

To Accept or Avoid: A Retrospective and Prospective Reflection on Death and Coping Method

Variations in Males and Females.

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Abstract

This thesis presents a narrative and cognitive investigation of grief, specifically, how individuals of different genders experience, anticipate, express, and adapt to the emotional, cognitive, and existential implications of death. Employing a phenomenological and gender-informed qualitative methodology, I draw upon 34 written narratives (17 participants) that explored three intersecting death-related domains: retrospective grief (previous experiences of mourning), prospective loss (anticipated death of a loved one), and personal mortality (views on one's own death). I organize this material thematically and cognitively, with particular attention to internal narrative contradiction, gendered emotional labor, cultural expectations, metaphors of embodiment, and strategies of assimilation and avoidance. While some participants mourned actively and communally, others grieved alone, or not at all. Regardless of strategy or style, participants consistently demonstrated a drive toward narrative construction: that is, toward self-integration through story.

In synthesizing these voices, we argue that grief is not merely an emotion- it is a mode of cognition, deeply influenced by gender socialization and cultural conditioning. Grief narratives often resist resolution and instead cultivate continuity, connection, or compassionate detachment. Stories of grief, told and retold, become the medium by which we preserve the presence of the dead, construct the moral framing of our identities, and discover strategies not only to survive loss but to live with it meaningfully. By tracing how individuals create grief narratives, both consciously and unconsciously, we propose a theory of integrative mourning: the ongoing, embodied, and imaginative blending of memory, emotion, and identity through language. Storytelling, we pose, is not merely therapeutic; it is existential architecture.

Literature Review

Death has long been a subject more often whispered about than studied. And yet across cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, researchers have tried, in different ways, to understand how humans respond when faced with what they cannot undo. Early models of grief, like Kübler-Ross's famous five stages (1969), tried to create a map: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. But as time passed, it became clear that grief does not move obediently through those neat phases. It circles back. It skips ahead. It camps out somewhere unexpected, stubbornly refusing to "progress" the way textbooks suggest.

Other scholars have tried to refine the picture. Some research (Bonanno, Chen, & Galatzer-Levy, 2023; Bonanno & Armstrong, 2020) emphasized resilience- the fact that many people survive profound losses without collapsing entirely. Worden (2002), in turn, framed grief as a series of tasks to work through, making it an active rather than a passive experience. Sociologists have shown how culture scripts grief differently: What it should look like, how long it should last, and how it should be expressed. Anthropologists have explored rituals around death, not just as ceremonies for the dead, but as survival strategies for the living.

When it comes to gender, research has found patterns, though not absolutes. Men are often taught to grieve in silence- to transform mourning into stoic action, to subdue sadness beneath the weight of responsibility. Women, by contrast, are more often encouraged (or burdened) with the task of relational grief- expected to hold families together, to remember, to sustain the emotional labor of loss. And yet behind these broad patterns are real people, each with their own messy histories, their own quiet battles, their own private definitions of what it means to survive a death. This study does not seek to disprove what previous scholars have

found. Instead, it seeks to listen more closely: to hear not only what men and women are taught about grief, but how they actually live it.

From this, we see that grief is not merely an emotion or a behavioral event; it is a dynamic mode of cognition- how we interpret, embody, and narrate the rupture that death brings. This thesis builds an interdisciplinary architecture by drawing insights from trauma psychology, cognitive narratology, phenomenology, memory science, and gender theory. At the center of this scholarly landscape is the notion that humans construct meaning through story, and that grief itself can be understood as a crisis of narrative coherence (Brewin, 2014; Bruner, 2002; Berntsen & Rubin, 2007). This review sets the theoretical foundation for analyzing grief at the intersection of memory, identity, language, and gender. It is organized into five thematic domains:

1. Narrative Identity and the Architecture of Self
2. Gender Scripts and Emotional Expression
3. Anticipatory Grief and the Cognitive Experience of Future Loss
4. Trauma, Memory, and Narrative Disruption
5. Meaning-Making, Ritual, and Integrative Mourning

Narrative Identity and the Architecture of Self

Theories of narrative identity underline the premise that individuals understand themselves not as static beings, but as stories-in-process. Bruner (2002) contends that narrative is a primary mode of meaning-making in human cognition; it is through storytelling that we organize our lives across time. Eakin (2005), further developing narrative identity theory, demonstrates how autobiography is not merely reflective- it is constitutive. Our identities,

especially in moments of loss or rupture, are built through the reconstruction of a story interrupted.

In the context of grief, these disruptions challenge the continuity of the self. Singer et al. (2013) introduce the concept of “self-defining memories,” which are critical autobiographical moments that shape personality and future behavior. The death of a loved one and the cognitive scaffolding created to understand that loss can become such a memory. Rubin et al. (2008) show that people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) frequently exhibit disrupted narrative coherence, suggesting that language-based reconstruction is essential to healing fractured experience. This thesis builds on this foundation by proposing that grief narrative is not simply a form of emotional expression- it is also a cognitive re-anchoring of identity.

Gender Scripts and Emotional Expression

Grief expression is shaped profoundly by gender. Here, we place gender not as a variable but as a constitutive lens through which grief is experienced and made legible. Existing research supports that gender socialization dramatically influences how individuals process and perform grief. Stroebe, Stroebe, and Schut (2001) provide a critical review of empirical findings showing that men tend to express grief in more instrumental, task-oriented ways, while women are more likely to report intuitive or emotive processing. Stelzer et al. (2019) further demonstrate that women tend to tell grief narratives with greater emotional elaboration, coherence, and personal insight than men, supporting the thesis observation that gendered grief is not just enacted but narratively structured.

The research of Coelho & Barbosa, (2016); Toyama & Honda, (2016) on anticipatory grief caregiving shows that these patterns persist even before death occurs: women frequently

take on roles of emotional labor and monitoring, while many men report emotionally withdrawing or compartmentalizing in silence. These findings resonate powerfully with our study's participant narratives, which showcase gendered contradictions, silences, and expectations that direct not only what grief should look like but how it should feel.

Anticipatory Grief and the Cognitive Experience of Future Loss

Participants in this thesis not only narrated past losses but actively imagined future grief, providing insight into a relatively understudied phenomenon in the grief literature: pre-loss mourning or anticipatory grief. (Toyama & Honda, 2016) define anticipatory grief as the “experience of grief prior to a significant loss,” particularly in contexts of aging and terminal illness. In these moments, as the thesis describes, narrative becomes speculative rather than reflective- “writing the death before it happens.”

Barry et al. (2018) in their meta-analysis of trauma and memory specificity, point out that pre-loss rumination often involves emotionally vivid, but cognitively disorganized narratives. This provides theoretical support for participants who, while anticipating a loved one’s death, described “mentally rehearsing” the experience but felt simultaneously blank, stuck, or ashamed. The internal conflict between anticipated affect and emotional disengagement reflects what Brewin, Dalgleish, and Joseph (1996) describe as a split between situationally accessible memory (imagery, fear, affect) and verbally accessible memory (organized reflection).

Crucially, anticipatory grief appears to be structured both by emotional attachment and by gender norms. As noted above, Coelho & Barbosa, (2016); Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, (2001) found gendered variations in pre-loss behavior: women coped through emotional preparation; men through individuation and minimization.

Participants in this thesis revealed versions of both strategies- rehearsing eulogies, scanning faces for “last moments,” stepping into soldier-like isolation- supporting the idea that anticipatory grief is a gendered narrative rehearsal of mourning.

Trauma, Memory, and Narrative Disruption

The fragmentation of narrative in traumatic loss is well documented. Brewin (2014) distinguishes between two forms of memory impacted by trauma: narrative memory (coherent, story-based), and sensory/perceptual memory (fragmented, intrusive, dissociative). Many of our participants appear to straddle or shift between these poles-attempting to construct linear stories about deaths that feel experientially nonlinear. They often speak in metaphor, contradiction, or disjointed temporality, consistent with what Buck et al. (2006) and van der Kolk & Fisler (1995) observe as memory disorganization.

This is especially true in cases of traumatic or unexpected death (suicide, overdose, COVID loss), where participants described emotional “snapshots” preserved out of sequence. Segovia et al. (2016) found that disorganized encoding can correlate with prolonged symptom duration in post-traumatic grief, further validating the need for narrative reconstruction as a potential mechanism for integrative healing.

Bennett and Wells (2010) suggest that rumination exacerbates narrative disorganization, yet this thesis proposes that gently recursive storytelling, rather than obsessively circular thought, may serve as a reparative tool. Engagement with the broken narrative, not its avoidance, becomes a form of recovery.

Meaning-Making, Ritual, and Integrative Mourning

Finally, storytelling does more than describe grief- it makes sense of it. This thesis positions grief narratives not as an endpoint to emotion, but as the medium by which absence is given meaning. As Ehlers and Clark (2000) argue, the interpretation of loss- our ability to find coherence and meaning- is a major factor in psychological resilience. Boals and Rubin (2010) found that when individuals can cognitively distinguish emotional content from overwhelming trauma, they gain more adaptive narrative access to the memory.

The construction of rituals- naming trees after loved ones, pilgrimage runs, meditation, object saving- bridges the internal world of grief with the external world of embodiment. As seen in archaeological and cultural scholarship (DeSilvey, 2017; McGraw, 2012), even mundane mourning rituals can create physical landscapes of memory, imprinting grief into daily life through secular sacralization. This connection between memory, place, and ritual offers more than metaphor: it is part of what the thesis calls "integrative mourning," a practice that restores cognitive equilibrium by embedding story into body, space, and symbol.

Together, these five areas of literature affirm the conceptual foundation of this thesis: that grief is best understood not as a linear disorder or emotional eruption, but as an evolving, gendered, storied form of cognition. Drawing from trauma psychology, memory studies, narrative identity theory, and gender research, this thesis repositions grief as a dynamic process of meaning-making within cultural expectations and psychological constraints. Whether anticipatory, retrospective, or reflective of one's own mortality, stories of grief are attempts to reconcile identity with interruption- to house the absent within language, ritual, image, and memory.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach centered on narrative inquiry. Seventeen participants (9 women and 8 men) contributed written narratives responding to semi-structured prompts designed to evoke reflection on three intersecting domains: 1) retrospective grief (memories of past losses), 2) prospective grief (anticipated future losses), and 3) self-mortality (personal reflections on their own deaths). They were provided the following prompts via email on the consent form prior to participation in the study to read and sign. After the consent form was submitted, participants were emailed the following message:

“Dear participant,
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This study consists of writing two narratives and participating in an interview about each. For the narrative part of the study, you will be writing personal narratives responding to the following prompts:

Prospective Written Narrative Prompt:

Can you please reflect on two significant aspects related to loss and mortality. Begin by addressing the first part, where you describe a potential significant personal loss that you believe you will eventually experience- the future death of a family member, close friend, or someone whose passing will deeply affect you. After finishing this section, proceed to the second part, where you will reflect on your own mortality and how you anticipate coping with the reality of your eventual death. Feel free to explore your thoughts and emotions openly.

Part 1/2: Future Loss of a Loved One Reflection

Imagine someone close to you whose passing you fear or anticipate in the future. Reflect on the possibility of their loss and consider the following questions to guide your narrative:

- Who do you imagine losing, and why might this be significant for you?
- What emotions or thoughts emerge when you consider losing this person?
- Can you predict how you might cope with this loss? Will it be similar to or different from how you’ve dealt with past losses?

- Reflect on whether you feel any pressure to grieve in a specific way due to societal or personal expectations.
- Are there any particular worries or challenges you foresee with this potential loss?

Part 2/2: Reflection on Your Own Mortality

Now that you've reflected on the future loss of a close loved one, take a moment to consider your own mortality. The following questions may help you shape your thoughts:

- How do you feel about your own eventual death? Consider feelings like fear, acceptance, or anything else that comes up.
- How do you think your loved ones will cope when you're gone, and does that influence how you feel about death?
- Are you more comfortable thinking about your death or someone else's? Has this perspective evolved over time?

Feel free to write openly and candidly about these topics.

Retrospective Written Narrative Prompt:

Reflect on a significant personal loss you have experienced. Begin by describing a significant personal loss that you have experienced. This could be the death of a family member, close friend, or someone else in your life whose passing deeply affected you. Take your time to think about the event and its impact on you. Feel free to explore your thoughts and emotions openly.

Part 1/1: Loss of a Loved One Reflection

Reflect on a significant personal loss you've encountered- be this a family member, close friend, or someone else whose passing impacted you. Consider the following questions to guide your narrative:

- Recall your initial emotions and reactions upon learning of their passing. How have these feelings changed over time?
- Describe the grieving process. Were there specific ways you were expected to grieve, or ways you felt you should grieve?
- What strategies did you find helpful in coping with this loss? Did you prefer to grieve privately, or were you supported by expressing your grief to others?
- Consider the tough moments- emotionally or practically- and note anything unexpected you experienced during your grieving.

- Looking back, evaluate your journey in coming to terms with the loss. Do you find that you have processed the grief, or does it remain an ongoing process?
- How has this experience influenced your broader views on death and grieving?

Explore these questions as deeply as you are comfortable. There is no right or wrong way to write about your experiences.

Remember, there's no rush. Write as much or as little as you feel necessary, perhaps a page or more if you wish for each part. You're welcome to ask questions or address concerns anytime, and there's no penalty if you decide to withdraw from this study at any point."

Upon the completion of this part of the study, participants were contacted again via email, and an interview in person or online via Zoom was scheduled as needed.

Participants were then read or sent the following message before the in-person or online interview:

"Thank you for completing the first part of the study. The idea of this study is to explore retrospective reflections where participants recount memories of past losses and prospective reflections to contemplate potential future losses, which include not only the anticipated loss of loved ones but also their own eventual deaths. The purpose of this interview is really just to clarify some of the points you brought up in your narratives, and ask you to talk a bit more about the experiences based on what you wrote.

The audio of this interview will be recorded, but please note that nobody except for me will be listening to the recordings. I will transcribe the recordings during

the analysis, but the transcriptions, along with the recordings, will be destroyed and deleted after the study is done as well. Your name or any identifying information will not be included in the study at all.

Please don't hesitate to let me know if you would like to skip responding to any question I posed. If, at any point of the interview, you experience any kind of discomfort and wish to stop the interview, you are free to do so without any penalty. With all of that being said- do you have any questions for me?"

Participants were recruited through academic and community networks and provided written consent for their participation to be anonymized. Data was thematically analyzed through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on frameworks from cognitive science, narrative psychology, gender studies, and grief theory. Particular attention was paid to internal narrative contradiction, emotional regulation strategies, metaphorical language use, and gendered patterns of emotional labor. Participants' accounts were coded iteratively, allowing organic thematic patterns to emerge rather than imposing priority categories. The analysis prioritizes the participants' lived experiences and narrative constructions, rather than attempting to categorize grief behaviors as "normal" or "pathological." Throughout, grief is treated as a dynamic, storied mode of cognition, not merely an emotion or a phase, but one that is deeply shaped by social, cultural, and individual factors.

