HONOURING LOSS: USING MEMENTOS AS TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS TO EXPLORE AMBIGUOUS LOSS

A HEURISTIC ART-BASED INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

HONOURING LOSS: USING MEMENTOS AS TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS TO EXPLORE AMBIGUOUS LOSS

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CHRISTINA THOMPSON (CHRISTY)

To investigate the question, "What is the experience of using mementos as transitional objects to explore ambiguous loss in art therapy?", I undertook Moustakas' Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Exploring my own ambiguous loss, I worked with mementos, personally significant objects I kept as a reminder of my brother who disappeared in a landslide in 1995. I searched for both personal insights and a professional understanding of the potential benefits of using mementos as transitional objects to support grieving clients in art therapy. Documenting my art-based inquiry over a three-month period, I undertook a slow methodical process of creative transformation. Engaging with the materiality of my mementos, knitted clothing once belonging to my brother, I unraveled the garments and wove the repurposed yarn into a burial shroud, creating a meaningful ritual that symbolically represented my brother's missing body and supported the development of a new narrative and deeper understanding of my loss and ongoing relationship with my brother (Gilles & Neimeyer, 2006). Through this creative process, I discovered and integrated current bereavement paradigms which underline the importance of meaning reconstruction from loss and continuous bonds with the deceased for healthy coping and loss integration (Neimeyer, 2001, Field, Gao & Paderna, 2005).

Key terms: art therapy, weaving, transitional objects, mementos, ambiguous loss, grief, bereavement, continuous bonds, transformation, meaning making, active grieving

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I dedicate this paper to my brother, Kelly Thompson (August 30, 1968- November 10, 1995). In life and in his death, we are sibling and his psychological presence continues to inform, support and inspire my life, even in his physical absence. His sensitivity and authenticity always encouraged me to be brave and step out of my comfort zone. This research honours my brother, my own lived experience and my belief in the power of the arts to support and heal both individuals and larger communities.

Thank you to my children, Sieben and Cleo, two bright lights who keep me humble, curious and give my life depth and meaning.

Thanks to my dad, Gerry, whose action-oriented way of being in the world quickly got us to Nepal to search for Kelly, an experience that decreased our feelings of helplessness, immersed us in the generosity and beauty of the Nepali people and their land which Kelly held so dear, and offered us a space for ritual and ceremony at his death site to support and honour our collective loss.

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Life challenges are made more bearable when love and friendship are present and for this
I am forever grateful to Sarah McKerlich and Rob Somogyi, who both physically and emotionally walked the uncertain path with me and my dad to the village of Bagarchhap, Nepal where my brother died.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On November 10, 1995, my brother Kelly disappeared in a landslide in a remote village in the country of Nepal, 11,000 kilometers away from our home in British Columbia, Canada. The journal that I kept as we traveled to Nepal to search for my brother illuminates the feelings of ambiguity, vulnerability, strength, and courage that I was experiencing – not knowing if Kelly was alive or dead:

> *I don't know where to begin, life for the last nine days has been so surreal. We have begun a journey not knowing where it will lead us, and I am very frightened. We must travel with courage, peace and light. I feel strong, but my emotions move and flow in waves. My heart is often overcome with great sadness of the unknown. Kelly would be brave and so must I. I imagine him somewhere very safe and I, too, must find this place of peace. Protect us and keep us strong and healthy. We are beginning our journey into Nepal to search for my most precious brother.* (December 8, 1995)

Kelly's body was never recovered.

The ambiguity of Kelly's death and my attachment to objects once belonging to him became the foundation for my research and led me to a heuristic art-based design which explored the experience of working with mementos as transitional objects. I undertook Moustakas' Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry using an art-based approach to obtain personal insight into how transitional objects may assist in the creative therapeutic process of making meaning and maintaining bonds in situations of ambiguous loss (Moustakas, 1990, Neimeyer, 2001). With this very personal investigation, I hope to offer an alternative way for anyone wishing to explore their experience of missing persons, and other forms of ambiguous loss, in order to make meaning from it and find hope within the context of their mourning.

Chapter 2: Background Literature

Transitional Objects

> *In grieving, as in childhood, transitional objects are a means of both holding on and letting go.*
>
> -Margaret Gibson

Like Winnicott's model, mementos as transitional objects may hold great significance to the bereaved as symbolic representations of their loss.[1] A *memento* is "an object kept as a reminder of a person or an event", such as photos, clothing, or music (Oxford dictionary, 2017) whereas a *transitional object* is a personally significant object that offers psychological comfort and assists in the development of independence by symbolically representing an absent loved one (Abram, 1996). Gibson's (2004) research suggests that when working with cases of grief and bereavement, mementos as transitional objects can offer comfort and support to the bereaved much in the same way that Winnicott (1980) argues transitional objects create a sense of security for young children separating from their primary caregiver.

Lindvall (2015) states that significant physical objects can act as a bridge, "reminding grieving individuals of the relationship with the deceased and that exercises to encourage engagement with the physical objects assist in the development of the narrative crucial for the healthy processing of grief" (p.iii). In the early days of loss, the use of clothing as a transitional object may symbolically connect the mourner to the now missing body of the deceased and may conjure up their presence and the "powerful fantasy" (p. 291) of their physical return, while holding onto these objects later in the grieving process may be a way of continuing a healthy bond over time with the dead (Gibson, 2004, Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Referring specifically to the increased importance of mementos in cases of missing people where the objects themselves may be all that remains, humanitarian child psychiatrist, Lynne Jones (2017) asserts that, "mementos appear to help focus grief because there's something solid to touch, around which to tell a story" (p. 225).

Active Grief and Continuous Bonds

In choosing to actively grieve, the bereaved choose life.
-Thomas Attig

The study of thanatology is maturing in perspective through increased research, co-authorship, female scholars, and cultural diversity (Doka, Neimeyer, Wittkowski, Vallerga & Currelley, 2016). Previously, western grief theory tended to promote a stage-based approach to

[1] Gibson (2008) proposes that as emotional needs change over time, and the grieving individual begins to integrate the loss, the object may lose some of its power and function, thus replicating Winnicott's theory of individuation; as the individual integrates a new internal working model, they attempt to define who they are now, post loss, without the physical presence of their lost loved one (Davar, 2001).

grieving that viewed grief as a passive experience ultimately ending with closure (Kubler-Ross, 1970). This model has been questioned and many scholars are choosing to adopt more active models that offer meaning reconstruction and continuous bonds as methods for supporting individuals' unique grieving experiences (Attig, 1996, Neimeyer, 2001, Stroebe & Stroebe, 2005). My investigation draws on current grief theories that stress grief as an ongoing and active process (Attig, 1991, Neimeyer, 2001, Stroebe, Hansson, Schut & Stroebe, 2008). The active grieving model states that while the loss itself may be choiceless, how one grieves can be done in many ways. People's experience of bereavement is complex and multi-dimensional and active grieving offers an opportunity for deeper self-understanding, as well as direction for those supporting the bereaved (Attig, 1991, Goss and Klass, 2005, Vale-Taylor, 2009).

The active grieving approaches of continuous bonds and meaning reconstruction illuminated and supported my creative process and I found that they were well-aligned with practices of art therapy. My investigation used an art-based process to explore grief theory that supports an active process of meaning making from loss as well as continuous bonds with the deceased as ways of increasing resilience and adjusting to life after loss (Weiskittle & Gamling, 2018, Neimeyer, 2001).

