St. Stephen's College

LOVE BEYOND DEATH:

SUICIDE, ACCEPTANCE AND THE AWAKENING OF THE BEREAVED

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SPIRITUALITY

Edmonton, Alberta

Abstract

In the West today suicide is considered a major public health issue of tragic consequence; universally devastating to those it bereaves. This enquiry explored an unusual experience of bereavement by suicide for the purpose of challenging common cultural beliefs, including that: suicide is violent, irrational, tragic, selfish, unexpected and always the result of mental illness, and; that those bereaved by suicide are inevitably guilt-laden, devastated, angry and ashamed. The research methodology was autoethnography within the context of a spiritual research paradigm. Analysis and interpretation drew upon three complementary approaches/orientations: Buber's philosophy of dialogue, critical theory and hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology. Findings consist of narrative compositions which illustrate how a lived spiritual orientation can not only ameliorate the effects of suicide bereavement and insulate survivors from social stigma but may also trigger an awakening of the bereaved. This lived spirituality included: a cosmic perspective; an openness of heart and mind; the recognition and valuing of relationship and connection; a stance of humility with respect to one's capacity to influence another's intentions; an acceptance of the 'unacceptable'; the willingness to fully face the prospect of a loved one's intentional death, and; enduring attempts to 'be' unconditional love. This research creates space in which freedom from oppressive social forces can be conceived and invites psychotherapy practitioners into deeper relating in support of spiritual maturation.

Keywords: suicide, bereavement, autoethnography, spiritual research paradigm, spiritual growth, awakening, acceptance, love.

Acknowledgements

To my intrepid collaborators, herein known as Michael, Otis, Jack and Anna—I am deeply touched by your unflinching willingness to give your time, your wisdom, your selves and your souls to this endeavour. May our wild ride together continue. I love you guys. Thank you.

To the inimitable Leslie Gardner, my thesis supervisor—your beautiful mind and wise heart have contributed to these pages in more ways than you know. *Supervisor* simply doesn't do justice to your brilliance as a research-guru-come-midwife; birthing new 'babies' with endless tenderness and respect.

To my dear and darling husband David—your ingenuity and persistence in finding creative ways to nourish and support me during this long journey was deeply appreciated, regardless of my occasional reactions to the contrary ;-). Thank you for keeping me laughing. I love you.

To the many other amazing friends and family who braved this journey with me—thank you for your contributions, for listening and witnessing and, most of all, for holding the sacred space in which this story is told.

To Chelsey and Justin at the Peaceful Paradise Barn—your sweet sanctuary entirely lives up to its name. I am deeply grateful for your warm, unobtrusive hospitality. Thank you for providing a refuge for souls like me seeking coziness, quietude and not much of anything else.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Suicide is a matter of deep interest and enquiry across a wide range of disciplines including, but not limited to: medicine, psychology, sociology, ethnography, law, history, philosophy, religion and spirituality. Evidenced by the active withholding of information about suicides in mainstream media—including, for example, attempts to 'reframe' celebrity suicides as accidents—it continues as one of the most taboo subjects in human history (Carlon, 2020). At the same time, suicide rates are rising globally (WHO, 2014).

In its *Preventing Suicide* report, the World Health Organization (WHO) asserts that "every suicide is a tragedy" (2014, p. 02). This statement encapsulates the prevailing worldview on suicide and the use of the absolute—'every'—excludes alternative perspectives. The Public Health Agency of Canada avoids the use of value-laden language when reporting that "suicide is a significant cause of premature death in Canada" but it similarly states that all such deaths have a "devastating" effect on those bereaved (2016, p. 2). Bereavement by suicide is reported to affect 4.3% annually, and 21.8% during the course of a lifetime (Andriessen et al., 2017).

While it is clear that the vast majority of suicides do bring great suffering, destruction and distress, my own experience attests to the possibility and potential for something else and so much more.

This research involves the sharing of a lived experience of bereavement by suicide—with particular attention to unexpected aspects of personal and spiritual transformation—for the purpose of questioning common cultural beliefs about suicides and the bereaved; including that suicide is violent, irrational, tragic, selfish, unexpected

and always the result of mental illness, and that those bereaved by suicide are inevitably guilt-laden, devastated, angry and ashamed.

While acknowledging the scope and multidimensionality of the subject matter, this enquiry is necessarily limited. Historical, philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives are not explored in depth, but rather included to locate and illuminate the present-day cultural context. This enquiry also does not attend to the range of current legal, political and social issues relating to suicide, including the availability, in Canada and elsewhere, of medically-assisted death. A modest hope, however, is that the sharing of an uncommon experience concerning a loved one's intentional death may offer some solace to those similarly confronted by the choices of relatives, partners or friends.

The Research Question

This thesis is an autoethnographic enquiry into the profound and transformative experience of journeying with my beloved late husband Harald towards and beyond his death by suicide. After Harald's death I became aware that many aspects of my experiences were atypical, unusual and contrary to cultural norms. This initial intuitive sense deepened as I later read a wide range of stories and studies relating to grief and loss in the course of my Master's program.

Accordingly, the research question is: what are the elements of my uncommon, and nonetheless genuine, experience and perspective on suicide, death, loss and love within a western cultural and spiritual context? And, to what extent do those experiences and perspectives prompt reflection on common beliefs and responses to suicide, and those bereaved by suicide, in similar settings, today?

The purpose of this research is to question and challenge cultural assumptions about suicide and its effect on those bereaved. Researchers' experience of bereavement by suicide is explored and interpreted in conversation with available literature. Developing greater public understanding of the range of reasons people suicide, along with the spectrum of responses each can generate, can assist in painting a more realistic and nuanced picture of this complex issue. Through analysis of an experience at odds with prevailing cultural opinion, this work opens and create the kind of space in which freedom from powerful, oppressive and/or unseen social forces can be conceived.

Personal Interest

Given that this research addresses the death of a beloved life-partner, along with my own psychological and spiritual development, it has been an intensely personal undertaking. And yet, while the story is deeply intimate there is also the sense that it was not so much mine, as *mine to write*.

This realization began forming in early summer, 2020, during a five-day intensive for a Grief and Loss course within the Masters of Psychotherapy and Spirituality program. Together, the instructor and students amassed a library of books on bereavement which grew to cover a number of tables in adjoining classrooms. Each day I mined the collection for new treasures. Arriving home on the third evening I felt despondent and sat quietly to listen within. As I did, a sense of dislocation and tender despair welled in my heart. I realized that in all the stories we'd shared there was nothing that spoke to my own experience.

As I arrived early the next day, our instructor asked how I was finding the course. I told him I was thoroughly enjoying it and also shared my sense of despondency—in not

yet finding a story which spoke to my own experience. To that, he gently replied: "then it is yours to write". It was as though those words were *known* to another part of me, true in a way that was just out of reach. They landed in me as deep validation—permission even—and they never left. Even though, at the time, I had no real idea when or how I might write such a story.

A few months later another instructor suggested autoethnography. *Auto-eth-what?*, I said. And then I did the *Research, Inquiry and Evaluation* course, came to appreciate the potential of autoethnography, and, equally joyfully, discovered I could write from within a Spiritual Research Paradigm (SRP) which recognizes and makes space for knowledge from beyond this world.

It became clear that in writing and reflecting on my own story I might offer an uncommon perspective on suicide and the potential for spiritual awakening and transformation in those bereaved. I say 'my own story', but I do not think of it as something that belongs to me in any way. It was a shared experience, naturally seen differently through the eyes of each who were part of the journey, including Harald of course, and the friends close by at the end. It is also not the experience, on its own, that seems important, but rather what that experience offers—what it might mean—in terms of a different perspective, an uncommon vantage point, or an illuminating element within a much bigger picture.

It is important to state that I am not intending to tell Harald's story. I have no wish, nor make any claim, to represent him or his actions; to attempt to explain or defend his rationale and his decision to end his life. This is not an exercise designed to address the *why* of any of it, but rather *how* it really was, and *what* was made possible in it all.

Foster et al. (2005) write that researching a personal issue "offers transformative potential for self and others" (p.9). While acknowledging and warmly inviting the growth and healing that has unfolded for me, personally, and for others directly involved, it is the opportunity to serve a wider and perhaps higher purpose that calls me to this work. For reasons I may never fully understand, I know it as my responsibility to share this story. In doing so, my hope, above all, is to honor Harald. A man whose fearless authenticity continues to fuel my heart.

During our marriage Harald would joke that he was my sādhanā—a Sanskrit term that loosely translates to 'spiritual practice'; the exercise of discipline to attain deeper wisdom or enlightenment (explained later in this chapter). The truth in his jest, rings on, years after his death, through this calling to the page, to the story, to the experience, to the love, to the wonder, to the beyond.

Spiritual themes

Ji (2014) invites us to "imagine how different our lives might be if we approached each day with an appreciation of ourselves and each other as spiritual beings" (p. 134). The differences are illuminated by this enquiry.

Existing research about the function of spirituality during suicide bereavement is minimal (Becker et al., 2007; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009). The findings of this enquiry overwhelmingly support the potential for a spiritual orientation to ameliorate the effects of suicide bereavement through the following: a cosmic perspective; the recognition and valuing of relationship and connection; a stance of humility with respect to our capacity to influence another's intentions; an openness and willingness to face the prospect of a loved one's suicide and a deep capacity to accept such an eventuality.

The sections following orientate the reader to a) relevant definitions of spirituality, before b) distinguishing spirituality from religion, and then c) introducing the yogic term 'sadhana'.

Spirituality

As the "animating or vital principle in man and animals" the term *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which means 'breath'. This points to spirit as essential in human and other beings, something we might recognize as deepest authenticity, innermost breath, or what Kass describes as our "fundamental ground of being" (1991, p. 2). Spirituality, then, may be seen as the quality of being concerned with this deep innermost or fundamental ground.

In *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*, Kenneth Pargament makes the case that "spirituality starts and stops with the sacred"; the "concepts", "qualities" and "varieties" of which he articulates at length (2007, p. 49). While I appreciate Pargament's perspective and the scope of his inclusions, I am uneasy with its fundament, because by definition that which is sacred is chosen, or selected, *by us*. Individually and collectively, as human beings, we are the 'deciders' of what to deem sacred in our lives, in this world, and beyond. Yet prior to such decisions we are *of spirit*: we *are* spiritual. As this there seems no 'starting or stopping', because it points to the core of what we always were, are and will be.

For a similar reason I find Gottleib's promotion of "spiritual virtues" (2013, p. 8) a little off point. While I agree that engaging in practices to develop mindfulness, acceptance, gratitude and compassion is time well spent and *can* help illuminate our inner beingness, the implication that through developing these 'virtues' we *become spiritual*,

implies a kind of top-down, or outside-in approach. As Gottleib himself later points out, such practices do not exist in isolation, but are "surrounded by beliefs about what they mean and why they work" (2013 p. 112). Beliefs which easily appeal to our egoic selves, for example, that if we become *good at* mindfulness, we'll become *more spiritual*.

Griffin and Griffin (2002) offer a perspective that rests more easily in me; one that emphasizes connectivity and relationship. They see spirituality as a "commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness with all that is" (p. 15-16), including ourselves, other people, our physical environment, our heritage, our body, our ancestors and God. One making such a choice then lives in "attunement" with this web of connectivity by "maintaining a posture of active, continuous responsivity and movement, through which the fundamental relationship can remain constant" (Griffin & Griffin, 2002, p. 16). Said another way, by Gottlieb, spirituality "begins in movement—away from what we come to see as unreal, painful, disappointing, trivial or meaningless and toward the ultimate, true, vital, real, or sacred" (p. 7).

Another beautiful and resonant, indigenous perspective, offered by Lee (2006), a Cree Elder, is that:

> being spiritual is . . . remembering the first thing that was gifted to you when you came into being was the spirit. Sadly we tend to forget that. Then we neglect our spirit and take it for granted. So we need to remember where we came from and the gifts that were given to us as human beings. (p. 3)

Spiritual but not religious

It is necessary to clarify the relationship between spirituality and religion, as they apply here, particularly as so many authors unhelpfully blur these terms.

For Krippner, Jaeger, and Faith (2001) the term 'spiritual' refers to "one's focus on, and/or reverence, openness, and connectedness to something of significance believed to be beyond one's full understanding and/or individual existence", whereas, the term 'religious', pertains to the adherence to "an organized system of beliefs about the divine, and the observance of rituals, rites, and requirements of that organized system of beliefs (p. 132). These definitions helpfully delineate that what is spiritual is prerequisite to what is religious. That, as Sheldrake writes, "all religions are fundamentally based on a spiritual vision", and further, that "institutionalization of a religion tends to be a later fossilization of what began as a dynamic wisdom tradition" (2012, p. 99).

In an engaging dialogue with philosopher, transpersonal psychologist and originator of Integral Theory, Ken Wilber, the Trappist monk and priest Father Thomas Keating, articulates the nature of this prerequisite relationship by stating that:

> Faith precedes belief systems… Faith is the consent or surrender to the divine reality…before it's broken down into different belief systems, which are bound to be influenced by the cultural conditioning… Faith, when it becomes contemplative, begins to perceive the oneness behind all the religions. (Wilber, K & Keating, T, 2007)

This 'oneness' behind all religions is, for me, the essence of spirituality. While we cannot have religion without spirituality, the reverse is not also true, which is why some authors, including Sheldrake, speak of 'secular' spiritualties including Philosophy,

Psychology and Psychotherapy (2012 p. 16-18). Spirituality can therefore be conceived of as a "dimension that is not socially dependent on religious doctrine but, rather, is based on a personally-constructed philosophy grounded in experience" (Pappas & Friedman, 2007, p. 22).

Sadhana

An overarching spiritual theme of this story is that of *sadhana*—a Sanskrit term that loosely translates to *spiritual practice*. Sadhana is a generic term that comes from the yogic tradition. It refers to any kind of spiritual exercise that moves one towards the ultimate expression of one's life in this reality. Sadhana encourages detachment from worldly things. According to Yogapedia:

> Sadhana is … a means of forging a ritual connection with God or universal energy. It encourages the practitioner, known as the *sadhaka*, to use self-discipline in order to achieve power over the ego and maintain connection with universal oneness. With regular daily practice, the practitioner continually realigns his or her inner self, slowly progressing toward the very ultimate expression of consciousness known as samadhi. (2022)

Anything that is practiced with awareness, discipline and the intention of spiritual growth can be considered sadhana. Contemporary spiritual teacher and yogi, Jaggi Vasudev, explains:

> Everything can be sadhana. The way you eat, the way you sit, the way you stand, the way you breathe, the way you conduct your body, mind and your energies and emotions – this is sadhana. Sadhana does not mean any specific kind of activity,

> sadhana means you are using everything as a tool for your wellbeing. (Isha Foundation, 2022)

Sadhana facilitates and encourages the ongoing nurturing of one's life and the movement towards betterment within and without; an openness to newer and newer possibilities. It impels our movement away from what we come to see as illusory, superficial or meaningless and toward that which is ultimate, true, vital and real.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is autoethnography, within the context of a spiritual research paradigm. Such a research paradigm "is especially relevant and needed for research that examines inward experience and that promotes meaning, purpose, interconnection with nature and other beings, inner peace, compassion, and tranquility of mind and heart" (Lin et al., 2016, p. xi). The emerging availability of a spiritual research paradigm was a significant influence on this writer's willingness to undertake academic research. The invitation to include knowledge gained in ways that defy rational explanation is inspiring and liberating, offering a long overdue integration of knowing, researching and *being*, facilitating the full employment of mind, body and soul in furthering human understanding.

A spiritual research paradigm is complementary and relevant to an autoethnographic method. Autoethnography combines 'autobiography' with 'ethnography', such that the personal story of the author is used to shed light on the larger cultural meaning and context for the story (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With its emphasis on reflection as means of deriving data, Edwards (2016) notes that autoethnography affords "strong potential to access internal feelings and spiritual knowledge" (p. 263). The

compatibility of autoethnography and a spiritual research paradigm is also related to the potential for "improving society" as Lin et al. suggest (2016, p. x).

The three key benefits of autoethnography, according to Chang (2008), are that it: (1) is "friendly to researchers and readers"; (2) "enhances cultural understanding of self and others", and; (3) has the potential to "transform self and others". These benefits are the underpinning reasons for my selection of autoethnography as a most suitable method for this work.

This chapter has provided an orientation to this thesis, including: an overview of the purpose of this research; the questions investigated; an explanation of my personal connection to the topic; a discussion of relevant spiritual definitions and themes; and a brief description of the methodology.

As an orientation to what follows, a title and a brief statement about each chapter in this thesis is provided below.

Chapter 2: Literature Review. My review of relevant literature is organized into two main sections—1. Suicide and 2. Suicide Bereavement. These sections are prefaced by a short introduction to death—in our contemporary western cultural context—and are followed by a summary of the literature review and the rationale for this inquiry.

Chapter 3: Methodology. This chapter introduces explains Autoethnography, within the context of a 'spiritual research paradigm' (SRP), as the research methodology utilized for this inquiry. It then describes the research approach undertaken—including the management of ethical issues—and provides criteria for the evaluation of rigor.

Chapter 4: Findings, Story or Composition. This chapter houses the 'findings' of this research: four constructed narratives which describe and illuminate individual and shared experiences with respect to the following themes:

Presence: Harald's character and the nature of our relationship.

Perspectives: Shared and recollected views on suicide before and after Harald's death, including the ways in which his suicide seemed different or unusual.

Departure: Key events that took place in the lead up, at the time, and just after his death.

Grace: Unexpected gifts received from our participation in the journey.

Chapter 5: Discussion. Providing a discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapter, this chapter addresses the research questions directly, in that the a) personal, b) cultural and c) spiritual elements of our uncommon experience are illuminated to prompt reflection on common beliefs and responses to suicide, and those bereaved by suicide, in similar settings, today.

Chapter 6: Implications and Conclusion. A final chapter offers some implications, questions arising, and potential areas for future enquiry that emerge from this research, before closing with a personal statement.

And so . . . now we begin our journey with a look into the literature on death, suicide and the suicide-bereaved.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Perspectives on intentional death are proffered by various disciplines including psychology, sociology, philosophy, thanatology and theology. Responses to this issue have shifted and changed throughout history. In the West today, suicide is considered a major public health issue of tragic consequence; universally devastating to those it bereaves. Prevention is paramount and substantial political will is invested in this cause.

The intent of this inquiry is to reveal and explore elements of a lived experience that do not align with the dominant perception of suicide as always and only tragic—both as an event and with respect to the impact on those bereaved. I reviewed literature representing less dominant psychological, sociological, philosophical and spiritual perspectives relating to suicide and bereavement by suicide. The results of this review are broadly organized into two main sections—1. Suicide and 2. Suicide Bereavement. The first section is prefaced by a short introduction to "the matter of death" in our contemporary western cultural context. The second is followed by a summary of the literature review and the rationale for the inquiry.

I retrieved literature using the following databases: EBSCO, ResearchGate, PubMed, DOAJ.org, Google Scholar and Academic Search Complete. Search words and phrases employed included the following: suicide, suicide + rational/autonomy/expected/ bereaved/spirituality/acceptance/beauty/elegance/existential/soul, suicide + survivor/bereavement, bereavement + growth/transformation/spirituality. Death, loss and spirituality were also included as key words when searching for related literature. Initial searches focused on articles published since 2010. Later, related older references were added to supplement and substantiate the information. On the topics of death/suicide, the

soul and spirituality, books from my personal collection are also referenced. A limitation to the literature reviewed was that all were published in the English language.

The Matter of Death

Death is a subject of deep religious, spiritual, philosophical and scientific reflections (Kokosalakis, 2020) and one much broader than the scope of this research, yet also the context for it. Contemporary Western society has difficulty accepting the reality of death (Ruiz-Fernandez et al., 2021). Modernity has extended mortality, but death is no longer an ordinary event discussed openly. Instead, it has become a personal and often embarrassing matter (Holloway, 2006; Petrov, 2013). As Alverez puts it: “What was once public, simple and commonplace has now become private, abstract and shocking” (1971, p. 47). Death, in the West, is overwhelmingly represented as a tragic event that generates great suffering both in the dying person and their loved ones (Ruiz-Fernandez et al., 2021); death to suicide, only more so (Tatz, 2017).

Spiritual enquiries regarding human death invariably involve the question of the soul. Humans have been generally understood to be composite beings of body and soul or spirit; the latter often associated with transcendence and the divine (Kokosalakis, 2020). A common belief of major religions and wisdom traditions is that the body perishes at death, whereas the soul/spirit is indestructible, and survives after/beyond death (Kokosalakis, 2020).

After an extensive review of the literature, Holloway (2006) determined no less than 12 meanings applied to death in Western theological and philosophical thought, including: “death as end”, “death as transition”, “the mystery of death”, and “death as the only truly personal act” (p. 837-838). Unless we “embrace an acceptance of death” that

acknowledges it's positive and negative elements, Holloway warns that the "tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences with which dying and bereaved people struggle" will continue to elude our understanding (2006, p. 837).

A person's beliefs and attitudes toward death will directly affect their experience of bereavement. A neutral, or accepting, attitude toward death helps bereaved individuals accept and adjust to the loss of their loved one more easily than individuals who are uncomfortable with, or fear, death (Bonanno et al. 2002; Boyraz et al., 2015; Wong et al., 1994). Similarly, an attitude of acceptance towards death lowers levels of grief, for those bereaved (Boyraz et al., 2015). Those who believe that death is a natural part of life have a strong sense of meaning in their lives, and this, in turn, ameliorates the experience of bereavement (Bonanno et al., 2002; Boyraz et al., 2015; Wong et al., 1994). Existential psychology emphasises the importance of facing up to and embracing death, with the intended effect of enabling the individual to live more authentically and to move toward self-actualization (Wong & Tomer, 2011).

Suicide

Among the leading causes of death worldwide, each year more people intentionally end their own lives than die from HIV/AIDS, breast cancer, car accidents, homicide or war (WHO 2012, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) more than one in every 100 deaths (1.3%) in 2019 were the result of suicide.

This section includes literature review findings on the subject of suicide, with particular reference to: a) the history and medicalization of suicide; b) the ethics of

voluntary death; c) risk and prevention; and d) the relationship between suicide and the soul.

History and Medicalization

In the West, suicide has historically been considered a sin, a crime, and more recently, an illness (Marsh, 2013; Osafo et al., 2017; Petrov, 2013; Tatz, 2017). The overall movement can be seen as a slow stumble from unequivocal condemnation to increasing tolerance, during which church and state have condemned while philosophers have attempted to demystify and decriminalize the act of voluntary death (Minois & Cochrane, 2001).

Through Emile Durkheim's (1897/1951) classic work *Suicide*, sociology made a significant contribution to the founding of suicidology. Durkheim saw suicide as essentially a symptom of the collective breakdown of society; a marker of decreasing social capital, the conditions of which were community networks, civic engagement, civic identity, reciprocity and trust (Kushner & Sterk 2005, Mueller et al. 2021). However, the nineteenth century eventually brought about the "medicalization" of suicide, in which "new claims to truth" were based on a "vocabulary of medicine and science" (Marsh, 2013, p. 745). The twentieth century saw psychiatry consolidate its interpretative rulership by effectively reducing suicide to pathology; establishing it as the result of mental disorder—something Marsh wryly refers to as a "compulsory ontology of pathology" (2013, p. 747)—and giving hegemonic advantage to medicine and psychiatry as the major professions involved in treatment (Hacking, 1990; Marsh, 2013; Petrov, 2013; Tatz, 2017).

The medicalization of suicide has contributed to a process of *decontextualization*, in which suicide has been isolated from moral, philosophical, political and social contexts by increasing *subjectification*—a focus on the individual and interior nature of suicide; on suicide as the result of *internal* pathological causes (Cullen, 2014; Makinen, 1997; Marsh, 2013; Osafo et al., 2017; Petrov, 2013). The core of it all being that the illness resides in the patient and must be diagnosed and treated, somehow, solely within the patient (Tatz, 2017).

In recent decades, a growing body of historical, anthropological and sociological evidence has lent support to the argument that culture matters to suicide (Mueller et al., 2021). However, attempts to understand suicide as a sociocultural practice have been overshadowed by medical and psychological definitions making it a personal choice rather than a cultural phenomenon (Cullen, 2014; Lester, 2011; Marsh, 2013; Osafo et al. 2017). When decontextualized—with sociocultural issues relegated to a distant backdrop—the possibility to see some suicides as rational responses to sick situations, rather than vice versa, is obviated (Petrov, 2013; Makinen, 1997; Osafo 2017). This "privatization" of suicide has been referred to as "the great origin myth" in suicidology, (Kral, 1998; Osafo et al., 2017).

In the twenty-first century, suicide in the West is predominantly seen by the public and especially by health professionals as essentially a matter of mental illness, the tragic result of depression or another 'treatable' disease (Marsh, 2013; Tatz, 2017). Within such a psychiatrized conception, human distress is pathologized and alternative forms of healing or help are discredited (Mills, 2014; Osafo, 2017; Watters, 2010). Viewing suicide as a symptom of psychopathology positions it firmly in the domain of psychiatry

and clinical psychology; thereby making suicidal individuals into psychiatric patients and holding mental health workers responsible for its prevention (Bantjes & Schwartz, 2017; Osafo, 2017).

Medical/biological sovereignty over suicide has, however, become increasingly problematic. Such medicalization inevitably leads to the claim that some forms of mental illness, usually depression, lead to suicidality, and yet, the association established between depression and suicide has been investigated and found to be unsubstantiated (Hjelmeland, 2013; Hjelmeland et al., 2012; Neustadter, 2010; Vijayakumar et al., 2005).

A wonderfully scathing indictment of individualized, medical models of suicide can be found in Chandler and Dunlop's (2015) chapter entitled *Cultural wounds demand cultural medicines*. Through their research of First Nations communities in British Columbia, Canada, they discovered the remarkable fact that communities with no suicides may neighbor those with a suicide epidemic. Consequently they "dare" supporters of an "individualized, essentialized, blame-the-victim perspective on suicide" to provide a potentially plausible explanation (Chandler & Dunlop, 2015, p. 82).

Chandler & Dunlop's (2015) own research shows that self-determination and self-governance are strong contributors to lower suicide rates in First Nations communities. The clear message is that suicide rates are best understood "not as some simple aggregate … of the personal woes of separately damaged individuals" but, instead as the "culmination of 'cultural wounds' inflicted upon whole communities and whole ways of life" (Chandler & Dunlop, 2015, p.78).

The Ethics of Voluntary Death

The assumption that all, or almost all, suicide is triggered by mental disorder is a widely accepted view (Pridmore & Pridmore, 2016), although the World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that "not all people who take their own lives have a mental disorder" (2014, p. 53). The Canadian *Federal Framework for Suicide Prevention* (2016), reports that of the 4000 Canadians who suicide each year at least 90% had been living with a mental illness. Assuming these figures are reliable, this also suggests that up to 400 mentally healthy Canadians voluntarily choose death each year.

The reasons people end their lives are varied and complex. Suicidality may not necessarily be driven by mental illness, lack of rationality or lack of mental capacity (Cowley, 2006; den Hartogh, 2016; Ho, 2014; Lester, 2006; Pridmore & Pridmore, 2016). Were there a direct link between mental disorder and suicide, one would see a correlation between national suicides and rates of psychopathology, but this is not the case, and instead, considerable variation exists (Pridmore & Pridmore, 2016).

Existing medical guidelines do not adequately accommodate the complexity of suicidality, including the potential for suicide by free will, uninfluenced by an identified psychiatric disorder (Ho, 2014; Pridmore & Pridmore, 2016). Even if a person *is* suffering from a mental illness, it does not necessarily follow that his/her thoughts are irrational (den Hartogh, 2016). A more accurate indicator of rationality or otherwise might be the kind of suicide under consideration, for example a "quasi-impulsive, violent and lonely act" versus the execution of a carefully made plan, in dialogue with others and involving the use of least violent means (den Hartogh, 2016, p. 680).