Introduction: The Story That Death Demands

We are born into a contract we never signed. From the first breath, we are promised- quietly, without ceremony, that we will someday leave this world, and that everything we love will one day leave too. We live with that knowledge mostly by looking away. We build daily routines, calendars, memories, entire lives- with the quiet understanding that to truly linger on death would be paralyzing. And yet, when loss comes- as it always does- we are asked to find some way to live with it. To mourn, to adapt, to remember. To survive the disappearance of what once felt permanent. We tell ourselves stories in order to live, but what kinds of stories do we tell ourselves in order to die? More pressingly, how do we narrate others' deaths - before they happen, during their occurrence, and forever after?

This thesis began not with a question, but a gap. I had experienced many losses, but I did not know how to make them matter. I could not find the words. And in my reading, I found that the frameworks we offer for grief, especially in the West, feel more like containers than conduits. We ask about “coping”, or “processing,” or “closure.” We teach the five stages. We offer ceremonial language for the grave, but rarely for the days after. But grief does not move linearly. And it rarely “heals” in the way a wound does. More often, as my participants revealed, grief changes proportions. It changes texture and vibration, and shape. For some, it rushes forward like a wave; for others, it corrodes slowly, silently. It speaks in stories. Or it hides behind them.

From this gap was born a simple but stubborn question: How do men and women carry grief? Are there differences in how we accept or avoid death, both our own and others? And if so, are those differences learned, lived, or simply part of what it means to be human? To answer these questions, I asked seventeen people to do something difficult: to look back at the losses they had already endured, and to imagine, in painfully vivid detail, the losses still to come. Their

reflections- some raw, some philosophical, some unbearably tender- revealed not only differences in how grief is carried, but deep, surprising commonalities. Grief, it turns out, has many dialects. But it speaks to all of us, in one way or another. What follows is not an attempt to "solve" grief. It is an attempt to listen to it carefully, in the hope that by doing so, we might understand something more about how we survive what love, inevitably, makes possible: loss.

As I began to interview participants across age, gender, culture, profession, and experience, one thing remained constant: whether the loss had happened, was anticipated, or was imagined as their own eventual passing, people spoke in narrative. Clarity faltered. Emotions wavered. But always, storytelling returned. They were trying to build something, not always resolved, often inconclusive, but something that could hold their pain. Is grief itself the story we build from what is lost?

We turn to cognitive science and narrative theory to investigate this. Research by Bruner (1990), Turner (1996), and Gottschall (2012) suggest that human cognition relies fundamentally on story: we understand events, identity, morality, causality, and meaning through narrative structures. Brewin (2014) and McAdams (2005) further argue that autobiographical memory and emotion are housed within this narrative architecture, and that traumatic memories (and grief qualities) resist integrating into coherent life stories. Layered over this are gendered social scripts. Who gets to express pain? Who is expected to cry, to cope, to smile? I argue that grief is not only mediated neurologically but linguistically, socially, and structurally.

Chapter 1: Writing the Death Before It Happens: Narrative Futurity and Gendered Anticipation

We begin mourning long before the last breath. Anticipatory grief, unlike retrospective grief, inhabits a peculiar territory. It is grief without finality or confirmation- an emotional, cognitive rehearsal for a future loss that has not yet occurred, but feels certain. In this chapter, we confront the strange and often unspoken ways people narrate death before it arrives: not as an abstract inevitability, but as an impending disruption that shapes identity, behavior, and emotional preparedness. This chapter takes up two core questions. First: How do individuals anticipate the death of those they love? Second: How is this narrative anticipation shaped not only by the psychology of attachment but by the gendered expectations surrounding grief, control, and care? Drawing on participant narratives, as well as literature from anticipatory grief research (Toyama & Honda, 2016; Stroebe et al., 2001), we explore what it means to "pre-grieve," and how this temporal shift- grieving forward rather than backward- animates anxiety, tenderness, and emotional complexity.

Anticipatory grief often manifests as an imaginative act: narrating a story into the future. Participants described several techniques of narrative futurity. Some imagined delivering eulogies. Others preemptively removed or altered possessions in their living spaces to brace themselves. A few created mental rituals, assembling the architecture of a loss-in-waiting- what music would be played, how they'd sit, what images they'd cling to. These practices signal a complex cognitive mechanism at work: mourning through narrative rehearsal. Notably, this rehearsal is often modulated by gender norms. Across participant accounts, women were more likely to approach anticipatory grief through relational care- planning for rituals, pre-processing emotions, or initiating conversations designed to ease future pain. They often described their anticipatory grief as active and emotionally layered: "I've already been grieving for four years,"

one participant said of her aunt's terminal diagnosis, "but the goodbye still hasn't happened." Men, by contrast, tended to minimize or compartmentalize projected loss, framing emotion as something to "handle when it happens." One male participant reflected plainly: "I'm bracing for it, but the grief won't start until the casket drops."

This temporal delay was not a marker of apathy, but rather a form of protective cognition-anticipation at the level of structure, not story. We know this because participants who delayed emotional engagement still demonstrated active forms of preparation- organizing wills, planning funeral logistics, or mentally bracing for impact, which shows involvement with the reality of impending loss, even while emotional narration was deferred. Their focus on structure rather than affect reflects an adaptive, protective strategy, not emotional indifference. For many men in this study, emotional engagement was back-loaded. They preferred practical preparation over emotional rehearsal. Conversations about wills, funeral logistics, or estate management often replaced intimacy or reflection.

As such, anticipatory grief appeared to be deeply structured by gendered emotion scripts: women as preparers, processors, and emotional stewards; men as bracers, avoiders, and logistical undertakers. But even these patterns yielded exceptions. Some women braced stoically, unwilling to pre-feel sorrow for losses that had not yet come. Some men spoke about anticipated grief with raw emotion, describing a desperate desire to "do it right" next time- to say goodbye, to be present, to not retreat into silence. What was universal, however, was the attempt to shape the narrative in advance. Whether through avoidance or articulation, order or chaos, every participant constructed some vision of future death, rehearsing not only the loss of others but a potential revision of the self.

As one participant wrote of her dreading her mother's death: "It's not just a death I'm anticipating- it's the end of who I am when she exists." Here, grieving begins not with death, but with the fear of its narrative power. Anticipatory grief becomes a cognitive and emotional dress rehearsal for identity rupture, especially when the dying person served as a narrative anchor in the mourner's life. Whether stated or implied, anticipatory grief forces the central question of this chapter: How do you keep living in a story you know will lose its protagonist?

Chapter 2: In the Wake of the Unsaid: Memory, Regret, and the Retrospective Shapes of Grief

There are no rewind buttons for the dead. If anticipatory grief imagines loss, retrospective grief responds to its ache. In the moments, months, and years after a death, the narratives we build shift again- from speculative to reflective. Retrospective grief transforms sorrow into story, excavating memory through interior conversation, ritual reenactment, or recurring absence of the deceased. In this chapter, we explore how people remember their losses, especially how memory is shaped as much by absence as by presence. In particular, we focus on unsaid goodbyes, unresolved relationships, and retroactive clarity: the patterns of regret, confusion, and longing that fill the void left behind.

Memory functions as both a map and a mirror in grief. It allows us to revisit what we once had, but it also reflects who we were in the face of unbearable emotional disruption. Participants described their memories of the deceased not as static images, but as living characters- voices they still consulted, faces embedded in rituals, echoes in familiar places. One participant described her late friend's influence as "a co-founder of who I am." Another spoke of her partner as "still reading the letters I write and burn for him every February." These memories were not archival. They were recursive. Memory is not neutral in grief- it is often conflicted. Many participants narrated not only what they remembered, but also what they regretted: the last phone call not made, the harsh words not softened, the apology that would forever remain unspoken. These narrative gaps, called "narrative vacancies" in this thesis, revealed not just emotional pain but also disrupted identity work. People weren't only mourning the dead; they were mourning the unrevised versions of themselves left in the aftermath.

Regret loomed large in gendered patterns. Female participants, in particular, expressed regret over relational omissions, such as "not showing up enough," "not being honest," and

“feeling like I should have known they were struggling.” Male participants more often described regret as a failure of action, such as “not protecting,” “not doing more,” or “being too late to help.” This echoes a broader psychosocial trend noted in the literature: women are socialized to mourn through interpersonal maintenance, while men are socialized to assume anchored responsibility (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The emotion beneath regret, though, was often more complicated than sadness. Many participants described feeling angry at the person who died, at themselves, at medical institutions, at God. One participant wrote about her partner’s unsupervised hospital death during COVID: “I wasn’t allowed to be with him. I had to watch him take his last breath on Zoom.”

Retrospective grief, therefore, becomes a tangled negotiation between memory, absence, and the stories we tell ourselves to remain intact. It is recursive, not linear, where instead of following a straight progression toward closure, grief loops through memory, emotion, and meaning, returning, sometimes unexpectedly, to earlier feelings, unresolved questions, or relived moments, each time layering new interpretations onto old wounds. One striking example comes from a participant who watched a video about German shepherds and suddenly burst into tears months after his own dog’s passing. Nothing in the moment “prompted” the feeling, but the memory surfaced anyway, porous and unbidden. In such moments of retrospective grief, time becomes nonlinear.

Memory folds in on itself, because in grief, memories do not stay neatly filed in chronological order; instead, past moments collapse into the present, surfacing suddenly, unpredictably, and often out of context, blurring the boundary between what was then and what is now. We do not simply lose someone- we lose the version of our story that felt intact with them in it. Rather than resolve that fracture, grief encourages repetition, ritual, and recursive

storytelling. As participants revealed again and again, grief teaches us that the story of the deceased is never really over, because we continue to reinterpret, revisit, and reshape their memory over time; their presence evolves within us, refusing to be neatly finished or laid fully to rest. And so, too, our own story remains unfinished, continually rewritten in their absence.

Chapter 3: Cultural Scripts and Gendered Expectations: Who Gets to Grieve and How?

Love cannot be measured, but grief is often policed. Grief is a cultural act and within that culture, gender serves as a gatekeeper for emotional expression. This chapter dives into the social scripts that determine who is allowed to grieve publicly, what forms that grief must take, and how gender regulates the performance, permission, and perception of mourning.

Participants in this study revealed that, while grief is deeply personal, the ways it is expressed- or concealed- are anything but private. In story after story, they voiced the feeling that their grief had been filtered through expectations: of strength, of caretaking, of silence, or expression. Women spoke of internalizing guilt for crying too little. Men spoke of going numb because crying was not “an option growing up.” Existing research strongly supports this stratification. Stelzer et al. (2019) found that grief narratives told by women contain more emotional elaboration and coherence, possibly not due to inherent differences, but due to social legibility. Men, socialized into emotional stoicism, tend to grieve in silence, through task-oriented activities, or through physical exercise (Stroebe et al., 2001). Male participants in our dataset commonly described grief through imagery of managing or overcoming- stacking wood, walking for hours, pushing weights. Female participants described their grief through metaphors of carrying, tending, or preserving, such as “planting trees” and “cooking recipes.” But wherever grief was staged, the background music was the same: “Who will judge me if I grieve like this?”

A male participant who lost his dog said, “I didn’t cry in front of friends. Even though I wanted to. I just couldn’t.” A female participant said she was expected to support everyone else in her family and only cried when alone, “because someone had to hold up the house.” Another participant described grieving harder for a friend than for family and feeling shamed for it: “I

cried more for her than for my family. That doesn't mean I loved them less." Here we see that not only is grief gendered, but it is stratified by relational legitimacy. Distant friends, teachers, co-workers, and non-married partners are often culturally erased from mourning rites. Thus, social grief becomes not just emotional labor, but navigational labor: who grieves whom, and how loudly, is always relationally audited. This predicament raises a crucial dilemma: Grief filtered through expectation may appear less visible, but it is not less real. In fact, it may be more agonizing. And it may, in some cases, lead to disenfranchised or prolonged grief- a condition well-documented in psychological literature (Prigerson et al., 2009).

To truly understand grief through an ethical lens, we must ask not just how people mourn, but whether they are allowed to. Cultural scripts decide who should grieve solemnly, perform strength, cry publicly, or stop "after a reasonable time." Participants repeatedly described feeling policed by others' expectations. One woman recalled, "I didn't feel like I was allowed to fall apart...someone had to be strong for the family." Another wrote, "I was seen as weak for crying too much, and selfish for crying too little." A male participant noted bluntly, "Crying wasn't an option growing up. You get told, "Man up" even when your heart has just been ripped out." Another expressed hesitation about appearing emotional at all: "I worried people would think I was overreacting if they knew how bad it really was."

In both men and women, grief behavior was shaped not only by personal feeling, but by a learned awareness of how their mourning might be judged: too loud, too quiet, too long, too messy. Every participant resisted these invisible scripts in some way: through laughter, through songs, through silent rituals, through "unsanctioned" tears shared in private spaces after others had gone home. Grief should not be measured by volume or by tears. It should perhaps not be measured at all.

Chapter 4: Houses of the Dead: Ritual, Place, and the Body in Integrative Mourning

What do we do with our hands when the person we loved is gone? Where words fail, the body often begins. In this chapter, we examine integrative mourning: the rituals, spatial practices, and embodied expressions of grief that enable the bereaved to establish continuity with the deceased. From planting trees and naming them after the departed to placing photos next to candles, going on prayer runs, or wearing mourning clothes months after customs demand, rituals emerge as vital acts of meaning-making. Ritual functions here not as superstition, but as cognitive scaffolding. DeSilvey (2017) and McGraw (2012) argue that rituals tied to place and object help survivors map absence onto physical terrain. Participants confirmed this: tending to memorial gardens, playing certain songs in specific seasons, and brushing past clothing items no longer worn. One woman spoke of decorating the tree planted with her partner's ashes each year. Another young woman keeps letters from her dad in a shoebox she hasn't opened in years- but knows she might someday. These rituals were not always religious, but they were personal, and often idiosyncratic. And yet, they functioned universally as bridges between memory and body, language and image, flesh and absence.

Rituals also emerged in movement. Several participants turned to physical activity as a means of integrating grief: running, lifting weights, practicing yoga, and walking trails with no end in sight. The body becomes a metronome for mourning- a rhythm to bear what cannot be spoken. One participant wrote, "I couldn't walk through my grief. So I ran." Gendered patterns surfaced here, too. While exceptions abound, women were more likely to describe rituals around nurturing, object-keeping, or emotional expression. For instance, among the nine female participants, six shared stories of lighting candles, planting memorial trees, preserving keepsakes, or writing letters to the deceased. Men, by contrast, more often described rituals

grounded in action- five of the eight male participants cited exercise regimens, rigid daily routines, or physical endurance as their primary outlets. These patterns suggest not strict divisions, but socially shaped tendencies in how grief finds physical form. Yet meaning was found in both. What mattered was not what the ritual looked like, but that it created a space for grief to live without being expelled.