Better mental health outcomes for the griever are demonstrated in research investigating the formations of continuous bonds with the deceased (Boss, 2006, Field, Gao & Paderna, 2005) and new art therapy research suggests continuous bonds and meaning making in grief work as "important mechanisms of successful adaptation to bereavement" (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p.10). Being able to hold the deceased in one's heart and mind, dialogue with them, and ask for support, can help to minimize emotional pain and increase personal resilience (Boss, 2007b). Looking at continuous bonds through Bowlby's attachment lens, Field et al.'s (2005) research suggests that by internalizing "the deceased as an inner comforting presence, it is possible for the bereaved to be emotionally sustained by the mental representation of the deceased" (p. 284). [2] The goal is to establish a sense of the internal relationship as a "secure base" (p. 285) from which to navigate the world and support affect regulation (Field et al., 2005).

[2] Field et al. (2005) also explore the possibility of mementos as either adaptive or maladaptive, suggesting for some "holding onto objects linked to the deceased may represent denial of the irrevocability of the loss, may serve as a transitional object in the movement toward internalization, or represent keepsakes that are part of an enduring continuous bond connection." (p. 296)

Meaning Reconstruction and Ritual

> *Meaning making is an important process for grieving deaths that tend to challenge beliefs about oneself, others, and the world.*
>
> -William Worden

Bonnano, Papa and O'Neill (2001) suggest that in cultures where death is rooted in the society as part of daily existence through rituals and social supports, there are higher levels of resilience, adaptability and coping when situations of loss arise. Researching meaning reconstruction in grief work, Neimeyer (2001) argues, "by ritualizing a loss in personally and communally significant ways, people symbolically mark their life passages and reintegrate themselves into a changed social world" (Neimeyer, 2001, p. 179). For example, research into cases of missing persons suggest that, when possible, it can be psychologically beneficial for families to travel to the disappearance/death site and actively take part in the search in order to making meaning from the event and to reduce feelings of helplessness (Nadeau, 2001). As well, these actions can create feelings of closeness to the missing person, help the visitors construct a better understanding of the event and offer an opportunity for personal ritual and mourning, all of which can help in the process of meaning reconstruction (Kristensen, Tønnessen, Weisæth & Heir, 2012).

A new trend in personal grief ritual to mark life transitions explores, "authentic, informal, and spontaneous emotional expression and sense making" (p. 565), acknowledging three key functions of ritual: "honoring, letting go, and self-transformation" (Sas & Coman, 2016, p. 567). Supporting meaning making through ritual, Francis Weller (2015) writes:

> Rituals are intended to take us into those places where we can engage with the difficulties in our lives in ways that are potentially transformative. They help us move from places where we feel stuck into territories of fresh living. (p. 84)

Moon (2004) offers art making as "an exciting process of shining through the fog, ensouling life and restoring imagination" (p. 31) and this can have a profound impact on grief work. In New York City, post 9/11, Harlow (2005) observed the outpouring of spontaneous art making that publically acknowledged and memorialized the communal grief. She noted that the ritualized events and commemorative art created a frame to honour the dead and give space for the expression of grief which functioned to counter the intense feelings of helplessness by giving people purpose and a place to express and contain their sorrow in physical form (Harlow, 2005).

Ambiguous Loss

> *When a loved one goes missing in body or mind, and there is no possibility of resolution, the pathology lies in the type of loss (ambiguous) and not in the person who is grieving.*
> -Pauline Boss & Janet Yeats

Ambiguous loss is an unresolved loss of a physical nature that occurs without closure or understanding, where the object of loss is physically absent but kept psychologically present (Boss & Carnes, 2012).[3] We (in the West) live in a culture of mastery that has a discomfort with ambiguity, preferring things clearly defined with a beginning and an end (Boss, 1999). Ambiguous loss does not fit this model as it lacks closure. An integral part of the healing process is the need to find meaning in the messiness of one's lived paradoxes of experience (Boss, 1999, Neimeyer, 2001). In her book, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Boss (1999) challenges previous western grief models, arguing that the tidiness of closure that western culture prefers simply does not exist.

Boss and Yeats (2014) name ambiguous loss as "one of the most difficult kinds of loss because there is no possibility for resolution" (p. 68), such is the case with missing-persons who may still be alive or may be dead (Boss, 2006, Mowll, Lobb & Wearing, 2016). Instead, they suggest that learning to live with the paradox of absence and presence may help inform the meaning one creates from the experience. Boss & Carnes (2012) encourage therapists to explore and reflect on their own personal experience with both clear and unresolved loss in order to better serve their client's needs. Additionally, theorists argue that it would greatly serve western society to let go of our need for certainty and to stop pathologizing and isolating those who need more time to mourn. Instead, it may be better to offer human connection, understanding and a focus on protective factors to increase resilience in place of diagnosis and medication (Boss & Carnes, 2012, Parkes, 1988).

Boss' work and research has been inspired by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl (1984) who asserted that in cases of unfathomable life events, humans need to create life meaning in order to remain hopeful for their future. With this in mind, Robins (2010) suggests that the ambiguous loss model for resilience can help people develop a new personal narrative by

[3] Psychologist Pauline Boss has been studying the effects of ambiguous loss on individuals and families since the 1970's and defines it in two categories: *type one* is a physical absence with a psychological presence, where the person is physically missing but kept present in the mind of the bereaved, while *type two* is a psychological absence with a physical presence, where the person is still physically alive but not psychologically available (2007b, p. 270).

searching for meaning within the uncertainty of their loss, in turn, learning to integrate two opposing ideas, absence and presence, with the hope of building resilience through the understanding of their experience (Figure 1).

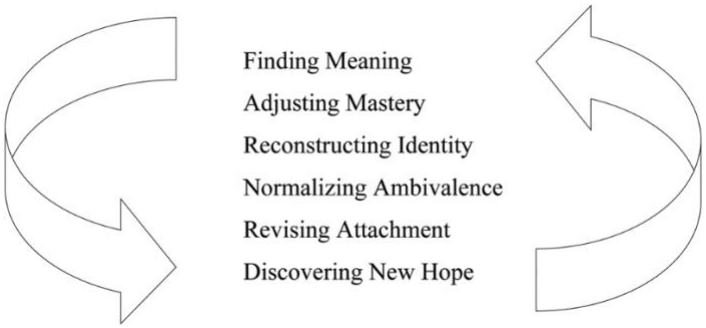

Figure 1. Six guidelines for resilience with ambiguous loss (Boss, 2017, p. 531).

Art therapy has unique qualities that make it a strong therapeutic modality for working with cases of ambiguous loss, such as its ability to hold existential questions of uncertainty and its use of objects and ritual to support the exploration of multiple meanings and to encourage the development of new insights and personal resilience (Moon, 2004). Specifically, the paradigm shift from finding closure and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1970), to one of loss integration through the creation of a new personal narrative, offers the development of ritual in cases of ambiguous loss to support this process (Harlow, 2005, Neimeyer, 2001). Boss (1999) states, "the existence of ritual to mark ambiguous loss is an indicator of a culture's tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 18), proposing that life requires a constant re-visioning, which in cases of unresolved loss, can at times feel hopeless and difficult to navigate.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Heuristic Art-Based Research

Leavy (2015) proposes that art-based research has the potential to create multiple meanings through the process of working with and responding to the research question. McNiff (2008) further adds that "art-based methods, making use of a larger spectrum of creative intelligence and communications, generate important information that often feels more accurate, original, and intelligent than more conventional descriptions" (p. 30). He also contends that creative experiences can be challenging to translate into language but in doing so the "original perception in this respect provides the stimulus for the unfolding of thought and the ongoing

process of interpretation" (McNiff, 2008, p. 35). By putting the creative experience into words, it may reach a broader audience, create new meaning from the experience and add an alternative way of understanding and exploring a topic of interest that can be useful to future investigators and individuals experiencing a similar phenomenon.

