the bereaved approach and distance from the center of the labyrinth, so to say; however, the slightest of movement may indicate processing of grief. This could be a slight shift in the way they tell their grieving stories, or in their attitudes towards the deceased, others, and their faith (if relevant). It is also important to note that the participants turned toward their losses through dialogue with themselves (i.e., journaling, resting, nurturing) and with others (i.e., spending time and grieving with others). If bereaved clients are blocked in dialogue with themselves or others, this may indicate that they
are stuck on some level in their grieving. This could be attended to through dialogue with a clinician.

**Paradoxical Nature of Turning Toward Loss**

An overarching theme of this study was the paradoxical nature of turning toward loss. The participants often felt themselves in tension of conflicting, but true realities. For example, they felt completely alone in their grief and on the other hand, were surrounded and supported by their communities (i.e., friends, family, church congregations, Compassionate Friends groups). They also felt like they came to the end of themselves, as if they themselves died in the process, and yet felt transformed anew like a rebirth. Wolfelt’s (2015) *The Paradoxes of Mourning* provides a description of three ways in which grieving is paradoxical: the dynamic between hello/goodbye, darkness/light, and backward/forward. He refers to them as forgotten truths. In familiarizing themselves with this wisdom principle of grieving as paradox, clinicians may provide some relief for the bereaved who are struggling with the felt tension. This may be helpful for the bereaved who have not yet surrendered to their intense grief, out of confusion and disorientation due to its paradoxical nature.

**Accompaniment through Turning Toward**

Lastly, it is important for clinicians to turn toward the bereaved and the loss as the bereaved turn toward their losses. This may seem simple, but it can be difficult in practice. Firstly, there is little to nothing clinicians can do ‘fix’ one’s bereavement. Secondly, clinicians may be tempted to have answers, explanations, or theoretical underpinnings they may wish to share with the client; however, this can sometimes be unhelpful for the bereaved. Thirdly, assisting grieving individuals can often cause clinicians to face their own grief or death anxiety, which if not attended to, may result in fear of being with bereaved individuals.
In EA, the emphasis is placed on accompaniment, not therapy since the former lends itself to a role of being with, rather than treatment. Existential Analysts caution the clinician not to push the client into their grief, but allow the grief to emerge and be with the bereaved as they choose to surrender to it. There are three central components to EA grief accompaniment, which include being present without words; turning towards through empathy, closeness, and caring; and helping the bereaved in their relationship to the loss as it relates to consenting to life and continuing relationship with the deceased. A central component of accompanying one in their grieving is timing: using words at the right time, giving comfort at the right time, helping the bereaved reorient at the right time, and so on. It is important to remember that one’s timing as a clinician is not always the mourner’s timing.

Lindemann (1944/94) unfortunately attested to the use of “considerable persuasion” to prompt the bereaved to do their grief work (p. 190). If the bereaved need persuasion to grieve, then they may not be ready or it may not be safe. Clinicians need to ensure that the bereaved have sufficient support and capacity to turn toward their losses. Bearing the intensity of one’s loss requires considerable energy, effort, and strength, and it would not be caring to push the bereaved to do so before ready. The participants in this study were thoroughly cared for by people surrounding them, and they all had the capacity to nurture themselves. This allowed them to turn toward their losses fully.

In conclusion, clinicians may benefit in assisting the bereaved by incorporating the use of metaphors in their practice, encouraging dialogue while grieving, having an awareness of the many paradoxes inherent to grieving, and accompanying the bereaved by turning toward them through being there and providing support. The participants of this study were particularly intentional in discussing what was most helpful and unhelpful to them in their grieving. They
each expressed the desire to help others who are grieving and who are assisting the bereaved. They stated that the most helpful were those who were willing to be there and discuss their deceased loved ones despite the fact that death is a taboo subject. They expressed the need for continual support, not just weeks or months following the loss but also at nine years and onward. They expressed appreciation for those who allowed them to be sad or angry, and those who were intimately familiar with grief and could walk alongside them. If nothing else, it does wonders to look the bereaved in the eye, ask about the deceased loved one by name, and to state, “I am with you.”

**Strengths and Limitations**

The purpose of this section is to highlight the strengths and limitations of this study’s research design. The lived experience of turning toward loss was explored using van Manen’s (1997, 2014) guidelines for hermeneutic phenomenology. Using this method was a strength of this study because it provided a holistic description of how a chosen encounter with grief is lived through. The phenomenological method allowed for exploration of turning toward loss on a multitude of levels, thus capturing how the participants experience their grief as whole beings. The participants were able to describe their experiences in detail, as it was felt through their bodies, emotions, minds, souls, and relationships.

One of the main tenets of phenomenology is openness and approaching the phenomena with an attitude of wonder (van Manen, 2014). This allowed unique features of turning toward loss to emerge, such as the power of metaphor and paradox, as well as the embodiment of grief. Along with openness to what is appearing, hermeneutic phenomenology also allows for openness in the way the data is analyzed. As the researcher, I was able to analyze the interviews in complementary ways. This included adjusting the analysis of the interviews to include reading
the transcript along with listening to the interviews so the lived experience could be explored holistically. This was also done with research assistants where we listened to the interviews, read the transcripts, and dialogued about the phenomena as we co-constructed meanings. I was also able to approach the phenomenon creatively, through reflexive practices of painting my subjective impressions and journaling various insights and reflections of the phenomenon. Conducting the thematic analysis through practices that brought me closer and helped me distance was crucial in the interpretation of the phenomenon, maintaining an attitude of openness and wonder.

Along with the strengths of this study come the limitations. One limitation is that the participants described turning toward loss over time. The participants provided examples of turning toward loss over the course of their bereavement, which was up to nine years for two of them. Naturally, the ways the participants turned toward changed over time. This allowed for unique findings of movement and transformation, but sometimes there were instances in the interviews where they provided breadth (over time), not depth (detail) to their lived experiences. Given this, and the fact that the participants attested to their grieving being ongoing, it seems that a longitudinal study of turning toward loss would be quite beneficial. The longitudinal design would allow for more thorough exploration of how turning toward loss changes over the course of their grieving.

The second limitation was the lack of diversity of the participants. Although there were few exclusion criteria preventing diversity of participants, the participants recruited were all Caucasian women, three of which identified their religious backgrounds as Christian; however, their ages were diverse. The women would also be considered within a middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status; however, their level of education varied. There were men who expressed...
interest in this study, but geographical location prevented their participation. Further exploration of this phenomenon would be beneficial among those with varying gender, cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds.

**Future Research**

In light of this study’s findings and the limitations, I will suggest areas of future research, particularly focusing on additional exploration and dissemination of findings. The findings of this study support the notion that grieving is complex. There is much agreement on this in the literature (Attig, 2004; Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001; Stroebe et al., 2008). This study’s findings indicated that turning toward loss is not merely a cognitive process, but involves emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual processes. And since turning toward loss is a component of grieving, it can be surmised that grieving is also not primarily a cognitive process, nor is it only an emotional, biological, physical, spiritual, or relational process, but contains all of the above because it is multifaceted as it is lived through (Attig, 2015). Separating these components may be convenient for analysis (Lazarus, 1999), but I agree with Attig (2015) when he advised that it is “inevitably limiting and can be distorting to focus on only one dimension” of grieving “for research purposes” (pp. 13-14). I think the field of thanatology could benefit from more researchers taking a holistic approach. Longitudinal studies and qualitative studies with methodologies such as phenomenology and ethnography, lend themselves to a certain openness that allows grieving to unfold in its entirety and accounts for both breadth and depth of grieving. Particularly longitudinal studies of grieving, over the course of a few years, would be beneficial to explore how grieving moves over time and the specific processes of grieving that unfold.

Findings of this study led to more questions about turning toward loss and grieving as a whole. One such question is that the personal dimension of grieving seems to go beyond
identity. Two models that address identity is Worden’s (2009) task model and Gillies and Neimeyer’s (2006) meaning reconstruction model. Worden refers to internal adjustment where Gillies and Neimeyer refer to identity change to describe changes in mourners’ sense of selves, worldview, and constructed meaning. The findings in this study suggest that turning toward loss led to this but also to a personal and spiritual transformation. The participants were attuned intuitively to themselves, dialoguing with and nurturing themselves throughout their grieving. It would be beneficial to explore this personal dimension of grieving further, as this suggests grieving is not merely something the participants are doing but rather intrinsically part of their being.

As mentioned in the DPM section, another potential area of research is the relationship between coping, turning toward loss, and grieving. It seems there is a wealth of information on how people cope with loss and adapt to it, but if coping is different from grieving, then there is still a need for more studies to explore how people grieve. The question of the role of emotions in grieving also arises when considering coping, grieving, and turning toward loss. Lazarus (1999), who along with Folkman developed the cognitive stress theory (cf. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), provided a sequel where he revised his theory, proposing the importance of emotion and its relation to stress. He stated that stress cannot be studied separately from emotion, hence the need to bridge the two fields. He also radically asserted that emotion is superior to stress and coping when he stated:

We should view stress, emotion, and coping as existing in a part-whole relationship.

Separating them is justified only for convenience of analysis because the separation distorts the phenomena as they appear in nature. The three concepts, stress, emotion, and
coping, belong together and form a conceptual unit, with emotion being the superordinate concept because it includes stress and coping. (p. 37)

He went on to state that grieving itself is an *emotional* coping process. Such areas of study would be valuable to explore, particularly in the domain of nonpathological grieving, which after all is an area of study unto itself, as Granek (2010) asserted that “the notion of a ‘normal course of mourning’ is unclear” (p. 53).