Place, too, is mythic in mourning. Rooms remained unchanged for years. One participant said she still makes two cups of coffee some mornings. “I know he’s not coming back. But I don’t want to be the one who stops pouring.” That act, the refusal to “move on”- speaks to a deeper truth: that rituals enable the living to grieve without rupture. Not by denying grief, but by housing it. Integrative mourning sustains the presence of the dead without insisting on closure. In this way, rituals don’t fix grief. They give it a form. A room. A daily breath. Grief, when spoken, heals, but when enacted, it endures. The body writes what the tongue cannot say. And in these movements, memories, and silent rituals, the dead are not buried. They are kept. To grieve, then, is not only to remember; it is also to acknowledge. Yet it is worth recognizing that ritual, while deeply meaningful, can also shield us from grief’s sharpest edges. In giving sorrow a shape, ritual may simultaneously soften its blow, making absence bearable without fully confronting its pain. Still, to shape our landscape whether physical, psychological, or spiritual remains an act of survival: a way to hold both the sorrow and the love we refuse to forget.

Retrospective and Prospective Narratives of Loss

To understand how grief lives inside us- not just as memory, but as anticipation- I asked each participant to speak from two vantage points: First, to look backward: to reflect on a loss they had already endured. Then, to look forward: to imagine a future loss they had not yet faced,

including their own death. The result was not a linear story. It was like a weaving created by both a skilled artisan and a person who only just learned what a “loom” was- strands of memory and fear, sorrow and resilience, anger and acceptance, braided unevenly together. Some participants recalled deaths that had struck like lightning - sudden, brutal, forever reshaping the landscape of their lives. Others spoke of slow losses: watching loved ones disappear in pieces, through illness or emotional drift, mourning them long before their bodies were gone. When asked to imagine future losses, a different kind of grief surfaced. For many, it was sharper, tinged with dread, helplessness, or desperate hope. Grieving the living, it turns out, can be even harder than grieving the dead. And when the subject turned to their own mortality, a quietness often fell over the conversation. Some approached it with calm, an inevitable chapter they had made peace with. Others recoiled, not at death itself, but at the idea of leaving burdens behind, or being forgotten.

In listening to these stories, it became clear that while gender shaped the style of grief in the way it was expected to be expressed or hidden, the substance of grief was more complicated. Grief, across all voices, emerged as something bigger than social scripts: a force both personal and universal, chaotic and sacred. It was not merely sadness. It was a negotiation with memory, love, guilt, endurance, and, finally, meaning. As I listened, four dominant emotional architectures began to surface- not divided neatly by gender, but by the ways people learned to survive the fractures death imposed.

Chapter 5: Echoes, Absences, and the Narrative Unfinished

Some losses do not settle. They resist clean storytelling. They resist the comfort of arc or closure. Instead, they echo across time, memory, language, and even silence. That is, the grief resurfaces in unexpected moments, in a smell, a season, a sentence we can't finish. It shapes how we remember, how we speak (or fail to speak), and even how we sit quietly with what's missing. These echoes are not remnants; they are recurrences- grief returning not to be resolved, but to be felt again. In this chapter, we turn toward the experiences of grief that remain open-ended: the fragmented narratives, the unanswerable questions, the moments of intimate absence that cannot be fully inhabited, yet cannot be escaped either. While earlier chapters explored grief that has been narrated into coherence or ritualized into routine, here we encounter disruption- grief stories that stutter, loop, question themselves, or end in ellipses. The kind of grief that feels like asking something into the void and not getting an answer. These are not failures of emotional processing. They are powerful indicators that mourning operates not only at the level of emotion but also at the level of narrative logic, where memory suspends time, and love never ceases to speak.

Echoes: The Dead as Protagonists in the Present

Participant narratives often blurred the temporal line between past and present. The dead continued to speak- through dreams, through intuitions, and most hauntingly, through the internal monologue of the living. F7 described a young friend who had died suddenly. "Sometimes when I need advice, I think about what she'd say. And it's not made-up, I hear it. I hear her voice." M2, who lost his twin, responded similarly: "When I'm in alignment, when I'm joyful, I feel his presence. It's like he's laughing in the background of my life." This phenomenon is supported by

grief researchers Klass, Silverman, & Nickman (1996/2014), who coined the term “continuing bonds” to describe how healthy mourning may include ongoing emotional attachment to the deceased. Rather than letting go, many modern mourners renegotiate the relationship. The person may be gone, but the dialogue continues. These echoes aren’t delusions. They’re integrations.

Participants felt that their loved ones were woven into their daily choices, their sense of moral judgment, or their personal growth. “When I climb that hill,” said F5 of her friend, “I imagine her legs in mine. She didn’t just vanish...she fused into the parts of me still moving forward.” Grief here is neither past nor future tense. It is a present-tense conversation made louder by silence. That is, the absence of the loved one does not end the dialogue- it sharpens it. In the quiet space where their real voice is missing, the mourner often hears them more vividly through memory, ritual, or inner narration. The silence does not mute the connection; it amplifies it.

Absence with a Pulse: Longing, Guilt, and Recursive Reflection

Other participants described grief as a wound that flared back to life during unexpected moments, such as specific seasons, certain smells, or familiar songs. These were not triggered flashbacks, but lived reminders of the relational unfinished. “I cried at a CVS when our old song came on,” one participant wrote. “I hadn’t thought about him in months. But there he was.” These narratives were often accompanied by guilt. One participant felt ashamed for grieving a close friend more deeply than her grandparents. “They raised me,” she admitted. “But her absence was sharper. I wasn’t expecting it. I wasn’t ready.”

Participant F6, who lost her father as a child, reflected: “I thought I’d ‘gotten over it,’ whatever that means... but then one day, I saw a dad running next to his daughter on her bike

and I just stood there. I couldn't move...could barely breathe." Here we begin to glimpse what van der Kolk and trauma theorists describe as "time collapse," the emotional return of something long processed intellectually, but not yet embodied. These reanimations are not regressions. They are reminders: grief is not stored on a calendar. It lives in the nervous system, but more than emotion, these moments often trigger a recursive logic. "What if I had called that night?" "What if I had said yes?" "Was it right to feel less than I expected?" What recurred was not sadness alone, but the whiplash of wondering whether we had done enough, felt enough, loved fully. Guilt is not merely an emotion in grief. It is a gravitational field.

The Narrative Unfinished: Death Without Answers

The sharpest wounds came from deaths that ended without a clear explanation- suicide, overdose, miscarriage, estrangement, and violence. These left participants not only in sorrow but also in an epistemic crisis. Participant F5, whose friend died from an overdose, said: "I keep wondering if it could've been different. If I'd stayed in touch. If one more call...?" and "The answer's not there but the questions never leave." One participant, M4, whose friend died by suicide, confessed to obsessively rereading their note. "I hoped to find something I missed. Some line that would make it make sense." Others received no note at all. Just a knock, a phone call, a disappearance.

These participants described these deaths as bewildering. Not simply because of the event, but because there was no causal groove to fall into. Piaget's theory of cognitive development posits human intelligence as a corrective system: we seek cause, effect, and resolution. A death without reason halts that process like a compass without a needle. When the

story doesn't resolve, the mourner often invents a placeholder. "Maybe it was time." "Maybe they're safer now." "Maybe they were tired." Whether religious or secular, these explanations are emotionally functional even when they are unprovable: what we might call narrative scaffolds: temporary frames to hold the emotional weight of what can't be known.

Narrative Quorum: Acceptable Incompleteness

In listening closely to stories that looped and fractured, a quieter principle emerged: that what we need after certain losses is not closure, but tolerable coherence. This thesis introduces the term narrative quorum to describe the moment when a mourner gathers "enough" fragments of truth, memory, or meaning to construct a story that doesn't resolve their grief, but lets them continue living. Not truth. Not resolution. But enough. "I still don't believe it," said one man. "But I wake up each day and carry it with me anyway." Another said, "There are so many ways the story could go. But I use the one that lets me sleep." This practice of cognitive consent, choosing the most bearable version, suggests that what makes grieving possible is not always healing, but living in spite of the breach. Narrative quorum is not surrender. It is sustainable ambiguity. It is saying: "This version hurts the least. I'll hold onto this one."

Grief does not care about narrative discipline. It breaks the structure. It interrupts sense-making. It blurs beginnings and ends and reroutes memory through the body. That is, memories don't always return in verbal form, they arrive as tears at the scent of cologne, as chest tightness during a particular song, or as restlessness in the places the deceased once stood. The body remembers what language cannot fully articulate. In this chapter, we saw love continued through whispers, dreams, and imagined conversations. We saw guilt flare years later, wrapped

in songs and second-guesses. We saw unanswered questions be offered up like candles lit in the wind, flickering, but honorable for trying. And we saw that for many, returning to grief is less about regressing and more about re-aligning. To remember, to invite back, to ask aloud yet again: “Did I do enough?” “Can you still hear me?” The unfinished narratives of grief are not evidence of failure; they are a testament to the complexity of grief. They are reminders we loved with no guarantee of return. They are the consequence of courage, and like all things unfinished, they go on.

Chapter 6: Patterns of Grieving: Four Emotional Architectures of Loss

Across the seventeen participants, four patterns appeared again and again, spanning across age, gender, and life history:

- Architects of Isolation: those who built strong walls around grief, surviving through solitude and structure.
- Keepers of Ritual: those who sustained emotional bonds through daily acts of remembrance.
- Philosophers of Death: those who placed mortality inside broader existential or spiritual frameworks.
- Carriers of Contradiction: those whose griefs were messy, tangled, full of unresolved love and regret.

Each participant found their own imperfect way of carrying grief. And each, in doing so, illuminated something profound about the human need to make sense of loss. Whether by shielding it, honoring it, thinking it through, or fighting it every step of the way. What follows is an exploration of these four emotional architectures, not as rigid categories, but as living, breathing strategies for enduring what cannot be undone. First, we offer a general description of each grief pattern to illustrate its core emotional and cognitive features. Then, we turn to individual narratives that bring these architectures to life with each participant serving as an example of how grief takes form.

The Architects of Isolation

Some people meet grief by closing the doors and pulling the curtains tight.

Not out of coldness, and not out of pride- but because something in them knows that survival sometimes demands silence, control, and solitude. These are the Architects of Isolation: the ones who build emotional shelters strong enough to withstand the storm. For them, grief is not shared easily. It is private, structured, and often hidden behind routines or hard work. They do not grieve loudly. They endure- and in that endurance, carve out a kind of battered grace.

The Keepers of Ritual

Not everyone tries to escape grief. Some, instead, build houses for it- small places where memory can live on safely, where love can outlast absence. These are the Keepers of Ritual: the ones who water the plants for the dead, light candles for them, write them letters they know will never be answered. For them, grief is not something to "get over." It is something to be honored, carefully and patiently, every day.

The Philosophers of Death

Some people meet death not with rage or denial, but with a certain quiet curiosity.

These are the Philosophers of Death: the ones who hold mortality in their hands, turn it over carefully, and ask what it means to live knowing it must end. For them, grief is real, but it fits inside a larger story. A story where endings are not failures, and love is not lessened by its impermanence. They do not pretend that loss does not hurt. They simply refuse to let pain be the only thing left behind.

The Carriers of Contradiction

For some, grief is not a single clean emotion. It is a crowded room: love jostling against anger, guilt pressing against sorrow, resentment tangled with longing. These are the Carriers of Contradiction - those whose mourning is complicated not by lack of love, but by the painful, honest fact that love itself is rarely simple. Their grief does not follow neat trajectories. It loops and doubles back, full of unfinished conversations, unresolved feelings, and a lingering ache for what might have been different.

Individual Participant Architectures

F1: "Loss of Life Partner, Grief Rituals, and Defiant Connection to the Dead"

This participant's narrative is a powerful testament to the ongoing nature of love and loss, shaped profoundly by the unexpected and traumatic death of her life partner during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her retrospective narrative reveals deep layers of sorrow, fury, and guilt rooted in systemic medical failings and the painful absence of a chance to say goodbye. "I was not allowed to be with him when he died. I had to watch him expire on Zoom," she writes. Initially, grief consumed her in isolation; pandemic restrictions denied her basic comfort, and the absence of touch deepened her despair. But over time, she transformed that grief into ritualized continuation: burning letters and offerings, marking his birthday and death day with Chinese traditions learned from friends, and naming and decorating the tree planted with his ashes-affectionately, "Roger-tree."

In her prospective reflections, she contemplates the possible loss of her adopted son, a complex figure marked by years of trauma and a strained relationship. Her anticipated grief

carries ambivalence: not lacking in care, but tempered by relational pain, that is, the emotional difficulty stemming not just from the idea of his loss, but from the unresolved wounds, frustrations, and exhaustion that have accumulated in the relationship itself. Still, she imagines planting a memorial tree for him, too, suggesting her reliance on ritual remains even when the love is tangled.

Regarding her own death, she is calm and practical. She accepts mortality as part of the life cycle and expresses a preference for natural burial methods or being used to nourish a tree. Her concern lies more with continuity than fear, not about personal survival after death, but about remaining embedded in a long, interconnected story. She wants to become a part of the ecological renewal, memory, and the emotional rituals of the people she leaves behind, believing ritual and remembrance can connect relationships beyond death. She has come to believe in an afterlife, “upended” by persistent signs she interprets as her partner’s posthumous communication.

Overall, her pattern aligns closely with the categories of Keepers of Ritual and Philosophers of Death. Her grief became an architecture, not of walls, but of bridges. Through daily gestures, spiritual openness, and symbolic acts, she sustains a relationship beyond final breath, refusing cultural pressure to ‘let go’ as proof of healing. Instead, she shows that holding on- carefully, deliberately, lovingly- is itself a form of resilience.

M1: "Grandfather, Rage, Routine, and the Numbness Superpower"

This participant delivers a portrait of grief shaped by fatigue, resilience, and emotional pragmatism, forged through military experience, depression, and a life marked by strategic solitude. When reflecting on the future death of his grandfather, an ex-Vietnam Special Forces

veteran and one of the few trusted family members in his life- his narrative is laced with deep respect, affection, and anticipatory pain. “He’s full of stories and ‘fuller’ of shit, but he’s my Papa and I love ‘em anyways.” His emotional forecast for that loss blends rage, sadness, and tears, but is edged with doubt: “At least, that’s what I’ve heard.” This doubt emerges from a military past in which he lost two friends early on and felt nothing- the grief never took root because the bonds hadn’t yet bloomed. Grief, then, is not guaranteed. It must be earned through time and closeness.

His coping strategy is blunt and consistent: drown in routine until emotional collapse breaks through privately, into his dog’s ears, into video games and weed, far from others’ eyes. “It’s how I cope with most things.” He acknowledges his evolution away from harder escapisms: alcohol and drugs have been replaced by milder distractions, but the basic emotional mechanics remain the same. Grief is managed through exhaustion, isolation, and carefully shielded vulnerability. His depression- often a source of suffering- becomes utility here: “If anything, depression is a superpower most days, especially when you’re alone.”

