A Dissertation
titled
Writing through the Pain: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Grief, the Doctoral Process, Dissertation Difficulties, and Doctoral Attrition
by
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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education

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Grief can impair the ability of a person to function productively, and it can prevent doctoral students from completing their degrees. The purpose of this study was to (a) develop a better understanding of the grief process, (b) use writing as a method of understanding my personal grief process, (c) share my experiences of coping with grief and dissertation work to help other doctoral students face challenges in the struggle to complete their degrees, and (d) uncover suggestions to help guide university faculty and staff when offering support to other grieving doctoral students. The researcher examined her personal experiences with grief and dissertation work and then connected those experiences with those of the larger higher education community. The researcher found she needed to (a) allow time for the grieving process without rushing through it or trying to conform to a time frame established by others, (b) frequently assess life and career goals to determine whether doctoral study still fit those goals, (c) research a subject relevant to life after the loss rather than before the loss, (d) utilize a research method appropriate to both her and her study, and (e) utilize support from a variety of sources. This study adds to the limited literature about grief and doctoral attrition and contributes...
to the existing body of knowledge available to assist grieving doctoral students complete
their degrees.

Keywords: Grief; Doctoral Attrition; Dissertation Writing; Therapeutic Writing; Adult
Transition Theory: Stages of Grief
I dedicate this work to my son, Taylor, with all my love.
Acknowledgements

Several people offered their assistance during this project. My cohort peers encouraged, commiserated, collaborated, and provided valuable feedback on my narrative. My husband, Jim, provided constant, dependable support and would not let me quit. My daughter, Sylvia, gave me encouragement even when I did not realize I needed it. My committee, Dr. Harmening, Dr. Roseman, Dr. Edgington, and Dr. Faulkner, provided much more advice and direction than I ever expected regarding the dissertation, its publication, my career trajectory, and even my well-being through the entire process. My Chair, Dr. Harmening, endured frequent topic changes, research method confusion, and a long hiatus even before taking on the added role of advisor to the grief-stricken. Her support was invaluable. Without the help of every single person listed, I may not have persevered long enough to finish.

I would also like to acknowledge readers, all those grieving and trying to piece life back together again, and parents who have lost children.

Finally, thank you, Taylor, for everything you gave my life both before and since your death.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Higher education has been a central part of my life for years, and during that time, completing my Ph.D. has been a high priority; however, the multiple stresses and obstacles involved in dissertation writing left me feeling that failure was absolutely possible, and many of my cohort peers felt the same. After the sudden death of my son, grief left me feeling incapable of research or writing. Until I discovered the research method of autoethnography, I doubted that I would ever finish, and I strongly believed that I could become one of the nearly 50% of doctoral students who drop out before graduating. While valuable research does exist on doctoral attrition, the personal narrative research is extremely sparse. My autoethnographic study of grief and doctoral attrition contributes to the limited literature available, and my personal narrative provides information and support to other doctoral students struggling through the dissertation process while they also cope with grief after a significant loss.

Context

My Higher education doctoral cohort peers and I started talking about our dissertations as early as our first year of classes. We knew it was a long, hard road and wanted to begin making progress down that road as soon as possible. We bounced topics off each other when we met for classes, offered feedback about how to narrow the focus of our topics and gather data, and debated the merits of qualitative versus quantitative research methods. One colleague even claimed she knew her topic already and wanted the papers she wrote for each class to be another chapter in her dissertation. Looking back on these discussions six years later, we can see how naive we were, completely
underestimating the time and complexity required to successfully complete the dissertation process.

During my second year of coursework, I decided to research online education. Career advancement rather than passion motivated me toward this topic. I wanted to make myself more marketable, and researching online education seemed like a good route. I started researching and reading all I could about teaching and learning at a distance. As a result, I had a good working knowledge of distance education (DE), found a faculty member to serve as my chair, and started enrolling in dissertation credit hours before taking comprehensive examinations. The annotated bibliography I began the previous year had provided me with a well-rounded understanding of DE and a good start on my literature review for Chapter Two of my dissertation; however, it still required another year of research and writing before I could properly shape my subject and align my research into something that could contribute to the field of higher education.