Sela-Smith (2002) describes heuristic inquiry as "surrendering to embracing subjective experience and leaping into the unknown" (p. 54), which allows for the internal experience of the researcher to be "another way of knowing" (p. 58), potentially offering new insights and transformation for the individual and society. Moustakas (1990) encourages researchers to search themselves and external sources to reach a descriptive understanding of the meaning of the experience. Art-based exploration is a good fit for this heuristic inquiry as the creative process leaves space for uncertainty, one of the key themes in cases of ambiguous loss. As well, visual representation of a lived experience has the potential to open up an alternative way of communicating to a broader public on a topic that is often experienced in isolation, thus bringing an attentiveness to other ways of understanding the subject of ambiguous loss through the visual expression (Kapitan, 2018).

Moustakas (1990) states that the goal of heuristic research is relational in that it needs to be relatable to other people's experience. Many grief theories suggest that grief, too, is relational and while the details of my own loss experience are unique to me, the experience of loss is universal, hence, making it a strong relational topic for heuristic inquiry.

Rationale

> *Human beings, as both Buddhists and psychologists remind us, are wired for attachment in a world of impermanence.*
>
> -Robert Neimeyer

While deciding on my methodology, I was encouraged by McNiff's (2008) questions, "What can you do that is uniquely yours and that grows from the authority of your experience? What feels most natural to you? Where does your authentic expertise lie? What is it that you have done that others have not experienced with the same range and intensity?" (p. 39). Ambiguous loss is a subject that has been personally present throughout my lifespan; additionally, I am someone who cherishes objects of deceased loved ones, taking comfort in their physical presence as a symbolic representation of the deceased. Moustakas (1990) suggests that, "Discovering a significant problem or question that will hold the wondering gaze and passionate

commitment of the researcher is the essential opening of the heuristic process" (p. 4). Consequently, it is my lived experience with ambiguous loss, western culture's grief avoidance, my conviction that creative processing can help express and transform grief and my attachment to mementos that inspired my rationale for a heuristic art-based inquiry and led to the development of my research question, "What is the experience of using mementos as transitional objects to explore ambiguous loss in art therapy?"

Due to the personally significant theme of my topic, I struggled to choose a methodology, questioning if more distance, such as a theoretical paper on ambiguous loss and art therapy, was psychologically healthier for me? It was upon reading Concordia art therapy graduate, Esther Kalaba's, 2009 research, *Making Memory and Meaning: The Memorial Function of Art*, that I committed to a heuristic art-based method. Kalaba's personal exploration founded on the death of her brother, inspired and gave me courage to embark on this epic journey of creative and self inquiry.

Having no physical body to mourn after the disappearance of my brother made the loss harder to believe, integrate and mourn. Physical objects and my memories were my connection to this incredible person's existence and his impact on my life. It felt profoundly important to me while researching the use of mementos as transitional objects in grief work to call upon my own personal relationship with significant physical objects in order to better understand their significance in my life as well as their possible use and benefits in my art therapy practice (Gibson, 2008).

My choice of a heuristic art-based approach was four-fold. Firstly, it came from my desire as an art therapy student to engage with and better understand my lived experience with ambiguous loss in order to better understand and support the needs of bereaved clients. Secondly, I wanted to investigate the potential of mementos to assist in art therapy grief work. Thirdly, I wanted to explore Attig's (1991) theory of grieving as an 'active process' which can empower and give hope in the grieving process, as well as give direction to those supporting the bereaved. Lastly, coming from a lineage of craftspeople, farmers and storytellers, this method of investigation felt much more me than a theoretical inquiry; this hands-on approach became a ritual that honoured and acknowledged my ancestors, my brother and my lived experience with loss.

Position of the Researcher

Heuristic art-based research may place the researcher in a vulnerable position due to its subjective and often emotional nature. To remain effective and focused on the larger purpose of the inquiry, Sultan (2018) recommends using *reflexivity*, a personal check-in to examine self awareness in order to remain cognizant of one's assumptions and biases. Within the context of grief, there are many different systems that influence human understanding and processing of loss. I would like to acknowledge some of the cultural and social systems in which I have lived and their influences own my perspectives and personal biases. I am a university-educated, Caucasian woman who grew up in a middle-class household in Western Canada under a dominant capitalist narrative with my father and brother, my mother having left when I was three. As a child, my social system consisted of close extended family and a daytime caretaker, all of whom helped raise my brother and me and created a strong psychosocial system of support. I am now a mother, once married, now divorced, raising my children in Montreal, Quebec, far from family support, while working toward my Master's degree in art therapy at Concordia University. Within my family, rituals of importance are celebrated within the context of family and friends and revolve around nature, food and storytelling.

As a mother of two children, aged eleven and fifteen, I needed to take into consideration their needs during my research process which primarily took place in our home. I chose to weave when they were out of the house as it felt like an important part of the process to honour my need for solitude and silence during this creative inquiry. It was equally important to take a break from it to be present with my children when they were home. Grief and loss are topics spoken of openly in our home and therefore not new, foreign or unsettling to my children. I discussed and shared with them some insights from my process and offered them space to ask questions, although they had few.

An assumption that I held commencing this research was that the use of mementos in grief work would bring positive change and transformation to client's grief narrative. Although grief is a universal experience, the way individual cultures approach and respond to it varies greatly. Taking into consideration the increasing cultural diversity of Canada and because this research is based on my individual experience, it is important not to make assumptions or generalizations that the results are transferrable to all clients.

Ethical Considerations

As both researcher and participant, it was important for me to have emotional and psychological support during this intimate inquiry and I regularly met with my therapist of seven years, to explore together what I was navigating within the process (McNiff, 2008). While the creative process was done in isolation, I spoke openly about my experience with friends and family and felt supported by my community. Lastly, in relation to the personal subject matter of my topic, another ethical and personal concern is that it may be harder for me to accept criticism from the reader; therefore, it is also an exercise in developing strong personal boundaries, which will serve me in my future as a therapist.

Validity and Reliability

"As with science, the validity of art-based knowing and inquiry is ultimately determined by the community of believers who experience firsthand what the arts can do to further human understanding" (McNiff, 2008, p. 38). Kapitan (2018) counsels that, "The main threat to validity in heuristic research is the tendency toward self-immersion or solipsistic reflections on artworks" (p. 195). My isolated process of working and the intimate content of my subject matter created the risk for self absorption, but as mentioned above, the use of *reflexivity* helped to mitigate this factor. In the process of heuristic inquiry as both participant and researcher, acknowledging my own social locators and continuing to be transparent about their influences throughout the research process helped increase the validity and reliability of the inquiry.

It is through the researcher's lived experience that the research question is produced and its relatability to others offers its validity (Moustakas, 1990). By using mementos and undertaking Moustakas's six phases of inquiry, other researchers may engage in a similar examination, although ultimately the end results will vary due to the subjective nature of this personal study, as well as each individual's experience with loss and grief, choice of art media, and process of creative exploration.

Data Collection Procedure

Using Moustakas' Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry leaves the research "open-ended with only the initial question as the guide" (p. 58) and gives a framework to explore the topic of interest in an attempt to better understand it through deep engagement and self-reflection (Sela-Smith, 2002). Phase one, *Initial Engagement,* involves discovering phenomenon that resonates strongly and often personally with the researcher (Kapitan, 2018). This leads to the next five

phases of investigation which involve commitment to immersion, indwelling, incubation, tacit knowing or the "inner search for meaning" (p. 355), intuition, illumination, explication and creative synthesis whereupon the researcher hopes to arrive at a new awareness and understanding of the research topic (Kapitan, 2018).

Data will be collected throughout the process of weaving a burial shroud; primarily journaling and photography will document the creative experience (McNiff, 2008). Journal entries will detail my relationship to the mementos, their materiality, as well as the creative experience describing emotional and sensorial responses to touch, sight and sound and any symbolic imagery or story recollections that emerges, hopefully deepening the descriptions and my understanding of the experience. Additionally, during each sitting, I will draw a visual marker of time, a vertical line on an eight by two-foot sheet of paper attached horizontally to the wall in front of the loom. As additional information, photo documentation and sound recordings will also be collected during the weaving process in hopes of strengthening the outcome of the inquiry by using multiple ways of knowing (Sela-Smith, 2002).