In contemplating his own death, he expresses no fear, but considerable surprise at his continued survival: “I always assumed I’d be dead by 36.” That statement carries both a jaded acceptance and a hardened belief that life itself is a kind of unexpected persistence, a stubbornness against the odds. The loss that might truly undo him, he admits plainly, is the eventual death of his dog: “She doesn’t realize how close we’ve both been to the brink.” This is his emotional north star: not people, but a creature who offers unconditional presence, requiring nothing except that he simply still be here.

He fits squarely within the Architects of Isolation category. His grief is braced for- anticipated as a solitary, physically exhausting crusade. Emotional assistance from others is

unwelcome; connections with family are minimal, and those who might “come out of the woodwork” are met with suspicion- or, at best, tolerated for their own comfort: “Maybe I’ll stick around and humor them so that they can feel better.” What emerges is a grief style that eschews communal rituals or outward displays. He may not believe he knows how to grieve, but what he has built is unmistakably his own mourning architecture- scaffolded by silence, structure, and one foot placed methodically in front of the other: “I don’t think I know how to grieve... But I do know how to wake up, and I do know how to walk. Sometimes, I think, that’s all you really need.”

F2: “Loss, Discomfort with Emotional Exposure, and Reluctant Empathy”

This participant poignantly illustrates an emotional style of mourning defined by suppression, avoidance, and acute discomfort with public vulnerability. Her grief narrative centers on the recent death of a close friend’s sister, someone she only knew through intermittent but meaningful visits. Her reflections on that loss are framed less around her own sadness and more around how to appropriately fulfill a supportive role: how to behave, what to say, how to not “make things worse” for her grieving friend. Even in death, this person remains indirectly grieved- mourned as an absence mediated through discomfort, loyalty, and empathy by proxy. “I didn’t even think about how [she] was gone,” she admits, “only about how my friend was dealing with the loss [of his sister].”

Emotionally, she keeps sadness at arm’s length. Rather than expressing it outwardly, she diverts and deflects. At the wake, she cracks jokes and offers small talk but avoids looking at any photos of her. She fears crying, not due to a lack of feeling but because such moments threaten her fragile emotional containment. “I get very uncomfortable when people cry around me... even

with small children, I don't let them cry or be sad." Though empathetic, she resists emotion's visibility for others, and especially within herself.

The prospective narrative deepens this pattern, especially as she anticipates the death of her grandfather, a second father figure whose cognitive decline from Parkinson's has already destabilized her ability to rely on him. Though the pain is clearly present, she plans to grieve by disappearing: by avoiding family, avoiding reminders, and evading any triggers that might spark a public breakdown. "If I can't see or hear it then it doesn't exist," she writes- a sentiment so simple and self-aware it becomes heartbreaking. Even the act of writing her narrative causes emotional distress; she pushes through, but never fully allows herself to emotionally arrive. In private, she knows grief will overwhelm her- the "damn will break"- but still she fears showing tears around others more than the pain itself.

Her self-reflection confirms this tendency toward self-erasure, particularly when contrasted with her calm acceptance of her own death. Raised Catholic, with a belief in an afterlife, she feels untroubled by her own mortality, even describing her teenage years as spent in a state of depressive peace with dying's inevitability. What she cannot abide is the death of others, not because of metaphysical uncertainty, but because she would have no control over when or if connection could ever return. "If someone else died and I was questioning if there was an afterlife, I would have to believe that there is... because I can't believe they would just be gone."

This participant fits powerfully within the Architects of Isolation pattern. Her emotional world is delicately balanced- she feels deeply, but is terrified of exposure; she supports others but mistrusts her own ability to manage shared sadness. Grief, for her, cannot be communal. Vulnerability is too dangerous. As she says of her future self: "I will not want to talk about it... I

will keep that to myself in private or possibly for my therapist.” Even kindness from others feels burdensome- she regularly deflects sorrow with humor, anxious to keep herself and others just far enough from emotional collapse. Yet in this protectiveness, there is real tenderness. Her grief architecture may be narrow and private, but it exists not from an absence of love, but perhaps from caring too much, and not yet knowing how to bear it in the open.

M2: “Losing a Twin, Loving a Wife, and the Cosmology of Grief”

This participant’s grief narrative reveals a distinctive framework for loss shaped by spiritual belief, emotional logic, and deep personal history. Having lost his identical twin brother at age 17, he experienced death early and intimately, not just as a devastating event, but as a foundational milestone that rewired his understanding of existence. His retrospective narrative is striking in its clarity and calm. Upon witnessing his brother’s final moments, he describes a rapid processing of emotions: initial shock, a burst of love spoken aloud, and brief survivor’s guilt- “I felt like it should have been me because he was always the kinder of the both of us”- followed quickly by acceptance through the lens of fate. This early confrontation with mortality didn’t break him. It educated him- spiritually, emotionally, and interpersonally.

His primary source of comfort and understanding has been the Abraham-Hicks teachings, which frame death not as an end but as a return to non-physical consciousness. These beliefs allow him to maintain emotional access to his twin- “When I’m happy, I have access to happy thoughts and memories of them [his twin]... It’s only when I’m unhappy that they seem far away.” Religion may not be mentioned in traditional terms, but his system of meaning and metaphysical thought is strong, consistent, and sustaining.

In his prospective narrative, the participant anticipates what may be his most significant future emotional rupture: the death of his wife. Their relationship is saturated with affection, mutual understanding, and blunt honesty, including about death. They've joked about it, forecast it, and tested its emotional terrain in conversation. He predicts he'll "be a mess" if she dies, but acknowledges that her view of him as resilient may not be wrong. Their dynamic is as emotionally interdependent as it is irreverent. He relies on her presence for daily affirmation, partnership, and the kind of synchronicity he once shared with his twin. Losing her would be, undeniably, a seismic change.

Still, he describes grief management much the same way he did following his brother's death: grounded in faith, philosophically reframed, emotionally valid but not overwhelming. His beliefs in non-physical continuance, parallel existences, and the law of attraction create a conceptual system that reduces the sting of death by casting it as a nonlinear, expansive transformation. "When we die," he writes, "we release all of our resistance and come into alignment with our non-physical counterpart." Even Brittany's potential self-destruction, should he die first, is rendered with a kind of cosmic looseness: people learn to take care of themselves once they can no longer rely on others. No endpoint is final, and no grief is eternal- just contrasts generating new desires.

Regarding his own death, he expresses neither fear nor denial, but curiosity- even eagerness. "Sometimes I feel like I can't wait," he admits, "mostly when I try to contemplate how good it will feel rendezvousing with the dynamic 'heaven' experience I have created for myself." The only lingering concern relates to management: having things squared away, preventing his loved ones from being burdened by his passing. Emotionally, though, he's ready- deeply comforted by his beliefs, and certain that even what is lost isn't really gone.

This participant is a clear example of the Philosopher of Death. From his early experience with the loss of his twin to the anticipated loss of his wife and his own mortality, every emotional experience is wrapped within a framework of transcendent explanation and spiritual integration. He turns to metaphysics not as a form of denial, but as a well-worn and resilient lens through which grief becomes transformative. Importantly, he balances this cognitive worldview with emotional openness. He doesn't suppress feelings; he interprets them. He doesn't cease mourning; he reframes it so that love, in this world and the next, always remains accessible. Grief, in his story, is not a wound. It is a passage, and he has already begun to learn how to guide himself across.

M3: "Death, Deferred Grief, and the Manual No One Gave Him"

This participant's story unfolds as a long meditation on grief that is at once poetic, raw, angry, articulate, and wounded. His relationship with death is not one of abstract fear or intellectual curiosity- it is visceral, embodied, and enduring. From the catastrophic loss of his friend at age seventeen, to the anticipated deaths of his aging parents, to the theoretical consideration of his own mortality, grief is not a chapter for him; it is a weather system that returns again and again, reshaping the emotional terrain.

His retrospective narrative- recounting his friend's drowning during a track team party- forms the bedrock of his grief identity. This loss is layered not just with sorrow but with persistent guilt, rage, and haunting self-blame. "He looked like how I had felt the few times in my life when I had nearly drowned. And yet, I did nothing but watch." His reaction at the time was to withdraw and punish himself physically. Through feats of exertion- lifting logs, smashing trees- he sought a corporeal outlet for the storm that no one around him seemed capable of

addressing. Notably, his grief never aligned with community expectations: he did not cry at first, he did not lean on others, and he did not heal. “I don’t think I have strategies that have helped me. I didn’t. None of it helps.” Twenty-five years later, he confesses full awareness that the trauma remains unresolved: “I don’t think I will ever bring my grief to a close, or let myself.”

In the prospective narrative, this longstanding wound informs his approach to future deaths, particularly those of his parents. Despite growing readiness to handle logistical matters- wills, estates- he admits that emotional readiness continues to elude him: “I must deal with it intellectually... But I am not ready to deal with it emotionally.” Unlike many participants, he is brutally honest about the identity crisis that loss will provoke: “When someone I love ultimately does die, I will be endowed, for a short time, with a level of Investiture sufficient to commit [vengeance against gods]. I will then return to being a mere mortal... and I do not know who that man will be.” This framing elevates grief to mythic proportions- he is not just mourning, he is shapeshifting, becoming unrecognizable to himself.

When reflecting on his own death, he acknowledges a rational desire to live as long as possible, driven by a curiosity for humanity’s future rather than fear of personal annihilation. Yet even here, ambivalence persists. His thoughts about his own death are “bland,” but he admits terror in moments when death felt imminent. He expects to outlive most of the people who care for him and doubts he’ll be particularly mourned beyond his immediate family. There is both fatigue and freedom in this view. He’s anchored to life by habit, obligation, the vestiges of hope, not because he expects catharsis.

This participant most clearly fits within the Carriers of Contradiction pattern. His grief is complex, unresolved, and full of emotional inconsistencies that he not only names but explores ruthlessly. He is at war with his own grief- at once resisting it, bearing it, mocking it, and

respecting its influence. He does not suppress grief through denial; instead, he burrows into it intellectually, mythologically, and physically, shaping his identity around the paradoxes it reveals. “Sorrow and sadness were not what I was feeling. Rage and anxiety were the emotions storming my synapses.” There is something profoundly masculine-coded in his response- endurance through violence (against objects and self), rejection of emotional vulnerability, and distrust of communal support. Yet, unlike hollow stoicism, his is a grief that burns white-hot with meaning, even if that meaning is unbearable.

Ultimately, his grief resembles something geological: layered, compressed, erupting unpredictably. “I think I see now that, at the worst of times, Death has been wearing me down. I have let it kill tiny parts of me.” These are not the words of someone who has made peace with mortality, but of someone who has learned to live with its permanent shadow. His final wish encapsulates the way he relates to death: not with denial, not with surrender, but with a very human plea: “Do you have a fucking manual, mate?” It’s rhetorical, of course. He knows the answer. But he asks anyway- because even rage, it seems, is a sacred form of longing for clarity.

F3: “Loss, Prolonged Grieving, and Anxiety Hauntings”

This participant’s experience of grief is marked by early emotional trauma, long-term psychological effects, and a maturation into someone who has endured and learned from loss, though never fully moved beyond it. Her retrospective account centers around the death of her childhood friend during the isolating chaos of COVID-19. The loss was both sudden and painfully visible- experienced through hospital vigils, community devastation, and the unforgettable image of her friend’s open casket, which she could not look away from. “I didn’t want to see her... but at the same time, I felt like I couldn’t look away.” Reactions like this recur

throughout her narrative; she is emotionally articulate yet haunted by the disconnect between her intellectual understanding of death and her emotional response to it.

The experience was compounded by physical symptoms of grief: intense recurring nightmares, anxiety attacks, a sense of derealization, and a distinct shift in mental health dynamics. A particularly poignant moment occurs when she receives a text from her friend's phone months after her passing, triggering an anxiety spiral: "It hit me like I blinked and suddenly I was five seconds from drowning." Her grief response blends emotional numbness and hyper-awareness, a paradox she identifies clearly: "There came a point where I hated the grieving process because I was disgustingly aware of it... I just wanted to feel able again."

Importantly, unlike some participants who grieved in isolation out of necessity, her family created a sanctuary for grief. Her parents' lived experience with war and loss- and their warm, quiet presence- provided a containing environment in which she did not feel alone, even while she processed in solitude. She continues to maintain a relationship with her friend's mother, received her ashes in a symbolic gesture of grieving permanence, and recognizes that "while I had processed the grief, I couldn't ever truly be over it." This statement encapsulates her understanding of grief: it is not something to be completed, but carried.

The prospective narrative reveals anticipatory grief rooted in trauma. Her father is the focal point of her imagined future loss, something so difficult to write about that it triggered a physiological anxiety response. "It took me about seven minutes to write that sentence," she explains, referring to a simple admission that she imagines- fears- his death. Her coping mechanisms heavily feature familial retreat: withdrawing into a small emotional unit of mother and siblings, possibly ceasing to speak for a time, and resisting outside contact. As the oldest child, she also feels crushing pressure to hold herself together. "Sometimes I think that if he dies

I might just have to as well,” she writes, creating a chilling portrait of how tightly bound her identity and emotional security are to this anticipated loss.

Looking inward, her perspective on her own mortality is surprisingly serene. She does not fear death itself, only the havoc it might cause for others. She distinguishes clearly between the anxiety of others’ deaths and the acceptance of her own- a split that reflects the trauma-linked sentiment of control. “Even though I don’t have control over my own death, it is something that I know will eventually happen... when I think about my own death, the tightness loosens.” She is not religious, though she finds comfort in spiritual openness and in the distinctly human trait of contemplating mortality. Thinking, pondering, naming- for her, these are acts of power against an uncontrollable force.

This participant exemplifies the emotional trajectory of a Carrier of Contradiction. Her grief is intensely felt, self-aware, and suffused with paradox: she was emotionally mature enough to process trauma young, yet still haunted by what she cannot quite resolve. She offers compassion and guidance to others in their grief, but struggles with replaying her own. She feels both empowered by her experience and exhausted by it. “I think I have processed the grief, but I am also aware that the impact this event had on me was lasting.” She is neither stuck nor free. Instead, she occupies the liminal space that grief tends to leave behind- the place between remembrance and recovery. Not in denial, but in determined coexistence.

F4: “Ganny’s Death, Family Breakage, and the Quiet Burden of Grief”

This participant’s experience of loss is shaped by her close-knit familial relationships, the subtle but corrosive effects of family tension, and the internalization of what she sees as appropriate or expected grieving behavior. Her retrospective account centers on the death of her

grandmother- “Ganny”- which, while not the first loss she had ever experienced, became the core emotional reference point for understanding what it means to grieve.

The loss came on the heels of a violin recital and was preceded by overhearing her mother’s phone call on the stairs- a moment that marked the beginning of an irreversible change. She expressed her sorrow both privately and publicly: crying with her mother, attending school the next day to maintain routine, but then weeping openly at the funeral. That moment of visible grief seemed to validate her emotion and gave her internal permission to feel: “When I reacted at the wake the way I did... I remember feeling like I was reacting the way I was supposed to.” Through this, she internalized a kind of emotional standard- a grieving script against which she now unconsciously measures all other reactions to loss.