My cohort peers and I never anticipated the possibility of devoting an entire year to the concept paper, but many of us did just that—that is, we struggled with the concept paper for a full 12 months. My topic ideas shot off into several different directions before I could narrow the focus into a study that made sense to my chair and the rest of the committee while also remaining interesting me. Once the direction of the study made sense, I found myself asking research questions that aligned more with a quantitative study rather than the qualitative research method I had planned, so more time passed while I gathered research about various methodological approaches and revised my research questions and methods sections. Many colleagues failed to clearly articulate the need for their study; others did not use adequate support. One colleague planned to
conduct a regression analysis but wrote research questions that aligned with a qualitative methodology. Not everyone took so long, of course, but many of us struggled with seemingly endless setbacks during the first year of the dissertation process.

Even though I knew my subject and worked consistently, my progress still felt maddeningly slow. One day I might feel pleased with my work, optimistic, and reasonably confident that I would finish, and the next day I could feel completely frustrated and ready to quit. The standard advice I receive from my chair and colleagues was to work on it every day, even if only for a short time. I tried to comply, but work, family, and stress interrupted my progress on some days. The distractions ranged from a full-time job to an inconvenient illness to wanting to have a relaxing weekend with my family. Some of my colleagues started new jobs while others lost jobs; some divorced, and others had babies. Some of our distractions were positive, and others were negative, but they were all a part of everyday life and, together, quickly became representative of the common obstacles that derail many doctoral students and prevent them from finishing their dissertations.

Because of scheduling conflicts, my committee required months to coordinate a mutually convenient day and time to convene for the concept paper defense. Just getting everyone together in one room for an hour was an unexpected and time-consuming feat. I could hardly believe how difficult it was to coordinate a simple meeting, but the timeline kept stretching. No one could meet during the fall session, as my chair and I had hoped, so we pushed back the defense date for the concept paper until spring. Other colleagues experienced the stress of this expanded timeline as well. Time stretches out quickly during the dissertation process, yet the deadlines for each milestone continued to creep up
and surprise us.

Then, without warning, out of nowhere, everything changed. My imperfect and frustrating life became a horrible nightmare when I lost one of the most important people in the world to me: my son. Without him, nothing felt like it was worth the effort—not talking, not thinking, and certainly not researching and writing about distance education. This horrific nightmare started when family and I had planned to visit my mother for the weekend; however, our oldest son, Taylor, wanted to stay home. We already felt lucky because he still lived at home while attending a nearby college, and he spent more time with us than either my husband or I had ever spent with our families when we were his age. The one other time he skipped a weekend trip, we returned home on Sunday afternoon to find him in the living room working on his laptop and watching a Golden Girls marathon, so we were not expecting anything worse when we returned from our weekend getaway. We certainly never expected him to die.

That Sunday afternoon, Taylor did not answer the phone when I called to let him know what time we would be home. I tried calling twice, but no answer either time. Uneasy nerves started quivering in my stomach halfway through the drive home. He must have gone out, I thought, or maybe he’s outside and can’t hear the phone. Something inside me knew that these were ridiculous notions. His kept his phone turned on and close to him all the time unless he was in class, rehearsal for a play, or attending the theatre.

The house was completely quiet when we walked in—no music or sounds from the television to break the heavy silence. The dog’s water dish sat on the floor bone dry. When I saw it, a trickle of acid slid into my stomach. My husband climbed upstairs to the bedrooms and knocked on Taylor’s door.
“Taylor, wake up. Taylor, wake up. Taylor, wake up!” Jim’s voice sounded louder, more and more strained and urgent each time he repeated himself.

*Maybe he stayed up all night and feels lazy today,* I told myself.