Suicide is unquestionably a moral, philosophical and existential matter. French philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960) declared that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (1955, p. 3). German writer Johann Wolfgang van Goethe (1749–1832) insisted that suicide is an event that is "part of human nature" (as cited in Tatz, 2017, p.542). German physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) insisted that one person's attempts to argue against another's suicide were pointless; that the only relevant arguments were those discovered for oneself and which were "the fruit and result of our whole story of knowledge and of our acquired being" (Stern, 1959, p. 317).

Austrian-born Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry (1912-1978) wrote that he believed "that the discourse on voluntary death only begins where psychology ends" (1999, p.16). Insisting that psychology was "something for an expert", but that the "act of leaping" to one's death, "breaks with the logic of life and therefore also with psychology" (1999, p. 18). Amery agreed with Lichtenberg; that the alienations and obstacles experienced in life may generate legitimate reasons for choosing a voluntary death (Amery, 1999, p. xiv).

Writing extensively on the ethics and politics of suicide, Thomas Szasz (1920-2012) argued strongly for the demedicalization and destigmatization of voluntary death, suggesting we learn to speak about it calmly and to distinguish clearly between describing and condemning or recommending dying voluntarily (Szasz, 1999). Szasz encouraged acceptance, insisting that "dying voluntarily is a choice intrinsic to human existence"; calling it "our ultimate, fatal freedom", a "behavior that has always been, and will always be a part of the human condition" (Szasz, 1999, p. ix).

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) viewed suicide as a form of resistance to what he called "biopower"—institutional control over individual bodies and populations (explored in Taylor, 2015)—a lens through which the recent Covid19 pandemic may yet be helpfully viewed.

Openly questioning popular beliefs about suicide creates space for different perspectives. For example, Cowley (2006) argues against the absolutist view that suicide is irrational, suggesting that it is neither rational nor irrational but rather, contains "profound mystery" at its heart (p. 495). And Lester (2006) suggests that, in certain situations, suicide can be an appropriate or even "good" death, as well as an act of authenticity.

Risk and Prevention

Prior to the adoption of the generic term 'suicide', in the seventeenth century, people ending their lives were described in a wide variety of ways according to the particular context and circumstances of their actions (Carlon, 2020; Tatz, 2017; Van Hooff, 1990). Some 300 Greek and Latin terms were previously used to describe suicide (Van Hooff, 1990). Today, the definition of suicide is, "the act of deliberately killing oneself" (WHO, 2014, p. 12). Definitions serve the purpose of *containing* a phenomenon, thereby making it amenable to scientific research. While such a definition underpins the framing of suicide as a public health issue, the assumption of intention positions suicide as an individual and private act (Carlon, 2020).

From a public health perspective, the prevailing view is that suicidal thoughts and behaviors (STBs) are "major problems" that have "devastating impacts on individuals, families and communities" (Franklin et al., 2016, p. 1). Early identification of people

believed to be at risk of suicide is a key driver of current suicide prevention strategies (WHO, 2012). Risk factors for STBs inform suicide theory, prediction and treatment or interventions provided by health care professionals.

In this context, the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis of 50 years of research into the effectiveness of risk factors, regarding the prevention and treatment of STBs, are illuminating. The analysis showed that, in terms of diagnostic accuracy, prediction is only slightly better than chance, and that predictive ability has actually diminished over time (Franklin et al., 2016). A large number of treatment approaches have also been applied, but few have been shown to consistently reduce STBs relative to a control group (Franklin et al., 2016). Guidelines developed to help practitioners identify STB risk are "long lists of relatively nonspecific factors" suggesting that an individual with almost *any* type of mental illness, serious or chronic physical illness, life stress, special population status, or access to lethal means, may be at risk (Franklin et al., 2016, p. 2). That a vast proportion of any population would possess at least one of these factors (and likely more) at any given time, surely demonstrates the extent to which researchers have been 'barking up the wrong tree'.

Risk and biomedical discourses dominate public health publications about suicide. People experiencing suicide ideation are regularly portrayed as "dangerous, different, lacking coping skills, and burdensome" (East et al., 2021, p.182). Risk discourse is far from morally neutral, it is often used to blame the victim, locate the problem with the individual and to express indignation at behaviors considered socially intolerable (Lupton, 1993). The word *risk* has even changed its meaning in contemporary western society. Once a neutral term, referring only to probability, risk has come to mean danger,

and “high risk” means “a lot of danger” (Lupton, 1993, p. 426). Literature on risk relating to public health tends not to acknowledge sociocultural context or the political uses to which risk discourse is applied (Lupton, 1993).

Overshadowed, as it has been, by biomedical dominion, sociology has been less prominent in contemporary efforts to address the upward trend of suicides around the world (Mueller et al., 2021). Durkheim had argued that it was misleading to focus suicide prevention strategies on individuals, but that the protection of individual well-being lies in collective public projects that can produce protective structural changes (Mueller, 2021). However, Durkheim’s basic insights can be seen to fall short of explaining *why* a particular person chooses suicide and *how* external social forces enter someone’s psyche to make them vulnerable to suicide (Mueller et al., 2021).

Tatz (2017) argues that the use of the word *prevention*, with respect to suicide, is “pretentious”—because it implies an understanding of the phenomenon and a capacity to address it “by known measures” (p. 543). In fact science has thus far failed to provide a “general and satisfactory answer as to why some people choose to end their lives” (Petrov, 2013, 347). As Chandler & Dunlop suggest, little can be said about efforts to prevent suicide “other than to keep insisting that before attempting to prevent something bad, it would be good to have a theory about what actually causes the problem in the first place” (2015, p. 85). They argue that:

> … intervention programs focused on ministering to … private ambitions regularly fail, not only because we have no skill at picking out who is the more disillusioned, but, more particularly, because such analyses leave us at sea about what we can actually do about such tragedies. (Chandler & Dunlop, 2015, p. 88)

Suggesting that suicide-prevention efforts focused on individual mental health are "like fishing in the wrong pond" (Chandler & Dunlop, 2015, p. 78) contemporary sociologists are advocating for a more collective and culture-based approach, arguing that what is needed instead—or at least in addition—are community-level initiatives; cultural medicines to heal cultural wounds (Chandler & Dunlop, 2015; Mueller et al., 2021).

Suicide and the Soul

The teachings of religions and spiritual traditions form a spectrum of perspectives regarding suicide. Christianity and Islam are firmly planted in the 'condemnation' corner, while Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism all adopt a more neutral, but none-the-less questioning stance (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2017). For Hindus, leaving the body in the "right frame of mind" is key to spiritual progress in future lives (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2017, p. 811). For Zen Buddhism, there is no need for 'evaluation' of a good or bad death; there is, simply, death (Lester, 2006).

Not surprisingly, studies exploring the after-suicide experience and the actual effect of suicide on the soul, are well outside the parameters of scientific enquiry. Engaging with the question—*What happens to the soul of a person who suicides?*—requires stepping beyond the limits of evidence, measurement and proof. It is heartening to discover that increasing numbers of brave souls (!) are willing to do so.

Dr. Michael Newton (1931-2016), an American counselling psychologist, hypnotherapist and pioneer of afterlife exploration dedicated 30 years of research to mapping journeys of the soul—including what takes place between lives here on earth. In his books *Journey of Souls* (1994) and *Destiny of Souls* (2001), Newton presents a trove of case studies from his work with individuals placed in a state of deep hypnosis during

which they recall their experiences between lives as eternal spirits. What is revealed are graphic details about how it feels to die, who meets us right after death, what the spirit world is really like, where we go and what we do as souls, and why we choose to come back in certain bodies.

According to Newton's (2001) research, in suicide cases involving healthy bodies, one of two things generally happens to these souls:

> If they are not a repeat offender, the soul is frequently sent back to a new life rather quickly, at their own request, to make up for lost time. This could be within five years of their death on Earth. The average soul is convinced it is important to get right back on the diving board after having taken a belly flop in a prior life… For those who display a pattern of bailing out when things get rough … these souls may volunteer to go to a beautiful planetary world with water, trees and mountains but no other life. They have no contact with other souls in these places of seclusion except for sporadic visits by a guide to assist them in their reflections and self-evaluation. (p. 177)

In complementary and related research, Robert Schwartz (2009, 2012) works closely with gifted mediums and channels to explore pre-birth soul planning; life challenges determined before birth to encourage the evolution of the soul. Schwartz and his collaborators explore the pre-birth plans of people with various life experiences, including, for example: incest, poverty, adoption, mental illness, rape and suicide. The research reveals that events in our lives are neither random nor arbitrary, but instead part of a wisely conceived and intricate plan (Schwartz, 2009, 2012).

In his second book, *Your Soul's Gift*, Schwartz (2012) specifically explores the soul plans of people who ended their own lives. He collaborates with Pam, a channeller who connects directly with *Jeshua*; a soul that Pam claims was once the man known as Jesus, here on earth. Through Pam, Jeshua opens by saying that "suicide is not wrong" and that "spiritually, suicide is simply a possibility, a choice one can make among others", and that furthermore, "it is not necessarily the worst choice one can make" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 403).

As conveyed by Pam, Jeshua goes on to explain that "from a spiritual perspective there are no acts that are absolutely wrong or sinful", and that "the deepest act of self-betrayal can lead someone into a state of inner clarity that may help forever" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 404). Jeshua continues, by plainly stating: "I wish to take away the traditional judgement about suicide, that it is the gravest sin" and that "God or Spirit does not feel this way." (Schwartz, 2012, p. 404-405)

When asked how people who have lost loved ones to suicide can heal the guilt and self-blame usually felt, Jeshua points out that "guilt and self-blame are human reactions to suicide" and that "this is okay", but that over time people bereaved by suicide will "slowly understand" that their loved ones had lives of their own, that "they are souls unto themselves", and that they "steer their own course in life, even if you try your utmost to help them change or recover" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 409). He continues:

> You gradually realize that you did the best you could and that you could not have prevented the suicide. There comes a point in the decision-making process of people contemplating suicide when it is between them and themselves. It is their choice. Respect this. Guilt and self-blame ultimately express an overestimation of

> one's power … No one has such power. To accept and respect one's own humanness can help to release guilt and self-blame. (Schwartz, 2012, p. 410)

Jeshua emphasizes that humility is required to acknowledge that we sometimes cannot help someone. An humility that can be liberating because it frees us from the notion that we could have prevented the suicide and opens space for forgiveness and the releasing of guilt (Schwartz, 2012).

PhD clinical psychologist Joseph Gallenberger (2017) recently released his book *Heaven is for healing: A soul's journey after suicide*. The book documents Gallenberger's personal grief journey and ongoing contact with his brother Peter, who died by suicide some 20 years prior. Gallenberger directly addresses the limitations of science; saying that "questions of afterlife go beyond its ken" and suggests there are other ways to find the truth, including "mutually-verified experiences" and "through the human heart" (2017, p. 51).

With assistance from channeller Pam Hogan and her guides—known as ARGO: Ascending Rays of God's Oneness—over the course of two decades, Gallenberger (2017) explores Peter's afterlife healing and his movement towards options for a next life. In doing so, Gallenberger discovers that "even an event such as suicide, which is defined as highly negative by our culture … provides opportunities for growth" (Gallenberger, 2017, p. 237). In the final of many sessions over two decades, Gallenberger asks ARGO if there's a particular message to emphasize in his book, and the response begins:

> Free from the pain of death, all souls achieve a reclaiming of spiritual (life). They retrieve their souls regardless of the method of passing … All death leads to light

… how one leaves the planet is not a determiner of fate on the other side.

(Gallenberger, 2017, p. 232)

This literature review now moves to the topic of bereavement by suicide.

Suicide Bereavement

Bereavement refers to all the physiological, psychological, behavioral, and social response patterns evoked in an individual following the death of someone close (Dunne, Dunne-Maxim & Mclntosh, 1987). Bereavement following suicide is complicated and complex. Those bereaved by suicide are not a homogeneous group. Suicide bereavement is molded and shaped by the bereaved individual's life experiences with the deceased and occurs within a cultural context. There are differences in the extent to which a suicide may be expected and understood as well as the ways in which such a loss might be grieved (Gall et al., 2014; Wojtkowiak et al., 2012; Sherkat & Reed, 1992).

This section includes literature review findings on the subject of bereavement by suicide, in the context of bereavement more broadly, as follows: a) survival; b) meaning-making; c) continuing bonds; d) spiritual beliefs, and e) personal growth and spiritual transformation.

Survival

The term 'suicide survivor' has come to refer to a person bereaved by suicide (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Jordan, 2008). When compared with other kinds of bereavement, thematic differences in grief include: shame and stigma, rejection, blaming, and guilt, especially early in the mourning process (Cvinar, 2005; Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Jordan, 2008; Tal et al., 2017). While many survivors of suicide are devastated (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Jordan, 2008), others have described it as a blessing or a relief;

an end to the anguish endured by the suicidal person and witnesses who had actively tried to intervene (Sherkat & Reed, 1992; Maple et al., 2007).

Societal reactions to suicide—arising from historical religious, legal and social sanctions, including relatively recent decriminalization—make this the most stigmatizing of bereavements (Cvinar, 2005; Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2018; Overvad & Wagoner, 2020). Suicide survivors experience social stigma in the form of shame, blame and avoidance (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2018). They may feel pressure to interpret and/or explain the death or guilt for not being able to prevent it (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2018; Sands & Tennant, 2010). Bereavement may be complicated by a belief that the suicide represents a failure on the part of the victim or their family to address an emotional or mental health issue (Cvinar, 2005; Tal et al., 2017). In this way, stigma is induced by the association between suicide and mental illness, which, for survivors, discredits not only the deceased but also themselves (Hanschmidt et al., 2016).

Research reveals the potential for not only social or *external* stigma but also self-stigma in the form of *internalized* negative attitudes (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Jordan, 2008). There may be differences in the way that survivors *believe* they are stigmatized versus actually being the object of stigma, for example, by self-isolating or distancing from others in an attempt to protect against possible, yet not experienced, avoidant behavior (Carlon, 2020; Cvinar, 2005; Jordan, 2008). Similarly, secrecy may be employed as a coping strategy, to avoid stigma, which then results in increased emotional distress (Oexle et al., 2020). Perceptions of stigma may fan feelings of shame, guilt, anger and blame, and, survivors may project their negative emotions on their social

environment, leading to a biased perception of others' behaviors and attitudes (Hanschmidt et al., 2016).

As an often inexplicable death, the need to make sense of the motivations of the deceased can be a major preoccupation for many survivors (Dransart, 2013; Jordan, 2008, Pritchard & Buckle, 2017). Suicide notes and videos can ameliorate grief (Gall et al., 2014). Initial shock may also be lessened when there is awareness of a loved one's suicidal intentions (Gall et al., 2014; Wojtkowiak et al., 2012). The less unexpected, or more "rational", the suicide (to the bereaved), the greater the ability to understand and meaningfully explain the suicide (Brazda et al., 2018; Wojtkowiak et al., 2012).

Survivors commonly overestimate their own role in relation to the suicide and most come to understand that the loved one made a choice that had nothing to do with them (Gall et al., 2014; Jordan 2008). Some survivors may make a conscious choice not to buy into stigmatization as a way to honor the deceased (Gall et al., 2014). The capacity to move forward can require "an acceptance of the unacceptable" (Gall et al., 2014, p. 433).

Studies in this area have generally focused on identifying differences between those bereaved by suicide as compared to other kinds of death (Cvinar, 2005; Pitman et al., 2018; Shields et al., 2017; Sveen & Walby, 2008). However, findings are often conflictual, and the complex experiences of those bereaved by suicide remain poorly understood (Shields et al., 2017, Sveen & Walby, 2008), leading some to insist that the emphasis be placed on differences between individuals bereaved by suicide rather than on differences between those bereaved by suicide and other forms of bereavement (Shields et al., 2017).

Meaning-making

Twenty-first century bereavement theory suggests that the extent to which we are able to make sense of a loss and to integrate its impacts into our life, the less complicated our grieving process will be, and the more highly adapted we are likely to be moving forward (Bottomley et al., 2019; Dransart, 2013; Pritchard & Buckle, 2018). There is increasing evidence to show that such 'meaning-making' has a unique, important and positive role in the grief process, including grief resulting from suicide death (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Bottomley et al., 2019; Dransart, 2013; Pritchard & Buckle, 2018).

In fact, studies suggest that meaning making may be an important variable in understanding the nuances of suicide bereavement (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Bottomley et al., 2019; Dransart, 2013; Gall et al., 2014; Pritchard & Buckle, 2018). Making sense of a suicide, and of the life of the deceased, enables survivors to continue loving the person who died while avoiding blame or idealization (Bottomley et al., 2019; Dransart, 2013). It can enable the bereaved to find a purpose in the death (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Gall et al., 2014), and it may also bring positive changes to their interpersonal relationships and appreciation of life, along with greater self-awareness and resilience (Gall et al., 2014). When the process of meaning-making can be negotiated successfully, it can lead to feelings of positive growth and healing and an ability to move forward (Fielden, 2003; Sands & Tennant, 2010).

The process of making meaning can be complicated by a lack of appropriate social support. Feelings relating to suicide are affected by the extent to which those bereaved are able to make sense of, or understand, the act, within a particular social context (Shields et al., 2017). Difficulties arise when those bereaved by suicide feel

expected to offer explanations or feel uninvited to openly discuss their loss with others (Fielden, 2003; Shields et al. 2017). Communications, interactions and relationships central to meaning making are inhibited when people bereaved by suicide feel unable to speak about their loved one and the cause of death (Carlon, 2020; Shields et al., 2017).

Continuing Bonds

A *continuing bond* is understood as "the presence of an ongoing inner relationship" between a bereaved person and the deceased (Stroebe & Schut, 2005, p. 477). Continuing bonds may involve a wide variety of behaviors and experiences including, but not limited to: remembering, reminiscing, or speaking of the deceased; sensing the presence of the deceased or hearing their voice; vivid dreams; internalized values and beliefs espoused by the deceased, and individual or shared activities to honor or connect with the deceased (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Levi-Belz, 2017; Root & Exline, 2014).

Extraordinary experiences (EEs), as defined within the context of bereavement and grief, are experiences that "occur at the time of, or after the death of someone" and which signify "contact or communication with the deceased" (Parker, 2005, p. 257). *After-death communication* (ADC) is defined as a "spiritual experience that occurs when someone is contacted directly and spontaneously by a deceased family member or friend" (Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1995). EEs and ADCs can overlap with, or be part of, the psychological concept of continuing bonds, but they more openly include the metaphysical and spiritual, including the belief in an afterlife (Benore & Park, 2004; Exline, 2021; Root & Exline, 2014; Parker, 2005).

Despite being increasingly seen as a central element in the construction of meaning after loss, little research exists regarding continuing bonds with those bereaved by suicide (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Levi-Belz, 2017). However, a world-wide survey of 1301 people bereaved by suicide revealed that 63% reported having spiritual after-death experiences related to the loved one they lost to suicide and that these experiences were overwhelmingly interpreted as positive events (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014). When asked which emotions accompanied the spiritual experience (as part of the continuing bond), those most highly endorsed—from a list of 17, and each by more than half of respondents—were *love* and *peace* (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014).

The vast majority of after-death communication appears to be beneficial to the bereaved, and is often described as healing, transformative, or life-changing, by those who experience it (Benore & Park, 2004; Exline, 2021; Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Parker, 2005). Although regularly involving metaphysical happenings, continuing bonds are not routinely recognized as spiritual events, yet they are acknowledged by the world's predominant religions (Klass & Goss, 1999). Individuals who believe in an afterlife may experience different forms of continuing bonds—including those which represent an interactive and dynamic relationship with the deceased (Root & Exline, 2014).

Continuing bonds have been shown to be adaptive responses to the grief process which can foster and enable acceptance of death, psychological well-being and spiritual growth (Parker, 2005). For individuals with spiritual belief systems, continuing bonds not only assist meaning-making, after a death, they also reinforce the framework through which the bereaved conceptualizes and experiences their unique spirituality (Parker, 2005). Extraordinary experiences and after-death communication can reinforce personal

beliefs which facilitate spiritual growth and diminish existential anxiety, thereby generating a sense of psychological well-being (Parker, 2005).

Spiritual Beliefs

The relationship between spiritual beliefs and bereavement is complex, not well understood and regularly clouded by a lack of distinction between spirituality and religion (Becker, 2007; Bray, 2013; Dransart, 2018; Walsh, 2002). This distinction is well-made by Lancaster and Palframan (2009), who recognize the spiritual as not necessarily reliant on the "institutional structures and authority narratives" associated with religion but instead on a "personally-constructed philosophy grounded in experience" (p. 258).

Studies concerned with the effects of spiritual beliefs on those bereaved by suicide suggest that spirituality can play a positive role in the bereavement process (Becker et al., 2007; Dransart, 2013; Fournier, 1997; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009; Walsh et al., 2002). Spiritual beliefs may provide an existential framework in which grief is more readily resolved (Walsh et al., 2002).

Beliefs in an afterlife—including the survival of the soul after death—have been associated with decreased death anxiety and better recovery from bereavement, regardless of the cause of death (Dransart, 2013; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009). One study, involving bereaved spouses, found that afterlife beliefs may be maladaptive if one holds a pessimistic view of what the afterlife entails (Carr & Sharp, 2014).

Existing scientific knowledge about the function of spirituality during suicide bereavement is minimal (Becker et al., 2007; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009). Spiritual well-being has been found to have a significant effect on improving adaptability by

reducing stress in those bereaved by suicide (Fournier, 1999). Also, people who believe that a metaphysical or spiritual meaning can be attributed to the suicide are more inclined to accept that no clear answers may be found in immediate reality (Dransart, 2013).

Personal Growth and Spiritual Transformation

The idea that personal growth can occur in people who are confronted by challenges, suffering or loss is far from new, and is commonly described in the teachings of philosophical, spiritual and religious traditions. It is also central to the work of humanistic-existential and transpersonal psychologists including Carl Rogers (1961), Victor Frankel (1963) and Abraham Maslow (1971). In fact personal growth is reported by a majority of people experiencing even the most traumatic of events (Park & Helgeson, 2006).

Most recently the term *post-traumatic growth* (PTG) has been applied to this phenomenon. PTG is defined as "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 11). It is widely recognized that bereavement offers one of the most significant opportunities for personal and/or post-traumatic growth (Calhoun et al., 2010; Kaul, 2020; Michael & Cooper, 2013; Taylor, 2021).

Research exploring the relationship between bereavement to suicide, specifically, and personal growth/transformation is sparse. Studies have shown that bereavement by suicide often triggers deep self-reflection on issues of meaning, responsibility, relationship, and identity (Dransart, 2013; Fielden, 2003; Gall et al., 2014; Sands & Tennant, 2010). Suicide-loss has also been seen to generate inner reflection and a review

of life's priorities which can lead to personal and/or spiritual growth and transformation in the bereaved (Dransart, 2013; Fielden, 2003; Sands & Tennant, 2010).

Some suicide survivors do experience post-traumatic growth (Levi-Belz & Lev-Ari, 2019). Individuals with secure attachment, who openly self-disclose, have good social support, a capacity for self-regulation and a problem-focused coping style have been found to be more likely to experience personal growth in the aftermath of the suicide loss (Drapeau et al., 2019; Levi-Belz, 2017, Oexle, 2020). In addition, the closeness of the relationship prior to death has been shown to contribute to post-traumatic growth in suicide-loss survivors (Drapeau et al., 2019; Levi-Belz, 2017).

Spirituality has been shown to be an especially influential domain of the growth process following major life events including bereavement (Bray, 2010; Calhoun et al., 2010; Kaul, 2021; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Taylor, 2021). In examining spiritual experiences in the context of bereavement and post-traumatic growth, Bray (2013) proposes that the loss of a loved one can "activate the human psyche in ways that allow transpersonal processes to influence psychological growth" (p. 891). It is here that traditional psychological perspectives on post-traumatic growth fall short. As Bray suggests, survivors of challenging life events may wish to "explain their post-traumatic experiences in spiritual terms that are centrally positioned in a broader framework than is currently available" (2010, p. 306).

Some authors suggest that post-loss changes are more akin to *transformation*, than growth (Bray, 2010, Taylor, 2021), including the potential for spiritual changes that are immediate rather than growth-oriented over time (Bray, 2010, Taylor 2021). Such

experiences have been variously referred to as “spiritual awakening” (Taylor, 2013b), “spiritual change” (Balk, 1999) and “spiritual emergence” (Grof & Grof, 1990).

Processes of *spiritual awakening,* as described by various spiritual traditions, have been shown to include the following themes:

> (a) increasing and intensifying awareness; (b) a movement beyond separateness and toward connection and union; (c) the cultivation of inner stillness and emptiness; (d) the development of increased inner stability, self-sufficiency, and equanimity; (e) a movement toward increased empathy, compassion, and altruism; (f) the relinquishing of personal agency; and (g) a movement toward enhanced well-being”. (Taylor, 2021, p 11)

Johnson and Friedman (2008) describe *spiritual emergence* as the integration of spiritual and transpersonal experiences ‘‘to achieve expanded consciousness and maturity’’(p. 514). Grof and Grof (1990) have observed that such experiences can be triggered by highly emotional events including bereavement. Occurrences may involve “heightened realms of experience” relative to an individual’s “awareness, acceptance and understanding of their transforming levels of consciousness” (Bray, 2010, p. 298).

Explorations of the relationship between spirituality and post-bereavement transformation have recognized *openness* as key (Garner, 2021; Grof and Grof, 1990; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Taylor, 2021; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004;). Openness to both one’s external *and* inner worlds can facilitate the releasing of attachment to the deceased as well as movement through resistance and an acceptance of the change (Kaul, 2021). Such an openness, enabled by an encompassing attitude of acceptance, is likened to the surrendering of the ego considered central to teachings of Eastern wisdom

traditions, especially Buddhism (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This is an openness in which the psyche temporarily submerges the ego, enabling the influx of deeper spiritual material and bringing about more encompassing sense of self or "more expanded way of being" (Grof & Grof, p. 34).

Calhoun & Tedeschi's (2006) model of post-traumatic growth and Grof & Grof's (1990) model of psycho-spiritual transformation both suggest a correlation between growth outcome and pre-trauma capacity or functioning (Bray, 2010). For Bray (2010), a "readiness to transform" may in certain instances be more significant than the external event. Similarly, in recognizing openness and acceptance as distinctly spiritual qualities, Taylor (2021) makes room for the possibility that those who experience post-bereavement transformation may have previously cultivated these qualities and were thus predisposed to transformation.

To the best of this writer's knowledge, to date there is no research specifically exploring transformative spiritual experiences in those bereaved by suicide. However, in an examination of the experience of suicide bereavement through a lens of "transformative learning"—a process not dissimilar to post-traumatic growth, but from an adult education orientation and with particular emphasis on meaning-making and relationships—Sands & Tennant (2010) have discovered the process to be an ontological one, where participants experience a change in their state of *being* and their relationships with self, the deceased, and others as a result. Such a state may be "deeper, wiser, and more in tune with matter, the body and soul, and the material world" (Scott, 1997, p 45-46).

Summary and Rationale

In the West, death is generally represented as a tragic event that generates great suffering in those bereaved (Ruiz-Fernandez et al., 2021), and death to suicide only more so (Tatz, 2017). An accepting attitude toward death can help bereaved individuals adjust to the loss of their loved one more easily than those who fear death (Bonanno et al. 2002; Boyraz et al., 2015; Wong et al., 1994). Traditional religious perspectives have viewed suicide as a sin, but contemporary spiritual research suggests that suicide is not "absolutely wrong or sinful", and, further that "the deepest act of self-betrayal can lead someone into a state of inner clarity that may help forever" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 404).