This internal standard explains the shame and confusion she later felt when the deaths of her paternal grandparents elicited a muted, more distant reaction. She wasn’t necessarily less affected by their passing- rather, the emotional register was less intense, less familiar, and complicated by strained relationships. “I felt very numb and almost like I wasn’t sad enough,” she writes. “In some ways, I felt ashamed.” Despite being intellectually aware that grief can vary based on context and closeness, she seems to carry a quiet self-doubt: whether her grief is “enough,” or “correct,” based on the absence or presence of overwhelming emotion. The grieving process for her grandmother is remembered through objects and symbolism- clothes, jewelry, and memories folded into the fabric of daily life. These tactile items and verbal affirmations from her mother keep the memory alive: “It helps to have her say that she thinks my grandma would be proud of me.” This ritualized form of remembrance- maintaining conversation with the living about the dead- creates a bridge between the emotional rupture and everyday survival.

Her prospective narrative returns to the anticipated loss of her parents, especially her mother, with whom she shares a profound emotional bond. Her fear is twofold: emotional devastation and practical instability. The loss of her mom would feel like the collapse of a primary tether in her life- a best friend, confidante, and daily support system. But woven into those emotional fears are practical anxieties: quitting school, tending the home, and financially supporting her sibling. She anticipates retreating into family while cutting off from the rest of the world, but still feeling pressure to “hold it together” for everyone. “I feel responsible for them,” she admits- a quiet acknowledgment of the emotional labor many daughters, particularly oldest daughters, feel culturally and personally conditioned to carry. Her vision of grief is realistically messy: “It just sounds so overwhelming.” And she recognizes that some of that anticipated burden will not only be emotional but logistical- sorted through boxes, in unfinished renovations, in learning how to live in a house where parents had once been.

When considering her own death, she acknowledges fluctuations between peace and fear. At her lowest and most overwhelmed moments, death appears like relief- a place to rest from the chaos. But overall, she doesn’t want to die: “I have so many things I want to do.” Her fear is less about dying and more about not knowing how or when it will happen. Though she didn’t initially consider herself afraid of death, imagining how her mother would react made her reassess that assumption. “That hurts a lot,” she says of the thought. This leads to one of the most emotionally honest realizations in her narrative: that she might feel more blasé about her death than others’, but her closeness to certain people tempers that distance. It becomes clear that what anchors her emotionally is not abstract concepts of death, but the people who would be left behind.

This participant fits most clearly within the Carriers of Contradiction pattern. Her grief is tangled with paradoxes: intense sorrow in some losses, numbness in others; public mourning

validated, private apathy shamed; fear of grief, yet a yearning to honor it deeply. She is trying to reconcile how her grief “should” manifest with how it actually arrives. She is a person actively trying to thread together memory, family, guilt, support, and emotional reality- sometimes succeeding, sometimes just getting by. Her grief, like her love, is quiet but deeply rooted. And while she speaks in calm tones and rational insights, there is an undercurrent of emotional exhaustion- of someone who feels alone with her own emotional calibration, always testing it against what she believes it ought to look like.

In essence, her mourning is a negotiation between inner life and outer demand, between loss of people and the simultaneous loss of family structure. Her grief is not only about who dies, but what their absence does to the structures that held her together. And in that way, her heart carries not just the sorrow of unfinished conversations, but the weight of holding her family in place, even as she wonders who will hold her.

F5: “Friends, Family, and the Long, Layered Practice of Letting Go”

This participant offers one of the most emotionally textured explorations of loss within the study, not simply narrating grief as an individual event, but engaging deeply with the many emotional, moral, spiritual, and temporal contradictions that grief imposes. Her experience of mourning spans three distinct relationships: the anticipated future loss of Kelly, the past death of her childhood theatre friend Connie, and a reflective meditation on her own mortality. Across these, we see a constant rhythm- not of resolution, but of reckoning. She turns toward each form of death with sobering honesty and profound empathy.

In her retrospective narrative about her friend, she walks us through what she calls her “last good day,” followed by one of the most complex grief responses in this entire dataset. Her

relationship to her was not intimate in a daily sense- they hadn't been close for years- but their bond was spiritually formative. They were part of the same children's theatre community, and that shared space of performance, growing up, and creative belonging secured their emotional imprint on each other's lives. "We were the co-keepers of each other's childhoods." That phrase alone captures the weight of grief for someone who may not have been a best friend, but was a thread in the emotional architecture of her early years.

Her initial reaction to her friend's sudden death from a drug overdose was shock, numbness, and restraint. At work, when she received the news, she didn't cry. She continued her shift. Returned later to work out. Ran errands for other friends who might be hurting worse. Only after moving through a full day of structure did she permit herself to grieve, through music- a song that anchors her belief in heaven. This choreography of controlled mourning, delayed by social and self-imposed obligations, contoured her grief in a complex way: structured during the day, deeply cracked open at night.

Her grief posture over the following year balances open-hearted remembrance with quiet moral ambiguity. She mourns her friend's absence while contending with guilt- guilt over not staying in touch, not intervening, not sensing their struggle. "If I had stayed in touch, maybe they wouldn't have gone to as dark of a place." And yet, this grief coexists with anger at the dealer who stood by as her friend overdosed and left her to die. That disconnect- between the sacredness of a life remembered and the cruelty of the life ended- becomes a spiritual burden that she tries to transfer to God: "I try to turn all of this over to God instead of carrying it all on my own."

The prospective narrative- her anticipation of her mother's friend's (who is like an Aunt to her, so will be referred to as such) death- mirrors many of these same emotional patterns. Her

aunt has had terminal cancer for over four years, and this participant is stuck in the margin between grief's beginning and its end. She names the paradox powerfully: "I've already been grieving for four years." What makes this particular narrative striking is the emotional honesty with which she names the tension between gratitude and quiet resentment. She is profoundly thankful for the time her aunt has been given beyond prognosis- graduations, family moments, potential introductions to future sons-in-law- but she is also tired. "I couldn't handle the waiting." She dares to express the unutterable: part of her would be relieved when her aunt goes, not out of apathy, but because the waiting has hurt. She doesn't want any more rehearsals for the death that still has not taken place, one that emotionally happened long ago.

Her conception of death and grief is shaped, though not numbed, by a devout Christian worldview. Her reflection on her own death frames it as both dreaded and welcomed. While she fears the uncertainty of how she will die, she is comforted by the religious metaphor of healing after death- that, like her aunt someday, she will be "completely healed and new again." She is from a town where, in her words, "we are very familiar with death and all of his friends," a statement that beautifully blends spiritual poetics with emotional realism. Still, she is unsure whether she wants to die like her aunt, with time for long goodbyes, or whether a swift, unseen end would feel easier.

This participant most clearly fits the Carriers of Contradiction archetype. Her narratives are knotted with tenderness and torment: guilt and grace, anticipation and avoidance, metaphor and memory. Grief, for her, does not conform to stages; it echoes, sometimes sharply and sometimes quietly. She weaves emotion through art, music, ritual, language, and the act of remembering- yet she resists tidy closure. Her mourning is communal and spiritual. Through theatre, song, prayer, and wakefulness, she stays connected to what she has lost: "Sometimes all

it takes is a pretty sunset or the sight of a deer in a clearing... [They (the deceased)] still play a role in my life.” Remarkably, her reflections show that love can grow in grief’s absence- that even when a relationship was once dormant, death can resurrect it, bringing someone closer in memory than they were in life’s final stretch. She is not trapped in mourning. But she continues to live in its terrain- navigating memory, loss, guilt, and hope not to conquer grief, but to carry it well. “I will think of them until the day I die,” she writes of her aunt. And for this participant, that is not an expression of despair. It is a vow.

M4: “A Philosophy of Grief: Memory, Mortality, and the Architecture of Loss”

This participant’s exploration of grief is sprawling, erudite, and profoundly introspective- an emotional and intellectual reckoning structured as much by personal loss as by his evolving relationship to memory, cognition, and mortality. His reflections span multiple deaths: a chronically ill friend from childhood who died by suicide, the recent medical scare involving his grandfather, and the past death of his grandmother. Woven through these threads is his broader philosophical musing on death itself- not as an end-point but as a dialectical process, at once visceral and abstract, enfolding the physical, emotional, and spiritual self.

His narrative begins with the potential loss of his grandfather, whose recent visit to the ER served not as an emergency to be feared, but as a reminder- a prompt to reflect. That reflection does not unfold linearly; rather, it meanders through memory, cognition, and metaphysical architecture. His response to potential loss is shaped by a deeply analytical mind that tracks how his access to emotion and memory is mediated by systems far beyond the personal. He writes of emotional recall like one might speak of digital memory, noting, “I can’t simply wrangle myself to actively access the full range of my experiences at will anymore,” and

describing how recollection now depends on outside triggers rather than internal command. His reflections use metaphors of compression, entropy, and information flow, offering a framework where emotions are “subsumed under a weight of abstraction.” These cognitive patterns, more technical than expressive, mirror how he approaches grief itself: not as a raw ache, but as a structurally tangled phenomenon that resists simple retrieval or resolution. His past emotional fluency, he laments, has been dulled by what he calls “the flattening architecture” of adult consciousness, a kind of cognitive entropy that, for him, parallels death itself.

The core of his emotional grounding comes not from abstraction but from physical memory- treks with his grandfather, shared meals, scenic vistas, the silence of camaraderie. These nature-bound flashpoints- each laden with highly specific sensory detail- offer resistance to the flattening effect of abstraction. Hiking through the Appalachian trails, running into soldiers on endurance drills, eating low-quality lunch meat sandwiches at a stunning overlook- these vibrant moments serve as counter-testaments to the “death” of meaning by digital overstimulation. That is, in a world saturated by constant streams of content, where information loses context and texture, these embodied memories retain depth, presence, and emotional weight. They anchor meaning in real time and place- something that, for him, screens and abstractions rarely allow. With his grandfather, life was not philosophized; it was lived. And that, he suggests, is something death cannot take.

Yet, he does not sentimentalize death either. He accepts the actuarial arc his grandfather is nearing with equanimity. “He’s passed 80 years, he’s more than gotten a fair shake... he stays fairly active.” The loss, he suggests, would be meaningful but not unjust, not brutal in the way other deaths have been. With this framing, he views grief itself as partially tied to the question of

justice- those who die inexplicably or prematurely awaken a destabilizing, more painful grief which, unlike expected deaths, carries deeper moral violation.

This belief is seen in his retrospective account of his friend's suicide, where the philosophical scaffolding begins to show cracks. Her death, unlike his grandmother's, was not expected. It left him numb, suspended in disjointed emotion, unable to feel fully at the time due to the emotional flattening of his then-medicated state. "Perhaps I never really grieved," he writes, not with resignation, but with agonizing ambiguity. Only now, years later, as an adult who has rebuilt emotional confidence and distance from that period of alexithymia, does he find himself capable of crying about her. He describes this shift not as a straightforward progression, but as a kind of emotional recalibration, "it hurts more to write about her now than it ever did to live through that moment." In this delayed sorrow, he touches truth: that grief, particularly complicated grief, does not respond to time or proximity. It reveals itself when the self is mature enough to see clearly, when experience can hold the pain and extract what's meaningful from it.

One of the most striking features of his narrative is how he contextualizes grief not as mere personal suffering but as a threshold into collective humanity and spiritual humility. Grief, for him, is the path to "a transcendent notion of the individual," a state beyond temporality where life is no longer merely functional but meaningful. He makes a sharp distinction between performative or unconscious grief and grief as conscious, spiritual labor- something akin to a sacred act. His account of collective grieving (e.g., funeral rites) positions memory not as individual recollection but as shared meaning-making, a "memetic sadness" that redistributes pain through solidarity. Yet philosophical as he is, he also acknowledges the potential for self-deception in his thinking. "Perhaps this whole outlook I've proffered is a masterclass in self-deception and repression," he writes. His awareness of his own intellectualization does not

nullify it- rather, it makes the entire narrative more honest, more human. He's trying to tell the truth, even as he questions whether his framework obscures as much as it reveals.

This participant most fully inhabits the Philosopher of Death archetype, but with strong inflections of the Carrier of Contradiction. He operates in formal systems- metaphysical, emotional, spiritual- but is constantly aware of the distance between thought and experience. His grief, especially in the case of his friend, lives in the contradiction between rational understanding and emotional opacity- between what he knew then and what he feels now. "It hurts more to write about her now than it ever did to live through that moment six years ago." That sentence encapsulates the long arc of his mourning- a grief deferred not because it was diminished, but because it had not yet found the room it needed in him to fully unfold. At the time of her death, his capacity for emotional reflection was limited, flattened by medication, constrained by developmental stage, and buried beneath cognitive defenses. Only now, with greater emotional vocabulary and temporal distance, can the grief be accessed, named, and integrated with the meaning it carries.

What emerges from his narrative is not a story of "processing" grief in the traditional sense, but of learning to sit with it. To name its emergence. To understand how grief intersects with one's worldview, self-perception, moral code, and relationship to memory. There are no neat endings here- no closure- but vast, teeming clarity. In essence, this participant offers a kind of philosophical liturgy for grief. Rational, searching, emotionally raw beneath the intellect, he reveals not just how it feels to mourn, but what it might mean to be the kind of thinker for whom mourning is not just emotional labor, but existential inquiry.

F6: "Grief's First Language: Early Loss, Family Deaths, and the Quiet Planning for Her Own"

This participant's grief narrative is notable for its raw candor, emotional pragmatism, and unexpectedly warm undercurrents. It binds a complex net of trauma, resilience, familial attachment, longing, and dark humor. Her story is anchored by multiple profound childhood losses and a keen, sobered anticipation of future ones, including her own. She writes not just as a person who has lived through death, but as someone who speaks grief as her first emotional language.

Her earliest memory of loss, at age five, is viscerally embodied. She recalls sitting on her mother's lap at her grandfather's funeral, sensing the grief in her mother's trembling embrace. There's childlike curiosity ("Mom, why is he crying?") and innocence ("Hi grandpa," she says brightly to the body in the casket), but also an emerging awareness that funerals are social scripts we participate in without always understanding. Her description of running around with cousins, dipping into candy bowls, makes death feel oddly ordinary, built into the rhythms of family gatherings, even those marked by sorrow.

But just a few years later, that innocence gets wholly upended. "My dad died on Christmas Eve when I was nine years old." Delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, this statement sets the tone for the rest of her narrative: grief is steady, unavoidable, sometimes ironic. Her blunt phrasing reflects lived reality more than sentimentality. The trauma of his death, terminal cancer endured slowly and publicly, is etched into her childhood. And although memory fails in places (she recalls little of the funeral), she does remember burying him in the backyard, a visceral, haunting image that both locates her grief spatially and emphasizes its unusual closeness.