Lastly, further exploration of grieving as an interpersonal, relational activity, particularly with methods that facilitate dialogue between bereaved individuals would be beneficial. The dialogical nature of grieving was revealed in the findings of this study. Recently, Bartel (2016) conducted a study to explore how family members grieved together jointly. She used the Qualitative Action Project Method (QA-PM) which involves joint interviews with the family as a whole, as well as separate interviews with each member. Such a method provides rich findings because it captures how families grieve together as they dialogue. Klaassen et al. (2015) also used the QA-PM to explore the spiritual and relational dimensions of bereaved parents’ grieving. Such studies add unique contributions, and the field of thanatology could benefit from approaches such as these. Overall, every method and approach has its strengths and limitations, but I think the field could benefit from more qualitative approaches to complement and enhance the pre-existing quantitative studies.

In addition to consideration of future research, it is also beneficial to highlight areas for improvement in the way research is disseminated. Wilson, Petticrew, Calnan, and Nazareth (2010) define dissemination as the “planned process that involves consideration of target audiences and the settings in which research findings are to be received and, where appropriate, communicating … in ways that will facilitate research uptake in decision-making processes and
practice” (p. 2). One said target of bereavement research are the clinicians who care for and support the bereaved and those who are grieving (CAH, 2004). I appeal to the field to consider ways of promoting research more accessible to practitioners. Stillion (2015) refers to this as “finding ways to marry research and clinical practice” (p. 28). One such way is to promote the development of texts aimed at counsellors and therapists. Attig’s (2011) How We Grieve, Worden’s (2009) Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy text and Neimeyer’s (2012a, 2012b) edited texts of numerous grief therapy interventions are excellent translations of research into praxis.

The Association of Death Education and Counselling (ADEC) also serves as a strong platform to translate knowledge; however, there is one notable barrier. For their annual conventions, ADEC requires that abstracts for presentations have three of the five references cited published within the last five years. This is understandable to encourage transfer of new knowledge, and continual advancement of research and professional development. However, this also poses challenges to explore grief and bereavement through varying ways of knowing. During ADEC’s 38th annual conference, Attig expressed that meeting this requirement can be challenging for those who study grief and bereavement from a philosophical or historical standpoint (T. Attig, personal communication, April 14, 2016). In summary, it would be beneficial to the field of thanatology to broaden the way grief is researched, employing methods and research questions that move beyond the psychologizing of grief (Granek, 2015). It would also be beneficial to find new ways of disseminating research findings through texts that translate research into practice; continual dialogue and collaboration across disciplines (Granek, 2013); and fostering an attitudinal openness in the field of thanatology to different ways of studying grief.
Conclusion

We must turn toward our experience and touch it with the softest hands possible. Only then, in the inner terrain of silence and solitude, will our grief yield to us and offer up its most tender shoots. (Weller, 2015, p. 99)

Grieving is a profoundly moving experience when the bereaved choose to encounter their grief. In Existential Analysis, encountering grief is referred to as turning toward loss. The aim of this study was to explore how turning toward loss is lived through. I used the method of hermeneutic phenomenology to study this phenomenon holistically. In interviewing four women of their experiences of turning toward loss, it was apparent that grieving was multifaceted. Their grief was fully embodied, permeating their entire beings. The ongoing, pervasive nature of their grief required them to continually turn toward their losses as they continued to engage with life.

Through interviewing these bereaved women of their engagement of grief by turning toward, the lived meanings (themes) of their experiences emerged. This included encountering the death of their loved one, in which they were overcome by the surreal and their own loss of self; acknowledging, allowing, and surrendering to the presence of their grief; discerning who and who not to grieve with and choosing those who support and walk alongside them in their grieving; permitting grief’s touch when it spontaneously emerged and pursuing encounters with their grief when they needed to process; experiencing a spiritual transformation of self in which they emerged whole and authentic; having a deepened appreciation of others where they pursued a relationship with their deceased loved ones and reconnected with those who are living; embracing life again by experiencing vitality, a surge of creativity, a renewed sense of purpose, and a newfound attitude of gratitude; and leaning into the ground of faith where they found hope and strength in that which is bigger than death and grief.
Turning toward loss is a deeply sacred experience. It serves as the ground for grieving, allowing the person to emerge authentically. It is dialogical, intimately weaving the bereaved into the fabric of their existence by drawing them closer to themselves, others, and the Divine. It is relational, where others are encountered, held, and surrounded in their anguish together. It is spiritual, deepening one’s appreciation for being human and one’s gratitude for the ever-flowing river of life. In our losses, we suffer the unfathomable pain of separation. Turning toward these losses need not be feared nor avoided, for in doing so, we move from a place of division to a place of wholeness.
CHAPTER 6: REFLEXIVITY

“Coming out” through reflexive analysis is ultimately a political act. Done well, it has the potential to enliven, teach, and spur readers toward a more radical consciousness. Voicing the unspoken can empower both researcher and participant. As more researchers grasp the nettle, the research in the future can move in new, creative directions. Are we ready to embrace the challenge?
(Finlay, 2002, p. 554)

The process of conducting this research took two years from its conception to its metaphorical birth. Over the course of this process, this thesis was continuously evolving on a theoretical and methodological level. I have engaged in continual reflexive practice throughout researching the lived experience of turning toward loss. Berger (2015) defined reflexivity as “turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have” on various aspects of the research study (p. 220). Reflexivity is especially important in hermeneutic phenomenology to ensure practice of the epoché-reduction of openness. Van Manen (2014) described the need for researchers to suspend their preunderstandings and overcome any subjectivity that would prevent exploration of the phenomenon as it is lived through. This involves an attempt to forget as many assumptions and biases as possible, whilst also being aware it is impossible to be radically free from these. To deal with the latter, van Manen (2014) suggested that certain preunderstandings “may need to be explicated so as to exorcise them in an attempt to let speak that which wishes to speak” (p. 224).

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate, portray, and reveal my reflexive process. My theoretical preunderstandings, my worldview, and my own grieving experiences are explicated in this chapter. Although the phenomenological writing in Chapter 4 is quite exposing, this chapter feels the most vulnerable to write. As Finlay (2002) has well stated, writing this chapter is like grasping the nettle, and although it stings to admit some of my faults, mistakes, and sufferings
throughout this process, I firmly believe in the importance of transparency in the research process. Overall, this thesis would not have had such movement without my reflexive practices, which have been the lifeblood of this study. For as much as my reflexive practices revealed my shortcomings, they also facilitated immeasurable growth and creativity. This is precisely the exciting part: to share it with you, and to hopefully inspire other researchers to “embrace the challenge” of reflexivity and to get creative in their research.

To begin, I will describe how the thesis evolved from its conception, highlighting some of the significant changes along the way. I will divide this into four stages, which include research formulation, data collection, analysis, and phenomenological writing. The second half of this chapter consists of describing my two reflexive practices, painting and journaling, which expressed my subjectivity as a researcher and as a griever.

**Evolution of the Research Process**

I maintained a consistent journal over the course of this thesis to document changes made on a theoretical, empirical, and methodological level. This was a consistent reflexive practice that was established from the outset. The following section describes the process outlined in the journal.

**Research Formulation Stage**

I began this research with an entirely different research question than the lived experience of turning toward loss. I was originally going to research the sense of presence experience among bereaved parents, but I chose to change this topic because I doubted whether I could sustainably study such phenomenon for the ensuing two years. Right from the start, I decided that I needed to be an insider, or to have some meaningful attachment to my topic to motivate me to finish the thesis. Since I was not a bereaved parent and I had not experienced sense of
presence, I felt this is a topic best left for another time. When I learned of turning toward loss in my Existential Analytic training, I was immediately filled with a sense of wonder because I had not done so in my own grieving. I became curious as to how others turned toward their losses and encountered their grief.

Following the discussion of changing the topic altogether, the research question became: *What is the lived experience of turning toward loss?* Perhaps one of the most challenging components of this thesis was arriving at a conceptual understanding of turning toward loss. We wondered how we could phenomenologically explore this topic and capture its essence. Over the course of formulating this study, there was confusion around what it meant to turn toward loss, since there is little research available on this topic. One of the most conceptually challenging components of this thesis was determining whether we could, and more so how, to phenomenologically explore turning toward loss. We questioned whether this thesis should be theoretical or empirical, and if empirical, whether a method like grounded theory would be better suited. The concern in using phenomenology was whether turning toward loss, in Existential Analysis, was a theory or model of grieving itself, making it too abstract to explore phenomenologically. However, I felt that turning toward loss was an actual phenomenon—something that bereaved individuals do experience—not just an abstraction. Essentially, the main challenge at this point was knowing intuitively what it was I was aiming to explore, but not being able to articulate it; however, van Manen’s (2014) words were quite helpful in explicating my aims:

Phenomenology may bring in theory to show where the promise of theory fails to remain fulfilled. … these theories may actually leave their central concepts impoverished of experiential and phenomenological meaning … theories that explain human problems
and processes through psychological theories may actually be enriched by having these psychological concepts translated back into experiential realities. (p. 67)

I wanted to explore turning toward loss phenomenologically to understand how it is lived through. We defined turning toward loss as encountering and engaging one’s grief. We then developed the interview guide to ask questions which explored exactly that. Once we connected to the experience of turning toward loss, it was much easier to reorient to the phenomenon throughout the subsequent stages of the study.