Historical attempts to understand suicide as a sociocultural practice have more recently been overshadowed by medical and psychological depictions of it as a personal choice (Cullen, 2014; Lester, 2011; Marsh, 2013; Osafo et al. 2017). Today, suicide in the West is predominantly seen as essentially a matter of mental illness, the tragic result of depression or another 'treatable' disease (Marsh, 2013; Tatz, 2017). This 'medicalization' of suicide has contributed to a process of *decontextualization*, in which suicide has become isolated from moral, philosophical, political and social contexts by increasing *subjectification*—a focus on the individual and interior nature of suicide; on suicide as the result of *internal* pathological causes (Cullen, 2014; Makinen, 1997; Marsh, 2013; Osafo et al. 2017; Petrov, 2013).

Suicide rates remain relatively unchanged in spite of decades of research devoted to prediction, prevention and intervention (Franklin et al., 2016). Science has failed to provide a "general and satisfactory answer as to why some people choose to end their lives" (Petrov, 2013, 347) and yet, public health proclamations insist that suicide is

"largely preventable" and that "tools" for this prevention are available (WHO, 2012, p. 2). Suicide "experts" regularly insist there is a straight line from "mental illness … to the life-taking act" (Tatz, 2017, p. 544), and yet the association between depression and suicide has been found to be unsubstantiated (Hjelmeland, 2013; Hjelmeland et al., 2012; Neustadter, 2010; Vijayakumar et al.; 2005).

Psychiatry, Psychology and Sociology are primarily concerned with how to prevent suicide; a perspective which rests on the assumptions that a) all suicides should be prevented, and b) that prevention is possible. It is only Philosophy that engages with deeper questions as to whether suicides ought be prevented at all and whether there might be some types of suicide that could be better understood first (Amery, 1999; Szasz, 1999). Some argue that suicide can be a rational and authentic act which is unrelated to mental illness (Cowley, 2006; den Hartogh, 2016; Ho, 2014; Lester, 2006; Pridmore & Pridmore, 2016). Tensions between individual rights and our social desire to prevent suicide mean that patient autonomy, a concept upheld by most Western countries, becomes a matter of much controversy with respect to suicide (Ho, 2014).

Those bereaved by suicide are not a homogeneous group. Loss to suicide is complicated and complex; molded and shaped by the bereaved individual's life experiences with the deceased and occurring within a cultural context. There will be differences in the extent to which a suicide may be expected and understood as well as the ways in which such a loss might be grieved (Gall et al., 2014; Wojtkowiak et al., 2012; Sherkat & Reed, 1992).

Suicide survivors regularly experience social stigma in the form of shame, blame and avoidance (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2018), and may feel pressure to

explain the death or guilt for not being able to prevent it (Hanschmidt et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2018; Sands & Tennant, 2010). Survivors commonly overestimate their own role in relation to the suicide, although, in time, most come to understand that the loved one made a choice that had nothing to do with them (Gall et al., 2014; Jordan 2008).

Studies suggest that meaning-making may be an important variable in understanding the nuances of suicide bereavement (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Bottomley et al., 2019; Dransart, 2013; Gall et al., 2014; Pritchard & Buckle, 2018). Making sense of a suicide, and of the life of the deceased, enables survivors to continue loving the person who died without blame or idealization (Bottomley et al., 2019; Dransart, 2013). It can assist the bereaved to find a purpose in the death (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Gall et al., 2014), and it may also bring positive changes to their interpersonal relationships and appreciation of life, along with greater self-awareness and resilience (Gall et al., 2014). Feelings relating to suicide are affected by the extent to which those bereaved are able to make sense of, or understand, the act, within a particular social context (Shields et al., 2017).

The vast majority of after-death communication appears beneficial to the bereaved, generally, and is often described as healing, transformative, or life-changing, by those who experience it (Benore & Park, 2004; Exline, 2021; Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Parker, 2005).

Studies concerned with the effects of spiritual beliefs on those bereaved by suicide suggest that spirituality can play a positive role in the bereavement process (Fournier, 1997; Becker et al., 2007; Dransart, 2013; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009; Walsh et al., 2002). Spiritual beliefs may provide an existential framework in which grief

is more readily resolved (Walsh et al., 2002). Explorations of the relationship between spirituality and post-bereavement transformation have recognized openness as key (Grof and Grof, 1990; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Taylor, 2021; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004;).

Overall, the complex experiences of those bereaved by suicide remain poorly understood (Shields et al., 2017; Sveen & Walby, 2008). Despite being increasingly recognized as a central element in the construction of meaning after loss, little research exists regarding continuing bonds with those bereaved by suicide (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Levi-Belz, 2017). Further, the relationship between spiritual beliefs and bereavement is poorly understood and regularly clouded by a lack of distinction between spirituality and religion (Becker, 2007; Bray, 2013; Dransart, 2018; Walsh, 2002).

As has been shown, there are different reasons for suicide and survivors respond in a wide variety of ways. Contrary to popular belief, some argue that suicide can be a rational and authentic act which is unrelated to mental illness. In addition, studies show that meaning, purpose, growth and transformation can all be part of the experience of the bereaved. In the light of these findings, the belief that 'every suicide is tragic' while culturally predominant, is one that is worthy of critique.

A strategic objective of the Public Health Agency of Canada's *Framework for Suicide Prevention* is to "reduce stigma and raise public awareness" (2016, p. 6). Developing greater public understanding of the range of reasons people suicide, along with the spectrum of responses this act can generate, will surely assist in painting a more realistic and nuanced picture of this complex issue.

There is a paucity of knowledge about the ways in which suicide survivors make sense of their loss. That which does exist highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and interpersonal self-efficacy as key to creating a positive psychological view of the event.

To the best of this writer's knowledge there is no research specifically exploring transformative spiritual experiences in those bereaved by suicide. A greater understanding of the meaning-making process in suicide bereavement is warranted, including the role of spirituality in the process. It is in this space that this research most naturally finds a home.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research methodology for this project is autoethnography, within the context of a spiritual research paradigm. The first section of this chapter outlines what a spiritual research paradigm is and the benefits it offers to this autoethnographic enquiry. Further sections explain autoethnography, the research approach—including the management of ethical issues—and suggestions for evaluation of rigor.

Spiritual Research Paradigm

Death is inherently spiritual and mysterious. Science offers little illumination while sages provide much. For the purposes of an open exploration of one soul's journey beyond life's end, and the consequences for those still living, a bigger picture perspective is much appreciated, and, arguably, necessary. A spiritual research paradigm invites not just worldly knowledge, but cosmic wisdom, accessible through a variety of sources, once one figures out where to look.

The purpose of a research paradigm is "to articulate the worldview from which one approaches research" (Edwards, 2016, p. 258). Until recently there was no research paradigm which invited the methodical exploration of "fundamental questions related to the development of spirituality" (Lin, Oxford & Culham, 2016, p.ix). In other words, there was no paradigm through which to explore and inquire into anything beyond the material world. A "shortcoming" that the editors, and contributors to the wonderful compilation, *Towards a Spiritual Research Paradigm,* have boldly and beautifully attempted to address (Lin, Oxford & Culham, 2016, p. xi).

Lin, Oxford & Culham make the case that a spiritual research paradigm (SRP) "is especially relevant and needed for research that examines inward experience and that

promotes meaning, purpose, interconnection with nature and other beings, inner peace, compassion, and tranquility of mind and heart" (2016, p. xi). Brantmeier and Brantmeier (2016) distinguish the "uniquely spiritual" features of a SRP as—the possibility for knowledge to come to, or be found "in noncognitive or non-rational ways" involving insight, gut feelings, intuition and the paranormal (p. 240). Such ways of knowing "are considered to be real, discoverable, and describable" in an SRP (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 240). In addition, they argue, alignment with an SRP suggests "a responsibility to serve one another and living creatures through boundless, selfless service" (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 243).

Some authors see opportunities to combine paradigms in ways that do not diminish the benefits of each paradigm individually (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016; Edwards, 2016). Brantmeier and Brantmeier suggest that a spiritual paradigm can successfully align with a constructivist or interpretive paradigm given its purpose on "deep understanding, which may or may not include co-inquiry with research participants" (2016, p. 240).

Underpinning beliefs

Lin, Oxford and Culham (2016) suggest that an SRP requires an ontology that sees reality as "multidimensional, interconnected, and interdependent" (p. ix) and an epistemology which integrates knowledge from outer as well as inner sources, thereby acknowledging the "integration of soul and spirit with body and mind"(p. ix-x). According to Lin et al. (2016), within a SRP, the goal to which new knowledge might be applied includes "gaining wisdom and truth, touching the divine, increasing inner peace, exploring hidden dimensions, or improving society" (p. ix-x).

Methodologies compatible with an SRP are necessarily qualitative (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016; Edwards, 2016; Lin et al., 2016); as these provide opportunities to attend to the "spiritual, cultural, and historical impacts on researcher's and participants' perspectives" (Edwards, 2016, p. 259). Value may also be accorded to participants' spiritual orientation and researchers' reflexivity regarding their own spiritual biases and any impact on research outcomes (Edwards, 2016).

Selection of an SRP

Within the context of a Masters in Psychotherapy and Spirituality, the selection of a spiritual research paradigm may be somewhat unremarkable. However, it is worth emphasizing that such a paradigm feels like *home* to this writer, offering, as it does, the freedom to engage with knowledge, meaning and insight from beyond this material world.

A spiritual research paradigm is also complementary and relevant to an autoethnographic method. With its emphasis on reflection as means of deriving data, Edwards (2016) notes that autoethnography affords "strong potential to access internal feelings and spiritual knowledge" (p. 263). The compatibility of autoethnography and a spiritual research paradigm is also related to the potential for "improving society" as Lin et al. suggest (2016, p. x).

The availability of a spiritual research paradigm has been a significant influence on this writer's willingness to undertake academic research. The invitation to include knowledge gained in ways that defy rational explanation is inspiring and liberating. It offers a long overdue integration of knowing, researching and *being*, facilitating the full employment of mind, body and soul in furthering human understanding.

Educational potential

With the present emphasis on vocationally-focused education, some argue that universities no longer "help students understand what it means to be human" (Lewis, 2006, p. 3); that what Keats referred to as 'soul-making' is less recognizable in modern education (Rollins, 1958, p. 101). In a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats insisted that suffering was essential to the evolution of the soul (Rollins, 1958). He wrote:

> Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! (Rollins, 1958, p. 103).

Miller (2016) argues that many forms of research within academia similarly suffer from the problem of having become "disconnected from the body and soul of the researcher" (p. 127). A spiritual research paradigm thus offers an opportunity for reconnection and reparation.

Embodying the research

My own spirituality is, at best, a flow of light, love, clarity and/or knowledge from innermost to outermost generating integration, expression, and, ideally, embodiment. As a natural extension of this authentic movement, I agree with Lin et al., that researchers aligned with this paradigm must "embody what they research" and that "spiritual cultivation and growth are part of the research endeavor." (2016, p. xi). Miller (2016) argues that embodied research is best achieved through meditation. In my own experience, other helpful practices and supports include quiet reflection, contemplative walking and movement practices, dance, art-making, relating with nature and depth connection with others.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a relatively new and novel qualitative research method that utilizes personal experience for the purpose of expanding sociological understanding (Adams et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2016; Wall, 2008). Autoethnography combines 'autobiography' with 'ethnography', such that the personal story of the author is used to shed light on the larger cultural meaning and context for the story (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Arising from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares its storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative while "transcending … narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2008, p. 43).

Like other researchers undertaking interpretive qualitative methods of inquiry, autoethnographers tend to reject the idea that social research is objective, neutral and achieved through the detachment of the researcher from that which is researched (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Instead, we support the view that knowledge about the social and human world does not exist independently of the knower; "that we cannot know or tell anything without (in some way) being involved and implicated in the knowing and the telling" (Douglas & Carless, 2016, p. 84). As such, according to Laura Ellingson and Carolyn Ellis—a key proponent of the form—autoethnography is a "critical response to the alienating effects on both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by … research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse" (2008, p. 450). Wall (2006) similarly argues that this critical response is the "philosophical open door into which autoethnography creeps" (p. 3). She continues:

> The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned. (2006, p. 3)

Adams et al. (2017) summarize the key features of autoethnography as:

- using a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences
- acknowledging and valuing a researcher's relationships with others
- showing people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles
- balancing intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion and creativity, and
- striving for social justice and to make life better.

Adams et al. (2017) also point out that "social life is messy, uncertain, and emotional" and that if our desire to is research social life, "we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion" (p. 9).

Autoethnographic researchers come to balance 'autobiography' and 'ethnography' in different ways (Chang, 2008). Ellis and Bochner observe that "[a]utoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" and that "[d]ifferent exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes" (2000, p. 740).

Autoethnographers do, however, undertake a research process which involves data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing (Chang, 2008). They may gather data by means of reflection, participation, observation, interview, document review and more; where possible verifying by triangulating sources and contents from multiple origins; analyzing and interpreting data in dialogue with the cultural meanings of events and actions (Chang, 2008).

As a qualitative research method, Foster et al. (2005) note that autoethnography is particularly useful for "making connections between researcher and participant", for "deepening interpretive analysis of both common and differing experiences" and for "producing knowledge drawn from compassionate understanding and rigorous reflection" (p. 1).

This thesis would not exist without autoethnography. The subjective, creative and flexible nature of this methodology engages the researcher in me—inviting it out for the first time. It gives permission for an unusual story to be told, not only for personal reasons, but for educational, philosophical, cultural and spiritual ones.

The three key benefits of autoethnography, according to Chang (2008), are that it: (1) is "friendly to researchers and readers"; (2) "enhances cultural understanding of self and others", and; (3) has the potential to "transform self and others" and encourage "cross-cultural coalition building" (p. 52). These benefits underpin my own reasons for recognizing autoethnography as a most suitable method for this work. The reasons why autoethnography seems a most perfect fit for this writer and the enquiry proposed are explored and discussed below. They are: 1) creativity, 2) authenticity, 3) scope, 4) education, and 5) humanness.

Creativity

As a life-long student who has never warmed to the abstract and impersonal nature of conventional scholarly writing, the freedom of expression offered by autoethnography comes as something of a revelation. Autoethnography can be very creative. Poetry, plays, prose, artwork, interviews—all kinds of research inputs might be included as part of the 'story'—and then held up and contrasted with the dominant cultural perspective. Autoethnography allows a researcher to offer a deeply reflective and subjective perspective—on taboo topics or entrenched social beliefs—for example that suicide is tragic.

In addition, autoethnography permits the expression of the 'story' in an author's unique voice. As Gergen and Gergen (2002) state:

> In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored. (p. 14)

Autoethnography also provides a unique opportunity for the integration of art and science. As Ellis (2008) suggests, autoethnography "connects social science and artful writing. It is a blend of right brain and left brain activity, heart and mind, as well as culture and self" (p. 362). In this way autoethnography invites uncommon conversation between parts of a whole; encouraging a kind of inter-dimensional "cross-talk" that serves to illuminate and expand our perspective of what it means to be alive, to be human and to be living at this time, in this world.

Authenticity

Authenticity is essential to autoethnographic research, and yet, remaining true to ourselves is risky. With autoethnography, Wiesner (2020) suggests that " the potential [for] rejection is double: first, we risk being rejected as researchers, and second, we risk being rejected in our effort to be our true selves" (p. 669). Furthermore, what is true today may not necessarily be true tomorrow. As Freeman (2015) states, "truth is indeed an impossible prey to catch" and "our own part-truths are easier to believe than those of other people" (p. 919).

The aim, then, is not to "prove certain objective aspects" of one's own lived experience, but rather to consistently effort towards own one's truth as well as one's vulnerability (Wiesner, 2020). Wiesner points to reflexivity—the continuous questioning of oneself as participant and researcher—as an important practice of authenticity (2020). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) elaborate:

> Our task [as qualitative researchers] is to find concrete practices through which we can construct ourselves as ethical subjects engaged in ethical ethnography—inspiring to read and to write. Some of these practices include … engaging in self-reflexivity, giving in to synchronicity, asking for what one wants, not flinching from where the writing takes one emotionally or spiritually, and honoring the embodiedness and spatiality of one's labor. (p. 965)

For this writer, autoethnography provides an irresistible invitation and challenge to truth-telling, originality and sincerity. I believe that a uniquely personal story, cleanly told, and in dialogue with a well-articulated cultural context, has the potential to reshape that context through its impact, its honesty and its resonance. Truth travels, and along the

way it finds travel partners; others' quiet knowledge that might be similarly dissonant from the loudest, most insistent voices in our socio-cultural world.

Scope

Wall (2006) writes that the scope offered by autoethnography varies widely: "from the highly introspective, through more familiar approaches connected to qualitative research, to somewhat experimental literary methods; experimental, at least, in terms of thinking of writing as research" (p.6). As previously mentioned, it also allows for flexibility in the balance of emphasis between the auto- (self), -ethno- (the cultural link), and -graphy (the application of a research process) elements (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). A balance that may shift and change during the life of project.

Autoethnography offers a breadth of possibility that feels liberating to this writer. As a research methodology autoethnography is less tethered to tradition and perhaps less 'safe' than other methods. Ellis (2009) writes of autoethnography as "unruly, dangerous, passionate, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative in motion, showing struggle, passion, embodied life, and collaborative creation of sense-making" (p. 363). The potential of autoethnography is, as Chapman-Clarke suggests, much more than simply a methodology or an approach for documenting research, it is an "intention is to speak from and to the head, heart, mind, body and soul" (Chapman-Clarke, 2016, p.12).

Education

By shedding light on society, culture and ways of being in this world, autoethnography can enhance understanding and educate writers and readers alike. The opportunity to inform and inspire gives purpose to this project, and is another reason why

the approach fits well. Hamdan (2012) writes of the educational function of autoethnography as follows:

> When writing an autoethnography, the researcher can develop a deeper understanding of his or her own life. Moreover, reading an autoethnography, one is able to view how others live their lives, which can also contribute to a deeper understanding of life in general. Therefore, autoethnography—whether read or written—has strong educational merit. (p. 585)

The "two kinds of intelligence" that the Sufi poet, Rumi (2004) speaks to in his poem of the same name (provided as Appendix 1) include an 'outer', worldly intelligence—developed in classrooms, through book learning and memorization— and an 'inner' intelligence that is a kind of "knowing" ... "a fountainhead from within you, moving out" (p. 178). The beauty of autoethnography includes its potential to invite intelligence from both realms, and especially its capacity to reveal and express … the "inner intelligence" of which Rumi wrote.

Humanness

All of the reasons above go some way to explaining why this methodology is 'fit for purpose', but there is something more fundamental as well. Something that relates to a "knowing, from within" (Rumi, 2004, p. 178); that values interiority, relationship and a perspective on reality that places humanity within an unfathomably larger and more incredible context than we dare to imagine. What I most love about autoethnography, in the context of a spiritual research paradigm, is the opportunity to step into this much bigger picture.

Bochner writes of autoethnography as an "existential calling" (2013, p 50). Chapman-Clarke speaks of it as an "epiphany", a "space for change", for exploring different ways of *being* in the world, and for connecting with the transpersonal (2016, p. 12). Yet, as Ellis suggests, you can't have autoethnography without that which is most human as central: "heart and soul: caring, feeling, passion, and vulnerability" (2009, p. 362). The researcher must be "impassioned and embodied, vulnerable and intimate" and our stories "evocative, dramatic, engaging" and "when the topic calls for it, even heart-breaking" (Ellis, 2009, p. 363). Perhaps it is through bringing our whole, embodied, humanness to this work, along with deep reflection and revelation of inner knowing, that we are able to "unlock" the "revoked parts" of ourselves, and to "embrace" our "otherness" as Wiesner so eloquently suggests (2020, p. 669).

In some ways, to me, autoethnography is like an island of refuge in an otherwise altogether hostile research sea. Other writers have written of it as "home" and I can relate to that too (Chapman-Clarke, 2016). It invites me into that which is mysterious and unfathomable, giving me full permission to enter and to report what I see. As Kristin Neff puts it, "it is as if a door has been opened and my job is to walk through it, not knowing what I might find, or what might happen" (as cited in Ballard, 2011, p.x).

Research Approach

Ellis and Bochner acknowledge that "autoethnography does not proceed linearly" (2000 p. 119), and for Wall, it is complex, not conducted according to a special formula, and can be likened to being sent "into the woods without a compass" (2006, p. 120). This was certainly the experience of this researcher, although I had faith that, as my supervisor

suggested, “my method will find its own equilibrium” (L. Gardner, personal communication, March 31, 2021).

Positioning of self and co-researcher/collaborators

Regarding the positioning of myself and others in this research; I investigated my own experiences and included four others as collaborators/co-researchers. The four collaborators were the only other people directly involved in the last months of Harald’s life. My intentions were that the co-researchers would validate my own recollections and perspectives as well as providing alternative and differing recollections and perspectives. What I did not foresee was the richness and depth of the discussion we would share.

Data gathering

The data gathering activities involved in this research included those following.

Review of personal journal entries. I conducted a review of journal entries made over the years I knew, and was married to, Harald—up to and beyond his death—with particular attention to entries describing, or reflecting on: a) episodes of depression and/or suicidality; b) poignant or evocative aspects of our relationship and bond; c) events taking place in the lead up and aftermath of his death; d) our ongoing connection. This review was conducted with an eye to what Chang (2008) refers to as “border-crossing experiences”—those which occur when you find yourself in unfamiliar situations, or at odds with the cultural context (p. 73).

Review of relevant emails. I reviewed and compiled a selection of emails authored by Harald, myself and/or friends with particular attention to those which illuminated unusual and/or culturally contradictory aspects of our relationship and/or his death.

Conduct of Joint Reflection Session. I invited the four friends who had journeyed toward the suicide with Harald, and were closest at the time of his death, to participate in a three-hour "joint reflection session", via Zoom. I sent these four potential co-researchers the *Letter of Information* (see Appendix B) and *Participant Consent Form* (see Appendix C) for their review. They each gave written consent prior to the session.

The Joint Reflection Session was structured in accordance with an *Interview Questions Guide* (Appendix D), which was provided to participants prior to the session. An audio-video recording of the joint reflection session was made via Zoom. I used otter.ai to roughly transcribe the recording and then corrected and edited the transcript myself, which was then sent by encrypted email to the co-researchers for review. At the request of one co-researcher a few words were removed from the transcript. Once all co-researchers approved the transcript and maintained their commitment to be a part of the inquiry, I began the analysis and interpretation process.

Maintenance of reflexive journal. Throughout the data gathering process, I kept a journal of observational and reflective writings including: issues and concerns, intuitions, dreams, synchronicities, conversations, ideas, questions arising, experiences, received wisdom, and so on. This activity highlights the reflexive nature of autoethnographic work and was essential to the process of recognizing the 'next step', and to analyzing and interpreting the dialogue between my and others' stories and the broader cultural and spiritual landscape.

Selection of Poetry and Quotes. As inspired by my reflections along the way, I gathered together and included relevant quotes and poetry from my personal collection.

Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis and interpretation of data gathered included the following activities: reviewing selected journal entries, emails and other relevant text-based items; reviewing the joint reflection session transcript; reflexive journaling to capture musings, experiences and ideas; note-taking to capture insights and realizations with respect to the relationship between my/our experience and the cultural context, themes emerging, snippets from conversations, relevant prose/quotes/poetry and so on.

Analysis and interpretation of data gathered drew upon three complementary approaches/orientations: Buber's philosophy of dialogue, critical theory and hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology. The relevance and application of each is outlined below.

Philosophy of Dialogue

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was an Austrian Jewish and Israeli philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism which centers on the distinction between two modes of being: the 'I–It' (Ich-es)—objectifying—relationship with others and our world, and an 'I–Thou' (Ich-Du) relationship which recognizes the "mutual and holistic existence of two entities" (Morgan & Guilherme, 2010, p. 982).

For Buber the I-Thou relationship was not exclusive to human beings, but could also take place "between human beings and reality, and between human beings and God"—as the ultimate 'Thou' (Morgan & Guilherme, 2010, p. 994). Buber saw that living an authentic life involves "awareness of interconnection through genuine and responsible engagement with the world"; where the concept of authenticity is a 'relational happening' rather than a 'subjective state of being' (Adame, 2020, p. 1-2).

For Buber, I-Thou relating—as an "encounter of equals, who recognize each other as such"—is a necessary precondition to true *dialogue* (Morgan & Guilherme, 2010, p. 982). The give and take in such dialogue not only develops our understanding of others, but also of ourselves, if we are truly open to change via the encounter (Adame, 2020). Buber's 'dialogue' does not necessarily lead to consensus or a merging of perspectives, but instead contains the potential for a "coconstructed reality" to be born (Adame, 2020).

Buber's concept of dialogue within I-Thou relating provided an important philosophical undergirding for the analysis and interpretation of the 'encounters' within this research project. Such encounters included those with and between: my own memories and recollections, the perspectives and contributions of collaborators; existing cultural opinion and critique; and the realm of the sacred and spiritual, which may be conceived of as a greater reality within which all such encounter unfolds.

Critical Theory

The taboo and stigma associated with suicide is well-entrenched in our culture. Critical theorists argue for the social sciences to integrate philosophy into their research methods in order to advance the higher moral cause of freeing human beings from circumstances that dominate and oppress (Horkheimer, 1993). Critical theory aims to change society by revealing the underlying assumptions that impede citizens from genuinely understanding how the world works. It seeks to enlighten, emancipate and transform both society and the self (Strydom, 2011).

This work offers such an "emancipatory interest in knowledge" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 144). Through analysis of an experience at odds with prevailing cultural norms and opinions—a kind of 'white crow'—this research opens and creates the

kind of space in which freedom from powerful, oppressive and/or unseen social forces can be conceived. Thereby making a constructive contribution to "emancipation from repressive institutions and ideologies" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009, p. 50). Critical theory empowered the analysis and interpretation of data gathered for this autoethnography, resulting in research which defies cultural expectations, highlights repressive norms and encourages liberation from stultifying social expectations and constraints.

Hermeneutic Interpretive Phenomenology

Underpinned by Heideggerian philosophy, interpretive phenomenology is useful when research involves seeking meaning for the purpose of understanding the lived human experience (Crist & Tanner, 2002; Standing, 2009). Lived experience includes the context, history, meaning and understanding of events that occur in our lives. The central concept, 'being-in-the-world' (Dasein in German), recognizes the interrelatedness of mind, body, lived experience, and historical or social context (Heidegger, 1962). Standing (2009) defines this as "bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings seamlessly connected to the world through past, present and potential lived experience" (p. 22).

Van Manen (1990) saw that the meaning of a lived experience could be multi-dimensional and multi-layered, its meaning being dependent on the various contexts in which people are immersed. Hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology assumes that we make sense of lived experience "according to its personal significance for us", and that "experiential, practical and primordial (instinctive) understanding is more meaningful than abstract, theoretical knowledge" (Standing, 2009). Rather than an effort to generalize, attention is given to the "instance" and to celebrating the "stubborn

particular" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 4); an apt description of Harald himself. Hermeneutics is also concerned with "understanding, not explanation" and it strives to remain open to mystery (Moules et al., 2015, p. 5).

Hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology guided the process of deriving meaning from the data gathered in that interpretation and sense-making developed in parallel with writings, observations and interviews (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Such an "hermeneutic circle" is seen as "a continuous process of interpreting lived experience and reinforcing or revising perceptions about oneself and others" (Standing, 2009). It is sometimes visualized as a spiral to represent this "widening of the whole as it is informed and shaped by each partial understanding or viewpoint" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 44), generating understanding from "a stance of focused curiosity and reflexive attention to different standpoints and ways of seeing a topic" (Moules et al., 2015, p.122).