Data Analysis Procedure

Analysis of the material will be done by reading through the journal entries at the end of the creative process to search for common themes and felt experiences that either reinforce or contradict the literature and my research question. Photos will be printed, sorted and arranged to give visual representation to the multiple creative stages of this art-based process and potentially offer alternative data to stimulate new understandings of the experience during the writing process.

Chapter 4: Data Collection Process and Analysis (Six Heuristic Phases)

McNiff (2008) proposes that "in the creative process, the most meaningful insights often come by surprise, unexpectedly, and even against the will of the creator" (p. 40). With this in mind, using Moustaka's Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry, I entered into a creative process with my mementos, engaging in a personal investigation to allow the meaning of my research to unfold.

Phase I: Initial Engagement

Introduction to ambiguous loss.

My introduction to the term ambiguous loss was during Krista Tippett's interview with Pauline Boss, "The Myth of Closure", an episode of the On Being (2016) podcast. A strong tacit

knowing presented itself in the form of an internal physical relief and emotional understanding upon hearing a term that described something I have lived with most of my life. I knew immediately that I needed to explore this topic in greater depth for both personal and professional reasons. It was here that a flame was lit for my research.

Importance of mementos.

> *Objects that remain are significant memory traces and offer a point of connection with the absent body of the deceased.*
>
> -Margaret Gibson

I remember being invited to the Canadian embassy in Katmandu, Nepal to search through belongings that had been recovered by the Nepali army in the landslide. *Walking up stairs to the flat roof top, my breath was taken away by the amount of unclaimed, personal, mud encrusted objects: Ziploc bags full of exposed film, clothing, backpacks, shoes, books, and other personal items. Searching slowly and deliberately, we started to find some of my brother's belongings and I was struck by a deep sense of unfairness that these material objects had survived, and my brother had not.* Gibson (2008) echoes this, reflecting on how strange the potential permanence of material things can feel beside the impermanence of human life. After the realization that my brother was gone, I became so grateful for his remaining material objects which acted as transitional objects and helped me navigate my life without him by keeping him symbolically and psychologically close. They became my way of remembering and communing with him, introducing him to my children, and keeping his presence alive in the life of my family.

In losing him, I felt that I lost half of my narrative; his perspective on our lived experience, his memories of the same events, seen through his eyes, very different eyes than my own. I dialogued with my mementos and they became his 'big brother' voice to me, sometimes soothing, sometimes stern, reminding me to be brave, and to have courage when life difficulties arose. I pull them from my closet from time to time, try them on, remember, letting emotions and memories flood me. I let them, I need to feel them, I need to remember… his life, our life together, our shared existence.

Developing the creative process.

It was from my passion for the subject of ambiguous loss, my lived experience with grief, and my father offering me some of my brother's clothing that I developed my heuristic research question and creative process of inquiry. This first phase, *Initial Engagement,* involved creating

the frame from which to document the transformation of both the objects and my relationship to them. As I collect materials, my decision to weave a burial shroud from my mementos was strengthened by Gibson's (2008) research that suggested, "Objects of the dead can be powerfully symbolic, transforming relationships and grief in unexpected ways" (p. 42). All of the materials were selected with ritualistic care and consideration. It felt important that the object be a blanket, symbolizing a protective covering for both my brother's missing body and a kind of receiving blanket for my own loss and continued need for comfort and connection, much like Winnicott's (1980) theory of transitional objects.

Several research articles suggest that a death without a body can make mourning more complicated as well as more challenging to integrate into one's life, often due to the lack of ritual (Boss, 2006, Kristensen, Tønnessen, Weisæth, & Heir, 2012). Within the context of art therapy, every action has the potential of becoming a ritual: the preparation of the space, the welcoming of the client, the organizing and offering of materials, the making of the art, the sharing of time and presence, the exploration of meaning within the artwork, and the closing of the therapy session. As I moved toward phase II, *Immersion,* I recognized the personal importance of simple ritual within the inquiry and its potential healing power within the context of therapy.

Phase II: Immersion

Fabric is our covering and our attire. Made with our hands, it is a record of our souls.

-Magdelana Abakanowicz

During the immersion phase, I moved slowly and methodically to care deeply for myself, my loss and my process, while also acquiring data. Researching through the winter months, allowed me space to let my reflections slowly develop, incubate and bloom with the unfolding of Spring. While immersing in the process, I unraveled and wove together, both literally and metaphorically, my experience with ambiguous loss using my mementos as transitional objects to support my ever-unfolding journey with grief (Boss & Yeats, 2014).

In order to "discover an in-depth understanding" (p. 348) of my research topic, I tapped into my tacit knowing reflecting on my lived experience while immersing in the creative process (Kapitan, 2018). An image formed in my mind; *I am diving deep into the water, searching and exploring, lungs straining, ultimately needing to come up for air. I take in the horizon, catch my breath and… dive in again, excited and nervous for what I have yet to discover.* I entered the

immersion phase hoping to better understand how my mementos have supported me over time, what they mean to me now and what the process of transforming them had to teach me.

Multiple artistic media were used in this inquiry and the importance of each will be described in subheadings below. Additionally, working with and transforming the mementos into a burial shroud involved many physical steps: unraveling, balling, selecting yarn, winding and attaching the chosen yarn onto the loom in a process known as *warping*, and long hours of sitting and weaving. Throughout all of these stages, I engaged in dialogue with the objects and my brother; contemplations and reflections are detailed below.

The importance of place.

To be an artist, you need to exist in a world of silence.
-Louise Bourgeois

I chose the sanctuary of my home to undertake the creative process; its silence and my feelings of holding within it anchored me during this introspective immersion which took place during the deep cold of the Montreal winter. I gave myself, perhaps for the first time since becoming a mother, extended time, space and psychologic permission to creatively explore the depths of my lived experiences with ambiguous loss. Doors shut, I created a sacred space to commune with my objects, my creative process, my thoughts, and my emotional responses (Moustakas, 1990). Before commencing the work, I reminded myself that I held all the knowledge and skill for this creative undertaking within me and with that encouragement, I began.

Building the loom.

To start the art-based *immersion phase* of the inquiry, I reassembled my forty-five-inch Nilus Leclerc floor loom, a gift from my father shortly after the death of my brother. (Figure 2). This process offered me three hours to reacquaint myself with the loom and created a striking metaphor for the therapeutic relationship, a strong stable frame built over time to hold me during my immersion into my research. It fit together with relative ease and precision and I felt full of gratitude for the original maker and the practical building skills my father taught me. Following the successful completion of its construction, I experienced a heightened sense of confidence in myself and the project. *Feeling gratitude for my solitude, I reflected on the past times this machine had supported me through loss, grief and uncertainty as well as periods of growth and renewal, holding both my sorrows and my joys.* In the course of its construction, I came to realize

that this loom acted as another transitional object in my grief work, silently, non-judgmentally holding my creative expression of grief on multiple occasions over the past twenty-four years.

Figure 2. Building the loom.

Making ink.

In my experience, ink making is easiest when you are patient and remain open to everything.

-Jason Logan

Having traveled to Nepal in 1995 to search for my brother, I came home with earth from the landslide where he was buried as a symbolic offering for myself, family and friends. It has been twenty-four years this November since his disappearance and I decided to turn the earth into ink to mark the passing of time during this research process. I realize now that this earth has acted as another transitional object in my ongoing relationship with the loss of my brother.