**Data Collection Stage**

The data collection stage occurred over the course of two months. The first interview took place on campus at a counselling centre. The participant indicated she was nervous and was wondering why she agreed to participate. She assured me she would like to continue with the interview, and signed the informed consent; however, I questioned whether she was truly consenting because she wanted to or because she felt obligated. I think her nervousness, and mine (since she was my first interview) did impact the quality of the interview, especially in terms of depth. The participant did not elaborate on her responses voluntarily, so I used more prompts and probing questions than the following interviews. I was unsure if the interview was phenomenologically rich, but after consultation with my supervisor, we decided it was sufficient. I was concerned that some of my questions were too leading because she stated she had not thought about some of them before, but after listening to the recording, we decided that the questions were more thought-provoking than leading.

The second participant requested that the interview be conducted in her home. This proved quite beneficial for the interview because it was taking place in the setting where most of her grieving was lived through. She was more relaxed, and throughout the interview, she pointed
to specific places where she turned toward. She also showed me pictures and keepsakes of her loved one. For the next two interviews, I provided their homes as an option for the setting of the interview, and both participants opted for that. It seemed that the participants’ homes were a safer and more inviting place to discuss such a vulnerable topic. These three interviews were rich with depth, as many of them had written at length about their grieving experiences (poems, blog posts, published books, etc.). However, because they had reflected extensively about their experiences, it was at times difficult to reach the prereflective.

I did depart slightly from a true phenomenological interview in that I asked about attitudes and understandings of grieving. Such questions would be considered opinions and perceptions, rather than details of how the experienced was lived through. I found that in answering questions like, ‘what does it mean to grieve for you?’, participants provided examples of ways they grieved, by turning toward, to answer the question, which was ultimately what I was exploring. In a way, providing their understanding of the phenomena also brought them closer to their experience of it, so there seemed to be this movement of distance from and approach to their experiences that allowed for a certain level of depth in the interviews. Ultimately, however, I do not think I asked for enough detail of turning toward loss for that required of a phenomenological study. I think this due mostly to my inexperience in conducting phenomenological interviews, and my absorption into the interview. I found it difficult to find the balance between being immersed in the dialogue and leaving enough space for the participant to provide detail, while orienting the interview toward the phenomena in question.
Analysis Stage

This stage was the most reflexively intensive because I was constantly checking my own biases and assumptions, while also co-constructing with the participants as I listened to, transcribed, and analyzed their interviews.

**Transcription.** I chose to transcribe the interviews myself because I wanted to be immersed in their experiences as much as possible. As I was transcribing the interviews, I began to feel unsettled. It seemed that listening to the interviews was richer than the text because the audio-recordings captured the participants’ tone of voice, prosody, pauses, silences, hesitations, emphases, sound effects, and rate of speech in a way that text did not. Seeing these in brackets in the text seemed to interrupt the flow of their descriptions. To mitigate this, I decided to listen to the interviews while reading the text to analyze the lived experience descriptions. I listened to each interview at least four times in their entirety, although I listened to various segments repeatedly.

**Analysis.** Analyzing the interviews evolved over the course of five months. Since there were no firm rules on how to analyze the phenomena, the first interview was analyzed more by trial and error. Although the openness of the method was daunting, it also provided much space to be creative and try varying ways of interpretation. I will describe my process of analyzing the interviews in different ways.

**Dialogue with research assistants.** After transcribing, I dialogued with a different research assistant per interview. We listened to the audio recordings while we read the transcript and then discussed our impression of the interview as a whole. We then discussed specific descriptions, focusing on which feelings were evoked in us and our gut reactions to the text. We then discussed how each description reflected what it means to turn toward loss. This was a
helpful part of the analysis because others highlighted various aspects of the text that I had overlooked, and fostered alternative interpretations.

**Poetic formatting.** Following the dialogue with others, I was still dissatisfied with the textual representations of the interviews. I felt that certain words like “um” and “like” were not always purposeful and detracted from the descriptions. I also felt that my interjections of “mhm” and “yeah”, broke up their descriptions in the text. Many of these did not add to or change the direction of the interview, but served as verbal indicators I was listening. It seemed these filler words served more of a colloquial function, and were less important to the lived experience descriptions. I decided to take these words out and “trim” the interviews. I removed anything I said that did not impact the participants’ responses, and I removed the fillers which did not add to the descriptions. I then formatted the texts into poetic format, making the various descriptions into stanzas. There was something about the aesthetic of this format that made the descriptions come to life. It felt like putting pieces of a puzzle together and trimming away the excess. It created this united picture, and from this, I analyzed the texts line by line.

**Thematic Analysis.** It did not take long analyzing the texts line by line to be struck by the depth and richness of the texts. One of the participants used metaphor throughout the interview to describe her experience of turning toward loss. Her descriptions were filled with imagery and poetic language. One such metaphor she used was that of “wearing a wedding dress of sadness” to describe how her grief was overbearing, heavy, and ever-present. As I read the line and listened to her say this, I was instantly inspired to depict her description. I had the immediate thought, “I have to paint this. There is just no other way.” I have never painted before. I have not taken art classes, and I had no supplies, but the feeling was so strong to do so
that my decision was already made. It seemed the text was not enough on many levels, audibly and visually. Moore (2004) captured this in describing imagery:

Images help clarify emotions, memories, and events. They can connect the past with the present and create a kind of reflection that impacts chronic suffering. It helps to know what you’re going through. Often our language is too technical, mechanistic, medical, and psychological, but falls short of our experience.” (p. 215)

I read Moore’s words long after I began painting, but I think he states perfectly how I felt when I began. I will discuss my experience of painting in a subsequent section.

I analyzed every line in the first text before I realized that I was analyzing lines that were not oriented toward the phenomena I was studying. I was fortunate to realize this for the next three texts. I do not think doing so negatively impacted the study apart from taking more time than was required. I was also constantly challenging myself to see the phenomena beyond my lens of Existential Analysis. Although Existential Analysis is my theoretical orientation as a clinician, it is also well integrated with my personal worldview, which at times made it difficult to ascertain what is theory and what is belief. This posed a challenge to suspend my assumptions, but because I was aware of this from the outset, I was careful. I think I benefitted from this époque-reduction because it forced me to be intentional in my word choice, which in turn expanded my interpretations. I became aware how closely related language and interpretation are. I continued to learn the importance of intentional word choice as I wrote the phenomenological text.

My interpretations of each line and phrase became the thematic meanings, which served as the foundation of the phenomenological text. For each participant, I created a table with the headings Meanings, Expansions, and Quotes. I would try to summarize my interpretations of
what it means to turned toward loss for each line into one or two sentences. Then any time I had an insight or thought that accompanied the theme, I would write it at length in the expansion section. These writings were often used directly in the phenomenological text, or as places from which to expand. I would then insert the direct participant quote next to the theme and expansion.

I analyzed the texts one at a time. I would then start fresh with each interview, waiting at least one or two days before beginning the thematic analysis of a new text. I did not want the themes of the previous text to influence my interpretations of the new text. Although there were some similar themes in text, I chose not to use the same wording of the theme as before so that new insights and interpretations could emerge. This created much more work in the end as I had to integrate every line-by-line theme of all four texts, but it was fascinating to see the overlap and divergence of the themes. I also analyzed the first text again at the end, as I felt I had achieved a deeper level of interpretation with the ones following because the first was a product of trial and error.

Overall the thematic analysis, at times, was quite frustrating because I felt like I was constantly waiting for moments of insight. Depth of interpretation demanded much energy and concentration, as well as an attitude of openness I was not used to, so this took longer than I had anticipated. My analysis suffered from lack of depth when I was tired, so I learned that this was not simply a matter of “pushing through”. It seems that not only did phenomenology require openness, but it also required patience. There were numerous moments when I wanted to throw in the towel, so to say, due to feeling blocked, uninspired, and all around inadequate; however, van Manen’s (2014) words offered much needed light to these moments of darkness:
The challenge for inceptual or originary thought is to find nonconceptual and nontheoretical access to the realm where understandings are evoked through more indirect, poetic, and vocative means. It requires on the part of the researcher patience and a willingness to surrender to the grace of serendipity, even if that means to be frustrated and exasperated when phenomenological insights just do not seem to come. (p. 239)

The thematic analysis also evoked much of my own grieving, which slowed the process. I journaled more during this phase than other phases. It was evident that my grieving impacted my interpretation, but it was difficult to judge if this negatively influenced the findings. I felt it provided more depth to the analysis because I immersed myself into the experience not only cognitively, but also somatically, emotionally, and spiritually. Journaling my experience of researching this phenomenon also enabled me to separate what was solely “my stuff” and what was grounded interpretation of their descriptions. It provided distance so that I could continue to approach the phenomenon with openness.

Web of themes. Once I finished the line by line thematic analysis, I began integrating the texts to identify distinct thematic meanings across the four texts. At this point, I had primarily done the analysis on my own, but wanted another’s interpretations and openness for this part. My research assistant, Tammy Bartel, was crucial to this portion of the analysis as she provided much needed perspective, drawing connections between themes and helped nuance themes.