With hermeneutic analysis, an interview such as the joint reflection session conducted with my co-researchers, was " not just a question of extracting information" from participants, but of "joining … in an exploration of community, or culture of which they are a part and have expertise to share" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 42). Hermeneutical questioning was informed by a "humility toward one's own not knowing", a sincere curiosity toward what the other might have to say, and an orientation toward shared understanding, "not simply taking information for one's own ends" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 42).

Hermeneutic research is "an action called upon for the achievement of some moral good"; an ethical obligation to ask "what can I add to the larger conversation … that might help us see, think about, act differently towards the phenomenon?" (Moules et

al., 2015, p. 58). Hermeneutic researchers are drawn toward a larger idea, both in their research, but beyond that, in their "lifeworlds" (Moules, et al., 2015, p. 60). The nature of hermeneutic experience is dialogical, in that "it enters into a relationship with the unusual and the strange and is transformed by it" (Moules, et al., 2015, p. 67).

Ethical Considerations

The ethical question of 'who owns a story?' may generate a range of responses, but as Goodwin et al. suggest, it is ultimately "the responsibility of the researcher to shape data in line with ethical and moral considerations" (2003, p. 569). This is a responsibility I take very seriously.

Honoring the interconnectedness of experience is important to this project. I recognize this story as mine, and also shared; primarily, with Harald, and with my co-researchers. Regarding the ethical inclusion of others, it is important to state the following; that I know I have Harald's permission to write freely about our life together. He encouraged my journaling throughout our relationship and repeatedly gave permission for me to write publicly about him in any way I saw fit. This is but one example of the 'fearless honesty' mentioned earlier.

The major ethical consideration with this research was to protect co-researcher anonymity and ensure that the possibility of harm to co-researchers was prevented or minimized. Anonymity was discussed with co-researchers in the initial correspondence, as well as before the joint reflection session. Due consideration was also given to the potential for the reflection session to generate psychological and emotional stress as participants recounted their experiences relating to Harald's death. Based upon our

previous experiences together, I hoped that any difficulties would be ameliorated by further connection, reflection and healing, and this was the case.

Safety of the researcher and co-researcher is of primary importance in the design and implementation of a research project. To this end, I considered all of the following: informed consent, opportunities to opt-out, anonymity and confidentiality, mitigation of threat or harm, and data security. Activities associated with each are explained briefly below.

Information and Consent. I provided co-researchers with the *Letter of Information* and sought their initial approval to schedule a joint reflection session. Co-researchers gave informed consent using the *Participant Consent Form* (see Appendix C). The *Interview Questions Guide* (see Appendix D) was provided in the week prior to the joint reflection session and all co-researcher questions or concerns were addressed before the session was conducted.

Opportunities to Opt-out. Co-researchers were informed that they had the right to opt out of the project at any time, without penalty, until the data analysis began. I offered co-researchers an opportunity to review and make revisions to their portion of the session transcript before approving the transcript for the data analysis phase.

Anonymity and Confidentiality. I made every effort to ensure confidentiality of co-researcher identities. Identifying information was limited to the raw data (the audio/video recording). The transcript did not include any identifying information, which meant that all transcribed data were anonymous.

Mitigation of Threat or Harm. The possibility of threat or harm to co-researchers was mitigated through the informed consent process and by ensuring that

there were opportunities to opt-out at any time. I took all possible steps to maximize confidentiality and anonymity. The *Interview Questions Guide* (Appendix D), provided ahead of time, was designed to allow time for reflection and preparation prior to the interview.

As the co-researchers were known to me, I was aware that all were experienced in holistic self-care and would be well-placed to support themselves—spiritually and emotionally—and/or to seek relevant support or help, after the session, as required.

Data Security. All computer files were encrypted on a password protected computer. The session transcript was delivered via encrypted email to each co-researcher for review. Electronic data will be kept for 5 years in the St. Stephen's College vault on an encrypted USB Key. I will retain the USB Keypassword in the case that the data needs to be retrieved within this timeframe.

Ethics Approval

An ethics application submitted to the University of Alberta's Human Research Ethics Board received approval on August 22nd, 2021. The ethics application process included: an explanation of the study staff, funding and location; a study summary; risks and benefits assessments; participant information, recruitment, and informed consent; data privacy and confidentiality; and supplementary documentation (i.e. information, consent and interview materials for participants).

Evaluation of Rigor

Morse et al. (2002) insist that "without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility" (p. 4). Those of us with writerly sensibilities might be tempted to challenge the implied equivalence of 'fiction' and 'worthlessness' in this

statement, but the point is never-the-less made. When it comes to the evaluation of quantitative research the "holy trinity" of objectivity, reliability and validity (Spencer et al., 2003, p. 59) are traditionally applied, but considerable debate continues regarding the relevance of such criteria when it comes to qualitative research methodologies—or indeed whether criteria should be used at all (Cho & Trent, 2006; de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Northcote, 2012; Yardley, 2000).

Whether or not research is 'good research' is an important question to ask, regardless of the research paradigm within which the research is conducted (Northcote, 2012). Many authors have made attempts to review or devise evaluative criteria for interpretive qualitative research, generally, and autoethnographic research, specifically (Cho & Trent, 2006; Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Morse et al., 2002; Northcote, 2012; Schroeder, 2017; Yardley, 2000).

The nature of knowledge within the naturalistic/qualitative paradigm is different from that within the rationalistic/quantitative paradigm and therefore requires different criteria for addressing rigor/trustworthiness (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Morse et al., 2002; Northcote, 2012; Yardley, 2000). For this reason, Northcote (2012) argues that attempts to evaluate qualitative research using criteria designed for quantitative research are as "absurd in [their] inappropriateness" as judging a "good apple according to the criteria of a "good orange" (p. 100). As Cho and Trent (2006) point out, the "conception of validity that is appropriate" will necessarily be "dependent upon the inquiry paradigms being engaged" (2006, p. 320).

It is clear that evaluation criteria make sense when it comes to "wide applicability and generalizability", but how might they work, for "interpretivist, critical, feminist, and

Indigenous researchers, including autoethnographers" who are "not looking for objective knowledge that exists outside of themselves, their community, their readers" (Schroeder, 2017, p. 323)? Evaluation criteria can have a "restrictive limiting, regressive, thwarting, halting quality to them" and may "never be completely separated from the structures of power in which they are situated" (Bochner, 2000, p. 269). However, as Schroeder demonstrates, criteria can also aide communication, by creating, a helpful "layer of mediation" between a researcher and their readers; a space where critique can occur without concern for the sensitivity of the subject of the research (2017, p. 325).

Strategies designed to uphold the validity of quantitative research are underpinned by measures to reduce and eliminate researcher values and biases (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, a defining characteristic of interpretive phenomenology, including autoethnography, is that findings are not neutral and value-free (Morse et al., 2002), but rather the researcher's preconceptions, biases and assumptions are integral to the study's findings (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Such inquiry does not exclude the researcher from the study, but rather it incorporates the researcher's, and any co-researchers', experiences (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Researchers must have direct experience of the phenomenon in question to facilitate the discovery of its "essence and meaning" (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1572).

Interpretive phenomenological research, including autoethnography, may be concerned with "meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality, not quantity; with experience not behavior" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1984, p.42), but it is not a process without rigor (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). The following section provides an outline of my approach to ensure the value and quality of this research.

Criteria for Assessing this Autoethnography

If we agree that good autoethnography achieves the (happy) marriage of art and science, then, as Schroeder (2017) argues, our challenge is in assessing the usefulness, value, and validity of methods and expressions that were once the preserve of artists and writers. If the goal of (my) art-plus-science AE within a 'spiritual research paradigm' is, essentially, "understanding and transformation", the question is: what part might evaluative criteria play in assessing the value and quality of such a work (2017, p. 323)? Or, as Schroeder elegantly puts it: "What criteria might exist that could ensnare such a chimera?" (2017, p. 318). Toward this end I appreciated Schroeder's suggestion that evaluation criteria can help focus not only a review of the overall work but also on "what the author herself indicated she hoped to accomplish" (2017, p. 325). This provided a helpful 'reframe' for me.

Schroeder (2017) has engaged with the "what criteria?" question in a way that makes good sense to me. He reviewed twelve sources of potential criteria for evaluating autoethnographic research and organized these into six categories. He then sought feedback from a community of autoethnographic researchers on the categories and the criteria contained within each (Schroeder, 2017). Schroeder's six categories provide a framework for housing evaluation criteria which assess the value and quality of an intended research project (2017). Below are the criteria most relevant from Schroeder's (2017) "possible criteria for review and evaluation of AEs" with respect to the value and trustworthiness of this study. These are: 1) revealing the self, 2) exploring culture, 3) storycraft, 4) ethics, 5) social justice, and 6) sacredness.

Revealing the Self (auto). Schroeder's first three categories derive directly from 'autoethnography' as the methodology's name, with the first part 'auto' relating to the effectiveness with which one reveals one's self in the work (2017). The revelation of my own experience and its expression in the context of this research project is demonstrated by: a) fidelity, or faithfulness to what actually happened for me during the experiences conveyed (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995); b) reflexivity, as the capacity to stand back and examine my own feelings, reactions, and motives and how these influenced what I did and didn't do (Richardson, 2000); and c) expression of a lived-reality—that this work effectively conveys an embodied sense of a lived experience (Richardson, 2000).

Exploring Culture/Society (ethno). Exploration of the cultural context for my experiences includes the identification and critiquing of existing power systems—including religious, medical and psychological—within the sociocultural context (Spry, 2011), and the "deep and careful self-reflection to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political" (Chang, 2008, p. 54).

Storycraft (graphy). Written expression is guided by a balance of "intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion and creativity" (Adams et al. 2017, p. 2), thus reflecting the marriage of art and science discussed earlier. Autoethnographic studies are sometimes short-changed by an unscholarly representation of the research, including: overreliance on an evocative personal writing style to arouse emotional responses in readers but without reflection or analytic scholarship; lack of self-honesty and disclosure about the motivation for doing the research and a failure to see and articulate the

relationship between personal experience and broader theoretical and cultural concepts (Duncan, 2004).

As identified in the plan provided, this writer appreciates that the essence of good autoethnography is in the critical, theory-based dialogue between the story/experience and the cultural context. Careful and rigorous attendance to this 'call and response' conversation ensures a balanced and yet scholarly representation of the research results.

Ethics. Ethical considerations for this work have been articulated in a previous section of this proposal. They reflect criteria relating to 'voice', including who speaks for whom, to whom, and for what purpose (Lincoln, 1995), as well as the importance of a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation (Adams et al. 2017).

Social Justice and Transformation. Social justice and transformation objectives are especially important to this research. Goodall (2000) suggests that to achieve such objectives we must serve a purpose of challenging or furthering what readers already know; writing about the self in ways that lead to readers' personal reflection.

Duncan writes that an autoethnographic study can avoid being self-serving by "proving how it is useful to others with similar concerns" (2004, p. 35). The proposed study is certainly intended to be useful, perhaps even inspiring, to others bereaved by suicide whose stories have not yet found a voice in mainstream research and reportage. Similarly, Eisner & Peshkin (1991) suggest that a study may be considered useful (and perhaps even transformative), if it helps readers to: comprehend or understand a situation that is otherwise enigmatic or confusing; anticipate future possibilities and scenarios, or if

it acts as a guide, highlighting particular aspects of a situation that might otherwise go unnoticed.

By providing access to an uncommon experience with suicide and bereavement, along with critical and contextual analysis of this experience, the study will motivate personal reflection and cultural criticism for the purposes of social growth and transformation.

Sacredness. Into his sixth "unclassified" evaluation category, Schroeder (2017) groups criteria which did not find a place in the previous five (p. 344). However, as my own sixth category, I am suggesting "sacredness" as offered by Lincoln (1995), and included by Schroeder in the previous category of social justice and transformation. For Lincoln (1995), sacredness "emerges from a profound concern for human dignity, justice and interpersonal respect" (p. 283). To my own mind, such 'profound concern' takes us beyond society, into human beingness and the spiritual. For Pargament (2007), spirituality is a search for the sacred. It is my sincere hope that this research makes its own contribution to this search.

Additional comments on evaluation of rigor

Although validity claims may seem incongruous with a spiritual research paradigm, where the "objective boundary of mind and matter is a false construct", Brantmeier and Brantmeier (2016) stress the importance of "matching method with the type of truth claim being made" (p. 246), the point being that the "research question should ultimately steer the method chosen for inquiry" (p. 244). The suitability of autoethnography within a SRP to the intended research has been explained at some length

in earlier sections of this chapter, and, in this section, the relevance of Schroeder's (2017) evaluation categories and sub-criteria, to this project, have been clearly outlined.

While scientific paradigms continue to dominate research, knowledge gained through insight, intuition and inner awareness may continue to be seen as "illegitimate sources of attaining truth" (Lamb, 2016, p. 62). However, the prejudices that lead to such views have precluded many from understanding what it is that people who engage with spiritual practices actually do, or what they gain from these practices (Lamb, 2016). This inquiry supports and contributes to the development of such an expanded understanding.

Chapter 4: Findings

This autoethnographic enquiry draws upon my own lived experience and that of four others bereaved by the voluntary death of our beloved Harald, on March 20, 2018 in Melbourne, Australia. Findings are organized into constructed narratives, intended to describe and illuminate our individual and shared experiences. Particular attention is given to story elements that challenge common cultural beliefs about suicides and the bereaved; including that suicide is violent, irrational, tragic, selfish, unexpected and always the result of mental illness, and that those bereaved by suicide are stigmatized, guilt-laden, devastated, angry and/or ashamed. The experiences reported are personal and particular and reflect positions of relative social and cultural privilege.

Orientation

This section provides explanatory, orientating information about my co-researchers and their connection to Harald, the journal entries included in the findings, and the organization of findings presented in the sections that follow.

Co-researchers. Four co-researcher-collaborators participated in this enquiry. In making every effort to preserve the anonymity of these dear and courageous friends, I have used pseudonyms throughout, and make no reference to their ages, professions, current geographical locations or any other identifying characteristics in the presentation of these findings.

In terms of context, Michael, Otis and Jack were close friends of Harald's. Anna is Jack's life-partner. Harald and I were close with Jack and Anna—as couples—during our marriage, and they were both very involved in the months and weeks before Harald's death.

Journal Entries. In the nine years that I knew Harald I made 2121 journal entries at an average rate of 235 per year. Entries included in these findings have been lightly edited, and pseudonyms used where appropriate.

Organization of Findings. The findings that follow are organized into four sections. Each section is a narrative composition that variously includes:

- Contextualized excerpts from the Joint Reflection Session.
- Selected personal journal entries (identifiable by date)
- Received and sent emails
- Supplementary writings
- Quotations and poetry.

As an orientation to what follows, a title and a brief statement about each composition is provided below.

Presence: This first composition includes two sub-sections entitled, *Unapologetically Harald*, and *A Real Relationship*. Together they describe Harald's character and the nature of our relationship as a couple.

Perspectives: This second composition includes four sub-sections entitled: *Co-researcher Perspectives*, *Conversations with Harald*, *Dancing with Death* and *A Considered Choice*. Together they explore the group's views on suicide before and after Harald's death and our experiences with him along the way.

Departure: This composition describes key events that took place in the lead up, at the time, and just after Harald's death. It includes sub-sections entitled: *Prelude, Departure*, *The Viewing* and *Connection, Challenge and Mystery*.

Grace: This final composition includes sub-sections entitled *Gifts* and *Love*. It explores the unexpected gifts received and some challenges faced through our participation in this unusual journey.

The four compositions described above are preceded by the following; an entry from the reflexive journal I kept throughout the course of this project:

Compose (February 16, 2022)

It's Harald's birthday today. He would have been 61.

Yesterday I drew a single tarot card from Mystic Medusa's site.

It was:

Compose

You have all the ingredients that you need at hand. No need to add on or pursue peripheral phantoms. This scenario is merely a matter of ordering and arranging them more optimally. Gather the disparate parts of yourself or a situation, objectively classify them and re-assemble. Rationally working with what you have reveals concealed treasures.

I knew the truth of it immediately and reoriented my work-plan accordingly. Later I was taken by the beauty of the word itself and its different meanings—qualities of rested assuredness, rhythm, elegance and design. Mid-mindless-click-stream, it had dropped in, light as a feather to show me the way.

Presence

I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Unapologetically Harald

Harald had an impressive presence. He was tall, German, upright and generally possessed of a rare equanimity. All of which, combined with a Capricorn ascendant, gave off an air of authority and assurance. He appeared straight, distinguished and serious, but was actually highly nonconformist, quirky and often hilarious. I noticed and spoke of this contradiction during our first date. He'd nodded, and told me that as a young man, if the police got called to a party, it was he who was sent to the door.

Harald's voice was deep, distinctive and contradictory as well; German and American accents merging to produce a kind of clipped drawl. Being quick to indignance he could be strident and quite gruff. When coupled with an occasional error in syntax or pronunciation—given that English was his second language—this combination produced wonderfully original expression. When Michael, Otis, Jack, Anna and I had come together for the first time, after Harald's death four years ago, we'd discovered, to great amusement, that each of used a 'Harald voice' to mimic his frequent vocal vexations.

When we came together again for the Joint Reflection Session in February, I asked about each co-researcher's relationship with Harald, and the impersonations flowed again. Otis remembered first meeting Harald, in California, many years ago, at a retreat with the spiritual teacher Adi Da:

I was lumped in a small room with him . . . and he wasn't very happy about that. He was like "but surely they can see this is only enough room for one person! What are you talking about?" And I'm like "no, they said this *room . . . look, I'm happy to just sleep on the floor right here and I won't get in your way" and he's like "Oh! These management! What are they thinking? I'm here doing very important work!"*

Jack then offered his own 'meeting Harald' story:

The first time I saw Harald, I was sitting in a room with [spiritual teacher] Bob Adamson and about 15 other people. The room was arranged with Bob at the front. I was way down in the back corner, and all the chairs were around the outside of the room . . . like a big circle. And Harald was sitting on the floor, on a camping chair, right in the middle of everyone. He was the only one down there and he was continually firing questions at Bob, that were quite aggressive—"But it doesn't fucking WORK!"—and there was occasional tut-tutting from the group but Bob was really enjoying it and trying to convince Harald that the only real issue he had was that his mind was insisting on expecting something that was . . . not real.

We all knew Harald to have an incredibly strong mind and an equally soft heart; that it took a certain willingness, on the part of another, to brave his hard exterior and discover the deep warmth within. His mind had also been extremely quick to critique—I used to call him the 'flaw finder'. As Jack explained:

He had an engineer's mind, which I recognized because I have something very similar, in that everything you see in the world, you see as something that needs to

be improved or fixed. We enjoyed talking a lot about pretty much anything in the world that needed to be fixed or improved. However, he seemed to be much more brought down by the fact that <something> wasn't fixed, than I was. I was just much more excited about the possibility of fixing things.

Above all it was Harald's qualities of honesty, openness and authenticity that were most beloved by all of us. Michael shared stories of life with Harald in the Adi Da ashram, to illustrate:

I really enjoyed how honest he was, you know . . . and also just really enjoyed how sort of . . . apparently free of taboos he was. You know . . . there's all sorts of society formulas that you're supposed to be like, and there were also, you know, rules and regulations about how you were supposed to live on the ashram and Harald just didn't give a shit about any of those . . . just none*. You know . . . you're supposed to eat a pure diet and stuff like that, and Harald would just openly eat chips and chocolate . . . all the time.*

And then also, you know, like, the peak experience of the ashram was to go and sit in meditation with Adi Da, or maybe go and have a conversation with him in a group setting. And everyone really wanted to do that . . . and also felt obliged to do that . . . and sometimes Harald would just say, "Oh, no, I've had a big day. I couldn't give a fuck", you know, "I'm just gonna stay in my room and eat chips and watch a movie". And I was like, "What!?" Like, you just didn't . . . no one did that on the ashram. So he really stood out as just . . . not giving a shit about rules.

For Jack, Harald's openness meant feeling "free to talk about absolutely anything . . . and you just knew that his response was going to be dead honest . . . and that was so refreshing". I invited Jack to say more about this 'freedom', and he continued:

> *. . . in most social interactions, apart from with my/our best friends . . . you find yourself needing to bring a character . . . a slight protection . . . for the situation . . . and you just need to sort of have an ongoing maintenance of that character in that social situation. And with Harald, it was just never any sense of any need to have to maintain a character in front of him. So . . . 'self' kind of disappears; there's no need to have a self in those situations . . . it's just the situation. And so it meant that conversations . . . had a sense . . . that you're both standing on the ground . . . really solid ground . . . and you're bringing your perspectives from your own truth without any sort of . . . editing, I guess . . . it's a deeply relaxing type of relationship to spend time in.*

Michael connected Harald's honesty to his being 'on the spectrum'; which seemed highly likely and was acknowledged so by Harald, but, to my knowledge, never assessed or diagnosed:

> *He had this sort of brutal honesty, which, you know, from a psychological point of view, looking back, I would say that he had elements of high-functioning autism. Because the honesty was, firstly, his style—but it also came out of a type of insensitivity to other people's feelings. He wasn't a mean person. He just . . . he had some sort of block in terms of empathy.*

Anna reflected that Harald's authenticity could be freeing for some, and intimidating to many:

<Harald> was extremely authentic—one of the most authentic people I think I've ever met. And there is a beauty in that . . . and . . . a freedom to be you, as well. I think he opens it up . . . by him saying "fuck it" to all the rules, basically, just . . . unapologetically being Harald. So it allows everyone else to do that, if you're not scared off by that [laughs], by Harald . . . which . . . I think he did scare off some people, potentially, though . . . being as 'unapologetically Harald' as he was. But I think that the people that could see past that, and actually kind of see the softness that was there and . . . his ability to see the beauty, at times . . . you know, <we> would go on nature walks, and he would love that kind of thing. And <he was> the best hugger—apart from Jack—that I know . . . just ridiculously warm in those moments.

Otis spoke to Harald's lack of judgement of others:

I found him to be very non-judgmental, which, you know, we can all say, "I'm not judgmental", but we all judge, at times. And I found him to be uniquely un-judgmental, which is a quality that I deeply appreciate.

Michael added:

Yeah, it's also part of his "fuck you" to all the rules, because if there are no rules, there's no foundation on which to judge anyone. You're not supposed to be any particular way.

Michael spoke about being inspired by Harald and his complex character:

I found him quite inspirational, in his honesty. It inspired me to be honest. And exactly what you were saying, Jack, that we all have social personas and

characters. And with him, it inspired me to drop that, which was . . . you know, I have . . . a small number of good friends with whom I can do that, but not many. And yeah, <he> was this very strange combination of: the honesty; the "fuck you" to rules; the great warmth; but also a huge *intellect. I mean, fuck that guy was smart!*

Yeah . . . a very unusual combination of things. So . . . as you guys were saying, if you were brave enough to wade into a conversation with Harald, you'd be guaranteed it will be interesting [group laughter] . . . but you had to want to go there.

And not everybody did. There were a lot of people who were put off, disturbed, or offended, even, by Harald's consistent rejection of social niceties and norms.

[Anna] I think a lot of people rely on those social norms and sticking <to them> . . . you know, you don't talk about particular things and, you know, that's how they navigate through it.

[Libby] And maybe because it feels safer? . . . There's comfort in that isn't there? "We know no-one's going to go outside of the box." And then here we are, we're all, like, "oh, no, fuck, let us out of the box!". It's kind of interesting . . .

[Michael] Yeah. And then you combine that with . . . the overarching topic of this session . . . suicide, which is one of the single most taboo topics in our society. And the fact that, as a number of you mentioned, you know, you could talk freely with Harald about all the pros and cons. Like, whoa, that's really fucking unusual.

[Jack] And awesome. [Anna] And healthy. [Michael] Absolutely. Yeah.

A Real Relationship

A real relationship is made of two independently-filled hearts, together, giving everything and needing nothing.

(John de Ruiter)

For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.

(Rainer Maria Rilke)

I was not new to relationship, or marriage, when I met Harald. Five years earlier, in my late 30's, I'd been brought to shuddering halt by a second divorce. The years that followed were spent in deep psychological and spiritual contemplation. And then I met Harald. Rilke's words were a touchstone throughout our time together.

As the group's reflections attest, Harald was a complex man, whose thoughts, speech and behavior frequently ruffled feathers and defied convention. During our marriage he joked that he was my sādhanā—a Sanskrit term that loosely translates to spiritual practice: the exercise of discipline to attain deeper wisdom or enlightenment. He was right. Our relationship became the single-most deeply developmental experience of my life. The following journal entries offer a tiny inkling of what marriage to Harald was like.

Holiday with H (August 3, 2011)

(This journal entry—just over a year into our marriage—describes the final day of our 10-day holiday together in far-north Queensland, Australia. The entire holiday Harald had been in a dark funk and I had exhausted myself trying to reach him.)

Yesterday we drove all the way to Palm Cove in silence. Almost an hour and forty-five minutes. I wasn't angry anymore, I was just tired, and it felt more comfortable to simply sit and drive.

Palm Cove was windy and unpleasant. We walked along the esplanade trying to find somewhere a little sheltered to eat. That was when H asked "How long are you going to punish me for my behavior?" I said I wasn't meaning to punish him, I just had nothing to say and needed some space. That I felt infected by his anger and ugliness.

He said that's how he feels.

I said I wasn't punishing him, just withdrawing.

He said that was the same thing.

I didn't protest.

"So you're responding to my drama with your drama?" he asked.

I said I didn't feel like there was anything else I could do.

He said that's how he feels.

And suddenly he was ten paces ahead, striding on without me.

When we'd both stopped outside the next café, I said I felt like the emotional connection between us had been lost and I didn't know how to get it back and that felt awful. Tears started to flow, and soon I was sniveling and gasping for air.

At H's suggestion we abandoned Palm Cove and drove on to Cairns. Again, in silence. I almost spoke a few times but stopped myself, figuring it'd be safer to focus on driving and have the conversation when we sat to eat. We ended up at a nice Italian place on the esplanade with a view of the water, beautiful sunshine and no wind; it was a lucky find.

To me it seemed the core of the situation was H's refusal to do anything about what was obviously (to me) a well-entrenched pattern of behavior that negatively impacted himself and those around him. It seemed fully 'ripe' to be dealt with, and I couldn't understand why anyone wouldn't. But this was a constant bone of contention between us . . . whether change is realized through effort, as I believed, or whether it just happens, as and when, regardless, as he did.

Every time we met on this ground I came away feeling annihilated by his intellect. Unable to pierce the perfection of his argument. Knowing all the while that it was just an argument . . . a collection of beliefs, no more irrevocably true than mine or yours.

But I knew I had to start somewhere, so I gave it another go.

"It seems that we are in clear disagreement about whether people can be helped to change. And the thing that bugs me most is that you don't seem to want to help yourself."

"My opinion—that people are not changed by effort—is based on observation of many, many people over a long time" he replied.

"And mine is based on experience. Therapy has been really helpful for me. And I don't like it when you reject that, and say that it hasn't."

I pointed out that his opinion was just a belief.

“No, it’s an insight”, he said.

He said it boiled down to whether I could be with him without wanting to change him. That he felt my need to change him. That the need to change things was at the core of all suffering.

Which got me ranting about how ridiculous it was (for him) to be angry about being born—the one thing all humans have in common. To be angry at the universe; not at anything in particular, just at the overall entirety of it all; how impenetrable his rage could then be! How entirely encompassing and justified! How brilliant he was to choose ‘the universe’ to be pissed with! That if ever there was a way to ensure never-ending torment, surely that was it.

He agreed. And let out a little laugh.

I asked why he was never angry with me. What made it so that he could direct his anger elsewhere and be so unconditional in his love for me. He said it wasn’t just me, he managed it with others, and gave the example of [his friend] Ted.