As I sift the earth down to a fine powder, in preparation for making ink, I am reminded of human ashes. The first sifting removed rocks and twigs, like bits of bone. This ritual took me back to Nepal. *I remember searching for you, the earth like cement, we formed a line – our search team and the villagers, all walking slowly forward, together, side by side, not knowing what we would find, but feeling a sense of solidarity in both our search and our loss, as the villagers too, had lost people and were also suffering. We didn't find you and yet I felt you everywhere.*

The second sifting removed little chunks the size of pepper corns; after the third sifting, what remained was a fine powder, greyish brown with a metallic sparkle that made me smile. Adding liquid, there arose a humid earthy smell that reminded me of my grandma's pottery studio and damp west coast forest walks we used to take together. *Stirring and stirring some more, I think of the landslide, its power and its magnitude. I stir, I breathe, I make a mark; it's like painting with sand- it is a beautiful mark. My mark, with your earth. Is there a piece of you in it? In me? Of course. Living ink. Repetitive stirring, repetitive marking.* Watching the earth settle, then stirring it up again; a poignant metaphor for how I encounter grief; emotional chaos, then calm, repeating. *Now with many years passed, the stirring and settling is less frequent, although new loss has a way of stirring up the old ones.*

Line drawing.

To mark the passage of time and bring my attention into the work space, a thick sheet of paper spanning eight feet in length and two feet in width was attached to the wall in front of the loom. (Figure 3). During each research session, one line was painted with a choice of two inks, one brown, made from Nepali earth and one flesh colour, made from winterberries. *Flesh and earth, this makes me think of you and I am soothed by the marks.* Multiple brushes were set out and chosen from intuitively. This process offered another set of data from the start of the art work, to the completion of the writing, the number of sittings, the presence of the maker and another creative object for contemplation and possible exhibition (Moustakas, 1990). *The marks remind me of roots, roots searching for grounding, uprooted by loss, roots growing stronger and multiplying over time.*

Figure 3. Segment of the line drawing.

Presence with the knitted objects.

Gibson (2008) reflects that "Objects that hold a biography and carry a narrative of the self become particularly important in re-establishing and reordering the self in a new environment and new relationships" (p. 37). To start the process, I sat quietly focusing on my knitted mementos through the senses; holding them, I explored their textures and colours, their scents, their weight in my hands, and the memories they evoked. (Figure 4). Additionally, I interacted with them through dialogue and photo documentation, recalling moments with my brother wearing them. During this time, using the heuristic process of indwelling, I turned my attention inward to better understand the significance of these mementos to me now and as soothing transitional objects in my grief journey over time (Kapitan, 2018, McCullough, 2009).

Figure 4. Embracing Kelly's toque and starting to unravel it.

Unraveling mementos.

The act of sewing is a process of emotional repair.
-Louise Bourgeois

Deconstructing these significant physical objects once worn by my brother was an intense experience that shifted my states between cognitive, symbolic, affective, perceptual, kinesthetic and sensorial (Hinz, 2009). I have always imbued objects with meaning, symbols of people, place, time, and emotion. I hold them dear and impart them with a kind of animism, giving them an enlivened quality and their own power. That said, I felt prepared to alter these mementos; perhaps it is a question of time and a readiness to let go or make new meaning?

It was challenging to start unraveling the threads of my brother's clothes. I felt impatient as I searched for the starting point and was tempted to grab scissors and make a random snip. *Are*

thoughts of deconstructing the clothing that once held his body making the act harder to commence? The process of unraveling reminded me that grief is the undoing of a life once known (Attig, 1996). *Loosening the knots is difficult; they are strong, tight and well-intended, but I am perseverant and the unraveling begins.* The speed at which I pull alters the experience and the sensations; I experiment and notice how my moods and attention shift as well. Gentle steady pulls released loop after loop of kinky yarn, full of its own memory. (Figure 5). As I worked, I thought of all of the people involved in the life of these objects, not just my brother but the original knitters, the spinners, the people who sheared, washed and carded the wool, the shepherd, the animals, all interconnected through this object. *The memory stays in the wool, each kink a reminder of its past.*

Figure 5. Unraveling the toque.

A feeling of playfulness and release arose in me as I tugged at the threads and they tumbled to the floor in a chaotic mass. *It reminds me that grief is messy.* There were also feelings of frustration and impatience as I struggled with knots and tangled threads. Paying close attention, I was reminded of the importance of time; allowing time for the process to unfold and deepen. *Unraveling, I come to the end of the piece, which is actually the beginning for the knitter. No going back, having undone all that previous labour. Photographing the unwound mementos in my hand, I am aware of my own aging, time passing for me without Kelly, while he remains forever young. My own mortality is very present as I work. Every inch of the fiber passes through my hands as I slowly reel it in, forming a ball, a new relationship, a new form, a*

new story. I don't wind it too tightly; the kinks hold a trace of the objects history and this feels essential. I don't want to lose the old stories.

The repetitive balling was a laborious task and I was soothed by its tedium and wondered, *how many hours did I spend balled up after Kelly's death?* My basket slowly filled with new balls of wool from these old cherished objects that begin to take on a new narrative. (Figure 6). *Double threads unravel simultaneously. My heart feels light as one follows the other in what seems like a playful game of tag. The line breaks and I repair it again for the game to continue.* (Figure 7). I am reminded that life is full of continual ruptures and repairs and that I must not

Figure 6. Mementos unraveled.

fear the unraveling, for it is part of grief and when properly held, has much to teach us. Through this process I also realize that after my mother left, Kelly became my secure attachment, a kind of lifeline from which I explored, never keeping him too far out of view. *I pull, unravel and wind; the double threads start to separate from each other, growing independent. I feel a tug at my heart as this separation and growth continues. At the end of the balling process, I realize the two are actually connected, that they are the same thread. Feeling a little uncertain, I decide to cut and separate them—individuation.* Through presence with the material, physical action, and play, a powerful moment of connection and letting go arose between myself and my brother, leaving me feeling both joyful and melancholic; equanimity was present, a balance and a calm, a feeling of being okay living with "both-and" (p. 67) rather than either-or (Boss &Yeats, 2014). I feel my narrative expanding through this creative process which is helping me to shift my grief

story through meaning making and I am starting to experiment with the notions of being both attached and detached, connected and separate, not just one or the other.

Winding the warp.

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibres connect us with our fellow man.

-Herman Melville

Before sitting down to weave an object, initial steps must be taken to wind and warp the loom which ensure a strong base from which to commence the weaving, much like the process of building the therapeutic alliance. One hundred and eighty warp threads running vertically were

Figure 7. Playful pairing.

wound and then secured to the frame of the loom. I choose the warp from yarn I have collected over the last twenty-four years; west coast colours of ocean, moss, trees, sky and sea life remind me of Kelly and our life together on the west coast of British Columbia, Canada. The warp yarn was either machine spun, or hand spun by me and our grandmother, giving variation in texture, tensions and history. I decided on eight different colours and as I started to wind the yarn onto the frame, I focused on flow, ease, and indwelling; what I got was a slow, awkward, clumsy process that involved much pausing and necessary knotting, reminding me of my experience with grief. I experienced both moments of patience and annoyance. Eight pots, each containing a unique ball of yarn, sat on the ground below the warping frame. *I choose intuitively by colour and textural preference; round and round I wind, stop, repeat, stop, repeat, until one hundred and eighty threads are securely attached. I too, feel securely attached to this process.*

Attaching the warp.