The traumatic nature of her aunt's death (a murder-suicide) adds another profound break in her early life- this time with a layer of guilt. She wonders if her request to sleep over that night had been granted, whether she could have prevented the tragedy. "I don't blame myself," she

says, but the implication lingers, revealing the many ways grief embeds imagined alternate timelines. Notably, she wasn't allowed to attend that funeral due to her age, a gesture presumably made to protect her, but which instead left her grasping in the dark for understanding and closure.

What ties her retrospective narrative together is her insistence on realism. She doesn't glamorize the dead but relates to them in brutally honest terms. Some deaths she feels more for than others, and she doesn't perform grief where none exists. "It's hard to cry over the death of someone you don't care about. That's how I know people cared at least a little." This sentiment becomes a kind of personal metric- a litmus test for what grief ought to feel like. That same worldview gives her a grounded sense of acceptance: "Life can be both a blessing and a curse." There's no philosophizing here, no search for abstract meaning- only bold, lived truth.

In her prospective reflections, the focus turns inward to anticipated devastation. The deaths she most fears- her mother's, her sisters', and eventually her own- are marked by closeness and emotional interdependence. Her mother acts as her emotional stabilizer, her haven. Losing her is imagined as a wound too large to recover from- "I won't be able to recover as I have with other deaths." With her sisters, she feels a shared burden: a sense that, even in grief, she must be the steady one. "It will be up to me to hold myself and them together."

When contemplating her own mortality, she fuses practicality with intimacy. Her plans are laid out with clarity and a deeply human touch: burial over cremation, money set aside for funeral costs, and the aspiration for a large family "to carry on my memory when I'm gone." Perhaps the most poignant goal: to have six close friends to serve as pallbearers- a poetic gesture, quietly asking to be remembered and carried home by love. She's not afraid of death, only of dying alone or leaving chaos behind for others.

This participant is a powerful example of the Carrier of Contradiction archetype. Her grief is paradoxically composed- sharp and honest in the telling, yet laced with yearning, regret, humor, guilt, and hope. She does not suppress her emotions, but neither does she dwell in them; rather, she accepts death as a lifelong companion. She's lived inside mourning for so long that her insights about grief are not theoretical- they're encoded in her daily life, sense of family, and identity. She is someone who refuses to sanctify pain, but who holds it respectfully, at eye level, with both a child's open heart and an adult's calloused hands. In essence, her story is not about recovery- it's about continuance. It's about carrying grief without the illusion that we will one day put it down. And in doing so, she teaches something vital: that what we mourn is not just who we've lost, but the unspoken strain of holding everything and everyone else together when we survive.

M5: "Warrior's Resolve, Parental Love, and the Code of the Living"

This participant's narrative is marked by clarity, control, and a values-driven philosophy of grief and mortality, born from his dual identities as a devoted son and a disciplined soldier. His reflections on death- his own, others', and his eventual mourning- are shaped by lived proximity to danger, an unwavering moral compass, and an athlete-warrior ethos of strength in body and mind. He never flinches from the topic. Instead, he faces it head-on, not to challenge death, but to integrate it into how he navigates life.

His retrospective narrative begins on the battlefield, even if not physically. A fallen comrade, a fellow Green Beret, is memorialized not through emotional outpouring but through action and tactical remembrance. The moment of loss is seared in visual memory: grainy CCTV footage capturing his friend's final moments, engaging in an ambush with a pistol in hand. This

image imprints itself so deeply that it reorganizes the participant's worldview. "Witnessing this traumatic event on video filled me with anger and violence," he recalls. Yet rather than being consumed by rage, he converts the pain into motivation. He vows to die like his brother-in-arms did- fighting. Grief, in this case, becomes a tactical manual: endurance, vigilance, embodiment. Importantly, he doesn't elevate this friend above others he's lost, stating that his death was not grieved differently than the many others. What sets this loss apart is what it taught him- as if grief, for a soldier like him, becomes a kind of silent mentor. "The time chooses you," he reminds his team, reinforcing a key theme across all his narratives: agency within fate. The paradox doesn't pull him apart- instead, it fuels his discipline.

In his prospective reflection, that Stoic framing is complicated by emotional vulnerability. He anticipates that the death of his parents will undo him in ways the battlefield never could. He highlights not simply a fear of their absence, but of the regret that follows: the time lost, the visits not made, the words unspoken. "I know I will wrestle with the feeling that my ambitions took away time we could have had together." The pain is preemptive, sitting in the ache of missed connection. In this way, his grief leans into the Carriers of Contradiction pattern- sorrow, guilt, admiration, and love all combined.

Unlike his fellow soldiers, his parents are not "replaceable" members of a team- he cannot compartmentalize them. They shaped the core of his identity, and their loss is inseparable from the scaffolding of his own life story: "They know me completely and support me in a way no one else does." In soldiering, he became who he is. But in his family, he became who he was meant to be. The tension between service and connection, mobility and presence, loyalty to the mission and loyalty to family- this is the contradiction he both carries and anticipates.

His reflection on his own death is strikingly serene. “I have seen my death, and this is not it,” he used to joke on missions- a line that encapsulates courage without bravado. Death, to him, is not an enemy to be feared but a boundary to be honored. His military past has given him a template to view mortality not with dread, but with readiness. Yet he is not careless. His fearlessness is grounded in discipline, not detachment.

Despite this composure, he admits it is far harder to imagine losing others than to visualize his own end. Grief for himself feels manageable because he sees it through the lens of legacy- what he is trying to leave behind for others. But grief for the living, particularly for his parents, is about lost years and vanishing voices. “I will dwell on the conversations and experiences I will miss with them.” His mourning is not performative. It is quiet, interior, yet unmistakably powerful.

This participant fits across two intersecting archetypes: the Philosopher of Death and the Carrier of Contradiction. From the Philosopher’s side, he brings a rigorously articulated framework for living and dying, grounded in discipline, a spiritual ethos of presence, and a need to leave the world better than he found it. From the Carrier of Contradiction’s side, he grapples with the pain of distance, the weight of unrealized time, and the inevitable guilt of ambition: a love for life that also costs something personal. In essence, his narrative is not a tale of grief undone, but of grief mastered into meaning, transmuted into the architecture of a life lived deliberately. His losses shape his strategy for joy, his discipline anchors his mourning, and his longing for connection is never far from the battlefield of memory.

M6: “Quiet Grief, Lingering Absence, and the Emotional Architecture of Anticipation”

This participant offers a quiet, emotionally restrained yet deeply contemplative account of grief and mortality. His experience is not defined by outward expression or dramatic emotional unraveling, but instead by subtle rituals, private mourning, and an ongoing relationship with absence. His tone throughout the three narrative reflections- past, prospective, and personal- suggests someone for whom grief is an internal geography: mourned most deeply in small silences, quiet gestures, and in the displacement of emotional energy into remembering and routine.

His retrospective account of the death of a beloved dog, though not a human loss, is treated with profound seriousness, and rightly so. The death is described not with metaphor but with precision: he collapsed, sobbed, then returned to the muted landscape of routine. Grief crept in before the actual moment of death, and its residue lingered long after. “Everything made me feel empty,” he writes. “I felt like I was cored out.” What’s remarkable here is not the drama, but the honesty of limitations- he processed grief through stillness, through memory, through withdrawal from tactile interaction with other dogs for months. He didn’t cry in front of friends, even though support flooded in, and this resistance to performative grief becomes one of the most significant themes in his narrative: grief is private, often subterranean.

In his reflection on a future anticipated loss- his maternal grandmother- the emotional content intensifies. Though language barriers and dementia block full expression between them, he notes that her presence is central to the structure of the family. “Losing her... feels like punching a neat hole in the middle of a picture.” It’s not just her he worries about- it’s his mother, who speaks to her nightly. Central to his method of mourning is this displacement: he grieves for others even before himself. “I think most about how my mom would feel.” His fear is less about the eventuality of death itself and more about how it might destabilize the entire

family architecture. This emotional caretaking instinct- concern for family coherence after loss- defines both the tone and the trajectory of his prospective grief. He specifically anticipates his family turning inward in their sadness, breaking from shared routines, emotionally “coming undone.”

While he doesn’t articulate an exact plan for how he’ll grieve, he does reveal a desire to do so culturally and ancestrally. He sees potential comfort in performing grief in ways his grandmother would recognize and find meaningful: “I’d want to try and research, remember, and practice the ways of grieving that my grandmother would hope us to do.” This points to a meaningful undercurrent of cultural identity within grief. The gaps between languages and generations are not easily filled, but he seeks connection through ritual, remembrance, and intentionality.

His self-reflection on mortality completes the structure of his personal philosophy. He has transitioned over time from cavalier indifference toward death to a distinctly un-romanticized acceptance. In middle school, he notes, death seemed abstract and weightless- likely a symptom of adolescent depression. Now, he sees death not as a dramatic finale, or something to be philosophically elevated, but simply something that is: “It just is, and processing it is incredibly difficult.” He fears most that he won’t have time to leave something of himself behind- that his life might disappear without a trace or tether. The figure most deeply knotted into this fear is his sister, his closest confidante, whose imagined grieving of him elicits the deepest pain. “I don’t know what she’d do without a conversation partner.”

He belongs to the Carriers of Contradiction archetype, characterized by quietly complex grief full of love, guilt, memory, and self-doubt. His mourning is full of emotional displacement- processing his own grief behind tamped-down expressions, storing worry in his thoughts about a

family member's feelings, delaying or diffusing pain. His fears of loss are not contained in one grand, unifying sorrow but are scattered across the many ways lives interweave across time. His emotional fluency exists not in how he performs grief, but in how sensitive he is to its slow arrival, its cultural shape, and its lingering weight.

His reflections show a full-spectrum understanding of grief for the living, the dead, and the dying. He knows mourning can begin before death. He knows loss re-emerges unexpectedly, sometimes in German Shepherd reels on Instagram. He gives space to grief not as a problem to be solved, but as a companion to be recognized and respected across stages of life. Ultimately, his narrative speaks to the part of grief few want to dwell in: not the day of the funeral, or the first night alone, but the long, aching middle where memories shift and rituals fall quiet- but love, in its softened form, remains present.

F7: "Grief as Love, Action, and the Choice to Keep Feeling"

This participant's narrative is a powerful testament to the ways emotional clarity, embodiment, and intentional self-reflection can coexist within profound grief. She approaches death not just as an event to be braced for, but as something mixed with love, legacy, agency, and emotional presence. Across all three narrative prompts, her voice unites vulnerability and self-possession- open-hearted, yet grounded in ritual and responsibility. Hers is not a passive descent into grief, but a conscious choice to stay with its textures and lean into healing.

In her retrospective account, she narrates the death of a young woman, a friend full of life, who passed away suddenly. The impact of that loss was intense: "It was a huge shock and denial for a week," she writes, and describes needing to physically isolate herself on a run to grieve in the woods. Despite how jarring the experience was, she created space for grief by

honoring both her body and her emotions: “Working out helped me a ton,” she recalls, but also emphasizes the importance of “making time and space” to feel sadness deeply. She is deeply attuned to how personal this grief was- and how painful it became when others turned it into something performative. The unexpected loss of friends because of how grief was handled socially left a mark: “Comparing and competition through grief is immature and should not be around me in my life.” Her grief, though personal, was accompanied by a moral clarity- only genuine support, not performative displays, matter during mourning.

In her prospective narrative, the anticipated future loss of her parents looms large. The emotional foundation of the piece is raw: “This is huge for me.” Her parents are the first love she’s ever known- her moral compass, her support system, her greatest source of emotional safety. She doesn’t use philosophical distance or spiritual metaphor to soften the blow- she sits in the plainness of what this loss would feel like: “like a knife in my heart, truly.” Most powerfully, she acknowledges the anticipated guilt and longing, not just grief over their passing, but regret over unmet aspirations: “Why couldn’t they wait... I wish I could’ve bought the time back to spend with them.”

Her predicted coping strategies tie closely back to her earlier grief: physical movement, productivity, and emotional sharing in a safe community. But what distinguishes her from many other participants is her willingness to grieve vocally, not performatively, but relationally. “I refuse to suffer in silence from those I love and those around me.” Her response to loss, anticipated or lived, is not to retreat, but to create space: for conversation, for community, and for collective healing. She fears, however, one thing deeply- that loss might close her off: “That I will be afraid to love again.” But she reassures herself, and us, that she will not let that happen. “I love love, and I’d rather have loved and lost.” This declaration, simple and deeply profound,

sits near the center of how she processes death: not as the absence of life, but as the presence of connection, of memory, of love transformed.

Her reflection on her own mortality is deeply aligned with the rest of her narrative voice. She is not fearless, but she is resolved. Sadness over her eventual death doesn't isolate her- it connects her to the value of living intentionally. "There's no sugarcoating it," she says of death, but emphasizes that she lives without regrets. Gratitude and a sense of stewardship over her life arise again and again in her words: she speaks of "making the most of the time I have," and of honoring the sacrifices that brought her here. Her fear, it seems, is not of dying- it's of leaving pain in her wake. When thinking of her loved ones grieving after she's gone, she writes, "It makes me feel very, very loved, but sad to see people I love so much in pain." And as with the rest of her account, she returns to her spiritual core- Love. Feeling. Connection. She is at peace with death, not because she romanticizes it, but because, as she says, she trusts who she is and what she values.

This participant embodies the Carrier of Contradiction archetype with enduring grace- grief for her is not simple. It's full of love, pain, health, guilt, clarity, and growth. She is not afraid to express that grief sometimes dulls and other times burns, or that coping mechanisms like exercise can serve as both distraction and medicine. But perhaps more strikingly, she exists at the fluid boundary between contradiction and conviction- it is in her willingness to cry and run and talk and withdraw and return and, above all, feel deeply, that she transforms grief from something to endure into something sacred. In essence, her narrative is a love letter to presence. To being open in moments of unbearable pain. To crying in the woods and keeping a dead friend's Instagram on "close friends". To moving her body through grief instead of tricking herself out of feeling it. To preparing loved ones for her death, not with fear, but with care. Her

story reveals the heartbeat of honest mourning: that to suffer loss with full attention is not a weakness, but one of the most courageous acts a person can choose.

M7: “The Rock and the Ocean: Grief, Heritage, and the Endurance of Emotional Tides”

This participant offers a deeply intimate, culturally grounded, and emotionally articulate narrative of grief, loss, and mortality- one that unfolds not simply as memory, but as presence. Grief is not a past event or future worry for him; it is an emotional landscape he navigates daily, characterized by tides of memory, familial reverence, unresolved sorrow, cultural inheritance, and a persistent desire to make sense of love that continues, even in absence.

Central to his retrospective reflection is the loss of CWO4 ("Warrant"), a commanding officer whom he clearly regarded with not just professional respect, but deep admiration and personal connection. His death- violent, traumatic, witnessed not only emotionally but visually through information shared in the military context- becomes both a private wound and a public silence. “We had the funeral, we had the service, whatever... but yeah. It was weird.” His phrasing reflects a numbness imposed by institutional rhythms: grief was permitted, but only briefly, before the machinery of duty resumed.