I asked why then couldn’t he offer that unconditional love to himself? Or to the universe?

He said he had ‘insight’ in certain areas but not in others—that he had no other way of explaining it. That he was aware of it, but simply couldn’t change it.

Reaching H (February 12, 2015)

During yesterday H was very bothered by pain in his back. I offered a massage which was refused. I then left him alone—gently checking in every now and then.

Later in the afternoon he hovered at my bedroom door and I offered another massage. This time the offer was accepted. There were many specific instructions throughout. I did my best, in some heat and sweating, to just love him with my hands as best I could. Nothing more, just love.

After that we lay together for quite some time. He napped. Twitched. Talked in his sleep. And I just held him. Relaxing together and being close with nowhere else to be. We spent a long time like this. Maybe two hours or more. Lying one way, then the other, then flat. Eventually I got up. H didn't want to get up and stayed a while longer.

Last night it was still difficult for him to sit. For a while he sat cross-legged and I massaged his back again. More instructions. More love.

This morning he said it felt a little better. He seemed much brighter. He held me in bed and told me he loved me. Nuzzled my boobs until Harry glimmered. Hopped on for The Big Kahuna. Seemed full of love.

What is so clear to me is that nothing is more important than being love.

Whenever he's angry, upset, controlling, whatever. Just being love is all that's required. Meeting him underneath it all. Reaching for him in whatever gentle way I can. Unflinchingly with him. Never against. Showing him, always, that I love him, unconditionally, no matter what.

Whether he is able to respond is not important.

What's important is the loving, the giving, the tenderness, the reach.

The (partial) entry below followed a deep conversation with my husband David's twin brother Chris in October last year (2021). He had asked me how my work on this

thesis was progressing, and it morphed into a conversation about my marriage to Harald and more.

The Chris Convo (October 24, 2021)

We talked about Harald's brutal honesty, possibly due to his Asperger's tendencies. That, on a Saturday afternoon, if a cashier at the supermarket asked "what do you have planned for the rest of the day?", he would frequently answer "getting stoned and having sex". And how my own initial embarrassment, at such unfiltered honesty, soon gave way to amusement and occasionally delight when, unexpectedly, an unfiltered response was returned.

I told Chris how, if I wandered into H's study and began talking, he might interrupt me and say "I'm not interested in this now", or "I don't have the mind for that, baby". That in the early months of us living together this frequently took me back. It didn't feel like I was asking a lot, a few minutes to share some nonsense that had fluttered across my path. It was an easy thing to take personally, to feel like it was me that wasn't interesting or that what I was speaking of had no value. Often, I came to realize, the latter was true, and, as a result, to use Chris' word, I learned to triage my communication with Harald. To share or take only what was most important to him, and to give fair warning when a meaningful conversation was required.

The flip side of Harald's unwillingness to feign interest was his capacity to be 100% present and available to me in a way that I had never experienced before in my life. When he was 'with me', there was nothing else. It was as though the entire universe was available to me. When he wasn't there was nothing I could do

to change that. With Harald I learned that giving someone your full, undivided attention was love.

And I experienced his love as unconditional. There was nothing we couldn't discuss; no topic was taboo, no feeling too shameful to be spoken, no request or suggestion too outrageous to make. Thanks to Harald's unwavering frankness, I always knew where he stood, in our relationship. I never had to guess. If ever something was awry I knew he would tell me, and the depth of that knowing freed me in a way that I'd never been experienced before.

When we first came together we spoke about not being responsible for the other's happiness. I remember the exact moment. We were walking from the car to my apartment, just about to climb the three flights of rear wooden stairs, and Harald said "we are not responsible for each other's happiness". It stopped me in my tracks, because I knew the truth of it, and I loved that he did too.

When I think of that now, given how things ended up, I see yet another gift, in how he was with me. He was always so careful to let me know that his angry outbursts weren't directed at, or about, me. That his need to be alone at times wasn't about being 'away from' me. Harald taught me about healthy boundaries, and space in relationships, and, as Rilke so beautifully puts it, being the "guardian" of each other's solitude.

Chris reflected that the depth of meaning and honesty in our communication would mean that a few months might be equivalent to years, in a more conventional marriage. I said it had felt like that. That we had consciously built our relationship, piece by piece, starting by throwing out all cultural norms and

conventions. Actually creating something that worked for *us*, no matter what it looked like from the outside.

That included not having expectations of the other; for example, me expecting Harald to come to friends' or family gatherings with me. Or even to participate if I was hosting such a gathering in our home. Over time he opened more to joining me, especially if I kindly requested him do so, but it also became entirely comfortable for me to spend time with friends without him, in the knowledge that we were perfectly content apart and not needing anything to be different; regardless of how that might seem to, or be judged by, others.

After I shared a little more, Chris said he understood why I'd described Harald as "complex", and how the relationship had been sādhanā. We sat quietly for a few moments, immersed in the intimacy of our exchange. Until I softly wondered aloud how it is possible that someone society might deem to be mentally unwell can also be the person who helps you become your best self; who shows you what unconditional love really is. As my own tears came, I looked up and saw that Chris was crying too.

Perspectives

> *If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.*
>
> *(Ernest Hemingway. A Farewell to Arms.)*

Co-researcher Perspectives

As the joint reflection conversation progressed, I invited everyone to share what their personal perspectives on suicide had been before Harald took his life, and Michael offered a wonderfully holistic summary:

> *I guess, my . . . philosophy . . . would be that there is something along the lines of reincarnation . . . That there is some subtle aspect of the human being that lives on after physical death, and then takes on another human form or some other form. So that's . . . obviously, a very common Eastern philosophy . . . and Adi Da certainly indicated there was some truth to that.*
>
> *. . . and so from that perspective, suicide is seen as a . . . pointless exercise, because . . . the reason why you're born as a human being, is because you have shit to work out, you know . . . or, to use another misused word, you have a lot of karma to work out . . . and a lot of spiritual traditions say the human lifetime is a*

great place to work it out. It's like, you can work out more stuff here than in some subtle place after you physically die.

So a lot of traditions say that suicide isn't a smart option, and doesn't accomplish anything, because you'll just go into some subtle place, and then you'll be reborn, and you'll have exactly the same shit to handle . . .

And then, I guess, you know, when I look at it, I guess I have to combine that with the fact that I grew up in a culture and inevitably, I'm affected by the culture I grew up in, which is the Western taboo on death, and . . . suicide . . . like, you just don't do it. And . . . if anyone wants to do it, you really, really try and help them not do it. And I can feel that in me, like . . . you know, quite apart from my spiritual philosophy, there's a very . . . core thing in me that suicide is a bad thing. And only a really desperate person would want to do it. And if you can help them come out of that desperate phase, then that's a really good thing to do.

Otis offered a more personal perspective:

. . . my own relationship to suicidal feelings and thoughts <is> that maybe at times, I would have gotten more serious about it if I didn't . . . wasn't allowed . . . to fully feel it. Allowing myself to fully feel it—and talk about it maybe with one or two very non-judgmental people—actually allowed me to kind of feel through it and out the other side. I was seriously feeling it . . . but I don't think I had the seriousness to go through with it. Two almost different things . . . to actually go through with ending your own body's life, you have to be profoundly serious to do that. Or profoundly in a reaction, like a dramatic kind of, "Oh, I'm just going to

slit my wrists!", you know, like, okay, that's one way, but to actually do it the way that Harald did? God, that takes . . . commitment.

Jack said he'd found it interesting to reflect on how he felt about suicide prior to Harald's death:

. . . 'cause my mind's first response was to rush to a conclusion that "oh yeah no, I was quite against suicide, and it's now quite different". But when I thought about it, I can't really remember. I didn't record the way I felt about it back then . . . I didn't explicitly lay down any opinions.

But having thought about it a bit since, something that I think sheds light on how I felt about it . . . was I can really remember clearly how I felt the moment Harald first told me. He actually put it as he's "decided" to . . . knock himself off. And the . . . experience for me, right at that moment was one of . . . extreme empathy. So I can remember feeling like I wanted to cry and just wanted to hug him . . . to think of how sad he must be feeling to feel like it's not worth continuing to live. And the other <part> was a recognition that I really had no opinion at all one way or another on what's right or wrong about committing suicide.

. . . We were out walking along the beach . . . and . . . the adrenaline started pumping . . . and the empathy was going crazy . . . and at the same time there was just this huge sense of being shot out into space, where any . . . any usual scaffolding about how I feel about things was just completely absent. It's just . . . an emotional space that has no . . . no ground to stand on in terms of opinions or . . . convictions.

Conversations with Harald

Harald moved through a number of suicidal episodes in the decade or so before his death. He had been characteristically open in his contemplations of suicide, discussing it at length with all of us. For Otis, openly sharing about suicide with Harald had been deeply supportive:

> *The thing with Harald that I . . . appreciate is that we could talk about it. We talked about suicide, a lot. We talked about feeling the way we were feeling with not sugarcoating it, plenty of times.*
>
> *. . . I never really opposed him, I allowed him to speak fully. And I spoke fully myself . . . in a way that I can only do with, like, one or two other friends. It's actually quite rare to be able to say, "I'm feeling suicidal", and then not have to sugarcoat . . . so that people don't start to [mimes air quotes] "worry" about you. I didn't have to worry about Harald "worrying" about me [chuckles].*

Jack's response had been similarly free of judgment:

> *. . . we'd walk for hours and hours and just talk about all sorts of things, including that [suicide], and yeah . . . like, the way, Otis, you described it, in the sense of not feeling like . . . it's my role to try and talk him out of it. . . and no judgement of any decision to go ahead with it.*
>
> *But at the same time, I guess what's perhaps different in my experience was that . . . I tend to have a pretty strong gratitude for life. I fucking love it. And I didn't always. In fact, I fucking hated it for a while as a young adult. And in a way, my own process over those years has been one of recognizing that what I actually hate is believing that I'm a separate self, in a world that's kind of*

dangerous, and you need to protect yourself from it. And in the absence of having that "I'm a self that needs to survive in this dangerous world" belief, life really is, just fucking wonderful.

Anna recalled her initial reaction to Jack letting her know that Harald had intentions of suicide.

. . . there's a part of my brain that was going . . . Someone's thinking of killing themselves . . . that's not right!. . . I must try and stop them! But then you kind of talk it through and go, well . . . this is Harald, you know . . .

I remember Jack and I went on a walk with him in the Botanic Gardens . . . And Harald was doing his normal kind of conversations about it . . . really open and . . . matter of fact about at all . . . and I remember one point in the conversation, he's saying, "I don't feel I'm mentally unwell . . . I don't feel I'm depressed. And so I don't feel like I'm making this decision from that position". But previously in the conversation he'd been saying, "I'm not seeing the beauty" . . . you know . . . "I'm not appreciating the breeze on the leaves in the branches of the trees" . . . and I said "Harald . . . if I'm hearing that from somebody else, I think 'depression'. . . and . . . I just want to put this out to you . . . <are you> possibly in a state where it's not the best time to make a decision . . . around suicide?"

And he goes "Oh, that's very interesting", and he kind of pondered it for a while. He was happy to have the thought . . . to think about it, but he came back saying "No, I think I've given it enough tries . . . I've been through it enough. I've come

out of it enough . . . this is my resting state. This is where I sit . . . I've had enough now."

Like, how do you argue that one? It's just such a different conversation than anything I've had, you know, with other . . . younger people in crisis. It was a totally different conversation.

Conversations with Harald about suicide, for those brave enough to wade in, were not without their challenges. Michael shared that his own conversations with Harald about suicide were "a major mindfuck". He recalled that Harald's perspective was that there was nothing beyond physical life, and went on to explain:

I would talk to him about my spiritual philosophy and he'd say, "prove it" and I'd say, 'I can't", and he'd say, "okay, well, that's irrelevant, I'm not interested. So, for him, it was like, "Okay, well, here I am, I'm alive, and . . . sometimes my life had purpose . . . like doing software for Adi Da . . . but if you take away the purpose and you take away the pleasure, then life is basically shit." And the problem was . . . I basically agreed with him. That was the problem [laughs]. And in fact . . . the great spiritual traditions also basically agree with that. They . . . say that life has inevitable suffering and death, you'll lose everything you love, you'll lose everything you're attached to whether it's, you know . . . Buddhism or whatever. And so I basically said to him, "I agree with you". And he said, "so tell me why I should keep living?" It was just a matter of these sort of scales, like: Is there more pleasure? Is there more pain? If there's more pain, well I'm just gonna end it because, nothing happens, I'll just be dead. And this pain'll be over. And I thought, well, yeah, that makes sense. And it's just a mindfuck.

Because . . . you know, he wasn't receptive to my spiritual philosophy, having been vastly disillusioned by spiritual life. And he wasn't really receptive to the sort of society formula that, you know, life is good, and suicide is bad. He said, Well, why? And I couldn't rationally . . . win the argument . . . because I basically agreed with him.

Dancing with Death

Acceptance of the unacceptable is the greatest source of grace in this world.

(Eckhart Tolle)

One significant suicidal episode occurred in September 2015, by which time Harald and I had been married five years. The journal entries below capture my experiences, feelings and thoughts over three consecutive days, as I was faced with the prospect of his intentional death.

The Announcement (September 7, 2015)

By dinner time last night H had sunk into a full rage. Banging things around in the kitchen and so forth. I got hooked and yelled at him to 'stop it'. He yelled 'just leave me the fuck alone' and I yelled back 'why don't you leave me the fuck alone' (and stop crashing about, frazzling my nervous system.)

I ordered take away and when it came I brought mine straight upstairs. By then, H was ensconced watching online poker under the headphones in the lounge.

I retired to my room – with my 'room service' and watched a couple of fantastic talks.

Despite waking around 4.30am for an hour or so, and again at 7.00am suddenly (to some kind of noise) I slept through until 8.40am. During the early wakage I thought about creeping into H's bed. I had a yearning to hold him and tell him everything would be alright. But I didn't want to startle him, so I didn't.

There seemed no question of the usual routine—the morning cuddle and such—so I just got up and went down to make breakfast. H emerged from his room and asked if we could talk after breakfast. I said of course, and then ate while imagining. He seemed calm, a little remorseful, but still also pretty pissed, though clearly not at me.

My mind ran through possible options. He wants to leave me. He wants to go away for a while. He wants to have sex with someone else. He wants to start using weed/self-medicating again.

We sat in the lounge to speak, H in the pink chair and me on the sofa, both in half-lotus. He said he doesn't see any point in living, that he finds no pleasure in life, so he wants to commit suicide but he doesn't want to leave me in the lurch with the rent and so forth, so he's prepared to do one last contract so that he can leave me with $20 or $30k.

I said nothing for some time, but I was thinking about how it would be possible to live between now and when the time came; how to live knowing your husband is going to kill himself.

Eventually I said something like "and your concern for me is financial?". To which H said he realizes it will impact my life significantly but the only thing he can really help with is the money.

A part of me wanted to say – why don't you leave me and go and do this alone instead of dragging me through it? But I wasn't sure where that was coming from so I kept it in.

He spoke about not having any purpose and so forth. Feeling completely disillusioned.

I listened, and tried to stay open in my heart and eventually just said "I don't know what to say".

He said "you may have something to say later", and I agreed.

We just sat and stared for a while, until I asked if he would come and lie down with me. And we came upstairs and got into bed and cuddled deeply and he fell asleep for about 40 minutes and I just held him. Then we changed positions and Harry got frisky so I gave him a long, loving head job and that morphed into sex and I orgasmed quickly and cried and apologized, and he said "there's nothing to be sorry for".

The Day After (September 8, 2015)

H is angry again and has, thankfully, taken himself into his room. Despite telling me two or three days ago that he is 'done' with playing online poker, he was at it again today and yesterday. And it seems he's on a losing streak. Long sighs and the occasional outburst of disgust. When luck runs against him it feeds his 'the universe is against me' belief and he spirals again.

I have no idea if he expects some kind of response from me to his announcement yesterday. If so, I guess it's too bad because I can't imagine what to say. A quick search online re 'my husband wants to commit suicide' brings up a litany of 'call

911' and 'have him committed' responses, making me wonder why I didn't think that way, and whether H has even considered that I might, or maybe is banking on the fact that I won't.

Such thought worms seem unhelpful. If he decides he's going to kill himself I think there is little I, or anyone else for that matter, can do about it. Whether he means to do so is the question. And for now, it seems that it's a plan, rather than an immediate threat. He is not so depressed that he can't get out of bed in the morning. He's just burned eight discs of TV shows for mum, at my request, yesterday. He continues to download movies and TV for us. He's reading the news, he's watching movies, and he's offered to cook dinner tonight. Perhaps I'm crazy but these do not seem to me to be the actions of a person who . . . well, who knows.

I've kept myself busy by weeding the garden patch out the back, around the deck. And vacuuming the downstairs area. And doing a load of white sheet washing that, on removal from the machine, had dust trails all over it so I flung the lot on the line outside and figured the rain can wash that off.

Meanwhile it's a dark moon and there's a solar eclipse coming on the weekend and a lunar one two weeks later. There's no doubt H is feeling like shit, I just hope that he gets a positive jump start in one way or another before much longer. Yesterday during our talk, he said he'd even prayed to Ramana (Maharshi) for a sign of some kind, and still nothing.

There's a part of me that wonders if I shouldn't be taking this more seriously, somehow, but then it's not that I'm not taking it seriously. . . I just don't know

what to do differently, and each time I wonder about that I just return to being love. What else is there?

The only thing worth focusing on in the short term is H getting a gig. He said that was part of his plan anyway. Once that happens, and he busies himself for a while, we'll see what happens. If he still feels the same way then perhaps I'll need to get some help—for me, if not for him.

I've just sent an email to Michael, giving him a snapshot of the situation and asking him to call H.

Deepest Reality Hits (September 9, 2015)

I woke this morning around 5am and began to connect with the impact of H's decision. I could feel it in my body. A hollowing. An emptiness.

Like trying on clothes, I tried on a few different responses to see which resonated. Anger? Sadness? Rejection? Everything felt self-orientated and somehow missing the point. I felt like I was beginning to walk a long gang-plank. At an unknown time in the future I would drop off the edge, that was certain. But until then, I just had to keep walking and I didn't know how.

From one perspective I can see H's 'announcement' as the ultimate in narcissism. Telling the world ahead of time that he's going to off himself. The ultimate 'fuck you' to the universe.

When H came to cuddle this morning he seemed open, soft and balanced. He asked how my night had been and I told him I'd been awake earlier and he asked why and I said I didn't know how to be with what he'd said. That it was very difficult for me. He held me and the tears came. He said he had thought a lot

about telling me, knowing it would be hard. But he said he wanted me to be prepared. He said “I want to make this as easy for you as possible.” That he loves me very much.

I said I just keep thinking about him not being here and that’s very difficult to deal with. I asked if he could understand how it might be if the situation were reversed and he said he could.

I said I’d been reading stuff online about calling emergency or having him committed. He said he wouldn’t let that happen. I said I didn’t think I could do it anyway.

Then I said ‘what if it’s a brain issue and it could be cured?’. He said the brain is not well understood. That it could be he has a brain tumor but that it would have to have been there since childhood.

He said it’s not really a typical depression. He understands what life has to offer, but he just finds it absurd. It’s simply not enough to make life worthwhile. He said if it wasn’t for me he would have been long gone.

I said I needed to hold out hope that maybe he would change his mind. That it’s important to take practical steps, like him getting a contract, and seeing how that goes. He said he was nearly ready and able to update his CV. I said maybe that’s a good first step – a goal for this week. And next week he can apply for one or two gigs. He agreed. We also spoke about getting him a profile on LinkedIn because I think there might be more interesting options available there. He said he hated their format and I said I would do it for him if he gives me his CV. ‘Or perhaps we can do it together?’ he said. I agreed.

It felt to me that we were deeply connected this morning. That he really did understand what he is asking of me, but that he sees no other way. He said perhaps I could look at it from the perspective that one of us will die before the other regardless. This way, I learn to deal with death before my own. Or something like that. Something that strangely made sense. There's truth in it too. A strange, dire truth.

At one stage I asked if he had a timeframe. He said no, that he's just taking it one day at a time. Then I laughed at myself. Me, the schedule freak, asking the 'no plan man' if he has a plan.

There's an incredible intensity to life—to our being together—that seems to be emerging from this knowing any day could be the last. Which is, as H is saying, the reality we live with anyway, we just don't acknowledge it.

Death comes to us all. And, for the most part, we know not when. I have an opportunity to simply be love, in the face of all of it and regardless. And this is all there is anyway.

Life presents us with opportunities to deepen. Suddenly I seem to have a big one.

A Considered Choice

Another suicidal episode had occurred in December-January 2016-17 as my marriage to Harald was coming to an end. At the time I'd been on retreat in Canada. Michael had contacted me saying "I think he's really serious this time", suggesting we needed to do something, that we needed to call the authorities. During the group discussion, I took the opportunity to ask Michael directly if, on reflection, given what eventually unfolded, he thought we should have done that, and he responded:

No, I don't think it's what we should have done. Because this is, this was the uniqueness of Harald's suicide, for me. I've never met, or really heard of anyone else who's done it this way, in that it didn't come out of a crisis. It came out of a deeply considered philosophical position.

Now . . . I could say all sorts of things about, you know: How was his childhood fucked up? Why was he alienated from his parents? Why was he . . . on the autism spectrum? . . . All the sort of stuff that . . . psychoanalysis might have got at . . . To me that that's an endless journey anyway, and who knows where that goes.

But should we have called the authorities? I don't think so. Because . . . thinking about it in retrospect . . . it's only really justified if . . . like, if a 17-year-old girl gets dumped by a boyfriend, and . . . is suddenly anxious and depressed and starting to cut herself. I see clients like that . . . in a temporary crisis . . . it's caused by a temporary life event, possibly in combination . . . with childhood <stuff>, and so on. But you can help that person through it, to the point where they will regain their balance and potentially live a fulfilling life. And that's entirely different from what Harald did.

Harald, over many years, considered his philosophy about life . . . and I've never met anyone for whom it was so carefully considered and done in what you might call a 'balanced' way. And so calling the authorities is like, what's the point?, you know . . . They could put him in a mental ward in a hospital and drug him up for a couple of weeks. And then he'd be smart enough to figure out, "oh. I just need to say, I'm fine now" . . . and then they'd let him go . . . and then he'd just quietly kill

himself . . . there would be no point. So <it was> very, very different than that sort of exaggerated emotional crisis, which is the foundation of most suicides.

Anna expanded, from her own personal and professional perspective:

I've not had anyone close to me . . . suicide before . . . but through work, I've called the CAT teams, or the emergency team, a number of times on adolescents I've worked with who were . . . standing on the edge of railway tracks, or were . . . talking about . . . imminent kind of action, and they were in . . . that reactive point. So thinking about the brain . . . the prefrontal cortex was not working in those situations . . . they were very much in their . . . reactive brain state. And that's where you see a lot of the suicides happen . . . with younger people in particular. And, I find, you know, that situation quite tragic . . . the people around them really suffer, because <they go>, "oh . . . I could have done more . . ." or "I didn't see it coming" . . . The responses, and the suffering of the people around them is significant. And the taboo . . . you know, there's this . . . we can't really talk about it openly. There's just this deep grief . . . sadness . . . shame that comes up a lot of the time as well . . . with the societal kind of taboos . . . And Harald's journey was so different. Like it was, it was a really different . . . feeling.

Otis spoke to this difference as well:

I agree . . . that intervention has its place, you know . . . when people are not themselves or they're kind of just in a reactionary . . . or dramatic state, okay. But we're talking a year's long process with Harald—it's very different to that . . . I felt like it came from a place of seriousness and depth and consideration . . . that a lot

of us I think, are afraid to even go to or feel . . . it's very confronting. So in that way, I have to . . . respect him, you know. It takes a lot to do what he did.

Michael drew out the underlying philosophical question:

. . . it boils down to the question of agency. Do human beings have agency over their own life? . . . that's a really critical way of looking at this. And what I said about crises, like if someone's in an emotional crisis, they're not themselves, they're not their normal agency . . . you know, to me, good agency is when you're balanced, you're clear . . . you're not overwhelmed. That's good agency. And then Harald, you know, most of the time had reasonably good agency. So . . . you know . . . do I have the right to interfere?

In response, Otis expressed strong support for personal autonomy:

. . . calling the authorities on someone like Harald would have felt almost ... violent . . . for mine. Because he was so not a threat to anyone, including, dare I say it, himself . . . You know, he was talking about it for months and years and was very non-dramatic about it and non-reactionary . . . in my experience. Yeah, that was something that I would never want to take away from him. I would back him to this day in that choice if he still wanted to do it. That's me. And I'm not saying I'm right. I just know that I need to be able to feel like I can make that choice for myself . . . the choice to live. Yeah.

Departure

Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may.
Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to
prevent it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent.

Ramana Maharshi

Prelude

Our marriage found its end in January 2017, but Harald and I continued to enjoy a deep and loving friendship until his death in March 2018. During that time I made a five-month visit to Canada, where I would eventually relocate. Harald had the use of my car while I was away, and on my return we shared it, which meant me making regular visits to his home to collect and drop-off when agreed.

It's Only Death, Baby. (February 1, 2018)

Just off the phone from H, who is continuing to plan for an 'exit'. He's very clear. He said he hasn't smoked for a month because he doesn't want to be influenced by weed. Says he feels he's lived his life. That barring anything unexpected/unforeseen he will proceed within the next week or two.

I wonder if there is a law against not trying to stop someone.

Not that I haven't tried. For the past eight years.

Love the bond.

I became emotional on the phone and that wasn't my intent. I wanted to untangle the divorce from his death. First I told him I didn't want to benefit in anyway. Then I ended up saying it was "energetically fucked".

He was very patient and calm. He said he doesn't see it that way, but that it might save paying for the divorce.

I said I might be left having to sort out a mess.

He said he is trying to do what he can to avoid that.

He agreed to complete a will online, and to write a handwritten note as well. He said he'll send a time-delayed email – probably to both Jack and I – before he goes ahead. So then either of us can call the police. That he'll leave the keys outside somewhere so they can gain access.

My tears seem like drama now. What I more deeply know is to support him however I can. That means going there on Saturday and continuing to love him in every way and maybe asking him to let me know before he does it so that I can connect with him and 'hold his hand' as he crosses over.

When I was semi-hysterical he said gently 'It's only death, baby'. And I guess that's the nub of it.

Things escalated as February unfolded. I was relieved and grateful when Jack and Anna reached out to me via email. Shortly after that, the three of us met—for the first time since Harald and I had separated—and discussed our respective distress with H's situation. We came away clear that we were doing all we could. That it was up to him to make his own choices.

The Intervention (March 3, 2018)

Well, I never thought I'd use that title. But that's what happened today. Jack, Anna and I staged an intervention. A 'let's get real' with Harald.

Its inception was last Saturday, when Jack, Anna and I met for the first time since Harald and I separated. We spent a few hours catching up and discussing our respective distress with H's situation. We came away clear that we were doing all we could. That it was up to him to make his own choices. I remember even saying I didn't want to stage an 'intervention', like it was some kind of over-reaction or just, perhaps, too uncool, I don't know.

The next day I had brunch with Brenda and Stephen. Brenda suggested I call Beyond Blue for strategies or resources to use with H. It hadn't occurred to me that they might be able to help someone trying to help someone else.

Straight after that I went to H's to pick up the car and ended up clippering his hair for him, like old times. It was tender and intimate and it felt lovely to just be with him in that. It was then I decided to ask if he would have a conversation with Jack and Anna and I about options. I positioned it as 'four heads are better than one'. He said he would think about it.

Two days later when I went to drop off the car I saw him only briefly. I could tell he was in a more difficult space, but when I asked if he would meet with us he agreed. When I left his place and called Jack, who was immediately concerned that maybe H would kill himself before the weekend. It hadn't occurred to me that he'd do that, but I ended up ringing H back and asking him to promise that he wouldn't, and he did.