> *To each thread she has given something of herself, so that her soul may be perceived by those able to sense it. For the others, her soul is hidden by thirteen hundred threads.*
> -Kathleen Mangan

One hundred and eighty threads have repeatedly passed through my fingers while winding the warp and attaching it to the loom. Bringing the threads to order was a very cognitive perceptual act; measuring, counting, attaching, detaching, knotting, unknotting, tying, untying, and retying. Thread by thread I passed them from the back of the loom to the front, carefully and methodically feeding them through different parts of the loom. (Figure 8). This exacting process is monotonous and offers me an internal calm through methodical repetition. *This morning I*

Figure 8. Attaching the warp threads to the loom.

woke, deeply steeped in thoughts and appreciation of stillness. The ability to be still is such a skill…and when balanced with action, it may be easier to recognize its gift, homeostasis. Weaving offers me internal stillness.

The use of different kinds of yarn, all unique in thickness, create challenges of tension; each thread is unique and holds its own structure and memory. This calls for attention, adjustments and flexibility; all of these steps activate an internal focus. *I dialogue with the threads feeling a mix of emotions: tenderness, anger, frustration... Untying knots takes patience and tender holding, but in doing so, instead of cutting them, I kept all of the history of the yarn—nothing wasted. I need assistance at this stage, two arms are not enough. It is hard for me to ask for help, and I feel some internal resistance, but the job gets done and I am alone again, moving on the next stage.*

Weaving.

I was initiated into weaving in art school in 1996, following the death of my brother. It is a creative textile practice full of order and metaphor and it helped to ground me. It offered containment for the emotional chaos of my capsized world. Living across the country, far away from family support and lacking a religious faith, weaving provided me with a quiet sanctuary and a practice of devotion. The requirement of mindful cognitive presence and internal patience offered me emotional regulation while its multi-stepped process and soothing rhythmic movements, held my sorrow and gave me moments of respite from my grief (Hinz, 2009).

Figure 9. Weaving the shroud from mementos.

Over a period of one month I immersed myself in weaving the burial shroud. (Figure 9). *A large basket sits next to the loom full of hand rolled balls of yarn. My whole body is active in the weaving process. Diverse thicknesses and textures ask for different kinds of attention; gentle tending is needed for each as they are passed across the warp. I intuitively chose which yarn to add next, reminding myself that this inquiry is about an exploration of process and not a final product. Different choices lead to different outcomes; one is not better than the other. I consider the similarities between weaving and grieving, both multilayered processes that take patience, care and time. As I weave, small fibers release into the air and settle on me and my surroundings*. I speak with my brother through the materials. *Are there bits of your DNA in the fibres? I know you are alive in me.*

The fibers are teaching me many things, including patience, trusting my judgement, disorder can be reordered, and strength can come from interdependence and collective action.

Each thread is made stronger when interwoven with another. (Figure 10). Images of my ancestors carding and spinning wool are on the wall above my loom and my grandmother's hand spun wool is being added into the cloth; generations are present in this process.

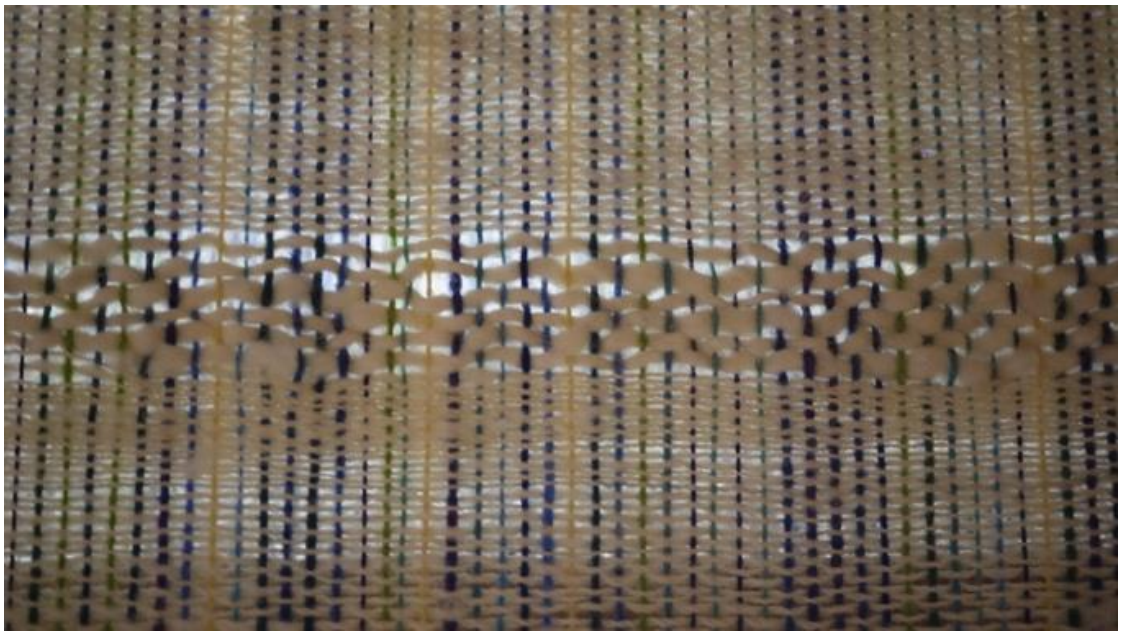

Figure 10. Close up weave.

The yarn from the mementos is embedded with history, old kinks laden with silent memories. As I pass the yarn across the loom, I place it loosely to keep its curvy form. Weaving with one material for a extended period of time offers moments of flow and mindful presence. The ritual of weaving with mementos offers me time for communion with my brother, calling forth our relationship through creative process. *Eyes closed, emotions arise as I interact with the loom; repetitive movements are both soothing and evoke a feeling of melancholy. I like this place, it is quiet, private and feels authentic.*

Sitting down to work, I caress the surface of the weave in greeting. Feelings of love and tenderness arise and a longing for connection. We begin our conversation where we last left off. Perfectionist tendencies arise, and I remind myself: process, process, process. As the balls of yarn in the basket decrease, the blanket on the loom expands, transforming the individual threads into a solid collective. (Figure 11).

Resting my head on the front beam, cheek pressed against the weave: it feels like a solid shoulder to rest on, leaning in, I let go, breath and rest there. The loom unconditionally holds

me, not shying away from my emotional self. The ever-growing burial shroud feels more and more precious and my attachment is growing to this new object.

Figure 11. Diminishing basket.

Termination is coming. (*Figure 12). I can see the end of the warp on the loom; as I sit down to weave the final piece of the burial shroud, this time feels sacred. I pull the bench in close, loving the first silence, my hands caressing the many textures that have become so familiar. Perhaps I am more patient than the story I tell myself.* When I find an error I must decide, to let it be "good enough" or fix it. *Is there a message in the errors? Fraying threads, breaking threads, repairing threads; learning to accept that repair is not always possible. The basket of yarn is now empty, making space for something new to emerge.* (Figure 13).

Figure 12. Nearing the end.

Figure 13. Empty basket and shuttles.

Looking at the completed shroud on the loom, all of those loose individual threads have been transformed into a new beautiful object, at once utilitarian and symbolic.

I feel a sense of lightness and curiosity unwinding and removing the finished shroud from the loom. (Figure 14). I notice that at the beginning, the weave is much looser, and many knots were left in the yarn. As the weaving progressed, I became more intentional, removing knots and overlapping the two ends to create a flatter more comfortable surface, perhaps, unconsciously considering the future life and use of the object.

Figure 14. Unrolling the weaving from the loom.

Additionally, the weave became denser and more solid as it progressed which I symbolically equated with me slowly and intuitively becoming more comfortable exploring the materials and my shifting narrative. I notice many imperfections and remind myself (again) that this was an engagement with process, an intuitive exploration and a practice of trusting my tacit knowing.

Lifting the five-meter shroud into my arms I am surprised and comforted by its heavy, awkward mass which reminds me of my early experiences with grief. I spend time positioning it differently, wrapping myself in it, folding it into an orderly pile and each time I release it, it takes on a new form reminding me of the constant ebb and flow of the tides of grief. (Figure 15). *Sleeping next to it in the darkness, I name the different mementos by my familiarity with the yarn's texture; this action soothes me much like the familiarity of and comfort one receives from a transitional object (Abram, 1996). I have become very attached to this new transitional object, feeling it supporting me as I move into a new stage in my life and relationship with my brother.*

Figure 15. Finished burial shroud.