Then Jim called down to me. “Angela, I need you.” The stress and urgency in his voice reached me, but I pushed it away. Instead of rushing up the stairs to see what was wrong, I finished filling the dog’s water dish. I did not want Jim to see it empty and have another reason to get mad at Taylor. When I reached the top of the stairs, I saw Taylor on the floor, his glasses on his nose as usual, arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed, lips black. A garbage bag clung to his left ear. I tried to bat it out of my way, but it felt heavy. Frantically, I grabbed at it and found a helium tank inside, which I threw into the hallway on my way to grab the phone. I dialed 911 and handed the phone to my husband.

“What’s wrong?” My daughter, Sylvia, called from below, so I warned her away. “Stay downstairs. Don’t come up here.” We could not let her see her big brother like that.

His fingertips looked dark. A part of my brain registered the lack of blood flow as a warning, but another part of me visualized us at the hospital, Taylor awake and talking, going to outpatient therapy, talking to a counselor.

Jim tried to breathe air into those black lips. When he pushed down on Taylor’s chest for CPR, the chest cavity should have risen again. He was supposed to pump the chest rapidly, but Taylor’s chest went down and refused to rise again. It would not fill up with air. We failed to make him breathe. We failed him. The paramedics finally arrived after what seemed like an eternity, but even they could not help him. *How could this happen?* I thought. *I spent his whole life watching over him; how could that not be enough to save him?*
When my children were babies, I could barely take my eyes off them. Taylor was the first, so his mystery completely took me by surprise. I did not expect babies to capture my attention so thoroughly, but I could stare at him for hours, holding him when he was awake and watching him from a few feet away when he slept. I was afraid that if I took my eyes off him, something bad might happen. He could roll over and stop breathing or get his arm caught between the slats in his crib. Too many hazards surround babies, so I watched them all the time.

**Background of the Problem**

A few days after Taylor died, I packed away all the books and papers in my office. Anything relating to my dissertation went straight into the garbage or a box in the basement. I had no intention of ever looking at it or thinking about it again. Why would I? I had wasted so much of the previous two years while I researched and wrote; re-wrote and deleted; changed, modified, revised; and mostly stressed out. I already had spent far too much time and energy on that frustrating project. Ultimately, what did it matter anyway? No one expects their children to die before they do. It feels wrong, unnatural, and unreal. My family and I kept expecting to wake up with things the way they were, back to normal. Although my brain knew that this horrible tragedy in our lives was all too real, I still wanted it to change. I wanted it to be different, but it wasn’t, and it never could be. I found meaning in nothing, purpose in nothing. If I could not keep my children safe, I was not the mother I thought I was. If I could not be a good mother, nothing else could ever matter. I could not see myself as a good student, a good teacher, or a future professor. I was not a researcher-in-progress anymore, and I did not really belong to the academic community. I did not belong anywhere.
My first year of mourning was spent in isolation, crying or angry, staring off into space with no academic thoughts in my head. I kept a grief journal to chronicle my memories and heartache. It helped me keep track of my ups and downs, and the process of journaling became more and more cathartic as time passed. After a self-imposed “reasonable” amount of unproductive time, I decided that I needed to re-start my brain and join the outside world again. Although I clearly was not convinced I would succeed, I started thinking about my dissertation again. I took walks on the university campus to feel people around me, the academic community I used to love. I sat in the library and looked at other students absorbed in their work or visiting with each other, and I started thinking about research again.

I quickly realized that the topic I had formerly been so passionate about, online learning, did not interest me in the least anymore, and I could not bear to pull out material I had packed away after the funeral. Instead, I started skimming new research articles, scanning other dissertations, and reading the *Chronicle of Higher Education* again, searching for a topic that might spark my interest. However, nothing did. Although I wanted to start feeling interested in a new topic, nothing seemed important. If I still could not muster up enough energy to care, how in the world could I ever convince a dissertation committee that my research topic mattered?