One of the most challenging components of this process was creating a visual representation of these themes. I was inspired by van Manen’s (1997) description of phenomenological themes as metaphorical knots on a spider’s web. It seemed there were four contexts to which the themes belonged: self, others, life, and the noetic. I tried to create a web of
the themes according to these four contexts, and then fitted the webs together. The result was this:

![Figure 2. Web of thematic meaning structures.](image)

There were a few problems with this. The first being that there were too many themes, and the second being the sheer confusion of this diagram. After having good laugh and staring at this for a few hours, we identified some of the themes that seemed to encapsulate and connect with multiple other themes. From this, we identified eight themes that were meaningful to the lived experience of turning toward loss, which were the eight described in Chapter 4. However, it seemed like there was an image on the verge of revealing itself, being more than just a diagram, as these themes were dynamic and multilayered, and could not be restricted two-dimensionally. As I thought more about this, M. C. Escher’s (1953) lithograph print came to mind:
This reminded me of an episode from a cartoon I used to watch as a child. In the episode, the writers brought this image to life and referred to it as a labyrinth. I began researching labyrinths, and found an informative article by Fergus-Jean (1996) where she described the labyrinth as a metaphor for transformation. The labyrinth also represented paradox, much like Escher’s *Relativity*, where there are many opposing elements existing in relationship. This gave words to that which I was intuiting, but did not know how to articulate: grieving as paradox. It seemed the eight themes revealed a labyrinth, which then served as the foundation for the phenomenological writing. I will discuss the labyrinth further in the painting section.

**Phenomenological Writing**

Once the themes were identified and the metaphor of labyrinth was discovered, the phenomenological writing flowed. This portion of the thesis was the most intimidating due to lack of direction, but also because of the topic. I had a growing reverence for the phenomenon, and I wanted to do justice to the participants’ experiences. Much of my journaling during this time was centered on the “bigness” of grief, and my own feelings of inadequacy in describing turning toward loss. I felt like I was tapping into the essential nature of grieving as part of the
human condition, which transcended my time and place in history. This makes sense, not only because of the pervasiveness of grieving across culture and history, but also because phenomenological exploration evokes that which is primordial: “This beginning must be sought, not in some abstract edifice or theory, but in the primordiality of lived experience” (van Manen, 2014, p. 236). Because of these feelings, I was grateful I had the participants’ stories to ground me and orient me back to the description of the phenomenon. This was especially necessary for interpretation, as I began to understand how interpretation is a never ending endeavour.

One of the most difficult themes to write was the choosing community theme. I could not understand at first why the words seemed not to flow as easily as other themes, until they did flow—when I was writing about lack of community. I become aware of my own personal experience of grieving and how I chose to be alone. I noticed this pattern emerging in conducting my research, as I often opted to do much by myself (i.e., transcription and thematic analysis). Although various colleagues offered to help me, it was difficult for me to open my research to those who were less familiar with the data or grieving in general.

Part of conducting the phenomenological research lends itself to being a solo affair because “fundamental inceptual insights are not so easily gained from others or in concert with others” (van Manen, 2014, p. 238). I certainly found this to be true, as seeking a space of silent reflection was integral to writing; however, van Manen (2014) continued by stating that these insights “require personal struggles, private pain, and intimate commitments” (p. 238). The thematic analysis and writing were quite painful processes, not only because they evoked my own grieving but also because I found myself in a pervasive state of loneliness. The experience of my analysis involved inceptual insights, intuitive knowing, and moments of touching truth, which made it difficult to explain or share my process with colleagues. I was not speaking the
language of coding, transcription, or content analysis typical of qualitative research. The results (the phenomenological writing) were embodied and intuited, and with that came a felt silencing from the culture of academia and from myself. This silencing came in the form of self-doubt where I would discount my interpretations as being too emotional or too feminine or too metaphorical and not scientific, valid, or rigorous enough. Yet, there was something right and good about what was emerging, which offered much hope amidst the doubt. My hesitation to allow others to share in this process came from not wanting voices of dissuasion to lead me away from what I felt in my deepest knowing was the truth of the phenomenon. The consequence of this decision was a sense of estrangement from my research team.

However, after quite a few months of wandering in the darkness of phenomenological research, I decided I needed some light. Just as the participants needed community to grieve, so did I to write the text. Tammy immersed herself into the phenomenological writing and offered some much-needed perspective. She read through the text along the way, expanding it and offering alternative wording. Ultimately, dialoguing with her also helped ground and reorient me to the phenomenon. Once the text was written, it was sent to my research committee, colleagues, and the participants to read and provide feedback. These iconic validity checks ensured that my interpretations were reflective of the descriptions. The individuals indicated that they resonated with the writing. Bringing in others at this stage brought the phenomenological writing to completion. It seemed fitting that it was not complete until others were involved, as this is reflective of the inherent relational nature of the phenomenon turning toward loss.

**Reflexivity Through Creative Expression**

In your dark night you may learn a secret hidden from modern people generally: the truth of things can only be expressed aesthetically—in story, picture, film, dance, music. Only when ideas are poetic do they reach the depths and express the reality.

(Moore, 2004, p. 9)
Writing this thesis often felt like one dark night after another dark night. About three quarters of the way through, I realized that this research study had been a microcosm for turning toward loss. Essentially in studying grief, I was continually coming to face with my own grief. Through their stories my participants taught me how to turn toward my losses. Their interviews did not serve merely as data to analyze, but as guides for my own grieving. I was constantly holding the tension between the purpose of thesis as an academic requirement for my graduate degree and the thesis being the source of a meaningful and transformative personal process. I painted and journaled frequently as a means to express this tension and to oscillate between these dynamics.

**Painting**

Originally when I chose to start painting, the purpose was to enhance the data through visual expression. I aimed to paint my own interpretations and impressions of the participants’ stories, as I felt written expression was insufficient. My hope was to use specific quotes as inspiration for the paintings. Painting certainly began this way, but soon morphed into this synergy of grieving, creativity, sanctuary, distance, and transcendence. Throughout this process I discovered how deeply rooted my value of aesthetics is, and how closely grieving and beauty are intertwined.

Indeed, it is part of the disturbance of the Beautiful that her graceful force dissolves the old cages that confine us as prisoners in the unlived life. Beauty is not just a call to growth, it is a transforming presence wherein we unfold towards growth almost before we realize it. Our deepest self-knowledge unfolds as we are embraced by Beauty.

(O’Donohue, 2004, p. 8)

Painting soon became a way to practice phenomenology, both of which I am a novice. And although there are guidelines, each brings with it certain freedom of expression and exploration. With phenomenology, there is an orientation toward the phenomenon and with that
I have some control to choose when, where, and how to interpret. However, there are also moments that I could not control, such as moments of insight and inspiration. I found this similar with painting. I began the process with a clear intention of portraying some of my participants’ beautiful words, but there were also reflexive pieces that emerged unexpectedly. I aimed to paint to bring me closer to my participants’ experiences of turning towards, but I also found that it took on the function of the epoché. Like writing, it brought me close to and distanced me from the phenomena. When I was depleted from writing, I found painting would still my mind. I was not nearly as focused on my participants’ words while painting as I was on the way the colours merged, the different strokes of each brush, and the way the light would reflect. Painting soon became meditation, until I was hit with a moment of insight to write once more. Painting deepened my reflections, becoming the loving partner to my phenomenological writing. I have included pictures of my paintings and the quotes that served as inspiration. I will describe my reflections throughout.

I choose the following quote for my first painting:

In times of deep pain in your life, you come to the bottom of who you really are.
And you think I don’t got any more.
And it punches through.
And there is a deeper place in you.
And it punches through.
And there’s these, these places of depth.

These words evoked a visceral response in me when the participant spoke them. I could see that grieving was transformative for her. From her place of pain, she emerged mightier.
This painting has about nine layers. I continued to add to it, partly out of perfectionist tendencies, and partly because of “these places of depth”. This painting brought a few insights. Firstly, it was the embodiment of the fact I did not know how to paint. It taught me to let the need for professional quality go, and to just do it. This was necessary for me to be able to write phenomenologically, since in many ways, I felt intimidated to do so. Painting provided me with the courage to write, and reminded me that I do not need to control, but instead allow depth to emerge. Secondly, I assumed that in painting quotes about grief, I would choose dark tones. After all, grief is black, is it not? Not always. I found in painting my participants’ experiences, I was surprised by the amount of colour I was using. The vibrancy on the canvas reflected back to me precisely that grieving is unpredictable and multifaceted. There are dark tones, but there are also rich and lively tones.

I chose the following quote for this painting:

I have found that grief has burned the bullshit off of me.
The theme of transformation was becoming more evident throughout analysis. The participants all discussed how in allowing themselves to turn toward their losses, they became more themselves. Their relationships with their selves deepened, and so did their relationships with others. They were no longer focusing on things of this life that were not meaningful (i.e., appearances), but rather chose to live more authentically. This was one of the significant lessons that the participants taught me.

In a dark night, beauty allows you a glimpse of transcendence and therefore liberation, without allowing you an escape from your situation.

(Moore, 2004, pp. 227-228)

I chose the following quote for this painting:
You can see when people are dying, they get this colour.
They turn ivory.
Their skin sits funny on their faces.
You see death taking hold.