Phase III: Incubation

Once the weaving was completed, removed from the loom, and I felt like I had received all of the information possible from the experience, I took a break from the intensity of the making, allowing my unconscious time and space to process. Wrapped in the shroud I let my

mind rest but even though I stepped back from the immersive process, I continued to dream about and be influenced by the experience. This incubation felt more like a pregnancy; a process of gestation in which detachment was not possible but rather a restful period during an intensive time of personal growth.

Phase IV: Illumination

I awoke to an illumination at three in the morning. Through my immersion with my mementos and their subsequent transformation, I realized that the last twenty-four years of my life have been a continual process of integrating new meaning and understanding from my loss, and that grief does not just end, but rather has the potential to teach and guide us throughout the course of a lifetime, in turn, potentially offering wisdom and increasing empathy and compassion for others navigating difficult losses.

Illumination also arrived as an understanding that the theories supporting both ambiguous loss and transitional objects overlap. Robins and Boss (May 13, 2014) propose that cases of ambiguous loss involving missing people require a renegotiating of relationships, a theory much in line with that of Winnicott's (1980) transitional objects. Within the two contexts, we learn to live in a place of "both-and" (p. 105), developing a relationship between 'absence and presence', a kind of liminal space with the missing person both there and not there (Boss, 2007a). It is the meaning we make from the loss that supports transitions and wellbeing (Boss, 2007b, Neimeyer 2001).

Phase V: Explication

This research has expanded my understanding of my need to create meaning from my lived experience following my brother's death. At the time of his death, I had just moved across the country for school; away from all my familiar attachments; it was a pivotal time in my personal development as a young adult asserting my independence and developing my autonomy.

Physically altering my mementos in this creative process offered me a bridge, much like the ones I traversed in Nepal in search of my brother, a bit precarious and destabilizing at times but ultimately assisted me to get where I needed to go, deepening my self understanding and my relationship with grief. The physical transformation of the mementos helped me develop a new narrative for my life and my relationship with my brother as it is now, both forever altered and also full of depth and meaning (Lindvall, 2015). While new theories on grief support continuous

bonds with the dead, it is through the active creative process of unraveling and reconstructing that I was better able to integrate the concept that, while feelings of loss for someone close may last a lifetime, so too may the relationship with them remain an active and integral part of one's life.

Phase VI: Creative Synthesis

Weaving a burial shroud came to symbolize a protective covering or shelter for the missing body of my brother and gave me agency in my ongoing grief work; a metaphorical way to keep him safe from a violent death that was beyond my control as well as a protective covering to represent the burial we could not have. I take comfort in its heavy weight on my shoulders and the awkwardness of its size; both of these attributes soothe me and remind me that loss and grief are neither light nor comfortable.

Sorting, printing and displaying approximately one hundred photos on the wall above my work area, offered a chronological ordering of my creative immersion and helped to synthesize the process in a visual representation. (Figure 16). The photographic images added another set of data, presenting the viewer with a nonverbal means of receiving the inquiry. Explicitly depicting my creative process through still images, it quilts together a progression of macro and micro views, exploring light and shadow, chaos and order. The close-up images abstract the forms, detailing texture, colour and sensation, while the wider views offer concrete documentation of the space, the loom, the mementos and other materials; together they create a visually explicit trace of the research process and timeline. Looking at and reflecting on the photos, I was drawn in to a deeper understanding of the relational qualities of grieving; the need for both solitude as well as feelings of connection. Observing this record, the first word that came to my mind was "holding"; there is a sense of tender holding that is present within the images reminding the viewer of the time, care and attention needed to support loss and grief.

Immersing myself in the materiality of these textile mementos has reinforced the capacity for art media to deepen insights within the context of art therapy. Receiving new information through the creative process, my sensorial engagement with the yarn accessed multiple metaphors reflecting on the grieving process: the individual threads spoke of a need for flexibility, their assorted colours and textures acknowledged the beauty that is abundant when we open to diversity and accept individual uniqueness; the large volume of threads spoke of strength in numbers which I understand to mean, community or systemic support; and lastly, the time and

patience it took to weave the shroud reminded me that grief is potentially a long and life-altering process, needing patience and care.

Figure 16. Photo synthesis and continued line drawing.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Attig (1991) states, "It is misleading and dangerous to mistake grief for the whole of the experience of the bereaved" (p. 398). People are all unique and may have different reactions to the same lived experiences with many elements coming into play when addressing individual ways of grieving, such as: cultural and social systems, gender, previous losses, relationship to the deceased, how the person died, and attachment styles of the bereaved (Jones, 2018). It is necessary for therapists to explore the systemic influences on their client's grieving process to understand what their needs are. My own response to the loss of my brother and my attachment to his belongings has been influenced by many of these factors. Investigating my own experience by exploring my mementos as transitional objects, I have come to realize that while emotional flooding and questions of identity are common responses to grief, many other specific factors have contributed to my experience, including, though not limited to: the ambiguity of his death, my age and developmental level at the time, my secure attachment to my brother and my previous experiences with other ambiguous losses (Attig, 1996, Kellington, 2015).

While I specifically chose to work with the disappearance of my brother, thoughts and reflections on other significant losses have also been present within my research; for I am human and when researching the lived experience, it is not a tidy experiment undertaken in a lab where one variable is isolated from others (Mercer & Evans, 2006). More specifically, I recognize the loss of my mother as my primary caregiver at the age of three as another profound ambiguous loss that has tremendously influenced the trajectory of my life. This overwhelming early loss traverses both types of ambiguous loss; *type one* being my mother's obvious physical absence while I continued to carry her psychologically with me, in both positive and negative ways. *Type two* occurred sometimes when she was physically present but psychologically absent due to her own personal struggles with childhood trauma, and physical and mental health issues.

Engaging with and transforming my mementos offered me an opportunity to explore and deepened my understanding of my lived experience with ambiguous loss. It also acknowledged the role of my continued bonds with my brother for personal healing and wellbeing. Within my new grief narrative, new insights manifested showing me that I have spent much of my life "minimizing" traumatic experiences as a protective self-defense mechanism. Within the frame of my creative process, I recognized this defense and offered myself time and space to honour my relationship with my losses, my sadness and my historical patterns of coping.

Physical ambiguous loss tends to make the grieving process more complicated, especially for those at an age when they are starting to create an independent sense of identity outside of their family system (Boss, 1999, Kellington, 2015). Here again I note the immense loss of my mother at the age of three, a time when most children are learning to individuate; taking steps to separate from their primary caregiver and then returning to them as their safe base. My mother's departure meant the disappearance of my safe base, causing me to question the reliability of my world. The disappearance of my brother brought these feelings up again as well as questions of identity. *Was I still a sister? Was I now an only child? What was my role now in the family system?* All of these questions added more ambiguity to my loss because I didn't know how to answer them. Creating a potential space to work with my mementos, gave me agency to name and acknowledge other continued effects of ambiguous loss on my present life and to express my ongoing lived experience with loss. This led me to a deeper personal awareness and acceptance of my persistent underlying feelings of tender melancholy and longing for the experience of unconditional love and holding.

Spending an extended period of time in creative process with my mementos has strengthened my relationship with my brother by deepening my "internal state of felt security and connection" (Field et al., 2005, p. 282). I would also argue that this strengthened attachment, along with the amount of time that has passed since his death, made it possible for me to physically alter my mementos, and in the process, create a new narrative, one that acknowledges my past and has the potential to hold and comfort me in the future.