His rage was real. His urge to retaliate toward the woman who killed Warrant- the ex-wife who, though acquitted, remains in his emotional crosshairs- was visceral and vividly recalled. In this moment, grief finds its twin in rage, not uncontrolled, but understood, named, and ultimately, though perhaps not completely, released: “Maybe a part of me still has some animosity towards her, but I know I have let go of a lot of it.” Coping, for him, is layered: he grieves in both Filipino and Catholic ways, through the belief that Warrant’s spirit is still with him, and through prayer, which gives structure to continued connection. Actions, too, hold

power: “Every time I drink bourbon, I think about him.” Sentiment, memory, and action intermingle- his grief is not outdated; it lives today, embedded in ritual.

This framework bleeds into the prospective narrative regarding his parents’ eventual mortality. That loss, though still on the horizon, is presented with aching clarity and active dread. His crying while writing is mentioned plainly, affect not as performance, but as truth in motion. What’s remarkable here is the cultural co-mingling of responsibility, myth, and memory. His mother does not want her death to be shared with extended family- a final act of self-control- and he promises, however reluctantly, to try. His father, the commander figure, has not made his wishes known, and the burden of this unknown weighs heavily.

With their loss, he foresees becoming a pillar- not just of a nuclear family, but of a larger intergenerational line: “It’s up to me and my brothers to carry on the legacy.” As the youngest, he feels the paradox of being the “baby” who will soon be tasked with adult responsibilities that exceed even his past military assignments. Those familial expectations deepen his already fragile, tender emotional forecast. His anticipation of grief is suffused with vulnerability- not just sorrow, but a quiet fear that he may not have the strength to carry what their absence will require. He worries about whether he will be emotionally resilient enough to support others, uphold tradition, and remain connected to who he is without their guidance. While he draws strength from Filipino culture and language, he is simultaneously haunted by the pressure to preserve them: “Will I be able to pass my culture on to my children?” The loss of his parents threatens not only emotional devastation, but intergenerational rupture.

A profound fear runs beneath these musings: the fear that grief will isolate him completely. When Warrant died, he drank alone. When his parents die, he believes he will predispose himself to solitude once more. “I might not want anyone around me.” But he names

this fear, and in doing so, opens a door for others to witness him walking through it. His reflection on his own mortality holds less emotional pain than the death of others, but no less weight. “I am actually terrified of my death,” he admits, though he does not resist joking to cope, or reading reincarnation narratives to imagine other afterlives. His fantasies about death are not nihilistic, but curious. He envisions being reborn into the past, into tradition, into a time before his own grief began. This longing reveals the thread that runs through all three of his reflections: the desire to anchor memory, identity, and spirit across time. Through all of this, one metaphor returns again and again: sadness as the sea, and the self as a rock. Sometimes the waves lap gently; other times they threaten to sweep him away. The metaphor is not novel. But in his hands, it is felt. “Sometimes those waves are so big you’re having difficulty holding onto the rock.” His grief is not even. It lives in tides, and he, like the rock, remains. That endurance is not stoicism; it is a blessed form of staying alive.

This participant embodies both the Carrier of Contradiction and the Philosopher of Death. His grief is messy, knotted with anger, love, duty, spiritual ritual, cultural obligation, and masculine vulnerability. He wrestles with emotional expectations, legacy concerns, institutional pressures, and inner conflicts- all while imagining, remembering, and mourning in real time. Yet alongside all of this, he builds a coherent worldview. His belief in reincarnation, his reverence for prayer and heritage, his honoring of the dead through ritual and memory- these are scaffolds that do not deny the horror of death but frame it within the slow, long work of understanding what life is for. In essence, this is not the grief of someone who collapses in death’s shadow, but of someone who kneels, speaks softly to the wind, and promises to keep memory alive however he can. “Just pray, anak. Everything will be fine,” his mother says. And he does.

F8: “Inside the Waves: Grief, Anxiety, and the Long Memory of Pain”

This participant brings a strikingly vulnerable, honest, and emotionally complex reflection on loss, mortality, and the intricate intersections between personal history, family dynamics, and anticipatory grief. Her narrative is quiet but profound, guiding us through past loss, present support of the grieving, and deeply-held fears of future bereavement. What emerges is a portrait of someone who has lived in close proximity to death before- not only through external losses but through moments when her own survival was uncertain. That sustained familiarity with mortality, combined with a blend of empathy and psychological insight, defines the tone and texture of her relationship with grief now.

Her retrospective narrative opens with the abrupt, tragic death of a middle school classmate- someone she wasn’t close to, but whose disappearance from daily life deeply disturbed her. It was the first time she encountered death, and the physicality of her shock is still vividly imprinted: “My body was suddenly plunged into ice-cold water... I had just seen him the day before in class, and now he was gone.” The experience didn’t require intimacy to leave a mark; it was the sudden interruption of normalcy, the reminder that anyone can disappear overnight, that haunted her. Notably, she never gets full confirmation on the cause of death- another layer of ambiguity and unresolvedness that echoes across her wider reflections on death.

The pivot to her boyfriend’s mother’s sudden death- written as a postscript- demonstrates her empathetic depth and emotional responsiveness. Though it was not her relative, the loss hit her sharply. “I burst out crying... my thoughts were reeling.” Despite the grief “not being technically” hers, it reverberated through her life, particularly through her worry about her boyfriend’s well-being and the role she needed to play in supporting him. Her self-doubt is palpable: “I feel guilty for feeling sad since it was his mom, not mine.” But this is precisely what

makes her reflection so poignant. She feels deeply but questions the legitimacy of her own sadness, as if mourning is something to be measured- an internalized guilt many experience when grieving tangential losses. She responds with care, seeking guidance through online forums, calling family, and surrounding herself with friends to stabilize. Her coping is active, empathetic, and community-oriented- not in a formal or public sense, but in the way she leans into relational networks for mutual support, emotional grounding, and shared understanding.

Her prospective reflection centers on her older sister, whom she describes as a lifelong anchor- someone who has always understood her, often more deeply than their parents. Her anticipation of this potential loss is laced with painful superstition: she avoids thinking about it too much for fear it might bring the outcome closer. Racing thoughts spiral at the thought of her sister dying: car crashes, medical emergencies, plane accidents- scenarios brought on not through morbid curiosity but through anxiety-fueled hypervigilance, familiar to many trauma survivors. “Losing her would be an unimaginable heartbreak,” she writes. The anticipated grief isn’t just emotional- it’s systemic. She envisions her family unraveling, her father relapsing into anger, her parents divorcing. These aren’t abstract fears- they’re based on patterns she’s already lived through.

Her reflection on her own mortality is perhaps the most layered. She approaches the topic with the emotional fluency of someone who has lived with the specter of death for years. Hospitalized in high school for suicidal ideation and anorexia, she recounts the years when her mind was full of methods, aftermaths, and plans. Now in recovery, her relationship to death has shifted- but not disappeared. She doesn’t fear death so much as the manner of it: she fears the panic in its final moments or the horror of suffering before it arrives. She touches on the beauty

of ordinary life- matcha lattes, restful sleep, untraveled journeys- as things she doesn't want to miss. Loss, for her, is not just about death itself, but about the end of potential.

Importantly, she reflects on how her younger suicidal self misunderstood the ripple effects of her death. "I thought they would suffer, but eventually get over it." Now, she understands those fractures aren't temporary- they're enduring. As someone who has seen her family stagger under the pressure of her pain, she recognizes that her death would bring deep and lasting harm to them. That understanding has become part of her recovery- part of her will to live.

This participant's grief arc falls squarely within the archetype of Carriers of Contradiction. Her mourning is layered with complexity: grief tempered by guilt, empathy clouded by anxiety, acceptance filtered through superstition, all wrapped in the long aftermath of proximity to her own nonexistence. Her instinct to help others through grief is developed and deeply felt, but her own emotions often come with caveats- like she needs to justify why she feels sad. Her narratives reveal someone who feels everything but holds it internally for examination before sharing it with the world. Her narratives live in nuance. She feels guilty for mourning, anxious for surviving, and worried about breaking- but continues showing up emotionally for herself and others with honesty and care. Grief, for her, is not a process with a clear end, but a continuous unfolding of memory, fear, meaning, and presence.

In essence, her story is one of grief, not as a rupture, but as an atmosphere: something you breathe, become accustomed to, carry forward, and occasionally drown in. She doesn't avoid the weight, but she does learn how to live beneath it. With every narrative, she strengthens the muscles required to hold love and loss together. And she reminds us that surviving our worst years is not the end of grief- it's the fragile, necessary beginning of choosing to heal in full color.

M8: “Sacred Sequencing, Spiritual Synthesis, and Grief as Continuance”

This participant’s reflections on grief, future loss, and mortality reveal a quiet strength grounded in introspection, ancestral respect, and a spiritually integrative worldview. His grieving is not loud or linear- it is deeply felt, carried close to the chest, and expressed with a sense of profound responsibility to others. His language is solemn without being heavy, and what emerges is a steady belief that the losses we endure, though painful, can generate wisdom to guide not only ourselves, but those we are charged to protect.

His retrospective narrative begins with the sudden and tragic death of his aunt, who passed away a few days after childbirth. Grief is entangled here with continuity: the presence of her daughter, who is now “the spitting image of [his] aunt,” means his loss is also a daily, living memory. He names the comfort in that image- “in part, I’m happy with that”- while not denying the pain of proximity. “It’s impossible to forget her,” he writes, which brings remembrance into routine. This loss also catalyzed a vow- not to fix the unfixable, but to ensure her child is guided and nurtured. His promise to protect his cousin becomes one of his main strategies for grief: purpose transformed into action. As many do in the wake of young or sudden death, he channels sorrow into guardianship.

He keeps his grieving private, but shares a poignant insight: that joy and grief are not emotionally opposed, but deeply intertwined. One memory of “joy and playfulness” with his aunt still moves him, even as he grieves her. The grief itself is not something he tries to erase- it becomes part of his identity. “Grieving will always be an ongoing process,” he explains. For him, memory does not “heal” in the Western, linear sense- rather, it preserves and deepens, becoming a source of strength. He draws on philosophical duality: “like the yin and yang, they [good and

bad memories] are both essential.” In this, he reveals a worldview that is deeply Eastern both in form and feeling, not focused on a finish line of grief, but on equilibrium.

His prospective narrative continues this emphasis on sacred connection and responsibility, but now pivots toward his mother’s mortality. Her imagined death evokes somatic fear- “a physical feeling of anxiety in my body”- and cognitive spirals about “rightful sequence,” a phrase which he explains and then deconstructs. He acknowledges that while we’re comforted by the idea that parents should predecease children, no life is guaranteed its order. Still, he hopes for this because “the burden of suffering” should not fall on the previous generation. This idea reflects his ethic of protection, not only for the young, but for the old. It’s not just her death that he fears- it’s her grief, should he have gone first. This, too, connects to a larger concern: the effects of legacy loss on the younger generation. His primary fear is not of his own pain but for the children in the family- their moral clarity, emotional resilience, and ability to find joy after tragedy. Will they be okay? Can they grow stronger from it, not harder? He speaks about grief as a civic, family, and spiritual responsibility. His fear is not sadness but the interruption of future flourishing: “I hope they can healthily process this and that they can embrace it into mental resiliency, and lightheartedness.”

When turning to his own death, the participant's voice becomes clearer still, grounded by faith and forged through self-sacrifice. He says, “I do not fear death,” but admits to a “bit of fear,” which he places in the natural order of things. It is not dramatic, but gentle. This equanimity has roots in his upbringing: as the oldest cousin and sibling, he took a leadership role early and often. “Most of the things I’ve done... have not been with my interests at the forefront.” Growing up quickly has allowed him to face his mortality with less resistance. “I’m used to sacrifice,” he says. Sacrifice, here, is not martyrdom- it is devotion.

This belief system is only deepened by his spiritual practice. While he was raised Catholic, he now draws from Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism- a rare and thoughtful synthesis that speaks to an openness of heart and mind. He doesn't need certainty after death. As he says with quiet humor: "I'll be too dead to think about it anyway, right?" But what faith gives him is more than answers- it gives him perspective, gratitude, and release. "I pray for the health of my loved ones, and for more mental and physical energy to continue fulfilling my social duties." In this prayer, we see his ethical core: service, care, and balance.

This participant aligns most fully with the Philosopher of Death archetype. His grief is reflective and spiritually grounded, his conception of mortality expansive rather than fearful. But within that, he also shares rich qualities with the Keepers of Ritual. His use of memory as presence, of prayer as conversation, and of family as continuum situates grief not only as a form of longing, but as a mode of connection- one that outlives the body. In essence, this participant reminds us that grief can be legacy work- not something we simply endure, but something we sculpt into guidance for others. His quiet mourning, attention to ancestral lines, and refusal to rush through sorrow show a life lived with intention. For him, grieving is not moving on- it's moving with. And through that movement, he honors not only the memory of those who have passed, but the full complexity of those still here.

F9: "From Youngest to Last: Grief, Legacy, and Becoming the Matriarch"

This participant offers a deeply reflective and emotionally layered narrative structured around three interconnected losses: the past death that shaped her, the future loss that haunts her, and the eventuality of her own death that she's begun to accept- reluctantly, tenderly, and with growing wisdom. Hers is a story marked by transformation: from daughter to mother, from little

sister to eventual matriarch, from one who grieves privately to one who understands the generational echo of unspoken sorrow. Her voice is contemplative and grounded, blending emotional clarity with practical insight. What emerges is a portrait of someone who deeply feels, patiently reflects, and carries forward legacies of love with grace and nuance.

Her retrospective narrative is centered on the death of her father, arguably the emotional fulcrum of this triptych. Though his passing was expected after a period of hospice care, the enormity of the loss hit like a “brick wall.” Her grief was immediate and long-lasting, yet largely interior: “I was going through the motions, but emotionally I was shut down.” She found transient peace in isolation, taking refuge in the family shed, listening to music alone on long car rides, crying privately while driving up and down the Taconic Parkway. These tactile expressions of mourning- sneaking away from the crowd, drinking the beer her father had left in his minifridge, surrounding herself with his photos- show a quiet devotion to keeping his memory at arm’s reach, but always near.

Yet her grief was complicated not only by loss, but by inheritance. In the days after her father’s passing, she was thrust into crisis management- not only dealing with her own sorrow, but with her mother’s rapidly diminishing mental health due to undiagnosed dementia. “She became quite self-centered and combative,” the participant recalls honestly, without bitterness but with fatigue. She had to immediately arrange for the sale of the family car, the house, and a new care structure. Her grief had no room to speak. Her emotions gave way to logistics.

One of the strongest themes across her narrative is the concept of generational patterning: the ways in which unresolved grief silently migrates across family relationships. This is especially apparent in her reflections on how her then-14-year-old daughter grieved the loss of her grandfather. “He was her best friend... and as a young teen, she didn’t know what to do with

that grief.” The participant admits to being too caught in her own mourning to support her daughter’s. That pain reverberates even today, as her daughter now attributes difficulty forming relationships and a long-held fear of attachment to the instability and sadness of that time. Here, the participant shows self-awareness not only of her own grief, but of the legacy of her absence within it- a recognition that sorrow doesn’t end with the mourner, but continues leaking downward unless carefully tended.