On Thursday I forced myself to ring Beyond Blue. I was expecting to be dragged through some kind of checklist by a well-meaning but inept volunteer, but instead I landed a kind man, Oliver, whose first question, after I explained the situation

and my relationship to H, was “Why does it fall to you (to make this call)?” He had me right there. “Good question!” I said. And from there it was clear that he was not about to sugarcoat or pussyfoot or hold back in any way. He said that H is drawing us in—perhaps unintentionally—to his situation/pain but that the bottom line is that he must choose to change himself.

Oliver used the intervention word. I said we weren’t calling it that and he said ‘that’s what it is’.

He gave me a list of resources for us to pass on to Harald regarding mental health, crisis support and housing. And he made it very clear that anything we do to take the responsibility for action away from H is enabling him. He essentially said that we have to let him choose to live or die. That it must be him that takes a step towards seeking help; for example by ringing Beyond Blue, who can then put him in touch with counselling services and housing options and so on.

I came off the call—which lasted less than 15 minutes—feeling empowered and clear. From there I emailed Jack and Anna with a summary of what had taken place and a suggestion for us to meet and prep for today, which we did last night.

Yesterday I also rang M. Initially to invite him to come along or to contribute in some way (because my research said to include as many as possible), but the conversation ran elsewhere. M is clearly quite angry with H (he didn’t actually say that, but it was clear in his tone), and understandably so. His unwillingness to be part of the intervention was clarifying for me. He said to tell H to stop torturing his friends with his inaction.

Today, following a tearful Pilates session and some stomach-churning en route, 'the intervention' took place. In wilting summer heat we sat at a table in the shade of some draping eucalypts, at a large park near H's place. We had the whole place to ourselves; just us and the birds.

As we each took turns to speak our feelings about H's intention and its practical and emotional toll, we made clear that we want H to choose life and that we are ready and willing to support him in that, but that we cannot continue funding and supporting him not working and not choosing.

It was as though a kind of line in the sand was quietly drawn.

Departure

Shortly after 6pm, on Tuesday 20th March, 2018, as I sat down in front of my computer with a plate of dinner, I immediately noticed a new email from Harald, entitled "Goodbye". My heart stopped; I steadied myself, then clicked and read:

Hello friends,

I have decided to end this life after all and by the time you receive this email I have most likely left this plane of existence.

I am sending this email with a delay of 3 hours or so.

I reckon if everything goes according to my plan I will be long dead by the time you receive it.

If something goes wrong then 3 hours should be enough time to stop the delayed sending of this mail, provided of course I am able to do so.

I mention some practical issues towards the end of this mail which you may want to read.

An important little detail is that I left the house keys on top of the door, which allows you and/or the cops to enter the house without breaking the door.

Last Words

In our last meeting with the four of us I got the impression that you all rather not further discuss my suicide. And I agreed and still agree. I thought pretty much everything was already said. Besides, such discussions take their emotional toll of course.

When at the end of the meeting I said that I would stick around a while longer I really had no idea where the motivation would be coming from. At that moment my motivation was to ease your pain and discomfort with the entire situation.

I am writing this to sum up what happened since that meeting and what lead to my decision to leave this earthly game at this time after all.

There were no fundamentally new developments. It was more an intensification of the consideration. After the meeting my plan was fairly simple: get a short-term run-of-the-mill contract to fill up the bank account and take that time to find a more permanent job situation in the support and/or non-profit sector. I was OK with that as a short-term solution but then I started thinking about the bigger picture of my life situation. And I realized that I am currently uniquely disconnected as I am at a point in my life where I have the smallest peer group I've ever had.

Together with my job and relationship situation this basically means I would have to rebuild most of my life. And that's where it was clear, that no – hell, no! – I'm not interested in doing that!

Having spent 57 years on this plane and planet I have a good idea how those things go. Slowly and tediously, always fighting the inertia that seems inherent in every single process in this plane of existence. I really can't be bothered is what it comes down to. I have never particularly liked that wicked game that is our earthly existence. I could never understand people who wanted to live here forever!? Are they blind?

So, basically, I don't like the game itself, I don't like the rules of the game and in essence I simply cannot be bothered to play it any longer.

After that became clear – yet again and for the umpteenth time – it dawned on me that now would be a very good time to take my exit from the game because my involvement in it is quite low. That was around Friday (today is the Tuesday after) and since then I am having a rather intense and interesting consideration about life and death in general and also in the context of suicide. Nothing of it was entirely new except for the intensity of the consideration. I had to face some intense emotions and discovered how strong my nostalgic tendencies actually are!

Some Practical Stuff

I left the second house keys set on top of the door, on the right side.

There is a very visible note for law enforcement on top of my signed and witnessed last will right when you come into the house.

Another (signed and witnessed) copy of my last will is in my black documents box.

The PIN for my Mastercard is 5810, which is also the code for my bike lock.

The main password for all my computers is 39hhwh61.

All my other passwords and login details are stored in a software called Keypass. Each system has an icon for it on the main screen. It requires a master password, which is 39milchreis61. The computer in my study has the latest info. The Keypass database also contains things like my tax file number and my super info (see section 'Misc'). Keypass of course also contains info regarding my online banking. However, to get full access to my online banking you'll also need a physical key generator (Digipass) that you need to use each time you log in to Commonwealth and which is located under the main monitor in my study.

Besides the movie database (Libby can explain the basics) there is also a text file for each external hard drive, which lists the file names and sizes on that drive. The list files are all located in D:\Dropbox\MovieLists. For example, the file S_4000_1.txt in that folder lists the content of my external hard drive labelled S_4000_1.

OK, my friends, this is all I can think of. I hope there is nothing important I have forgotten. I'm a bit distracted of course since I have never planned and prepared for a suicide before. Still many emotions coming up...

I have not included M in all of this because he was not involved. If you feel like talking to him or forwarding my mails to him, I leave that up to you, Libby.

You all have been amazing friends. You really have! And I love every single one of you very much. I reckon if there is karma and something like an afterlife then I will see all of you again.

Until then: I wish you all the best!

H

A wave of thoughts and feelings arose and swirled as I took in Harald's final words. He had done it. He had actually done it.

After some moments I realized it was up to me to call the police. Speaking had the effect of focusing things. Each sentence held a kind of weight. I was surprised how clear and calm I sounded. I told them about the email and that the key was above the door. They said they would go to his home and contact me after that. To confirm his death. Until that moment I hadn't considered that he might not have been successful. Deep fear coalesced. It was hard to bear that thought.

Jack and Anna had been out celebrating Anna's birthday when they'd received the email. We maintained contact throughout the evening. I rang Michael, too, to let him know. And then my friend Kate, because I sensed she could be with me in it. We sat in silence for some time; lit candles, connected with H and wished him well on his way.

It was after 10pm when the police finally came to let me know that Harald was dead. Apparently they always do that in person, which seemed kind, but the wait was so long that all I felt was relief. The male constable was caring and considerate and he did all the talking. A young blonde constable hung back and picked at her nails. I wanted to ask "Is this boring you?".

I called Jack and Anna again to let them know that Harald was gone. We ran out of words. Before hanging up, Anna suggested we meet for breakfast in the morning and it was as though she'd placed before me a small but solid piece of ground to step on to, and I was deeply grateful.

It was late by the time I crawled into bed. I lay in the quiet dark for a long while—breathing, allowing, opening, softening. Dropping through the static to the soft core of my tired and broken heart.

I had seen Harald the day before. He'd asked if everything "in Canada" was progressing well and I'd told him it was. Before I left we'd shared a long, warm, deeply intimate hug and he had kissed me on the cheek, which was unusual. At the time our parting felt different in a way I couldn't pinpoint. But now I knew he'd known it would be our last.

A senior constable, who introduced himself as Josh, called me the next morning. During our conversation he shared that Harald's suicide was the "cleanest" he'd ever seen. The key had indeed been above the door, along with a note to let the police know they could enter safely. Next to the gas cannister was a receipt showing proof of purchase to help rule out foul play.

As next of kin, Josh said I would need to identify Harald's body. My heart sank—I wasn't prepared for that. I asked if it could wait another day, and he said "of course".

As I left the house that morning, the world seemed entirely new. I took in the movement at the junction, all at once, as though seeing it through different eyes. People were boarding a bus across the other side of the intersection. A few cars were pulling up at the lights. A young woman wearing black and purple was standing near the curb, adjusting her earphones and waiting to cross. Everything was wide and liquid and slow.

I thought about how people confronting life-changing loss, or a terminal diagnosis, often speak about feeling disconnected from others and life around them; as though a veil's come down and you're not part of the world anymore because everything

around you seems so trivial. I'd known that experience before, at other times of loss. But this time was different. It was like the veil had been lifted and I was split wide open. Intimately connected and available. And everything occurring was beautiful. Unfolding exactly as it should.

Anna and I met at The Galleon cafe and sat towards the back near the kitchen. I looked at the menu but couldn't relate to a decision about food. Until I saw they had porridge—three different variations. I chose Porridge #2: Banana, strawberry, toasted almonds and maple syrup.

The next day, Anna drove me to the Coroner's Office downtown to identify the body. The area was familiar; it seemed odd that I'd never noticed the building before. We parked in a gated lot out front and walked towards an opaque glass door that slid open, at the exact moment of our arrival, to reveal a diminutive Indian man in a suit, who welcomed me by name, introduced himself as Melroy, and invited us to follow him as he floated down a long earth-toned windowless corridor into an internal room containing a circular table, four chairs and a small couch. The effect was of entering a soft, supportive, alternate reality, entirely at odds with the city abuzz outside.

Melroy went about his work with such gracious composure it was impossible to imagine a person better suited to his role. He left us alone just long enough to take in our surroundings, and to notice a second door in the room, before returning with forms that he kindly and neatly completed on my behalf. I was enchanted by his lightness of being and impeccable containment of self. It amused me to think that when he went home each day, he might plonk himself on the sofa, rip open a beer and have a long gripe to his wife.

After leaving and returning a second time, Melroy delicately explained what the identification process would entail. That Harald's body would be on a steel gurney in a room behind a glass wall on my left through that second door. That I was welcome to go into the room to be closer to him. That I might notice a slight discoloration on his lips from the gas.

Anna offered to accompany me, but I wanted to do it alone. She told me to take my time. When I saw him I was immediately struck by how tranquil he looked; as though deeply asleep with a whisper of a smile on his face. Apprehension was washed away by relief. He was finally, truly, at rest.

Later that day I emailed friends and family:

Dear Friends,

I am writing to share the sad news that earlier this week Harald ended his life.

He was very clear and exceptionally well-organized.

As some of you know, he'd had a difficult relationship with life for some time. So while not entirely unexpected, his loss is now deeply felt.

Following our separation early last year we remained close friends and I saw him the day before he died. It was a dear and loving meeting and I am grateful for the memory.

Since he passed it seems his huge heart has taken residence in mine and I am swollen with love.

As next-of-kin and executor of his will I have much to take care of in these days. Know that I am well supported in this.

If you feel so moved, please direct loving thoughts to Harald to help him on his way.

yours, Libby.

The responses I received made me laugh, cry, grimace and wonder. Many touched me deeply, including this one, from my dear friend Mendy, who graciously gave permission for its inclusion here:

Oh my dear Libby,

Unreservedly my heart is blown open to both you and Harald and this at-once magnificent, mysterious and difficult experience of life.

I know that you had continued your connection with Harald and I am so happy that you were able to maintain such a loving and supporting relationship, right up to the end of his time here . . . in a way that you specialize in . . . uniquely honest and very, very clean. Harald may not have always seen it, but to have such a force of love in one's life, so clearly, must have made a difference.

Through my conversations with you about Harald's relationship to life, I came to see that a decision to 'bow-out' from a certain perspective, can be seen as an entirely rational choice. This has been a great insight for me and I am very very grateful to have received it. It is not to say that Life is not essentially good (necessarily) but for those in whom this foundational understanding is not clear, is shaky or inconsistent, (or . . . may be understood as good but its requirements have become just too demanding), I can understand.

Because there must be so much for you to attend to, I will not phone you now, but stand ready and very willing to provide anything at all in my power . . . a conversation, a visit, a yurt in the country ...

In the meantime there is maintained, as much as possible through this vehicle just love, born of no separation, with special holding of you and H.

Loving hugs, Mendy.

That night as I lay my head down I felt spent from all that I had carried and faced in the day. Soon, a wave of sorrow welled. When it broke, it consumed me, so I sat up and sobbed.

Moments later I heard Harald say, *It's only death, baby*.

And it soothed me and simplified everything.

And my tears soon subsided.

And I wriggled back under the covers and went to sleep.

In the days that followed Harald's departure, I walked the streets like a huge heart on tiny legs. I felt expanded as awareness. Like I could see into everything. Into the real, into the love within it all.

I took care of a multitude of practical details as an uninterrupted flow of clarity. Knowing to simply and cleanly direct my attention to first this and then this and then this.

Collect his belongings. Call the funeral director. Arrange the cremation. Organize the viewing. Inform the landlord. Thank the neighbours (for witnessing his will). Schedule the cleaners. Collect the death certificate. Cancel his cell phone. Close his bank account. Correct the death certificate. On and on it went.

In the weeks that followed Harald's departure, the roots into my being—developed during our relationship—were available, drawn from and deepened. I was amazed at how capable I was. Moving through many days of intense difficulty with an unshakable benevolent ease.

For me, Harald's death had the effect of focusing everything on only that which was deeply true and real, including our unbroken bond. Everything else was still there but it seemed to recede, in a way that showed me, clearly, how to be and what to do, in every moment. Somehow, during what might have been a devastating time, I was simply love, moving.

The Viewing

In one of many uncannily serendipitous occurrences, I was consulting to an organization that managed a group of cemeteries at the time of Harald's death. In the months prior, I had been working with people who faced death on a daily basis, all of whom I experienced as unusually open-minded and kind. I felt incredibly fortunate to be able to seek guidance from my client, upon Harald's death, and gladly followed her advice, which included a viewing—of the body in an open coffin—as an opportunity for final goodbyes.

The Viewing (March 25, 2018)

> On entry I noticed the piped muzak. I could hear H say "Get that shit off!" and scurried from the room to have it quashed. As promised, the funeral director, Alex, had brought a Bluetooth speaker, so we plumbed some J. J. [Cale - H's favorite] from my phone and then everything started to feel right.

Yesterday, when Alex had asked about clothes for Harald [for the viewing], I said he would have much preferred to be naked. Alex then suggested a shroud, which I'd imagined to be a simple cheesecloth sack, but turned out to be a lacy satin nighty. As if that wasn't bad enough, frilly satin covered the entire coffin. We laughed at how much H would have hated it. At least they had the good sense to leave him unshaven. We all agreed he looked entirely at peace. Finally.

Seeing H in the coffin I was overcome by tears and went to sit at the back of the room. Anna came to comfort me and it passed quite quickly. Soon the five of us stood circling his body like pillars of light and love. Jack placed his hand on Harald's and I asked if he was cold (yes), and then found the courage to do the same and we both stayed like that for a time.

Each of us simply shared what came. There were so many amazing stories. Most sprinkled with imitation 'H voice'—which we all seemed to do automatically. Jack, Anna and I held space for Michael and Otis's difficult feelings until only love and laughter flowed.

When we finally, reluctantly, left the viewing room, Alex was waiting nearby, outside, and I went over to thank him for what had been a deeply connective and healing experience for all of us.

He said it had been lovely to hear the laughter coming from the room.

"I bet you don't hear that often—especially when it's a suicide", I said.

"No, we don't hear that at all Libby . . . and when it's a suicide what we hear is people blaming each other", he said. I felt like I'd been punched in the chest.

Plunged into the deep hurt that so many suffer in a similar situation.

As I resurfaced, I marveled in gratitude at how different our experience had been.

Connection, Challenge and Mystery

As the reflection session flowed into a discussion of what had been "most healing, helpful or important" after Harald's death, Anna recollected her own feelings at the viewing:

> *I have this super-clear memory of us standing around Harald's body, and Jack reaching in and taking his hand . . . And . . . I think . . . it kind of moved it . . . for me anyway . . . moved it to this other, Harald's now part of the conversation, and there were these, you know, what people might think are inappropriate moments of Who can do the best Harald impersonation? which was fabulous . . . like, so fabulous.*
>
> *It just was such a lovely way to . . . express love for Harald and share the memories. And I just think that for whatever reason, the combination of people . . . and I'd say that the connecting factor was Harald. So whatever Harald brought to that, that relationship that, you know, we all had, was, yeah, I think a beautiful thing to be able to share.*

Jack spoke about feeling deeply connected by our shared experiences:

> *. . . I feel more connected with you guys than most people I've met in my life . . . I think because of that experience . . . yeah, it feels like . . . one of those unusual connections that's really deep and very highly valued . . . I really appreciate it . . . and it happened in those . . . brief times we got together and those times were very connecting.*

That's what I appreciated . . . the connection felt healing, and it felt like it was a connection to an aspect of Harald, as well . . . through you guys.

And . . . getting back together today . . . it hits deep, straightaway, as soon as I see your faces . . . Aahhhh . . .

Otis spoke of the 'mystery' that was part of Harald's death:

. . . there's a kind of a mystery about it that . . . yeah, kind of mystery . . . like, I remember, very vividly, sitting around his body with you guys—with you beautiful people—and shedding some tears and laughter and looking at his body right afterwards within the first <few> days.

You know, I believe that people are still hanging around and it takes a while to leave their bodies <and> I didn't get a sense of . . . what's the word . . . turmoil, like 'troubled'. I have been around . . . people that have just died, and you get different vibes . . . but I didn't feel that from Harald, I felt a kind of a sense of relief.

Like . . . in spiritual traditions sometimes they say that people that commit suicide are kind of stuck in a bardo or something . . . I can imagine Harald maybe enjoying being in a bardo because it's slightly different to this bardo [laughter]. 'cause this is a bardo to him . . . like I can just see him turning anything on its head . . . He was "ready for the next thing, whatever it was", you know.

Michael then opened up about his own challenges, after Harald's death:

Um, so I've got quite a different experience, which I've been thinking about, which is quite a difficult one. When he died, I went through a lot of guilt, that I wasn't there in the last round. Because, you know, on many occasions, we'd talked about

it, and on a couple occasions he was really serious about doing it, and I spent hours and hours and hours and hours on the phone with him. And . . . it was completely grueling for me, and my partner even told me to stop, it was . . . really affecting me a lot. But it was sort of, you know, quote, unquote, "successful"—in the sense of preventing him from doing it at that time.

And yeah . . . I actually told Harald, I said, how incredibly emotionally grueling this was for me, and he was very blasé about it. Like, he didn't seem to have any capacity to understand, that—for whatever combination of reasons—I was trying to talk, a dear, loved friend out of killing themselves . . . and the process of helping over many, many hours was taking a great toll on me. And . . . I don't think he, ever once, was able to have the capacity to acknowledge that . . . in my case, which, you know . . . I look back on it and see, well, that was his . . . that was a big liability of his; this lack of understanding other people's emotions, and recognizing their importance.

So, you know, as I said, the last round, I just couldn't do it anymore. And I said no [to participating in the intervention] and that was passed on and I know that he was very gracious about it.

. . . and so yeah . . . even now I can feel I've actually got a lot of anger at him for not acknowledging my support before he died. And that's very difficult for me to just, you know, talk honestly about.

But yeah . . . you know, I really loved the guy. And I really didn't want him to go. And there were many reasons for that: my love of him . . . my social upbringing of taboos around suicide, my spiritual beliefs and so on. But I mean . . . bottom line,

I really loved him. And I also always had the sense that . . . if we could help him get down to the nitty gritty of his childhood trauma, and why he was alienated from his parents and all that sort of stuff that we could find a way that he could enjoy life. But that never happened.

And so . . . it's funny, you know, I feel more anger than sorrow about his suicide [laughs]. Still, to this day, I feel pissed off at him . . . and, you know, it doesn't make any sense . . . it's not rational . . . because he was not a mean person, he was not an unkind person, he just had this inability to empathize. Certainly in my experience. And that really hurt me, big time. So . . . so that was, you know . . . that was a very difficult part of my response to his suicide.

[Libby] *And you still feel like that anger is . . . clearly it's still there. Yeah?*

[Michael] *Well, you know, I mean, this is amazing, being able to talk to you guys . . . I hadn't even thought about it until I got your email. And then . . . I read through the questions . . . and it came up . . . and I thought, "fuck, I'm still pissed off at him for never saying to me, "Hey Michael, you've spent hundreds of hours on the phone with me", you know, "goodheartedly, giving me your love and energy. And you know what, I know I took a toll on you. I really appreciate it . . . and, thank you." He never said that, not once.*

. . . I felt I put a lot of myself on the line for him . . . to the point where I was sort of red raw . . . and he just didn't get it, and didn't acknowledge it, and he never once said he was grateful for it. So that really, really hurt.

Grace

Love and death are the great gifts that are given to us; mostly they are passed on unopened.

(R M Rilke)

The group's final reflections addressed the question as to whether there had been some kind of 'gift' in their experience of Harald's suicide.

Gifts

For Jack, the entire journey with Harald had been a gift:

My own experience with Harald over those few months was an absolute gift. I was very aware of it at the time, and have been ever since, that I savored every moment to have an opportunity to speak so openly with someone who I recognized as truly being at the precipice, and quite possibly deciding to jump off. To have that opportunity to be with him, in that situation, just felt like such a such an extraordinary gift.

Otis said he resonated with an earlier comment from Jack about the bond between the group of us, and continued:

. . . it's like we share something that only us are privy to in a funny way . . . we share something that none of us fully can put a finger on. But what we all know . . . there's something magical and mysterious about what we went through, in relationship to Harald, and even with the difficult emotions that Michael feels, I fully include that . . . and I'm really happy that Michael shared that with us too.

And, you know, I tend to get a response from people—even just slightly outside this circle—of tragedy and sadness around Harald's passing. Like when his stuff was here for that few months until I got it all sorted and got rid of . . . you know . . . <Otis' partner> felt like the room was sad. We called it 'Harald's room'—the one that had all the stuff in—and I would listen to that and go yeah, there was a sadness to it . . . a sadness that his stuff kind of represented. But I also felt . . . and still do feel when I look at his fridge . . . I get a sense of, I don't know . . . it's like . . . Adi Da said a beautiful thing, he said, "It's okay to practice your relationship to the dead". He said, there's a period of grieving . . . and he recommended fully allowing the grieving . . . as much as you possibly can, as fully as you can . . . and then, letting go. He said, if you just keep holding on to that grieving, that's more about you than about the person who's passed.

But then he said, in the years to come, it's actually okay to 'practice your relationship to the dead', which was interesting . . . sort of like, not in a way of holding on, and not in a way of 'I feel so sad about it' . . . but actually, like . . . love, I guess. And I feel that with Harald, I feel like he made an extraordinary impact on my life that . . . I didn't see coming in that way . . . until it happened.

Then Anna continued:

I think I've had that conversation . . . Otis, that you're saying . . . with other people . . . about <our> experience and kind of being able to share and hopefully provide a bit of an alternative view or insight.

I remember not long after Harald died, talking to someone at work—whose brother had suicided a few years ago— and he was just fascinated . . . he's like,

"Why aren't you, devastated?. . . I don't understand . . . you talk about people like laughing and kind of sharing . . . <a> kind of lightness that . . . comes with it as well in some ways".

I remember . . . Michael, you weren't there . . . but the Jell's Park 'scattering of the ashes' get together was an amazing one . . . We've got photos of like, kind of just funny selfies . . . I don't know why we'd gotten into the habit of taking selfies on that day . . . but there are some amazing photos of the four of us just kind of pulling weird faces and just being silly. And the opportunity to . . . I think there was something about not just focusing on Harald, that we did. You know, there was always the love for Harald that was there . . . but there was something about the love for each other, that kind of, I think, got more focus in those moments as well . . . that . . . allowed . . . some healing to happen, or . . . the grieving to shift in a different way, that I found really helpful.

Harald's wicked sense of humour and love of the absurd was something we all relished and enjoyed. Many moments of our shared experiences, after his death, were infused with a kind of gallows humour that felt liberating and appropriately perverse. For example, there had been the matter of the gas bottle:

[Anna] *I remember taking the gas bottle back . . . It's like, "we've gotta do something with this gas bottle . . . we've got a receipt . . . he left the receipt". . . It's like . . . "all right, we'll take it back."*

[Libby] *I remember the receipt was for $175 and you got a $170 refund when you returned the bottle. So it actually cost $5 for him to kill himself. I still find that hilarious. And, very occasionally, if I tell someone, you get that <mildly*

horrified> expression . . . and you think "oh fuck . . . I can't . . . I'm not supposed to say that".

And then there was the sofa—a luxurious teal velvet dual recliner from King Furniture, purchased during our marriage—upon which Harald had done the deed.
At his home, directly after the viewing, the five of us had begun the process of allocating, sorting and disposing of Harald's things. Jack and Anna had taken possession of the couch that day.

Otis recalled:

. . . one of my memories was you guys sitting on those chairs, rotating yourselves back and forwards . . . I just found it so funny . . .

And Anna responded:

We still refer to it as "Harald's Death Couch".

And we all burst out laughing, again.

Later, Otis expanded on the lightness and looseness as one of the gifts of our shared experience.

. . . I get a sense of light and humor when I think of Harald, and you know, I don't think I'd have that if I didn't share this process with you guys . . . which he's totally a part of . . . like, you know, I'm not trying to separate him. I'm just saying, he brought us together and it's an expression of him in a certain way . . . with all of his limitations and everything . . . we were the people . . . the only ones . . . at his passing.

Yeah, there's so many levels of it . . . like I'd imagine, for example, if there were a heap more people involved, and he had a 'service' and . . . stuff, there would have

been a sense of . . . like [solemn voice] "we're all meant to be sad about this [muttering under breath] tragedy . . . horrible." But the fact that it was only like . . . five of us . . . meant that we could just kind of be a bit looser with it and a little bit more real and yeah . . . so many things about it . . . that . . . when you think about it . . . are unique.

Michael dug deep to locate the gifts in his experience.

Yeah, look, I have very, very mixed feelings. I guess I think I'm the least clear here . . . about how I feel about things. And I really appreciate being able to share that . . . because I haven't really thought about it for a long time.

I really miss him. I really loved him . . . I have very fond memories of him. And, you know, even though he . . . was strangely not very good at expressing his love, I felt his love a lot. And he was also . . . frequently, a right pain in the fuckin' ass . . . I need to say that, because that's how I feel about it.

And so . . . I think that the gift of his passing for me . . . it wasn't just his passing, it was all the stuff leading up to it . . . it's helped me develop a different point of view about the fact that I can never control anyone else's journey.

. . . I don't know how I would be if someone I knew and loved closely, now, said they wanted to kill themselves . . . I don't know whether I would do anything different, than, you know, really wading in and trying to change it <but>. . . I think that the journey with Harald helped me sort of understand that everyone's journey is their own.

Of course I can make compassionate gestures. But if I cross the line of compassion to thinking that somehow their journey is my responsibility, then I

think that I've proven to myself that I get into big trouble. Apart from the fact that it doesn't make sense to me rationally . . . emotionally it doesn't work either. And so I think it's really helped in terms of understanding that principle; that ultimately, whatever anyone chooses to do is their business. And, you know, in times of crisis . . . I can be a support, but the end result is not my doing.