The advice many of our professors had given me and my colleagues during our final year of classes was to “follow your passion.” If we did not feel passionate about our topics, or so the reasoning went, the work would not sustain our interest. The same theory applied here as I searched for a new dissertation topic. What was my passion? What could hold my interest? I did not have any idea, and I could not think of a new idea on
my own; however, after talking with my chair, an idea started to emerge. The story of my loss, my struggle to keep going, and my journey through grief had held my interest and seemed important enough to matter. The most prominent obstacle in my narrative, the single topic that felt important enough to study, was grief itself.

Frank (1991) wrote that “to grieve well is to value what you have lost. When you value even the feeling of loss, you value life itself, and you begin to live again” (p. 41). Conducting this research study and exploring my own grieving process as the topic has helped me move forward into a meaningful and useful life. My specific story may be unique, but my struggle with loss and grief is not. Many doctoral candidates struggling through the dissertation process endure other types of loss as well, such as the loss of a job, a marriage, a house, or even a loved one. They do not need to suffer the same exact loss as I did in order to understand the feelings associated with loss and the grief that permeates their lives for years after that loss. Hopefully, other doctoral candidates will relate to my story and it will serve as a useful resource to them while they struggle to complete their degrees.

Problem Statement

Only about 50% of students entering doctoral programs finish their dissertations and earn their Ph.D.s (Cassuto, 2013; Golde, 2005; Morrison, 2014; Nettles & Millett, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), the attrition rate for doctoral students increases significantly with each year of study (see Table 1).
Table 1

*Cumulative 10-year Attrition Rates among Doctoral Students.*

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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
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(Source: Digest of Education Statistics, 2013)

Unlike undergraduate study, doctoral student attrition rate is lowest during the first year. The dropout rate is only 6.6% during year one but increases steadily each year thereafter.

In 2008, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) established the Ph.D. Completion Project, a seven-year initiative designed to address the issue of Ph.D. completion and attrition. The very existence of this initiative has demonstrated the need to find ways to help doctoral students graduate.

Possible organizational factors that have contributed to low attrition rates include poor student selection processes, program inflexibility, and programmatic structures that inadequately prepare students for dissertation writing (Gumport & Syndmany, 2002; Lipschutz, 1993; Lovitts, 2001). Social isolation and an inability to integrate into the academic community (Herzig, 2002) may contribute to students’ leaving a doctoral program before completion, and the isolating environment of the dissertation process can also cause students to give up before graduating (Ali & Khun, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Sigafus, 1998). Smith et al. (2006) found that stress brought on by a variety of factors affects attrition, and Fullic (2011) suggested that stress and depression contribute to attrition during the dissertation stage. My personal communications with
colleagues and professors as well as my personal observations during the past six years also support Fullic’s (2011) theory that depression contributes to doctoral attrition, particularly at the dissertation stage, but currently there has been a lack of empirical evidence to support that theory, which has resulted in an important gap in the research literature.

Grief, compounded with these other factors, creates a challenging obstacle for students trying to complete their dissertations; as a result, grieving doctoral students have a much more difficult time completing their degrees than non-grieving students. Knowing the personal experiences of someone struggling with grief during the dissertation process could help other doctoral students experience a sense of community and support that may encourage them to finish their degree.

Grief is only one of many reasons for student attrition, but it poses a significant threat to higher education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), more than 18 million students are enrolled in college at any one time. Of these 18 million students, 39% have lost someone close in the past two years, and 30% have lost someone close in the last year (Balk, 2008; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Wrenn, 1999). Based on these statistics, between five and seven million grieving undergraduate students are enrolled in college at any given time. Although these statistics on grief are based on undergraduate student samples, it is unlikely that the doctoral student population could be substantially different. In fact, some data also has suggested that 25% of graduate students also have lost someone significant in their lives within the past two years (Varga, 2013). In 2013, approximately 266,220 new students enrolled in doctoral programs (Allum, 2014). If the percentage of grieving doctoral students is similar to Varga’s (2013) data about grieving
undergraduate students, this suggests that as many as 66,555 to 103,825 grieving students could be enrolled in doctoral programs. This number is too high to ignore. While the lack of data in this area has indicated a need for research, more importantly, the harmful effects of grief among doctoral students is a problem that deserves research as a way to give a voice to these vulnerable students, to explore possible solutions to this problem, and to attribute meaning to their shared experiences.