![Figure 6. Painting of Death's Hand](image)

I chose the following quote for this painting:

> It’s like wearing a big freaking wedding dress,
> That's not a wedding dress.
> Like a wedding dress of sadness.
> Just wear it.
> Do the dishes in your sadness wedding dress.
> Go shopping in your sadness wedding dress.
> Just with you.
As I was painting, I was finding textures, colours, brushes, and mediums that I liked and did not like. There came with this a sense of freedom and liberation to paint in a way that would reflect who I was. Although it will keep evolving, it was important for me to become aware of this so that I could write the phenomenological text with my authentic voice. Getting in touch with my inner authenticity served as a ground from which I could roam freely as I explored turning toward loss.

I chose the following quote for this painting:

It colours, even to now, colours everything.
Even when I am in those wonderful moments, I am aware that my son is not.
I can’t escape that.
I can’t escape that.
But for me, it doesn’t stop me from having those moments.

Figure 8. Painting of Grief

As I continued to paint, I found my own abilities, and even at times the canvas, becoming increasingly limiting. The participants’ experiences were incredibly dynamic and complex. There were times I wish I knew how to animate so I could portray this complexity through movement. I began to use more texture in my paintings, so that they would be more tactile. I started to imagine numerous ways I could depict this phenomenon. It was around this time when I created the web of themes, thought about Escher’s (1953) *Relativity*, and discovered the labyrinth. The next three paintings were influenced by my journey into the labyrinth of grief.
Figure 9. Painting of *The Labyrinth of Grief*

Labyrinths are ancient, being one of the “oldest circular formations on earth” which are “recognized by many cultures … over thousands of years” (Katsilometes, 2010, p. 194). The spiral pattern of a labyrinth symbolizes energy regeneration, and the “nonlinear pattern of intuitive, meditative exploration” (p. 196). Labyrinths are also symbols of death and rebirth, self-exploration and discovery, and pilgrimage. They are places for people to face their inner darkness toward a more whole, spiritual self. The more I read about the labyrinth, the more intrigued I was by it. I had felt that grieving was on many levels primordial. Grieving is something people have been doing for as long as we have been in relationship with one another. It is something people will continue to do long after we are gone. Viewing turning toward loss through the lens of walking a labyrinth deepened my understanding of what it means to grieve.
The metaphor of labyrinth captured the disorienting, unpredictable nature of grieving while also the illuminating and transformative component, which corresponds with the centre and the journey outward (cf. Griffith, 2002). The labyrinth captured the many paradoxes the participants described, such as the process of dying to themselves and rebirthing, and feeling alone and yet connected with others.

The painting below was inspired by the quote:

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There is still that empty spot but it’s faded.
It’s like somebody walking off into the distance.
You can’t see them as much the further they get away.
So the same thing as time goes on you never forget that person.
But I think eventually the pain goes.
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*Figure 10. Painting of The Center*
The image of a loved one walking away in the distance greatly impacted me, as I felt it captured the pain of pining for someone who is far away. This painting took on a new meaning for me personally, as not only did it signify the death of a loved one, but it also signified walking towards the center of the labyrinth. That in turning towards the loss of a loved one, there is a “second death”. The bullshit is burned and a transformed self emerges. Discovering the labyrinth felt like stepping into the center of this research process. It provided ground from which the phenomenological writing could grow.

The painting below was inspired by the quote:

I was like a chameleon.
I tried to twist myself into what I thought you wanted me to be.
No.
No.
I am who I am.

Figure 11. Painting of Ignite
I was contemplating how to depict the participants’ transformative experience of turning toward their losses, which seemed to correspond with the centre of the labyrinth. The participants described their transformations in a fierce and powerful way. They did not apologize for their strong sense of selves nor for freely grieving. There was a certain electricity in the air when they spoke, and I felt that their renewed strength was embraced amidst their losses.

**Journaling**

To write is to reflect; to write is to research.
And in writing we may deepen and change ourselves in ways we cannot predict.  
(van Manen, 2014, p. 20)

As will be described in this section, this research was very difficult to conduct due it being emotionally evocative. I resonated with Granek’s (2017) article on five female researchers who were impacted personally and professionally due to conducting qualitative studies on emotionally laden topics. I also have been impacted in these ways. Exploring the lived experience of turning toward loss has been nothing short of emotional labour, as Seear and McLean (2008) termed it. They stated that “the unacknowledged emotional labour in qualitative research on sensitive topics can produce significant anxiety and stress for researchers”, so it is ethically imperative to have support systems in place (p. 4). I sought these on my own as I needed them (more as trial and error), but in hindsight, I would have benefitted from discussing how I would seek support from the outset. I was fortunate that I was not surprised the emotional labour because my supervisor and I had discussed the likelihood. I had a support system surrounding me throughout this process, which consisted of my research team, clinical colleagues, friends, and family.
Journaling was one such activity which was integral to processing the emotional labour of this research, while maintaining reflexivity. Journaling served as the bridge between the academic and poetic writing, as well as the professional and personal aims of this study. It facilitated a certain closeness and distance on multiple levels throughout this study. Van Manen (2014) asserted that writing is the research in phenomenology, which I did not fully understand until I was well immersed in it. Conducting phenomenology challenged me as a researcher, clinician, student, and griever simultaneously. It is truly a marriage of research and experience. It lends itself well to studying topics relevant to counselling psychology because as scientist-practitioners, we are concerned with both.

Robert Neimeyer is a prolific scientist-practitioner in the field of thanatology. I resonate with his words on professional and poetic writing:

I shift my writing efforts from the computer keyboard on which I compose all of my ‘professional’ work to the paper and pencil with which I tease lines from my poetic muse. Although both forms of writing flow best when I am feeling inspired and minimally directed by preconceived goals (which I take as something of a general principle for therapy and life, as well), poetry requires something more: a clearing of mind, a slowing of pace, a patient opening to experience, cultivating a kind of “connoisseurship” for its novelty, feeling tone, and contradiction. When the writing is going well, it comes in short bursts of images, with half-conscious attention to alliteration, rhythm, prosody—factors that also play a role in my academic writing but which are promoted to center stage when my focus is poetic. Something about this process makes me keenly aware of the dialectic between myself and the world, as I quiet my typically intense activity to “sit with” a
memory, feeling, scene, or perception, while also noticing its reverberation in me at
nearly a bodily level. (Neimeyer, 2008, p. 289)

With phenomenology, I am not so sure that the professional and personal work can be distinct in
this way, moving from keyboard to pen, although I certainly did the same. But that which
moved me on an emotional and bodily level—the numerous insights, which often came in poetic
form—served as a ground for the phenomenological writing. I have included some of my
journal entries below, divided into specific stages of this study. I have summarized some journal
entries and provided quotes, as well as included full text for some. I have tried to include the
most salient for the purposes of this study, so not all entries are listed. My hope is that these
reveal, not only conducting phenomenological exploration as it lived through, but also the
richness of reflexive practice of qualitative research.

**Research formulation journaling.** The following journal entries were written while the
study was being conceived.

May 13, 2015

In beginning this thesis on the topic of grieving, I will describe my own experience of
grieving to make my position explicit:

I had always felt that a core piece of me died along with my dad. I felt ‘finished’ grieving my
father within the year and a half following his death. I felt estranged from him. He was nowhere to
be found. He wasn’t in me—I looked nothing like him and we had different personalities. Pictures
were just pictures—he’s not there. The grave is just dirt—he’s not there. He never lived with me,
so he wasn’t at home. I didn’t see him in other people—he was too unique. He was just gone. I
wrestled with what the point of grieving was since he would never come back. I moved on.

Eventually I was so far removed from my grief, from my relationship with him, that nothing
would move that barrier. This did not begin to change until I transitioned from adolescence to
adulthood, to which I faced a problem with my sense of self: I felt completely fragmented.

This led to the development of this study, as I wondered what may have been different had I
allowed myself to turn toward my loss of him from the beginning. I am seeking that answer through
the participants who have allowed themselves to grieve their losses. What does it look like to attend
to grief? How do others do it? Does this process shape or impact them in any way? I am hoping
that the answers to these questions will bring understanding, and a wisdom, in supporting those who
are grieving as a counsellor, a researcher, and as a fellow griever.
I am defending my proposal next week, and I feel so unprepared. What does turning toward really mean? How do we operationalize it for this study? I will operationalize turning toward loss as the active process of attending to one’s grief when it arises. Attending to the thoughts, feelings, sensations—attending to what arises as the result of one’s loss. The “what” may vary depending on the individual. It could be within the bereaved—feelings, thoughts, impulses, longings, desires, fears, dreams, and so on. It could be outside the individual, such as relationship dynamics with others and the bereaved’s surrounding environments (school, work, nature, and so on). Grieving is defined as turning toward loss? This study is looking at the grieving process, not at grief in terms of emotion.

Thesis is a very vulnerable process. I feel exposed. I have to continually come to face with myself. Again and again. And then I have to face others as they examine, evaluate, and critique my own work. Am I afraid of being inadequate? That they will somehow point out to me that I am not cut out for this? That there is something inherently wrong? I fear standing in front of my committee, knowing that they see a woman who is not good at everything—a student, a novice, an imposter even. What am I really here for? Why am I doing research?