[Libby] *For me, what you are saying also really brings up . . . just how easy it is for us to place expectations on others as a result of our own choices . . . you know, there can be this kind of reciprocity that's expected . . . that if I care for you, then something will come back in return. And seeing those beliefs, you know, and really kind of unpicking them . . . is huge, I think, in this world.*

[Michael] *Absolutely . . . And I could feel . . . you know, emotional dynamics are very complicated and I'm no exception to that . . . I can feel that's what, you know . . . somewhere in me, that's what was happening . . . that I was assuming that if I gave him all of that, you know, with . . . supposedly very good motives, that if I didn't get something in return . . .*

In other words, you know, I can look back and say, it wasn't unconditional love, it was definitely conditional, in some way . . . It's not easy, but I appreciate when I'm forced to have more awareness of my own liabilities. And . . . yeah, so . . . I can look back and see that, you know, while I thought I was fully giving of myself to Harald, that there was a big portion of what I was doing that was actually about me, not about him.

Michael's willingness to be open about such difficult feelings and insights was warmly received by the group, and Otis suggested that "if Harald were here, he would appreciate what you've said". To which Michael responded:

> *Well, interestingly enough, you know, I do feel . . . sort of, in some sense, inspired by the memory of Harald, to be honest in this conversation, because . . . it was a situation where everyone was . . . by and large, expressing very genuine . . . but largely positive memories of the whole incident. And I was aware that I had something very different . . . and something that I found, you know, not so positive. And so for me to come out and say that was the type of honesty that I know that Harald would appreciate.*
>
> [Otis] *Michael was 'unapologetically Harald'. [Group laughter]*
>
> [Libby] *Michael was unapologetically Michael . . . inspired by unapologetically Harald!*

As the conversation drew to a close, Jack said he felt the session had been a gift in itself, and Otis agreed:

> *. . . the fact that we're speaking together . . . it's really valuable . . . I do value it, and I do see, you know, maybe Harald was not an empathic person, but somehow I feel like all of us are. And I really value that . . . I feel like I can relax more and be myself in a deeper way, and that's really valuable and something I feel deeply with all of you. And that's a gift to me. So thank you, Harald.*
>
> And I found myself left with the mystery of it all:
>
> *I want to use your word, Otis,* mystery. *There is a mystery in all of this . . . for me . . . I think that's such a beautiful word to describe it. And it points to what you*

were saying too, Anna, about the connection between us. There's something about our connection to Harald, our connection to each other, the journey that we've been through, and the different layers and levels of that that makes this such an unusual . . . thing. And it is mysterious . . . and beautiful . . . and I'm not sure I really understand it, but I'm so glad to be in it with you.

Love

Even

After

all this time

The sun never says to the earth,

"You owe me"

Look

What happens

With a love like that

It lights the

whole sky.

(Hafez)

Letter to H (January 13, 2022)

Hi baby,

As you probably already know, I'm writing about you, us and me for the thesis that will conclude my studies in psychotherapy and spirituality, here in 'Canaardia'.

I'm grateful that you expressly gave permission many times, while you were alive, for me to write about you and I can't imagine you've changed so much as to feel differently now. It's also not that I'm writing about you, so much, but rather my own experience of what went down; how it affected me in ways that seem incredible and strangely beautiful and don't at all align with what most people might imagine.

Right now I'm in the kitchen of a small, two story wooden barn on a property in Birch Cove, Alberta. A lovely younger couple and their two daughters live in the main house next door, with two cats, four chickens and a goat, Ivan, who visits occasionally from his new home at a nearby farm. Birch Cove is a 'summer village', but I'm here in the depths of winter. It was -31 when I arrived, last week. Thick pristine sparkly snow blanketed everything; the tree boughs were drooped low, burdened by the weight. It was the perfect picture of a 'winter wonderland'. Now I understand why you alinsisted that Christmas in the southern hemisphere is wrong.

It's my third and longest visit so far. I've been here a week, and today is my last full day. The weather's warmed surprisingly; this morning I woke to soft, gentle rain tapping the plastic skylights above the bed. A couple of hours later the rain

became snow and thick floaty flakes fell all morning. In spite of the challenges, and inordinate length, the stillness and depth of a far-north winter suits me so well that when spring finally comes and everyone starts buzzing around again, I almost miss it.

While here, I've mostly been reading and cataloguing articles for my literature review. I don't really know what I'm doing. . . or how I'm going to pull this together, so I just take one step at a time and see where I'm led. Today I read a woman's letter to her 20-yr-old son, eight years after his death, and I realized I wanted to write to you.

I've been swimming around in terms like "suicidology", "bereavement" and "traumatic loss" and all they do is take me away from you, from our love. I can see my desire to 'explain' pushing through. Not so much to explain what you did— because I know that's not my responsibility—but to somehow convey the whole of it. The hugeness of what our love was . . . that it really was . . . is . . . big enough to hold you ending your life here on earth. That your departure was not a drama, a trauma, a devastation, a tragedy or a curse. That it was, and still is, somehow . . . simply okay.

And maybe it wouldn't be okay, or couldn't be, if I hadn't really known you. If you hadn't given everything to me, all of the real in you; your unflinching honesty, your giant openness, your cosmic perspective, your futile struggling and your vast, unconditional love. If you hadn't given it all to me while you were here, perhaps it would be different? Perhaps there would be something to 'miss', something to regret, something to grieve. But I don't feel that. I feel that you are

happier. That you are finally content. That you can see clearly now. And that our love, continues to flow, unabated, from here, to your new home in the beyond.

I sought this place out so that I could dedicate time and space to my research and writing, away from the daily routine; especially with David and I both working at home due to sanctions in the name of 'public safety' and a virus called Covid19. (I imagine you would have railed against the impositions, especially given that Melbourne is, at this time, the most locked-down city in the world. Somehow I can't help thinking that you not living through this is a blessing as well.)

The thing is, I'm realizing my coming here is not so much about having my own space, although, as you well know, I enjoy long bouts of solitude. What I'm only just seeing, is that it's more about me being alone *with you*; which doesn't seem right in my marital home with David. It feels a bit duplicitous, somehow. And yet, as I write this, I see that the physical environment has little to do with anything, that such boundaries don't really exist and that love isn't something to control or confine. Writing about my love for you takes nothing away from my love for David. As we agreed before you left, there's more than enough to go around.

I can also hear you saying that I'm just making it complicated, and I see that I am. And that doesn't alter the ease that I feel, coming here, only I wish it hadn't taken so long to realize what it was really about. I'm suddenly sad at the thought that we might have spent more time together, if I'd been able to tear myself away from all my diligent researching, and just rest, in the quiet white, with you.

During the latter part of *The Chris Convo* (in *Presence*), Chris told me he was sensing Harald's presence. Such psychic activity is not unusual for him, and it was the first time we'd spoken together about Harald, so it wasn't surprising to either of us but we didn't directly explore it at the time. The next day, I asked if he would share what he'd seen, and he sent me the notes below and gave permission for me to include them here:

> At some point when you were making statements regarding how you really knew what love was, from your experience with Harald, and you were describing how that felt, I started feeling a strong flow of energy spontaneously rushing up and I got goose bumps. That's when I knew he was listening. Energy rushing up (and goose bumps) are spirit's validation that powerful words of truth are being spoken, that there is a higher purpose in those words and that the truth is taking you in the right direction.
>
> When I knew he was listening I started putting some of my awareness on him while you were talking, kind of like a thumbnail picture up in the corner. I could feel how happy he was to know that the truth of your love, the essence of your relationship and his own personal struggles would be shared with the world, framed in a beautiful and thoughtful way; and that he was making a contribution to the world through your writings, insight and positive perspectives about it all.
>
> I also started to feel a little of what he was like when he was alive here (feeling the anger he had for example). I saw him wearing a lot of green for some reason, and with auburn coloured hair (I don't know if that was his real hair color).
>
> He loved what you were telling me, because it was ultimately all about love, and that's what he would've wanted the take-away to be.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Embarking upon this enquiry, the research questions I posed were: What are the elements of my uncommon, and nonetheless genuine, experience and perspective on suicide, death, loss and love within a western cultural and spiritual context? And, to what extent do those experiences and perspectives prompt reflection on common beliefs and responses to suicide, and those bereaved by suicide, in similar settings, today?

The findings reveal a story that is not readily shared, much less part of the body of literature about suicide and bereavement in a western context. They encourage a critique of cultural assumptions and norms as well as an appreciation of spiritual beliefs and attributes which can ameliorate devastating grief and inspire psychological and spiritual growth in the bereaved. In conversation with relevant literature, the following discussion illuminates the a) personal, b) cultural and c) spiritual elements of this uncommon experience and encourages reflection on common beliefs and responses both to suicide, and the suicide-bereaved.

Personal

This section focuses the discussion on two personal themes as they relate to the story: Harald's inclusion and connection with others in his journey towards suicide—enabling us to make meaning of the event; and our shared respect for his personal agency.

Connection and Meaning

Arguably the single most important element in the unusualness of Harald's suicide was Harald himself. With characteristic openness and honesty he had shared, at great length, over a period of years, his contemplations, deliberations and, eventually, intentions regarding his own death. These conversations were rarely easy, but they meant

that others were included in a way that then enabled us to consider and determine how to respond and when to intervene. Harald's openness and honesty provided *the opportunity* to make attempts to influence him, which in turn, helped minimize guilt and regret after his death.

As friends, Harald attracted people who were similarly open-minded and relatively free from the constraints of social convention. His openness also meant we could speak about his intentions, and the impact on ourselves, with *each other*, and this meant we were not isolated in our challenges along the way. With the benefit of hindsight, Harald's willingness to discuss his thoughts and plans, was a huge blessing, helping us all to avoid the emotional blindsiding that generally accompanies the sudden loss of a loved one to suicide.

In line with what Gall et al. (2014) and Wojtkowiak et al. (2012) have suggested, our initial shock *was* lessened because we were fully aware of Harald's intentions. Based on our direct conversations with him, and his explanatory email, our ability to understand and meaningfully explain the suicide, as Wojtkowiak et al. (2012) and Brazda et al. (2018) suggested, was greatly increased. Our shared capacity to make some sense of Harald's suicide, *has* indeed contributed to our ability to continue loving him without blame or idealization, as Bottomley et al. (2019) and Dransart (2013) suggest.

In my own case, this experience deepened my interpersonal relationships, appreciation of life, self-awareness and resilience, as Gall et al. (2014) also found. In line with findings from Drapeau at al. (2019) and Levi-Belz (2017), the closeness of my relationship with Harald is also likely to have contributed to my personal and spiritual growth after his death.

Shared Respect

It is necessary to restate that I do not see it as my place to explain Harald's choice, or in any way justify his actions. However, as is clear from the findings of this research, that the decision to end his life was one that Harald gave deep consideration over a number of years. For him it clearly *was* a rational choice. Those of us who tried to persuade him otherwise were defeated by his adamance, supporting Lichtenberg's (1742-1799) suggestion that attempts to argue against another's suicide are pointless (as cited in Stern, 1959). Furthermore, if, as den Hartogh suggests, a rational suicide involves "the execution of a carefully made plan, in dialogue with others and involving the use of non-violent means", then Harald's can certainly be judged as such (2016, p. 680).

Witnessing Harald's journey was a deeply existential experience for us. We each admired his authenticity as a person, and, as far as we were able, respected his autonomy: his capacity to live, and even die, in accordance with his own values (Lester, 2006; Roberts, 2017). Without explicitly recognizing it as such, we variously honored a principle of non-interference, by not taking action to have Harald involuntarily hospitalized. As Otis expressed, such action would have felt *violent*; a deep disrespect and abuse of Harald's autonomy. Respect for Harald—as an intelligent, loving friend, husband and human being—was a foundation of all of our relationships with him.

Harald's respect and care, for us, in turn, was evidenced by the manner in which he planned and executed his own death. He wrote a clear, comprehensive 'goodbye' email that attended to an extraordinary range of practical details, provided an explanation of his actions and included a final message of love to us as his friends. He completed a last will and testament, which made my role as executor straightforward and which

facilitated not only the repayment of all personal financial debts, but also the provision of a large sum to me as his not-yet-divorced wife. He left keys and a note for first responders. He left the receipt for the gas cannister in clear view, so as to avoid misplacement of blame. He made no mess. His suicide was exceptionally well organized and as uncomplicated as possible. These were not the actions of a mentally disturbed individual. Instead, they demonstrate nothing but love, care and consideration for others.

Cultural

In this section, the discussion focuses on two key cultural themes as they relate to the story: the medicalization of suicide, with its emphasis on intervention and prevention, and the stigmatizing and discrediting of those bereaved by a voluntary death.

Pretension of Prevention

The dominant western perspective of suicide as the result of mental disorder—or to use Marsh's cheeky phrase, the "compulsory ontology of pathology" (2013, p. 747)—not only positions medical professionals as *experts* in the matter, but it means that the responsibility for suicide rests with the individual rather than society. To my mind, this focusses attention on the effect rather than the cause. Until social conditions change considerably, some people—particularly those who already feel oppressed or ostracized—will inevitably find their suffering too much. The medicalization of suicide positions it as the result of illness, rather than a response to unendurable circumstances and even, perhaps, a rejection of cultural expectations and ideology. A rejection of what this world is—as experienced by the ideator—or what it has become.

Within the context of the medicalization of suicide in the West, the message dispensed, to mental health practitioners and the public alike, is a loud, insistent one

about intervention and prevention. As a group, we were not immune to the cultural insistence that Harald be *saved*. Anna, Michael and I all grappled directly with the question of intervention. In some ways Michael had most actively tried to *help* Harald—to prevent him from fulfilling his intentions—and he was left with the most difficult feelings, even years later.

The question arises: How does the medical and cultural emphasis on intervention and prevention affect those bereaved by the voluntary death of a loved one? Colleen Carlon (2020) provides one answer, by sharing her experience with the R U OK? suicide prevention program in Australia, following the voluntary death of her partner. According to the R U OK? website, the organization is a "harm prevention charity" that envisions a world where all are "protected from suicide". The focus of R U OK? is on building skills in *help-givers*, a strategy which, intentionally or otherwise, has the effect of locating agency with family and friends. This, in turn, has implications for people bereaved by suicide, like Carlon, who may feel shamed and enraged by the question—real or implied—*Did you not ask if he was okay?* (Carlon, 2020, p. 9). The seeds of the guilt, shame and stigma experienced by so many bereaved by suicide are sown by the assumption that all such deaths are preventable.

In contrast to Carlon's experience with R U OK?, the advice I received from Beyond Blue—another Australian mental health support service—served to affirm my own sense of the limits to the help that I and others might be able to provide. The message I received was one of direct support for me and *my* circumstances. I still recall my surprise that the counsellor's opening question came from a place of concern for *me*. How indescribably grateful I was to *be seen* in it all. On reflection, perhaps a part of my

initial reluctance to reach out to such services, was fear of facing the implication that I was not 'doing enough' to prevent Harald from killing himself. That, somehow, as Carlon's story shows, the responsibility for his choice might be laid at my feet.

During the course of this research, I found myself recalling a long distant memory from some decades prior. A friend had shared with me that the husband of her friend had killed himself, leaving behind not only his wife but two children as well. It is with some shame that I remember my instant, unspoken, reaction to this news was something to the effect of *oh my, what a failure*; the failure, in my mind, being that of the wife and not the husband. In such a simple, momentary, telling judgment, one can see a range of cultural influences threading together: competition between women, the burden of responsibility for marital 'success' being borne by women, stigma around death by suicide and so on. How insidious our cultural conditioning can be.

Franklin et al's (2016) five-decade study into the prevention and treatment of suicidal thoughts and behaviors illustrates that science has both failed to explain or prevent suicide, something that mental health practitioners would surely do well to accept. When I mentioned this study to my husband David—who was previously a volunteer for our city's suicide Distress Line—he told me that the top-scoring trainee in his intake at the Distress Line had ended up taking his own life. As Tatz (2017) suggests, the use of the word *prevention*, with respect to suicide is simply pretentious and misleading.

The Discrediting of the Bereaved

Bereavement to suicide, in the west, occurs within the context of a culture that has little but disdain for the action, the shadow of which may fall on family and friends. Such

a loss is often endured through unconsciously adopted cultural filters of social judgement and shame. Those bereaved are regularly left to mourn in isolation which makes their grief even more difficult. However, an awareness of these cultural constraints can help the bereaved rise above them. Awareness allows choice. The opportunity to choose an alternative or a larger perspective.

When I engaged with the literature on stigma, as experienced by the suicide-bereaved, I found myself feeling oddly disconnected from what I read. I had not noticed, or related to, feeling stigmatized by Harald's suicide. It may be that I was not impacted by social stigma because my relationship with Harald was already somewhat unconventional. We frequently 'went against' cultural norms for couples, like socializing together and sharing a bed. At the beginning of our relationship, I'd also faced social reprimand from two friends who'd found him difficult; one of whom severed our friendship entirely as a result. It may be that I had developed a kind of resilience I didn't specifically recognize.

It is also true to say that my social circle, and Harald's, were perhaps similarly unconventional. My experience of personal and social interactions after Harald's death was that, almost without exception, people were warm, open, kind and extremely helpful towards me. So although I was aware of the social stigma around suicide, it just didn't occur to me to take on any social or cultural judgements regarding Harald's death.

Another possible influence on my lack of engagement with survivor stigma may be related to my grandmother's suicide when I was 19. The circumstances of her death were not openly discussed in our family at the time, or for years afterwards, and this always felt unsettling to me. It seemed a kind of collusive dishonoring of her struggle,

and an unwillingness, on the part of some family members, to openly face the reality of her choice and its impact on their lives.

Oexle et al. (2020) found that the more that suicide survivors experience or perceive social stigma, the greater their difficulties with bereavement, which seems all the more reason for survivors to forge a different path to that offered by mainstream culture. Hanschmidt et al. found that some suicide survivors were able to "resist" stigmatization, but suggest that "the psychological mechanisms of these strategies remain unknown" (2016, p.11). The language here is interesting: s*trategies* and *resistance* evoking a military, masculine, oppositional orientation that seems unnecessary and outmoded.

I agree with Carlon (2020), that what is first required is the capacity to *see* the "structure of suicide taboo" in our culture, and that doing so provides the opportunity for "detachment" which means one can distance oneself from cultural meanings of suicide without simultaneously separating from the loved one or the nature of their death (p. 13). By bringing the structural meanings of suicide into view, the potency of stigmatizing interactions in social contexts is negated or reduced (Carlon, 2020). Carlon describes the process as "moving away from being a 'passive' receptacle'" of cultural meanings about suicide, to "proactively challenging those same meanings" (Carlon, 2020, p. 13). Rejecting stigmatization requires the capacity to see suicide taboos as illusory and unhelpful—which can then open up opportunities for increased agency in the interactions and experiences of those bereaved by suicide.

Our shared story also demonstrates the power of healing through real connection; itself a kind of stigma-rejecting strategy. As was discussed in the session, those outside

our small circle seemed to be wonder *Why aren't you devastated?* when we shared some of this story. As Anna said, "there was something about the love for each other" that was key to our healing; allowing "the grieving to shift in a different way". We developed a kind of stigma-busting, shared agency; through giving each other permission to be loose, light and irreverent in spite of the circumstances and in full knowledge that Harald would want nothing less.

Hanschmidt et al. (2016) point out that stigma is generated by the association between suicide and mental illness, which discredits both the deceased and their surviving loved ones. On reflection I can't help wondering if it was, at least in part, this sense of *discreditation* that spurred me to tell this story. The cultural narrative that a) suicide is the result of an (individual) disorder that can b) be treated by a medical practitioner who will c) prevent a tragic and unnecessary death, is simply not borne out by the evidence. This narrative is damaging to many who choose to end their own lives and, arguably, all who are bereaved by suicide. It dishonors everything that was *good* in who you knew and what you shared; reducing it all to a kind of 'failure' that those still engaged with the struggle of life are then somehow expected to shoulder.

Spiritual

This story offers a direct challenge to cultural norms and assumptions about suicide and the bereaved. But perhaps more importantly, it also contains clues about the ways in which a larger perspective, which one might call *spiritual*, can serve to support something more hopeful, helpful and, ultimately, more human.

In one way or another, what was common among all of us was a capacity to place Harald's struggle, and his suicide, within a context that extended beyond the cultural

conventions of our time and place in this world. For most of us this capacity was unquestionably helpful in, firstly, empathizing with Harald's challenges, and secondly, ameliorating the impact of his loss. All of us could, at least at times, relate to a higher truth that loving Harald meant respecting his perspective, his autonomy, and ultimately, his decision. A spiritual orientation also opened us to the possibility that something greater than Harald's survival was at stake. This section explores the various spiritual elements of our response to Harald's circumstances and his death.

Facing Reality

All human unhappiness comes from not facing reality squarely, exactly as it is.

(Buddha)

Perhaps the most essential of our spiritual 'achievements' was that of facing reality; which included the prospect and then eventuality of Harald's death. We shared an appreciation for that which is real, authentic and true; for that which lies beyond the pretenses and illusions of this world. An appreciation that, as was discussed, is generally at odds with social convention, and is rarely experienced with more than one or two very close friends.

Within the context of contemporary Western society our shared capacity to squarely face death was unusual, and, as the literature suggests, this did contribute to an amelioration of the bereavement experience for most of us (Bonanno et al. 2002; Boyraz et al., 2015; Wong et al., 1994).

Openness

The main character of any living system is openness.

(Ilya Prigogine)

Openness was another spiritual quality central to this story; wonderfully embodied by Harald, and equally lived by the rest of us. Harald's frankness in sharing his thoughts and deliberations with us, meant that first and foremost, his suicide was not unexpected or shocking. For my own part there was the sense that nothing had been held back, left undone, or left unsaid. That we were able to face the possibility of his death, before it happened, enabled a very different kind of bereavement process and provides another contrast to the common experience, as articulated by Anna during the session, in which loved ones feel blindsided, say they *didn't see it coming* and wonder if they *could have done more*.

When sharing his intentions with me, in September 2015, Harald had said "I want to make this as easy for you as possible". At the time I could barely relate to the kindness in that. I could only vaguely see that his inclusion of me in such a dreadful possibility was coming from a place of love. But it didn't stop there. He also gave me the gift of a larger perspective—that one of us would die before the other regardless—as well as an opportunity: to learn to deal with death before my own.

Harald's mind was frequently a thing of exquisite beauty, a kind of wild vast spaciousness that could hold any thought or entertain any possibility. To me it felt like a giant ocean in which I could freely float without ever encountering an end. He could provide a considered response to virtually any scientific, philosophical or spiritual query

seemingly at the drop of a hat. One time my friend Mendy and I were contemplating the question: *Does it matter if the human species survives*? I had been writing a detailed exploration of my thoughts in an email to her, and paused to put the question to Harald as he appeared at the top of the stairs. He answered immediately, "not at all", and when asked him to elaborate he said, "We arbitrarily arose . . . and we turned out to be a failure . . . and that's that."

As the literature shows, and this research attests, *openness* is central to the relationship between spirituality and healthy bereavement (Garner, 2021; Grof and Grof, 1990; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Taylor, 2021 Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004;). Described by Lancaster & Palframan (2009, p. 257) as "enabling acceptance of material deriving from a realm of self beyond the everyday ego", openness enables a lessening of attachment: to hopes, to cultural expectations, to the decisions of others and to the departed themselves.

Acceptance

Eckhart Tolle's quote—*Acceptance of the unacceptable is the greatest source of grace in this world*—was on my bedroom wall throughout my marriage to Harald, and it frequently provided a touchstone, particularly at times when I found his depression or anger most difficult to be with.

My co-researchers showed an extraordinary capacity to accept what might easily be deemed an unacceptable situation, and, from my perspective, it was their deeper spiritual orientation that made this possible. In his book *The Deepest Acceptance*, non-duality teacher Jeff Foster, writes:

> I teach one thing and one thing only: a deep and fearless acceptance of whatever comes your way. This is not passive surrender or cold detachment, but an intelligent and creative emergence into the mystery of the moment. (2012, p. xiii)

Such acceptance is widely recognized as a central tenet of many wisdom traditions. In my own experience it is a kind of courageous softness that expands to enfold that which is inconceivable. It makes possible the relinquishing of expectations, of desired outcomes and of the niggling insistence that something *should not be*. Acceptance allows others the freedom to be as they are, to know what they know, and to choose what they choose. It makes possible not only the deepest respect but also the unconditionality of love.

Awakening

The literature on bereavement and spiritual growth generally deals with the kind of awakening that can occur *as a result of* deep engagement with one's loss; that manifests *upon reflection*, one might say. The kind of development that evolves over time. However, some authors do acknowledge the possibility of spiritual experiences immediately following a loss (Bray, 2010, Taylor, 2021). As we have seen, these have been variously referred to as "spiritual awakening" (Taylor, 2013b), "spiritual change" (Balk, 1999) and "spiritual emergence" (Grof and Grof, 1990).

Six of the seven themes of *spiritual awakening,* as identified by Taylor (2021)—and reflected in the teachings of various spiritual traditions—were part of my experience following Harald's death. I felt an expanded awareness, a pull towards connection, a spacious inner equanimity, a huge increase of empathy and a deep desire to serve something beyond myself. I cannot locate any resonance of the "movement toward

enhanced well-being" that is the seventh of Taylor's themes, and I cannot say why (2021, p 11). I experienced a change of *being*, in the way that Lange (2004) and others describe; a state that is "deeper, wiser, and more in tune with matter, the body and soul, and the material world" (Scott, 1997, p 45-46). Naturally, this had a consequent effect on my relationship with myself, with others, and with Harald after he passed.

It is important to convey that the awakened state I experienced did not negate or obscure the deep sorrow I also felt upon Harald's death. These two 'states' seemed to co-exist comfortably alongside each other for some time. They were not mutually exclusive, but perhaps it's true to say I moved between them, or rather that the wholeness of the awakened state was one of allowing everything, including space for my sorrow as and when it arose.

I cannot say why or how this awakening occurred. Bray (2010) suggests that, for some, the *readiness* for such a transformative experience may be more significant than the catalyzing event. In recognizing *openness* and *acceptance* as distinctly spiritual qualities, Taylor (2021) similarly allows for the possibility that those who experience post-bereavement transformation may have previously cultivated these qualities and were simply predisposed thus.

Calhoun & Tedeschi's (2006) model of post-traumatic growth and Grof & Grof's (1990) model of psycho-spiritual transformation both suggest a correlation between growth outcome and pre-trauma capacity or functioning (Bray, 2010). For Bray (2010), a "readiness to transform" may in certain instances be more significant than the external event. Similarly, in recognizing openness and acceptance as distinctly spiritual qualities, Taylor (2021) makes room for the possibility that those who experience post-

bereavement transformation may have previously cultivated these qualities and were thus predisposed to transformation.

Bonds of Being

They that love beyond the world cannot be separated by it.

Death cannot kill what never dies.

(William Penn)

My own spiritual belief, and lived experience, is that intimate connection with another, in life, creates or develops an enduring bond. Surety that the soul survives physical death makes it possible for me to enjoy an ongoing *relationship* with Harald; for our enduring bond to be accessible and deeply felt. Existing literature suggests that the vast majority of after-death communication is beneficial, healing and even transformative for the bereaved, and my own experience attests to this (Benore & Park, 2004; Exline, 2021; Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Parker, 2005). Hearing Harald say, *It's only death, baby,* was a beacon of love in the depths of my despair. It gave me the courage to face the tasks before me and it opened me to receive the wonder of his heart entering and expanding mine in the days that followed.

What is also clear from this research is that the five of us are bonded; by the experience of journeying with Harald to his death and with each other beyond that. As Otis so beautifully expressed, we shared an experience that was "magical and mysterious", something that "none of us can fully put a finger on"; a depth of connection that was comforting and healing after Harald's passing, and is as palpable and nourishing four years later and hemispheres apart. There seems no doubt that Harald's honesty,

authenticity and openness with each of us *before* his death, paved the way for our continued sharing and mutual support afterwards.

Unconditional Love

Unconditional love really exists in each of us. It is part of our deep inner being. It is not so much an active emotion as a state of being. It's not "I love you" for this or that reason, not "I love you if you love me". It's love with no reason, love without an object.