While I still have times when it is hard to acknowledge and accept the loss of my brother, the concept of continuous bonds has helped me to integrate a new narrative and speak more confidently about my loss to people who might not understand bereaved people's need to remember. By remembering, his life and my own are made more meaningful; my memories and previous life experience are the building material that have supported me in my past, are still helping me grow and will continue to support me and others in the future (Denise Choquette, May 10, 2018, personal communication).

McNiff (2008) suggests that in art-based research "all of our senses and ways of communication play an integrated role in the process of understanding experience, and it offsets the idea that words and subsequent interpretations conceal the essence of an experience" (p. 36). Therefore, what is learned in art-based research can give unique, in-depth insights to the research question beyond the theoretical explanation by words alone. Conclusions can be felt, seen and heard through the visual representation of the data. The same can be said for the practice of art therapy, whereupon it is through the physical act of creation and the exploration through multiple senses, symbols and metaphors that lead to new insight and self understanding.

Implications

The use of objects, ritual and reflection is commonplace in art therapy, making engagement with mementos a potentially beneficial intervention and psychological comfort for someone grieving an ambiguous loss. Collecting personally significant objects and creating rituals in an art therapy process may empower individuals or groups to create more meaningful ways of grieving a death or other significant loss by bringing focus to the absence and making meaning from the loss while also honouring the ongoing relationship with the deceased.

Within the frame of art therapy in these globally stressful times, meaningful future research could be done to support the natural resilience of children and families who have been displaced from their homeland by war or disaster (Boss, 2007b). Using mementos may promote

the exploration and integration of their ambiguous losses, such as 'place or home', which is physically no longer with them but may still be psychologically present in their minds and hearts. Working from an attachment perspective, researchers Field et al. (2005) suggest that transitional objects have the potential to offer the bereaved a space for psychological holding and continuous bonds with the deceased. Working with mementos may offer new immigrants a safe space to express and honour their multiple losses as well as address their resilience and hope for their future.

I hope that my research brings new knowledge and insight to how using personal experience in art-based research can inform and support one's professional practice as well as one's ability to accompany clients in developing their personal grief narrative and a deeper self understanding (Lindvall, 2015). McNiff (2008) illuminates:

> Change and insight in the personal realm are increasingly being recognized as a key source of corresponding social change. Therefore, the way in which we treat the humble images of our art-based research may have a definite impact on how we engage the world. (p. 38)

Limitations

Within the context of heuristic art-based research there is always the possibility of self-absorption due to the subjective and often personal nature of the inquiry (Kapitan, 2018). While undertaking this intimate and personal research, it was important to engage in reflexivity, remaining cognizant of my research question and the potential impact of using transitional objects in therapeutic grief work. As a therapist, it is necessary to pay attention to the individual client's systemic supports, challenges and personal needs, recognizing that each person's grief is unique and that for some clients, working with mementos may have maladaptive effects on their healing process (Worden, 2009, Lindvall, 2015). Boss and Yeats (2014) claim that within the context of ambiguous loss, it is often the circumstances surrounding the loss that are complicated, not the person's way of grieving, suggesting that these complicated circumstances can make grieving more challenging and often demand more time to make sense of and integrate; when the circumstances are not acknowledge or understood, the bereaved person's way of coping may be pathologized.

When thinking of this research as a potential art therapy intervention, the length of time since the loss should be taken into consideration. Now, almost twenty-four years since my

brother's death, I am at a very different place in my grief than I was immediately following his disappearance. Upon commencing this inquiry, I felt ready to alter my attachment to my mementos (McCullough, 2009), whereas recent bereavement may influence a person's willingness to work with mementos. In such cases, mementos could be used to support clients as physical symbols of their loss from which to explore their grief with other art media.

As a final thought, while I chose weaving was my creative media to explore my loss, media choice will depend on the clients personal preferences. There are potential limitations to weaving in an art therapy practice due to the complexity of the weaving process, accessibility to looms and session time restraints. That said, weaving holds many beautiful metaphors for attaching, strengthening relationships and healing, therefore, exploring ways to simplify the process or work in weaving dyads is worth investigating.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I realize that while I regularly honour my brother through many small rituals, this research has honoured my own lived experience with ambiguous loss and its effects throughout my life (Vale-Taylor, 2009). My mementos, both in their original form and now woven into a shroud, have accompanied me during the distilling and transforming of my creative process into written form. When I felt bogged down with words, thoughts and reflection, the creative process helped take me out of my cognitive head and back into my sensing body, reinforcing the importance of art media and action in the practice of art therapy to shift perspective and offer new insights through alternative ways of knowing (McNiff, 2018).

My research question asked, "What is the experience of using mementos as transitional objects to explore ambiguous loss in art therapy?" Weaving together theory with a deeply personal creative process, I hoped to better understand how my mementos have supported me over time, what they mean to me now and what the process of transforming them had to teach me. Making an externalized physical offering from my mementos through a creative therapeutic process helped me represent and honour my ambiguous loss, the disappearance of my brother. Through the ritualized process of unraveling and weaving with my mementos, I made a burial shroud to symbolically hold my brother's missing body, create personal meaning from my loss and develop a deeper continued bond with my brother (Neimeyer, 2001). Furthermore, it allowed me to experience first-hand the benefits of creative expression for coping with ambiguous loss. As well, engaging in the process myself has given me hope and inspiration as a future therapist

for the potential usefulness of mementos in helping to transform and integrate personal loss through creative therapeutic action (Attig, 1996).

My hope is that this inquiry inspires and supports anyone reading it to explore and honour their unique experiences with loss to better understand how grief informs their lives. Of course, people experience grief in a multitude of ways and as a therapist it is crucial to remain open and flexible to the unique lived experience of each client (Worden, 2009). In many cultures, grieving is a public act, where communal rituals offer time, space and holding to mourn openly; in the North American dominant capitalist narrative, many funeral and burial practices have been commodified and often disempower those closest to the loss, thus decreasing opportunities for meaningful ritual and loss integration (Francis Weller, 2015). Additionally, with increased immigration and forced migration due to political, social and environmental instability, the loss of family support, and religious and community systems can leave people grieving in isolation which can lead to poor loss integration and increased stress on mental health (Jones, 2017). With this in mind, Boss & Carnes (2012) acknowledge that the often-complicated circumstances of ambiguous loss can lead to a prolonged and more complicated bereavement and recommend healing focused on human relationship and community support as opposed to medical diagnosis. Furthermore, it must be noted that ambiguous losses are often not honoured in a ritualized way, which can lead to a lack of meaningful integration and understanding of the experience; therefore, the creation of meaningful ritual using mementos has the potential to support an alternative positive outcome (Boss, 1999).

This process of memento exploration offered me a solid period of time to reflect on my past relationship with my brother as well as his influences on my life now through our continuous bonds, which are not in any way a denial of his death, but rather an acknowledgement of his continued influence and role as a positive and supportive presence in my life now (Goss & Class, 2005). There is no denying that we are changed by our losses; continuous bonds offer a space for the open-endedness of loss to be held and honoured with intention and respect.

In speaking of the outcomes in heuristic inquiry, Moustakas (1990) states, “A connection has been made that will remain forever unbroken and that will serve as a reminder of a lifelong process of knowing and being” (p. 17). His quote speaks equally to my research journey and my lived experience with the ambiguous loss of my brother, one having influenced the other and both having impacted my way of interpreting and being in the world. My relationship to loss

continues to inform and deepen my understanding of the human need for love, connection and attachment. The creative process of unraveling Kelly's clothes and making new meaning from them offered a methodical ritual which enabled me to examine and honour my loss and weave it into a new story and a new transitional object, that being an heirloom to hold and comfort my family in the future.

Figure 17. Kelly's knitted clothing.

Figure 18. The final burial shroud.

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