I just had my proposal defence. I know what I want but I blanked. I could not find my voice in there. I couldn’t articulate anything. Where was I? Why did I not show up? As soon as we started discussing changing this to a theoretical thesis or doing grounded theory, I felt like I was going to be sick. Why am I so set on phenomenology? Is that not a bad thing, to be stuck to one method? And yet, I have this deep-seated sense that it is right. It actually feels like the only right piece about this whole thing. We decided to change the topic from a phenomenological study of turning towards loss to grieving in general, as to remain open. But van Manen says that you can do a phenomenological study on a theory if the theory is the phenomenon in question. And turning toward is not even a theory, we decided it is an activity. So I am confused. I need to narrow in on a specific definition of grieving, and build my rationale. I need to review the empirical studies on bereavement and outline the limitations. I need to take out the grief scale and make slight changes to the method. Then I need to do and submit my REB application. But then again, maybe I will just take a break for a while.

**Data collection journaling.** The following journal entries were written while the participants were being recruited and while the interviews were being conducted.

I had my first interview. I am a little concerned this interview is not exactly what I am looking for. It seems in some ways she has turned towards and other ways not. She did say some things that are quite thought provoking. When she said misfit, I thought about exposure. Being exposed. Grief exposes you. It sets you aside. It puts you on an island, away from others. Are they
to swim to you or are you to swim to the sho...? Can you withstand the waves? Is it safer on your island of misfit? Is it safer to remain separate? Is this what grief does? Does it separate? Separate whom from whom? The self from the self? Does it do this so we may examine the self and the other for what is truly appearing? Does grief reveal the truth? Is that not the whole point? We are never truly not alone. No one else is in our bodies. No one else experiences our feelings, our thoughts. No one else feels the breath we draw and expel. We are all misfits—grief just exposes this truth. We become surprised when we all grieve differently. To grieve is to expose the self. Exposing the self is a dangerous endeavour, for how will we meet the self? With kindness and love? With shame and self-loathing? Does our relationship with the dead help us stand with ourselves amidst this exposure? Who will stand with me if not I, you? We are all misfits, perhaps prone to perpetual loneliness. Grief just delivers this message. And as we pull it from out of the bottle, our eyes open to our personal islands. Perhaps hell or transformation awaits us when we realize grieving is all we have.

August 21, 2016

I am losing steam with this thesis. I feel I am grieving again. I am not sure it will ever go away. I don't think grieving ever does. It just fades, like Shirley says … or morphs. It changes. My dad is a stranger but I still long for him in some way. I am not sure what I want. I cannot picture having a dad. What if he were still alive and then we became estranged? That would be worse. My person desperately wants to connect with him, to not feel this longing, this loneliness, this foreignness. I suppose that is the loss. My person will never encounter his. Perhaps that is the tragedy when a child loses her parent. There are not enough person-to-person encounters to hold onto, and further yet, the child is poor now because the child needs the other in order for the self to develop. And one of my “others” died. I think the part of my person that would have been seen by my dad is searching for him. She longs for him. A hollow ghost looking to be made whole, substantiated, so she can dance, soar, take flight … for now, she’s poor.

Analysis journaling. The following journal entries were written during transcription of the interviews, the thematic analysis, and the interpretation of the lived experience descriptions.

September 20, 2016

Grief is a different terrain. It is land, like a desert—vast and endless. It is like a forest, layers upon layers of trees, hundreds of paths, unable to see the other side. It is water, like an ocean—deep, dark, powerful and always in motion. This is ‘Grief-land.’ It is a terrain that is difficult to walk and swim. One with many paths. How can I be on one path and all paths at the same time? How can I feel these many things within me? How can I lose my positioning and yet stay standing? How can I shed so many layers and yet become stronger? How can I connect with some people, and walk with them, and with others I am distant? How can I be with others and yet be completely with myself? What is this land, and water that I am treading? How do I navigate it but stay present? And yet I am in my life, doing life and caring for others, but I am also perfectly grieving. How do I exist on these two planes?
October 1, 2016

Is grief not just like maturation in some respect? How do we know we are who we are? What about us is constant over time? Yet we are not the same as when we were children, teenagers, young adults even. We know we have grown, learned, changed, and lost. We have lost. And in our losses, we grieve. And as we grieve, we grow, and change, and learn, and lose some more. We lose ourselves. We are not the same, until we find ourselves, but a slightly different self. We may not even notice until we pause and reflect on where we were, and suddenly we are light years away. How could I have gone all this way and not have known I was moving? How is it that I remember so clearly being stuck, stagnant, broken on the floor? But here I am today and I am not the same. I am changed. My grieving is with me, but it is changed, grown, matured. I do not need the same things now that I did then. My appreciation is deeper. My empathy is ever present. I see more clearly. I fear not. How different I am! And yet I am me. The same me that was born into the world. But a renewed me, a transformed me. And thus, the grief that courses through my very cells is also transformed. It has changed and grown with me.

October 10, 2016

Hmm. How interesting. ‘Grief is indescribable and I am a writer’. It seems that words and pictures still lack movement. The truly gifted people are those who can imbue movement into their still characters and images. I am not gifted in that regard. I also feel I am not a writer. I am not fit for this task to describe and portray the indescribable and the incomprehensible. What does grief even look like? I need someone who can depict movement. I need someone more gifted than I. I am not suited for this. I am not big enough for grief. Is this how it feels? Suddenly something is within me that is bigger than I? It is foreign and strange and surreal and does not fit. It is unreal, it is not of this world. How can it be within me? How can I be encountering something that is figureless? Yet when I look in a mirror I see it on my face, and in my heart, and my hands. I try to wash it off and it is there. It has taken over my cells, my consciousness. It is ever-present and pervasive, and bigger yet. I can only catch glimpses. Only my person can encounter something so big. Only my person. But I am not in touch with my person always. I cannot possibly live authentically, fully persona in every waking moment. As such I cannot possibly touch grief in every waking moment. It is too much. I need rest. I need to cope. I need to get living, for whatever that means at this time.

Is this what grief does? Does grieving force me to be one with my person? Does it build that bridge for me to walk along, so that I know the path? Or is it the thing that I encounter when I am with myself? Do I need to turn toward my person, and in doing so, then I find grief? Is this why I cry even when I do not know it is me who is crying? Because my person is ever constantly encountering grief? Is this why I could not when I was younger? Is this why it is so painful for me now? Because just now I know myself, and just now I know my grief. It comes when it wants to, but I feel it when I allow myself to. It is a two-way street. Can grief not be experienced fully if I am not with myself? And the loss wants to be experienced fully, it wants to be felt and recognized and reconciled with. Is this why then I am forced to reach deeper places within myself? I cannot fully reconcile this loss when I am not fully with my person.
December 12, 2016

What is a journey? Do I assume it has a destination? Perhaps it does not. Can grieving truly be compared to a journey? There is no real destination. The pain fades, so you get distance, but that only happens through closeness. Closeness with self, others, and God—what a paradox! But it feels like a journey because there is movement, and it is laborious and tiresome. So a journey to what? A path to what? In some ways, it is like life … the journey of life that ends when we die. Is grief the journey back to life, although I never left it? A picture that I have seen before keeps coming to mind, although I cannot remember the name. It has stairs going in all different directions. That is what I feel intuitively that grieving is. I have to find the picture of the stairs …

December 13, 2016

I would say that Time has not been my friend during this thesis. One part of me wishes it would end and be finished, wishes that I would meet deadlines and check off boxes. But a much larger part of me knows that this cannot be the case with such a topic like grieving. Grieving seems not constrained by limits of temporality. The griever who turns knows not the rules or boundaries of time. Time just seems to deliver the future, often the unwanted future reminding me that I am still not finished. I have changed since the start of writing this thesis, but Time was the passive player. It was Grieving that really changed me. May I be so bold to say that Time healed very little? It simply reminded me that I do not like its rules.

December 19, 2016

I think the healing in grief is that I grieve with my whole person. Every part of me grieves in unison. And when this happens, it is like I am touching truth. My whole being quakes and quivers. My deep person thunders and sparks with lightening. She has awoken, and all I can do is surrender and quiver away.

December 20, 2016

I am totally paralyzed. This feeling has become familiar but no friendlier than it was the first time we met. How am I to possibly write the analysis? It just seems to be too much. Where to start? How to make it flow? Something within me is just screaming WRITE SOMETHING. Part of me needs a plan, needs direction, needs control … but is that not missing the point of this entire process? How can I learn something again and again, and still not fully grasp it? I have been truly alive in the presence of this wisdom, and yet I continually forget its touch. If I do not begin now, I am afraid I'll never finish. The paralysis of desperation.

December 23, 2016

Are the physical realm and spiritual realm separated? They co-exist but one is seen, experienced, and the other is intuited and believed in. Perhaps the death of someone I love allows me to live in these realities simultaneously. The spiritual self awakens and becomes aware, but does not align so closely with the physical self, the self that exists and operates in my every day. And perhaps grieving is the reconciliation between these two. The bridging of these two. It facilitates these two selves to turn toward one another and come together, and perhaps that is why we come into our persons
when we grieve. We need suffering to be fully awake. Surrealism, meaning beyond realism … perhaps this does not mean not real or unreal, the way I have always thought of it, but just that: real, and further beyond. More real, truer real. We need suffering to come to this place. And the suffering brings us here before we even know where we have arrived, and thus we are disoriented and barely remember when they first died.