(Ram Dass)

Michael's deep insight was in seeing that the anger he continues to feel towards Harald arises from socially accepted expectations relating to reciprocity of care or love. Expectations that, while entirely understandable given our cultural context, have no place in the deeper movement of unconditional love. As my supervisor so elegantly, commented, after reading the findings of this research:

> Michael illustrates for all of us the incredible difference between "letting go" (which you and the three other friends did) and "giving up" (a kind of taking your marbles and going home that Michael did out of frustration and exhaustion, etc., but which left him energetically still connected to him in his resentment that he couldn't change Harald's mind). Michael's reflexivity and insight around that truth grabs each one of us deeply in the heart of where we live and where we fear most. This whole story is a beautiful meditation on one of our greatest spiritual tasks, and it invites each one of us to reflect on situations in our own lives that ask us to

"let go" and "be love" as unconditionally as we can. (Gardner, L., personal communication, 2022).

Marriage to Harald showed me what unconditional love really is, through his being that towards me, and in my fledgling attempts to be that, towards him. This was the essence of my spiritual sadhana, this learning to *be love*. To this day, when I'm challenged by any number of circumstances, the question *What would love do?* is my favorite. Immediately, it opens and deepens awareness, activates sincerity and directs me to a purity of heart that can do no wrong. From this place, an answer is usually readily available and will easily be a surprise to my self. Over time I have also come to know a special quiet delight when the answer is: *nothing*.

After Harald died and filled my heart, I moved as love, for everyone and everything I saw. People insisted on being sorry for me, over and over again, and all I knew was to tell them it was really okay, and to support them in their shock and awkwardness as best I could. On the rare occasion that I encountered someone open enough, I did my best to convey the magic, mystery, beauty and humour in my experience of what had unfolded.

The Evolution of the Soul

If the findings that Newton (1994, 2001), Schwartz (2009, 2012) and Gallenberger (2017) have shared regarding the relationship between suicide and the soul are to be believed then Harald's soul will continue to evolve one way or another in spite of the circumstances of his death. Jeshua/Jesus's key messages, especially the statements that "from a spiritual perspective there are no acts that are absolutely wrong or sinful", and that "the deepest act of self-betrayal can lead someone into a state of inner clarity that

may help forever", resonate truly within me as words spoken by a higher intelligence (Schwartz, 2012, p. 404). It further seems cause for celebration that a PhD clinical psychologist found his way to the conclusion that suicide, an action that is highly offensive to our culture, nevertheless provides opportunities for the evolution of the soul (Gallenberger, 2017).

That our loved ones, including those who choose to end their lives, will "steer their own course in life, even if you try your utmost to help them change or recover" is a message that all of us, especially those plagued by guilt after a suicide, will do well to hear (Schwartz, 2012, p. 409). Acknowledging the limitations of our capacity to influence change requires acceptance and also humility. The flavor of humility that flows into us when we gaze out into the midnight sky.

Final Comments

When I look back on Harald's departure, the overarching sense is of a *conscious* experience. A kind of awareness that permeated every step. The walking of a fine line. A careful balancing of personal and cultural urges to *help*, to *try* and to *stop*, with a deeper spiritual knowledge that there was likely nothing I could really do to alter the outcome.

The findings of this research essentially support the suggestion that spiritual beliefs can play a positive role in the bereavement process (Fournier, 1997; Becker et al., 2007; Dransart, 2013; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009; Walsh et al., 2002). However, this research illuminates some of nuances in this relationship. For example, the spiritual belief expressed by Michael—that suicide is essentially 'a pointless exercise'—may have strengthened his resolve to prevent Harald's death, which in turn may have led him to sacrifice his own well-being in pursuit of that end, which eventually left him holding

feelings of anger towards Harald after he'd left. While not wishing to suggest such a path is necessarily this clear, one can see its potential. So while spiritual beliefs *may* provide an existential framework in which grief is more readily resolved, as Walsh et al. (2002) suggest, and as much of this discussion attests, this relationship is complex and worthy of deeper exploration.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This concluding chapter outlines the socio-cultural implications of this research and the practice implications for psychotherapists, before discussing questions arising and potential areas for future enquiry, and finally closing this paper with a poem.

Socio-cultural Implications

Facing reality includes recognizing the fact that the medicalization of suicide has thus far failed to lessen the numbers of people trying and/or succeeding to end their own lives. Den Hartogh (2016) elegantly depicts the pretzel induced by the pathologizing of suicide as follows:

> If you have a stable death wish, however well-founded in the circumstances in which you find yourself, in a climate in which the wish itself is already considered a clear sign of mental illness, in which you cannot communicate about it with others without endangering the very possibility of acting on it, and in which it seems to be general knowledge that you can only do so by using violent means, it is only to be expected that you develop mood-disturbances and other symptoms of mental illness, perhaps including a tendency to acts of self-injury. (p. 677)

That our culturally-endorsed pathologizing of suicide may, at least to some extent, include a self-fulfilling aspect, is surely worthy of greater attention. During the course of my own practicum placement more than one client spoke with me about previous experiences in which they had felt entirely unseen by a counsellor's assiduous attention to preforming a suicide risk assessment. These clients wanted to be able to speak freely and confidentially about their suicidal thoughts as a way to help themselves. One had been forcibly hospitalized on two separate occasions and felt traumatized as a result. My

understanding, from discussions with colleagues and friends, is that such stories are not uncommon.

That suicide in the west is increasingly privatized, subjectivized and decontextualized—effectively disconnected from any socio-cultural issues at play—obliterates the opportunity to perceive even *some* suicides as reasoned responses to sick circumstances. As Petrov (2013) suggests, our task is not to remove voluntary death as an alternative, but to endeavor to make life—in its psycho-spiritual whole—"a bit more decent to live" (p. 363).

Were society to become freer, more accepting and more egalitarian, individuals may have greater incentive to choose life. While speculative in the implied causality, as Petrov suggests, there "just might reside in this belief the seeds to a reflexive public health suicide prevention program" (2013, p. 363). Within a culture that denies death and avoids sorrow, our continued refusal to engage openly with existential issues, may mean, as Petrov warns, that suicide "paradoxically" becomes an excuse to "get in touch with the really vital issues" (Petrov, 2013, p. 362).

Tatz points out that suicide is "fraught with faith, fear, folklore, demonology, dogma, dread, mystery, secrecy, speculation, and tradition" (2017, p. 543). He insists that entire cultural complexity of intentional death must be opened for discussion, even confrontation, and I agree (Tatz, 2017). However, doing so requires us to learn to speak about it calmly (Szasz, 1999) and to "think *against* the present" (Rose, 1996, p. 18) so that which has come to seem most essentially true can be questioned, and the "forces and contingencies involved in the formation of our taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting can be uncovered" (Marsh, 2013, p. 753).

Practice Implications for Psychotherapists

Jean Améry wrote that "that the discourse on voluntary death only begins where psychology ends" (1999, p.16). He insisted that psychology was "something for an expert", but that the act of leaping to one's death "breaks with the logic of life and therefore also with psychology" (1999, p. 18).

How then might we best relate to those contemplating such a leap? A good place to start is to learn from the reasons that people like Harald distrust conventional psychology and intentionally keep *helpers* like us at bay. What is it that we are *not* doing? Or perhaps, more accurately, what is it that we are not *being*? That question invites us into a deeper, wholly human realm, the answers to which, in my mind, are located in a therapist's capacity to embody, to the best of their ability, the *spiritual* qualities discussed earlier in this paper, of openness, acceptance and love.

What might a therapeutic encounter founded on openness, acceptance and love actually look like? Perhaps, first and foremost, it would be freed of *intention*, expressed or otherwise, on the part of the therapist. For example the intention to help, to heal, to resolve, to stop, to start or to change. (God save us from other people's good intentions indeed.) Such a therapeutic encounter would then enable a client to speak freely without fear of judgement, assessment or imprisonment. Without the burden of unduly 'worrying' the therapist. As practitioners we need to recognize that it feels considerably more supportive to our clients when we come from a place of ease with the deep truth that, as Michael put it, *everyone's journey is their own*.

Learning to face the realities of one's own life is an obvious, but oft overlooked, pre-requisite to fully being with others as they learn to face theirs. Existential

psychotherapy is one approach that invites practitioners and clients to engage with fundamental realities, including the four *givens* of life: death, meaning, isolation and freedom (Yalom, 1980). Existential psychotherapy poses questions like, *Am I able to be?* while allowing that for some, the answer may be 'no'. That death will come for all of us, is a given worth facing at any stage of life, as Tibetan Buddhism especially, has heartily endorsed.

Transpersonal psychology also helpfully offers a more holistic lens. From a transpersonal perspective, existence is seen as multilayered, and the physical universe—so often assumed to be the entirety of existence—is only one of multiple realms (Neustadter, 2010). Neustadter (2010) suggests that practitioners maintain an open mind and be available to our clients' soulful yearnings. That it is only from "inside" the problem that a therapist can begin to understand the meaning inherent in the desire to die (Neustadter, 2010, p. 73).

Similarly, spiritually-oriented psychotherapy recognizes, as this research attests, that spirituality can be a supportive resource during times of existential angst:

> Through the spiritual lens, people can see their lives in a broad, transcendent perspective; they can discern deep truths in ordinary and extraordinary experience, and they can locate timeless values that offer grounding and direction in shifting times and circumstances. Through a spiritual lens, problems take on a different character and distinctive solutions appear: answers to seemingly unanswerable questions, support when other sources of support are unavailable, and new sources of value and significance when old dreams are no longer viable. (Pargament, 2007, p. 11-12).

Mainstream psychology may fall short when it comes to discussions about metaphysical experiences in ways that support and validate the bereaved. *Sorry madam, but your way of relating to your dead loved one is not valid.* How is this not stigmatizing, yet again? As Park and Benore (2004) suggest, a metaphysical belief ought not be relegated to the realm of "delusion" by psychologists merely because its veracity cannot be proven (p. 39). Such a belief may be central to the client's bereavement and coping and to the very meaning of the death for him or her (Park & Benore, 2004).

When the 'extraordinary' experiences of the bereaved can be viewed by mental health practitioners as 'normal' human experiences, conducive to well-being and helpful in adjusting to loss, then individuals may feel less fear and inhibition about reporting them (Parker, 2005). With continued research—and hopefully, growth of the spiritual research paradigm—one imagines that much of what the western world terms 'anomalous' will eventually fall into the realm of the 'normal' simply because such experiences occur for a substantial portion of the population. As Parker (2005) suggests, helping professionals need to become better equipped at assisting bereaved clients to integrate these experiences within a healthy and adaptive grief process.

It is also not helpful for therapists, friends or family to minimize, 'explain away', or pathologize an individual's interactions with a deceased loved one by labelling them hallucinations, illusions, fantasies and/or 'just a dream' (Parkes, 1970; Raphael, 1983). Doing so can alienate the client by stigmatizing or pathologizing deeply intimate and often profound experiences (Parker, 2005). An affirming, safe, open therapeutic environment is essential to helping bereaved clients make the most of these experiences while minimizing any risks. If, as Exline suggests, we can adopt a "respectful, humble

stance, rather than remaining too tightly attached to our worldviews", we may in fact broaden our own perspectives "in ways that will be life-giving not only for our clients but also for ourselves" (Exline, 2021, p. 174).

Something I find perplexing is the emphasis in the research on postvention; the healing of the bereaved, *after* the fact. And yet, what this unusual enquiry illustrates is the extent to which an open, authentic, unconditionally loving relationship *before* death can facilitate a smoother integration and acceptance of a loved one's choice and their action, after the fact. In my view, one of the most important roles a therapist can play in a person's life is to help them see and know themselves, and to support them to establish and nurture genuine, open, intimate relationships in their life. The quality of our relationships with our loved ones, while they are alive, will directly affect our capacity for a healthy bereavement process after they die.

An orientation of openness, acceptance and unconditional love can helpfully underpin a therapist's ability to be present and available to the pain of a client's loss without pushing to *fix 'the problem'*. Life inevitably includes struggle and suffering. Sorrow is a human fact. It may be that we can only rediscover joy when we fully allow and experience our pain. Freud believed that a more open attitude towards death and a greater opportunity to mourn losses would bring about a reduction in the number of voluntary deaths (in Jansson, 1998), and I agree.

Building upon Carl Rogers' (1961) seminal work, which recognized our human capacity for ever-expanding awareness, congruence and integrative growth, Jared Kass (2015) offers a wonderful model for "person-centred spiritual maturation" that can helpfully underpin the kind of psychotherapeutic work to which I aspire. Kass explains

that person-centred spiritual maturation is a "multi-dimensional learning process" that can contribute to the well-being of individuals *and* society (2015, p.67). In outlining the elements of the model, he writes:

> It offers a shared, holding environment for people with theistic, transpersonal, and secular humanist worldviews. It facilitates person-specific growth that can help individuals navigate life's existential, interpersonal, and intergroup tensions through growth in five dimensions: improved behavioral self-regulation through mindfulness; cognitive understanding of humanity's chain of pain that promotes pro-justice narratives about self, others, and life; social–emotional growth that repairs broken attachment templates and promotes compassionate attunement to self and others; contemplative skills that build a structural foundation for secure existential attachment and that tap the human capacity for unconditional altruistic love; and development of a resilient worldview, confidence in life and self, that enables individuals to confront life's problems with internal composure and the ability to derive maturational growth. (Kass, 2015, p. 67)

In a way that seems highly complementary to this research, Kass explains that person-centred spiritual maturation is located "at the relational interface between self, life's existential insecurities, human micro systems, and sociocultural macro systems" and that the model highlights "the role of spiritual growth within the context of diverse community as an antidote to these destructive forces" (Kass, 2015, p. 54). The ability to be in community with others, managing life's existential, relational and intergroup tensions with resilience and empathy, is a central feature of person-centred spiritual maturation (Hoshmand & Kass, 2003).

If Jung was right, and *what we resist, persists*, then we have ourselves a simple answer to the continuing increase of voluntary deaths around the world. Until we are able to really hear the voices of those who yearn for death, without insisting they speak from abnormality, malfunction or sin—without viewing them only, and always, an aberration—we shall continue to contribute, unconsciously, to a world that makes others invisible, wrong and unsafe. Not because of their wish to die, but because of our unwillingness to really live.

Questions Arising and Suggestions for Further Research

It is clear that our cultural context is not truly supportive of those who a) contemplate death and b) suffer the loss of a loved one to suicide. Stories like this one might easily be lost in the cultural mist which insists that: *every* suicide is tragic, *self-murder* must be *prevented*, and that *you* didn't ask if he was okay.

This research raises multiple and various questions about intentional death and its impact on the bereaved, starting with the most obvious: some people just don't want to live—what would it mean to accept this? Why are we so keen to prevent suicide? What is it about walking into its darkness that we are so afraid of? What if we were able to let our loved ones go when they chose? What if death is not the ending we think it is?

Instead of simply continuing to insist that the growing numbers of suicidal people are damaged, broken or wrong, surely it behooves us to find better ways to understand what they need. Not what 'experts' *think* they need, but what individuals—and communities—in all their unique circumstances, *know* they do. The kind of understanding that is entirely free of judgement, intention, sanctions, condescension or 'protection'.

I've often pondered the difference between being unhappy—as in despondent or disillusioned—and being ill. How do we *actually* know the difference? Is it about length and breadth? Or a line midway on a spectrum where one becomes the other? And how does our medical model diagnose "fed up with playing this game"? Is the game simply denied? Is the necessity of playing it insisted upon? Or do we take the coward's way out and blame the player for their unwillingness, skill deficit or disinterest in participating in what most, in blissful ignorance, don't realize is a kind of game in the first place?

Can suicide be the action of a calm and unemotional person? What proportion of suicides might be considered rational? To this writer's knowledge there is no research available on the relative frequency of emotional and non-emotional suicides (Lester, 2006). What is curious, however, is the attribution of 'rationality' to physician-assisted suicides. As den Hartogh asks: "How is it possible that suicides are seldom 'rational' and well-considered, and requests for euthanasia that have been granted almost without exception are?" (2016, p. 673). Many countries around the world, including Canada, now offer medically-assisted death in circumstances where quality of life is deemed low enough. Why is it entirely okay for a doctor to grant permission for death but not for an individual themselves?

Could it be mere coincidence that suicide is disadvantageous for capitalism? If consumers kill themselves, who will be left to buy the vast quantities of unnecessary goods produced by the few with exceptional means? An 18 year investment in training to be a 'cog in the machine' is nullified if the 'trainee' chooses death. What if suicide is a rejection of political power in this world? In the tradition of the "hermeneutics of suspicion"—a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur to capture a commitment to unmasking "the

lies and illusions of consciousness" (1970, p. 356)—a question like *What (or who) does prevention serve?* could facilitate the circumvention of obvious or self-evident meanings to draw out deeper and darker truths.

And what of those, like me, for whom 'tragic' just doesn't do justice to a transformative bereavement experience? What more can we learn about the contribution of emotional maturity, authentic relating and spiritual orientation to a healthy bereavement process for those who lose loved ones to suicide? What would it mean if we learned to accept the unacceptable, to love without boundaries and to let go on another's terms instead of our own? How different, indeed, might our interactions, our relationships, our choices, our *entire lives* be if we fully embraced the cosmic reality of ourselves and each other as eternal souls, journeying here on earth for a short time only, according to a unique purpose that is ours alone to fulfil.

The invitation for further research addressing any or all of the above questions exists. As does the opportunity to share culturally discordant stories of 'white crows' or purple crows or polka-dotted crows or striped giraffes; to contribute to an expansion of perspective, an unleashing of social discourse and, ultimately, the evolution of human consciousness.

On Love

Then said Almitra, Speak to us of Love.
And he raised his head and looked upon the people, and there fell a stillness upon them. And with a great voice he said:
When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.
Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.
Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.
He threshes you to make you naked.
He sifts you to free you from your husks.
He grinds you to whiteness.
He kneads you until you are pliant;
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your heart you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure,
Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing-floor,
Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all of your tears.
Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself.
Love possesses not nor would it be possessed;
For love is sufficient unto love.

When you love you should not say, "God is in my heart," but rather, "I am in the heart of God."
And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.
But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:
To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night.
To know the pain of too much tenderness.
To be wounded by your own understanding of love;
And to bleed willingly and joyfully.
To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving;
To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy;
To return home at eventide with gratitude;
And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise upon your lips.

(Kahlil Gibran)

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Appendix A: Two Kinds of Intelligence

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired,
as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts
from books and from what the teacher says,
collecting information from the traditional sciences
as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world.
You get ranked ahead or behind others
in regard to your competence in retaining
information. You stroll with this intelligence
in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more
marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one
already completed and preserved inside you.
A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness
in the centre of the chest.
This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate.
It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside
through conduits of plumbing-learning.
This second knowing is a fountainhead
from within you, moving out.

(Rumi)

Appendix B: Letter of Information

St. Stephen's College

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Love beyond death

Research Study

Ethics Number: Pro00112870

Letter of Information

Researcher Introduction

Dear friend,

As you know, I am currently completing a Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality (MPS) program at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton, Alberta.

My final program requirement is to research and write a thesis, which is a formal report summarizing the results of an inquiry of interest to the researcher.

Thank you for your willingness to consider participating in my research project.

Libby.

Research Focus

I am interested in contributing an uncommon perspective on suicide and bereavement through the exploration of personal experience in critical conversation with our cultural context.

My research focus has two parts:

1. What are the various aspects of my uncommon, but nonetheless genuine experience and perspective on suicide, death, loss and love within our cultural and spiritual context?

   and

2. To what extent do those experiences and perspectives prompt reflection on common beliefs and responses to suicide, and those bereaved by suicide, in similar settings, today?

Participation Process

As part of this research, I warmly invite your participation via an online Group Interview on a date to be scheduled.

After reviewing this Letter of Information and the Letter of Consent, please contact me to via email to confirm your willingness to participate or to discuss any questions or concerns.

The Letter of Consent must be signed before the Group Interview. The Group Interview will take up to 3 hours.

The interview will be video and audio recorded and the researcher (myself) will be taking notes by hand, as well. The researcher will assign pseudonyms to all co-researchers (and any other identifying names/locations) before the audio video recordings are transcribed. The researcher will transcribe the recordings herself. No identifying information whatsoever will be contained in the transcript.

Once the interview has been transcribed, the researcher will deliver, via encrypted email, a copy of the transcript to you for review. At that time you are invited to adjust, alter or delete any/all of your contribution. Any changes can be made to the transcript that you deem necessary at this time.

Interview Preparation

In an effort to better inform potential co-researchers about the nature and aim of this project, the researcher has prepared an Interview Questions Guide.

Methodology

The research methodology for this project will be Autoethnography; a qualitative research method which utilizes personal experience for the purpose of expanding sociological understanding. Autoethnography combines autobiography with ethnography, such that the personal story of the researcher is used to shed light on the larger cultural meaning and context for the story.

Since interpretation is a fundamental aspect of this approach to research, co-researchers will be invited to validate and confirm the researcher's interpretation of her experience and also to provide alternative perspectives based on their own experience.

Co-researchers will be asked to review the interview transcripts to ensure their contributions have been accurately captured.

Participant Rights

Your participation in this project is voluntary, and you are able to withdraw from the project at any time, for any reason, up to the point at which the interview transcript has been reviewed, revised, and finalized.

Data collected during this project will be stored in a secure location for 5 years before being destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns at any time, please contact the me via phone or email.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to consider participating in this project.

Libby Kostromin: Lead Researcher

Supervisor: Leslie Gardner

Appendix C: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

St. Stephen's College

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Research Study

Ethics Number: Pro00112870

Study Title: Love beyond death: Suicide, acceptance and the awakening of the bereaved.

Research Investigator:

Libby Kostromin
St. Stephen's College
University of Alberta
8810 112 Street
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2J6

Supervisor:

Dr. Leslie Gardner
St. Stephen's College
University of Alberta
8810 112 Street
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2J6

Background

You are invited to participate in this research study about suicide acceptance and the awakening of the bereaved.

I am currently completing a Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality (MPS) program at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton, Alberta. My final program requirement is to research and write a thesis, which is a formal report summarizing the results of an inquiry of interest to the researcher.

The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis requirements to complete the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality (MPS) program at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton, Alberta.

Please review the Letter of Information provided in conjunction with this Consent Form. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. Should you agree to participate, you will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to question and challenge cultural assumptions about suicide and the effect on those bereaved. The researcher's experience of bereavement by suicide will be explored, and interpreted in conversation with available literature.

Developing greater public understanding of the range of reasons people suicide, along with the spectrum of responses each can generate, can assist in painting a more realistic and nuanced picture of this complex issue.

Through analysis of an experience at odds with prevailing cultural opinion, this work will open and create the kind of space in which freedom from powerful, oppressive and/or unseen social forces can be conceived.

Study Procedures

In order to be participate in this project, you must be willing to share and discuss your personal thoughts, feelings and experiences with respect to death broadly, and the suicide of our shared friend, specifically.

This Consent Form must be signed before the group interview can be scheduled.

The group interview will be an online discussion conducted in accordance with the Interview Questions Guide. The interview will be directly audio and video recorded via Zoom and the researcher will be taking notes by hand.

The researcher will assign pseudonyms to all research participants (and any other identifying names/locations) before the audio video recordings are transcribed. The researcher will do all transcribing of the recordings.

The data collected will include one audio-video recording of the 3 hour group interview, researcher session notes, identification information (name, telephone number, and email address).

Transcripts will delivered by encrypted email or couriered to research participants by the researcher Research participants will have an opportunity to review and make any changes they deem necessary to the original transcripts. Data can be withdrawn at any point, and for any reason (or without reason), up to two days after the participant has indicated by e-mail to the researcher that

Any living non-participant individuals named in the interview, will be assigned pseudonyms by the researcher at the time of transcription in order to eliminate any identifying information. Transcripts will not include any identifying information, which means all transcribed data will be anonymous. Your answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but neither you—nor your profession, organization or location—will be identified.

Benefits

The findings of the proposed research may promote a critique of cultural assumptions and norms with respect to suicide and bereavement. In addition, the findings will shed light on the potential for psychological and spiritual growth in the bereaved.

This research will involve exploring a story that is not currently part of the body of literature. The story may resonate for others with similar experiences and may encourage non-culturally dominant perspectives to be voiced.

The research will also provide a rare example of autoethnographic research conducted within the context of what is a newly emerging "spiritual research paradigm".

Risk

It is possible that research participants may feel psychologically or emotionally stressed while recounting personal experiences associated with the death of a friend. It is also possible that attempting to recall and articulate the effects of these experiences may be difficult, frustrating or tiring.

In an effort to minimize any risks to research participants, informed consent is reviewed and obtained before the group interview is conducted. Participants are able to opt-out at any time during the interview or transcript review process. Participants are able to review transcripts and make any revisions or deletions deemed necessary by the research participant. The use of pseudonyms in the transcript and analysis process serves to assure confidentiality and anonymity.

An Interview Questions Guide will be provided before the scheduled interview in order to provide research participants with an opportunity to consider and reflect on the question areas before responding in the interview setting.

Researcher contact information will also be provided to the participants should any further questions or concerns emerge post-interview.

Voluntary Participation

You are under no obligation to participate in this research. If you choose to participate, you may refuse to answer questions that you do not want to answer. Should you choose to withdraw midway through, any data collected to date will not be included in the final analysis and will be destroyed.

The data can be withdrawn at any point, and for any reason (or without reason), until the research participant has approved the transcript. After this point, the data will not be able to be withdrawn from the study.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The research will be used primarily for the purposes of completing a thesis. The information that you will share will remain strictly confidential and will be used primarily for the purposes of this research.

The only people who will have access to the research data are the lead researcher and the research supervisors. Your surname and first name, telephone number, and email address will be collected by the lead researcher for communication and transcript delivery purposes. Identifying information will be included only in the audio-video recording of the interview, the lead researcher's interview notes, and an excel document noting research participants' names and contact information.

Participants, and any other individuals named in the interview, will be assigned pseudonyms by the researcher at the time of transcribing in order to eliminate any identifying information. Transcripts will not include any identifying information, which means all transcribed data will be entirely anonymous. Your answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but neither you—nor your profession, organization or location—will be identified.

Two weeks after the researcher has received the approved transcript from the participants, all identifying information collected for communication purposes and noted on an excel spreadsheet will be destroyed.

All data, in both paper and electronic files, including raw data from interviews, session notes, reflective journal notes, analysis and interpretation notes and drafts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet located in the office of the researcher's home office for five years.

Electronic copies of the transcripts and data analysis will be encrypted and stored on a password protected USB Key in the St. Stephen's College vault for 5 years. After 5 years, all data will be destroyed.

If research participants are interested in reviewing the findings of the project after publication, follow up information will be provided.

Contact Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Libby Kostromin, lead researcher, or Leslie Gardner, thesis supervisor.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature	Date
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

Appendix D: Interview Questions Guide

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS GUIDE

St. Stephen's College

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Study Title: Love beyond death: Suicide, acceptance and the awakening of the bereaved.

Interview questions:

Please note – additional or follow-up questions may arise in the course of the interview.

1. How would you describe your relationship with H?
2. What was most valuable or important in your relationship with H?
3. What was your perspective on suicide prior to H's death, including your own cultural and spiritual beliefs?
4. In what ways was this perspective challenged, changed or reinforced by your experience of H's suicide?
5. What has been most healing/helpful/important to you in your bereavement, and why? (*may include knowledge, experiences, memories, activities, perspectives, practices etc.)
6. Are you, or have you been, aware of any kind of communication, connection or 'bond' with H since his death? If so, please share details.
7. Would you say there was any gift in this whole experience (before, during or after)? If so, please say why you think so?
8. Is there anything else that you'd like to say about your own experience and/or response regarding the suicide of H?