In her prospective reflection, the anticipated death of her sisters, particularly as the youngest of four, is presented with subtle existential melancholy. The weight of outliving them fills her with unease, especially as she reflects on the fragmentation of family stories: “Once the 2 oldest are gone, all of those memories will be gone, as they aren’t my memories.” She fears becoming the youngest turned matriarch, carrying the memory torch- not because she resents the task, but because it signifies loneliness, symbolic inversion, and the heavy duty of legacy. “Should I be the last one standing... will I have the strength to hold the family together?” she wonders. Her longing for her sisters’ stories, paired with her reflection on her older daughters having "two families" due to age gaps, illuminates the complexity of sibling bonds that grow both across time and apart because of it.

Mortality, for her, is now deeply personal and pressing. Turning 60 became a psychological milestone- “the final third of my life”- and with it came both urgency and grief. Her contemplation of her own death is shaped not by morbid fascination but by maternal concern. Her earlier fears about her daughter’s future without parental support are somewhat resolved- her daughter has married into a family and built a new network- but the ache of eventual absence remains. “There’s now a clock ticking quietly in my head,” she writes. She feels it especially during sleepless nights when death feels near and time feels finite.

Though she expresses religious ambivalence- describing herself as a “church of the woods” kind of person- she acknowledges moments during and after her father’s passing that “can’t be explained or rationalized,” moments that open her heart to the unexplained possibilities of an afterlife. Her spirituality feels like an open window, not a closed doctrine, hovering between legacy, mystery, and reverence.

This participant sits squarely in the Keepers of Ritual archetype, with deep roots in the Philosopher of Death. Ritual for her is memory through action: shedding tears while driving familiar roads, surrounding herself with the physical reminders of people she’s lost, worrying palpably about what stories will remain when she is gone. Her reflections are filled not only with grief, but with storytelling- a living form of legacy preservation. Still, the questions she asks are not easily answered: What happens when the keepers of memory begin to vanish? Who carries the stories forward? In essence, this is a narrative about what it means to grieve as both daughter and mother, past and future caretaker, memory bearer and future ancestor. The participant doesn’t try to resolve her grief- she lets it be not “done and over,” but ongoing and transformative. To live with death is not to be crushed by it. It is to acknowledge its presence in the room, the photo frame, the shed, the silence of solo car rides. It is, above all, to belong to a lineage of love that asks not for closure, but for care.

Chapter 7: Narrative Patterns: Further Findings

Across the narratives shared, several consistent themes emerged, particularly around how grief is experienced, expressed, and understood. One of the most resonant throughlines is the rejection of a linear, stage-based model of grief. Contrary to the Western paradigm that assumes resolution or closure, participants overwhelmingly described grief as ongoing and atmospheric- something carried rather than conquered. It is cyclical, unpredictable, and often coexists with daily life rather than being something to move past. M3 articulates this succinctly: “I don’t think I will ever bring my grief to a close, or let myself.” Others echo similar sentiments. F3 notes, “I couldn’t ever truly be over it,” and F9 speaks to how grief, once felt, becomes part of the self: “The processing of this grief (and all grief) is an ongoing one.” This orientation transforms grief into a kind of companion- less a wound to be closed, more a presence to be acknowledged and lived with. Emotional drift, memory-based continuance, and uninvited triggers form the base of this long-carry model.

A second shared pattern is the experience of anticipatory grief. Many individuals were already grieving people who are technically still alive, projecting emotional pain into futures that feel imminent yet uncertain. For instance, F2 fears the slow collapse of her grandfather’s mind, saying, “If I can’t see or hear it, then it doesn’t exist.” F8, meanwhile, avoids imagining her sister’s death altogether, worried that acknowledging even the possibility might summon it. F9 wonders if she will be “the last one standing,” foreshadowing the invisible weight of becoming keeper of not only her family’s grief, but also its collective memory.

Participants also often expressed their grief through action- particularly by taking on responsibility. Many individuals, especially women, spoke of channeling their own sorrow into caretaking or becoming emotional anchors for others. F1 establishes ongoing rituals to

commemorate her late partner. F4, after her father's death, shoulders the management of family housing and finances. F5 navigates the dual responsibility of tending to her own mourning while also supporting her boyfriend through the loss of his mother. In this way, grief transforms into a mode of labor- performed not just internally, but as visible effort extended toward others.

The metaphysical, spiritual, and symbolic is also featured prominently across participant accounts. Participants frequently integrated ritual and belief systems- both traditional and personally adapted- into their mourning processes. M2 and M4, for example, invoke reincarnation and cosmic continuity. Others, like F1 and F9, though not religious, create or maintain symbols to anchor their grief- planting trees, lighting candles, or playing music to remain connected to the deceased. M7 blends Catholic and Filipino spiritual practices with ideas related to reincarnation, crafting a hybrid cosmology through which continued connection becomes possible. In this vein, grief stories were often scaffolded by belief, gesture, or spoken memory so that love could persist well beyond death.

These core similarities did not erase important differences across the stories. One prominent point of divergence emerged in grief style- specifically, whether grieving was done privately or communally. Several participants, such as M1, F2, M4, and M6, gravitated toward inward, often isolated expressions of grief. They were reluctant to share their mourning experiences aloud, retreating instead into routines, solitude, art, or physical activity. F2 was particularly adamant about withholding visible grief- even from children- stating, "I keep it to myself." Conversely, others like F1, F5, and F7 took on more communal expressions: writing letters, conducting shared rituals, and openly discussing their losses. F7, in fact, offers a pointed rejection of stoicism, declaring, "I refuse to suffer in silence."

Another axis of difference was the way participants coped with grief- either cognitively or through their bodies. Cognitive grieverers like M3 and M4 processed their loss through analysis, metaphor, and intellectual reflection. M3, for example, mythologizes his grief, referring to it in grand, literary terms such as “investiture” and “vengeance against the gods.” M4 approaches the death of loved ones as philosophical problems to be studied and discussed. In contrast, embodied grieverers such as F6, F7, F9, and M3, moved through grief with their bodies: visiting cemeteries, drinking their father’s beer, or in the overlapping case of M3: carrying logs (literally) in the woods where they use to run. Grief rituals were located in place, presence, and sensation- a visceral encounter rather than a cerebral one.

Clarity around the relationship with the deceased also varied. Some individuals- F1, M2, M5, and F9- spoke of enduring emotional bonds filled with reverence, love, and sadness, untouched by complication. Others, like F3 and F6, described emotionally ambivalent relationships in which the grief was weakened or splintered by prior estrangement or the circumstance of death. F8 and M3 expressed conflicted roles in their grief processes, unsure how much emotional space they were “allowed” to occupy- feeling deeply even when the loss was technically “someone else’s”.

Notably gendered patterns also emerged across these grief narratives. Female participants frequently emphasized emotional labor: the need to manage not just their own mourning but the sorrow, responsibilities, and practical needs of others. F4 reflects with regret on not tending to her daughter’s grief. F6 anticipates “holding it together” for relatives after her mother passes. F9 marks a personal evolution from the family’s youngest child to a matriarch expected to reference, endure, and maintain family legacy. In contrast, many male participants framed grief using metaphysical, military, or philosophical language. M5 borrows vocabulary from honor and code;

M2 speaks of cosmic law and reincarnation. M7 employs masculine metaphors such as being “the rock in the ocean” and worries about the cultural obligations that death imposes on him.

When organizing the narratives across broader archetypes, certain recurring roles surfaced: “Keepers of Ritual” (F1, F9) (primary), and (M8) (secondary), (who use symbolic or ceremonial practices to remain in contact with the dead; “Architects of Isolation” (F2, M1, M6), who preserve grief in silence and solitude; “Carriers of Contradiction” (F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F8, M3, M5, M7) (primary), (M4) (secondary), who balance love, regret, duty, and unresolved feelings; and “Philosophers of Death” (M2, M4, M5, M7, M8) (primary), and (F1, F9) (secondary), who contextualize loss through wide-angle frameworks including spirituality, politics, memory, and morality.

Themes that appeared repeatedly across these narrative accounts included ritual as a path to continued connection (F1, M7, F9); guilt as a side effect or even companion to grief (F3, F6, F4, M3); silence used as a protective strategy (F2, M1, M6); memory as a central feature of personal identity (F3, M4, F9); anxiety about future losses (F3, F4, F8); and the framing of grief as a form of duty (F5, M7, M8).

Ultimately, what unites these stories is not a shared trajectory of healing but a shared astonishment- not at the fact that grief is hard, but at the ways it arrives, what it demands, how it alters the self, and what it reveals about love, legacy, and the fragility of life. These are not narratives of closure, but of continuation. They speak not of “getting over,” but of learning how to live with what remains- of carrying forward while bearing witness to what has been lost.

Conclusion: Mourning as Meaning-Making- Toward a Cognitive Ethic of Grief

Grief is not a task to finish. It is a place we learn to live in - sometimes reluctantly, sometimes with grace, sometimes with one foot dragging stubbornly behind the other. The participants in this study taught me that grief is not simply about loss. It is about survival, and more than survival- it is about meaning. Some survived by building dams so grief could not flood their lives. Some survived by planting gardens where memory could still bloom. Some survived by finding reasons for death: philosophical, spiritual, existential, that made loss bearable. Some survived by simply carrying the weight, not cleanly, not proudly, but with raw honesty.

To mourn is to build something, not out of joy, but out of necessity. It is to rearrange the pieces of a life shattered by absence into something that can be lived inside again. There is no correct way to grieve. There are only honest ways. And every participant, in their own voice, showed what that honesty sounds like:

- A letter burned to a lost partner.
- A tree planted for an old life.
- A memory tucked into a daily prayer.
- A stubborn insistence to survive one more day.

In the end, this project was never just about death. It was about what survives death, and what grief, in all its messy, aching beauty, dares to build from the wreckage. When we began this thesis, we set out not to discover how we "get over" grief, but how we get on with it- how we carry it, how we make sense of it, and how grief, rather than being a pit to escape, becomes

terrain we learn to walk. What I've come to understand through this process is that grief is not a detour from life. It's part of the map. Each chapter has traced different topographies of mourning- from the imagined terrain of anticipated loss, to the fragile root systems of personal memory, to the quiet rituals of place, body, and cultural expectation. Looking across them all, a truth blooms: grief is fundamentally a search for coherence in the face of emotional rupture. It demands not only presence but narration. When we grieve, we are trying to put into language, and into structure, something that exceeds both. A void shaped like love. A silence with weight.

But this thesis is not only about what we feel. It's about what those feelings reveal about being human. Grief, in the stories shared by participants, was less a state and more a process- recursive, uneven, nonlinear, often contradictory. Some people cried immediately; others stayed silent for years. Some channeled grief into speech; others into sprints, baking, tattoos, playlists, or trail-worn prayer. Some did not grieve at all and felt guilty. Others still grieve daily and feel judged. These experiences are opposite, and yet the same: all signal that grief is tangled with identity. Who we are in mourning is who we believe ourselves to be, how we have been trained to perform, and who our grief demands we become.

What holds these threads together is the role of narrative. This thesis posed a central cognitive hypothesis: that grief is not simply processed emotionally but narratively. That it is not a single disruption but a story reassembly: painful, imaginative, often unfinished. The stories people told about their losses- real or anticipated, voiced or avoided- reveal that memory is tethered to time, voice, gender, ethics, and embodiment. More than that, these stories reveal that grief is not the opposite of love, but its consequence. It is what love becomes when the object of love disappears- and the narrative must revise without erasing.

We can now consider what this all means from a broader psychological and cultural standpoint. Grief is not only a phenomenon to be theorized by clinicians or broken into typologies by researchers. It is a lived experience, one textured by language, space, social expectation, neurobiology, spiritual belief, and relational scripts. The questions we should be asking are not: “Have you mourned appropriately?” or “Has your grief ended?” but rather, “What version of the story helps you breathe?” and “Whose grief do we still leave unheard?”

One of the most sobering realizations from this project is that grief, like so much else, is not equally distributed. That is, grief is allowed more space and visibility for some people than others, depending on their gender, race, social role, or perceived proximity to the deceased. This reveals an ethical obligation: to recognize not only the stories of grief that are told, but also the ones that are silenced. The wife and the widow, yes. But also the friend, the estranged sibling, the caretaker who was “not family,” the unmarried partner not allowed in the hospital room. Their grief exists. Their love exists. Their stories should be heard.

This thesis calls for a cognitive ethic of grief- an understanding that mourning is not merely personal, but sociocognitive. That the ability to construct grief narratives is shaped by resources both internal (memory, affect, imagery) and external (social permission, cultural scripts, and relational safety). That grief cannot always be organized, but it can be witnessed. Sometimes, the only healing comes from someone saying, “Yes. That happened. Yes. That mattered.”

The metaphor that resonates most with me as I close this work is that of narrative architecture. We build houses of grief not to entrap ourselves inside, but to create a structure strong enough to hold the weight of what is gone. Sometimes, the house is silent and empty. Sometimes it sounds like an elegy, or wind through a tree planted for a father. A prayer

whispered at dawn. A barbell lifted in sweat-born reverence. We must learn to recognize these houses, not as prisons, but as sanctuaries. Places of memory. Places of integration. No house of grief is ever complete. But the act of building is sacred.

As we close, we offer you not an ending, but an elegy and an invitation. Grief does not finish. It transforms. The losses we don't want to speak of begin to speak back. The narratives we avoid organizing build themselves in our dreams. And even when we do not know what to say, our bodies talk, our hands reach for the familiar, our memories press forward like late light through stained glass. This thesis does not claim to tell the definitive story of grief. It offers only what each of my participants offered each other: a fragment. A thread. A moment of cohesion in chaos. We can only hope that's enough. What becomes clear in all these voices- in their anger, their softness, their contradiction and love- is that grief is not a weakness to be overcome. It is the greatest proof of connection. To grieve is to continue the story of someone else's life through your own. That's not an ending. It's a beginning.

We end, as we began, with profound gratitude. This thesis is composed not only of my own thoughts but of the stories generously and vulnerably donated by participants. Many of you wrote words you'd never said aloud, remembered moments you had buried, granted language to something your soul had only known in silence. Thank you for the vulnerability, complexity, imagination, and truth in your words. This thesis belongs to you. Your griefs, your stories, your rituals, your contradictions- they are not anomalies. They are the very core of what it means to be alive and to be loving in a finite world. Let this work reaffirm what we often forget to say: That grief is not evidence of weakness. It is not an interruption. It is a form of knowledge. It is witnessing love, extended through time. Grief keeps the dead known, love keeps them remembered, and storytelling keeps them alive. What might grief become if we honored it fully,

not as a phase to overcome, but as a narrative we carry, revise, and share? That is the story this thesis hopes to tell. Let it be told again. Let them keep living.

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