The spiritual self, the creative, intuitive, noetic, essential person exists in the surreal. Perhaps this is why we cannot access this self all the time. It is only when the real and the surreal align that we truly experience authenticity in its truest form: The person that was never meant to die. The person that can never get sick. The untouchable, unstoppable person. The person that feels no fear. Grieving allows us to exist in the surreal. So what is grieving in all this? What is grieving’s role? Identity? It seems silly to personify grief, but yet it is something. It is like it exists, in the way that love does. In the way that death does. Is grieving a guide? Is it the bridge?

**January 3, 2017**

It’s a labyrinth! That’s what it is. I found the picture. The more I read about labyrinths, the more excited I am to write this thing. It seems like all the pieces that were floating have come together to make a cohesive whole.

**January 13, 2017**

In researching grief, I feel like I have stared into the abyss. I think what was one of the most overwhelming feelings of studying grief is that it is so big, who am I to reduce it to something measurable? I suppose that is why I chose phenomenology in the first place. It was the most open, and it gave the most space to something so much bigger than I. How does one step out of one’s human condition to study that which seems primordial? Grieving is older than I. It transcends me. Where do I look? Up to the stars? Down to the core? Out to the vastness? How can I study that which I swim in, like a fish in water?

**Integration stage.** The following journal entries were written during the integration of the findings into existential analytic theory and the existing grief and bereavement literature.

**February 12, 2017**

I am thinking about my discussion chapter, and what point I would like to make with my findings. It is difficult because I feel I do not have more to say, and yet I need to integrate it with the current literature and discuss clinical implications and so on. I wonder what is our goal in making grief a science? For what purpose? To control it? Improve the outcome? What understanding does it provide? Why do we seek to understand it? How am I going to contribute to my field if I am questioning the point of research? I believe there is purpose in it, but today it feels trite. As I am writing this, there is a group of graduate students singing the Beatles’ *Let It Be*. I cannot help but smile. Today I think I need to just let the findings breathe a little, before trying to summarize and mold them into academic language. Perhaps this is all I can really do with grief: let it be.
March 12, 2017

Writing is a producing activity.
The writer produces text, but he or she produces more than text.
The writer produces himself or herself.
The writer is the product of his or her own product.
Writing is a kind of self-making or self-forming.

To write is a measure the depth of things, as well as to come to a sense of one’s own depth.
(van Manen, 2014, p. 365)

Writing allowed me to heal. It was like tending to the wound, an essential way for my spirit to reconcile with the loss and do justice to my being. Writing gave voice to the ungraspable in ways that talking does not. Writing is self-distancing and self-transcendent. I distance from myself to look at myself and then I transcend myself and encounter my person. Writing is a monument to the pain, to the loss. I will write and write and write and write. I will witness me again and again, over and over. I am writing to engage with my loss and to find reprieve from it. Writing to clean the wound and tend to it. Writing to sew it shut and take out the sutures. It is a tugging and a pulling and a weaving. It is beyond me. I can only catch glimpses and describe the glimpse.

March 27, 2017

Writing this thesis was like giving birth. It was strange to see how the findings came into existence because I wrote them, and they would not have otherwise. It felt somewhat miraculous, especially after laboring for so long. However, writing the discussion is like breast feeding with sensitive nipples. I just gave birth, now I have to—perhaps successfully or not—do this other thing with my body that feels tied to my inherent worth as a mother. That is how I feel as a researcher who just birthed this creative, interpretive work and now I need to nurse it by integrating it into praxis so it can grow.

June 19, 2017

I am struggling to finish the revisions of this thesis, and I think I have finally pinpointed why. Van Manen (2014) stated, "the practical value of phenomenology also should be found in the sheer pleasure of insight and feeling touched by things that reach the depth of our existence and confirm our humanness" (p. 68). I think that has always been enough for me personally to do this study—simply that grief is fundamental to being human and that turning toward evoked such a wonder in me, it shook my entire being. But this has never felt enough academically, not when it came to building a solid rationale. Van Manen goes on to write how Heidegger agreed "with those who feel that phenomenology lacks effectiveness or utility if one hopes to do something practically or technically useful with it" (p. 69). And I think that is how I have always viewed the rationale: that my study must have an obvious utility value to it and the problem being that I have never been able to come up with one. If I am to be truthful, I can speculate how my findings contribute to theory and the discipline of psychology and the grief and bereavement field, and I enjoy discussing theory, but when it becomes the justification for the very existence of my study, that was never what it was for to begin with. It was always for the griever. I wonder, will this ever be enough for academia?
So the question of ‘why did I study this?’ haunts me because I don't feel like the truth is good enough for the requirements of a thesis study, and yet exactly good enough for phenomenology. All this to say, this thesis was not simply a cognitive affair, but a soul affair. And I wonder now, what does it mean and what does it look like to be a researcher who hunts for the soul of a thing? Is there a place for me in academia?

June 30, 2017

As a most assuredly implicated researcher, I am aware of the body of researchers who may criticize this research as illegitimate due to its personal nature. However, as much as I am aware of the mores of academia, I choose in this moment to be free of them. I will end with this:

When my dad died, I should not have been able to ‘bear’ myself, but I did because I was too concerned with social graces of whether or not it was acceptable to touch a dead person. My culture was so overpowering, it kept me separated from my own grief. My dad was dead, but I was more concerned of what others would think of me. Perhaps this may be indicative of my adolescence, but I feel in my deepest knowing that I was the most afraid of being ostracized and alone. Someone I loved to my very core was dead in front of me, so what I could not bear was to have others leave me, if I could help it. I did touch his hand despite my fear, but for the days following I was to be perpetually separated from my grief for the sake of acceptance. And I lost myself because of it. This thesis was nothing if not a long apology letter to that little girl that I left behind. So to her I say I am sorry, and of her I ask, please forgive me.

In conclusion, practicing phenomenology and reflexivity often led me to places of more questions—questions of grief, turning toward, coping, emotions, creativity, and spirituality, questions that seemed to have no easy answers. It has been difficult to conclude this thesis, put down the pen/keyboard, and package it into a ‘finished product’. I constantly have to remind myself that this should be the case, especially for a topic such as grieving—that the state I am in now, questions and musings, is perfectly reflective of the complexity of this topic. And this topic will continue to evolve and be interpreted over time. It is certainly dynamic and fluid, not something that can be fully grasped, captured, or pinpointed. What I can conclude confidently is that my exploration of turning toward loss has transformed me as a griever, a researcher, and a clinician. I hope that the phenomenon of turning toward loss will also evoke, awaken, transform and resonate deeply with others. And for those readers who are grieving, I hope that you find much comfort, care, and courage through your own labyrinths of grief.
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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Poster

Volunteers Needed for Bereavement Study

◊ Has someone you loved died within the last ten years?

◊ Is this someone your spouse, child, sibling, or parent?

◊ Have they been gone for at least three years?

◊ Are you 19 years of age or older?

If so, we would greatly appreciate your willingness to discuss how you have been grieving your loss. Your experience is extremely valuable and will help us understand the grieving process.

Involvement includes one audio-taped interview and a follow-up session to confirm the research findings.

For further information and to participate, please contact

Janelle Drisner

Leaving your name, phone number, and a message telling me that you are interested in participating.

Thank you so much for your consideration.
APPENDIX B: Screening Template for Participants

Phenomenological Grieving Study
Template for Screening Participants

Name: 
Date: 
Phone Number: 
Email: 

• Introduction of who I am and explain that I am returning his or her call regarding participating in the grieving study.
• Thank you for contacting us in regards to this study. Can I ask how you found out about this study?
• The purpose of this call is to explain the study to you and to determine whether your experience fits with the purpose of the project. I am going to be asking you some questions about your grieving process to better understand your journey. You do not have to go into much detail, but rather provide broad descriptions. I am going to be typing your answers as we go—it is only to record your answers and not to evaluate them. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions.
• This phone call may take up to 30 minutes. Is it all right to proceed or would another time be more suitable?
• I understand that these questions are quite personal, are you in an area you feel comfortable answering some of these questions?

Semi-structured questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about your loved one? Who was it that died? When did _______ die?6
2. When you first heard the news of the death, do you remember your reaction? What was that like for you?
3. What feelings or thoughts emerged and have these feelings/thoughts changed over time?
4. How did you respond to these feelings/thoughts? What was your attitude towards them? (e.g. liked/disliked them, welcomed them, so on) What did you ‘do’ with them?

Query: Following up after asking what the potential participant did with their feelings, I will inquire about suicidal ideation/previous attempts. If the potential participant indicates that s/he is presently or recently suicidal (i.e. less than one year), the screening portion of the call will be terminated immediately as the potential participant will not meet the requirements of the study. In its stead, the researcher will conduct a brief suicide risk assessment and direct the potential

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6 In order for the participants to be included in the study, the deceased has to have passed away in the past 3 + years. Should the potential participants not meet these criteria, they will be informed of this fact at this point, thanked kindly for their interest in the study, and the phone call ended.
participant to the appropriate level of care. Questions that may facilitate such a risk assessment include:

- Have you ever attempted to hurt yourself or tried to commit suicide in the past?
- How often do you presently think of harming yourself?
- Do you presently have a plan or a timeframe to harm yourself?
- Has anyone in your family or among your friends committed suicide or attempted to harm themselves in the past?

If the potential participant indicates that s/he is at a greater risk for suicide (e.g., is thinking about suicide daily, has a current plan/timeframe for committing suicide, has recently attempted suicide), the participant will be encouraged to call a suicide hotline (e.g., 1-800-SUICIDE 784-2433) and will be given the information of their local public mental health centre (e.g., Abbotsford Mental Health; 604-870-7800). In the event that this potential participant has a mental health provider, s/he will also be directed to contact him or her. In the event that a potential participant is actively suicidal during the telephone screening call (i.e. indicates that s/he plans to commit suicide), the potential participant will be required to seek professional help immediately (eg. call his/her doctor, psychiatrist, counsellor, or 911).

5. Was there ever a time where you allowed yourself to feel your feelings/think your thoughts about the loss? What did that look like? (Query: concrete example)

6. How did you do this? Did you grieve on your own or with a family or group?

7. Did you use anything to help you express your feelings? (e.g. journaling, conversation, art, etc.)

Screening Interview Conclusion:

Thank the individual for their time and for briefly discussing their grieving process. I will explain that once we review the interview, we will decide if the individual fits the criteria for inclusion in the study. I will also explain that should we continue to the next phase, the individual will be asked to meet at Trinity Western University to undergo an hour and a half to two hour interview, which will involve a more in-depth discussion of their grieving process.

If once we review the interview and decide the individual is not the best suited for the study, then I will contact them and let them know. The individual will be asked how they prefer to be contacted (email or telephone).

If we do not continue further, your answers will be permanently deleted. If we decide to continue to the next interview, your answers will be password protected and stored in a secure location. We greatly appreciate your willingness to participate. Ask if there any questions.
APPENDIX C: Demographic Questionnaire

Phenomenological Grieving Study
Participant Background Information

Name: _________________________________________________________________

Gender: MALE / FEMALE

Date of Birth: _____________________________

Current education (check only one option):
   ____ Completed High School
   ____ Completed College or Trade/Technical Institute
   ____ Completed Undergraduate Degree (e.g., Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science)
   ____ Completed Graduate Degree (e.g., Master of Arts, PhD, MD, etc.)

Current profession:
______________________________________________________________

Were you born in Canada? YES / NO
   If NO, what country were you born in: ____________________________
       How many years have you lived in Canada: _________________

How would you describe your cultural or ethnic background (e.g., Welsh; German; Taiwanese; French-Canadian; East-Indian; First Nations, Latino):
______________________________________________________________

How would you describe your current spiritual/religious background (e.g., Christian [Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, Christian Reformed, other], Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, etc.):
______________________________________________________________

What language do you usually speak at your home (e.g., English): ____________
Who is in your immediate family? ____________________________________________

Names and ages:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Who was your loved one who died? (e.g. spouse and name)_____________________

How old was your loved one at the time of his/her death? ______________________

When did your loved one die? _____________________________________________

How did your loved one die?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What have you done to cope with the loss of your loved one? (e.g., support from family/friends, parental bereavement support group, worked with a grief therapist, etc.)

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APPENDIX D: Informed Consent for Participants

Experience of Grieving Study Informed Consent

Principal Researcher:  Janelle Drisner, BA (Honours), Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University
Supervisor:  Dr. Derrick Klaassen, PhD, Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University
Contact info:  If you have any questions about the research project itself, you may contact Janelle Drisner.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research, Trinity Western University at 604-513-2142.

Dear Participants,
Thank-you for your interest in this study, which is designed to explore your experience of grieving.

Overview of the Study
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in one interview which will be two hours in length. The interview will be audio-recorded. The purpose for the recording is to enable the research team to transcribe and analyze what you have said. This interview involves gathering details about your loss and what your grieving process. It is not required that you know specifically each detail following the death, but rather that you can share what your grieving process has been like since your loss. You will be asked questions about your grief, including how it impacted you and who also shared in your grieving process. After the interview, you will be given opportunity to add to your narrative if you see fit.

Time Commitment
The total time commitment involved in this study is three hours. This includes the time of the interview, plus any questions you may have before or following the interview. If you are interested in the results of the study, you will be given the opportunity to leave your contact information so that we can send you a summary, once we have finished with each participant. You will also be given an opportunity to provide the researcher with feedback after reading the results.

Potential Risks and Benefits
The potential risks of participating in this study are minimal, meaning that participating in the study will not involve risks that go beyond what you normally experience in your daily life. The focus of this study is your experience of grieving following your loss. Some people may find it embarrassing to be audio-recorded, or uncomfortable talking about their grieving. If you ever feel uncomfortable, you can take a break from the interview, or even decide that you no longer want to continue at all. Some distress in discussing your grief may be expected; however, if problems in your grieving process do develop over the next six months, we will be available to
help you find an appropriate grief counsellor, depending on your needs. You may access Fraser River Counselling Centre at low or no cost. Should you require professional counselling services and not have the funds to pay for these services, we can direct you to publically accessible and free resources within your community.

Your participation in this study will help us explore and understand more about the experience of grieving. You may also discover that participating in this study will be helpful to you in your grieving as some participants become clearer about the impacts of grieving and rethink their values and lives.

**Your Rights and Compensation**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. To compensate you for the time that you spend on this study, and for any travel or other costs that come from participating, you will be given $30 after the interview. Your compensation will not be affected should you choose to withdraw from the study after the interview.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Before the interview commences, you can opt to choose a pseudonym so your name will not be included in the transcript. We will store all information and recordings from interviews in locked filing cabinets and password protected computer hard-drives and email accounts; only the investigators will have access to the information. The data (transcriptions only – audio recordings will be destroyed) will be stored securely for 5 years. All data from participants who choose to withdraw will be destroyed. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason up until the research is submitted to the point where it is made public. Should you wish to discontinue participation, you may advise the researchers in person or by phone or email using the contact information provided on page one.

Your signature below indicates that you have had your questions about this study answered to your satisfaction and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature also indicates that you consent to participate in this study as it is described in this consent form and that your responses may be put in fully anonymous form and kept for further use after the completion of this study (i.e. no identifying information about you or audio recordings of the interviews will be included in the results of the study that will be published and/or presented at conferences).

☐ I am willing to participate in the study as described in this consent form

☐ I am willing to allow my data from this study to be kept in anonymous form for up to five years for further research.

___________________________________________  __________________________
Signature (Participant)  Date

___________________________________________
Name (please print)

___________________________________________  __________________________
Signature (Interviewer)  Date

___________________________________________
Name (please print)
APPENDIX E: Interview Guide

Phenomenological Grieving Study
Template for Grieving Interview

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. First we will start by reviewing the informed consent and answer any questions you may have. I also want to check-in about confidentiality. Did you want to use a pseudonym for yourself and for others you will be referring to? I can give you a pen and paper to write them down so you remember as you go.

When you are ready to begin, I will start audio-recording the interview and we can begin discussing your grieving process. The questions I will be asking are quite personal, and it is understandable if feelings arise for you. If at any point you become uncomfortable, you have the right to request a break or stop the interview altogether. I will be checking in with you as we go.

1. Can you tell me about _________? (ask about picture or special item if they brought any). What was your relationship like with the person who died?

2. Can you describe the death of your loved one?

3. Did you have a service? Can you describe the funeral/memorial? (Query: did you have a role in the funeral?)
   If they didn’t have a service, how did the support of the community follow afterwards?

4. Can you tell me about how you responded when your loved one died? (Query: Feelings? Reactions? Thoughts?)

5. What did you do with your feelings, thoughts, and reactions when they arose? (Query: turning toward them, coping with them, distracting)

6. How would you describe your grieving/mourning process in the months/years following your loss?

7. What was your attitude toward grieving your loss? (Query: resistance, acceptance, views of grieving, etc.)

8. Are there any rituals, practices, or habits that you have to continue your relationship with your person? (Query: rituals and remembrances, conversations, legacy building, memory sharing, dreams, etc.)

9. Over the course of your grieving, have you ever intentionally/consciously taken time to grieve? (Query: amount of time, setting, with others or in solitude, etc.)
10. Have you changed as a result of grieving? How has your relationship to yourself and others changed? Did you change in your closeness with others amidst your grieving? If so, how? (Query: self-nurturance, relationships with others, familiarity with feelings, etc.)

11. How has this loss and your journey through grief impacted you? (Query: relationships, closeness to self, outlook on life, career trajectories, etc.)

This concludes our interview. Thank you for sharing your grieving process with me. What will happen next in the study is that I will transcribe the interviews (put the interviews in written form) and analyze them. Once this is completed, I will contact you to provide you with an opportunity to hear the research results as they pertain to your own interview and give me feedback. This may be a couple months from now. I also want to ensure you once more, as written in the informed consent, that the audio recording will be deleted once it has been transferred onto a password-protected computer. The transcripts will be kept secure in a locked filing cabinet and the electronic versions will be encrypted.

Do you have any questions? (Give the participant compensation for their involvement, ensure they have my contact information, and walk them out).
APPENDIX F: REB Certificate of Approval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Investigator:</th>
<th>Janelle Kathryn Drisner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department:</td>
<td>Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor (if student research):</td>
<td>Derrick Klaassen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Investigators:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Title:** Encountering Grief: Turning Toward Loss

| REB File No.: | 16G02 |
| Start Date:   | May 3, 2016 |
| End Date:     | September 30, 2016 |
| Approval Date:| May 3, 2016 |

**Certification**

This is to certify that Trinity Western University Research Ethics Board (REB) has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans”.

REB Coordinator  REB Chair

This Certificate of Approval is valid for one year and may be renewed. The REB must be notified of all changes in protocol, procedures or consent forms. A final project form must be submitted upon completion.