Depression, anxiety, and loneliness frequently develop in people suffering from grief. These symptoms become especially problematic for college students because they are already in a difficult transitional period in their lives (Balk, 1997; Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010). Deep grief during this important time has led to difficulty in making decisions (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995) and completing school. Hardison, Neimeyer, and Lichstein (2005) also discovered that college students experience high levels of insomnia when grieving, which can contribute to a loss of motivation and an inability to concentrate and focus well enough to study (Balk & Vesta, 1998; Janowiak, Mei-tal, & Drapkin, 1995)--all of which can prevent degree completion. The combination of these typical bereavement responses places grieving students at high risk of complicated grief (Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005)--i.e., deep grief that impairs day-to-day activities, including social and cognitive performance (Priegerson & Jacobs, 2001; Priegerson et al., 1995), which could additionally lead to student attrition.

The vast majority of the studies exploring students and grief have focused on undergraduate students, but the demands of doctoral students differ significantly from those of undergraduate students. Because doctoral students in the dissertation stage often already experience high levels of stress that potentially threaten their degree completion
(Herzig, 2002; Martinez et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2006), the additional stressor of grief could present an insurmountable obstacle.

While using both quantitative and qualitative research designs, previous studies have used traditional, scientific methods of data gathering and analysis without “narrative cognition or storied knowing” (Smith, 1999, p. 266; see also Bruner, 1986). These studies have provided valuable knowledge to our understanding of doctoral students’ struggles with dissertation work, but they have not provided an exploration into the specific influence of grief and loss on dissertation struggles. The higher education academic community needs studies that do not bury students’ voices under layers of analysis (Denison, 1996; Van Maanen, 1988) but rather explore and describe the emotional experiences revealed through autoethnographic story sharing. My study explores the impact of grief and loss on the dissertation process through storytelling. It combines narrative with analysis and connects readers with the emotional experience of grief and dissertation writing with the goal of helping others finish their degrees.

Brookfield (2013) and Nash (2004, 2011) both have recognized the need for scholarly personal narrative (SPN) in doctoral dissertations. Richardson (1990) rightly observed that “narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (p. 65) and refers to writing as a method of inquiry (1994). Existing work on dissertation studies has provided insight into what doctoral students should and should not do to succeed. My study adds to the current body of literature by connecting my personal experiences (a) to the experiences of other grieving doctoral students, (b) to existing research in dissertation writing and (c) to attrition. Engaging readers in this frequently overlooked topic has the potential to provide
them not only with an understanding of their own grief and the dissertation process in a way that only stories can accomplish, but it also has the potential to provide them with a sense of reassurance that results from being understood and accepted instead of isolated and alone.

**Purpose of the Study**

One purpose of this study was to understand the grief process. Using autoethnography as a method helped me connect the grieving process I experienced to the grieving process of others. Another purpose of this study was to share my personal experiences of coping with grief and completing a dissertation at the same time. Through sharing, I am able to help other doctoral students face challenges in the struggle to complete their degrees. Writing my personal stories forced me to relive significant episodes of my life. It allowed me to analyze those lived experiences (Zaner, 2004) and make sense of them. Because making meaning helps the bereaved adapt to life after significant loss (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006), this study has helped me adapt to life without my son. It also has helped me connect my experiences to those within the larger academic community and helped other doctoral students realize that they are not alone in their struggles. In doing so, it may help them complete their dissertation projects, which is an additional goal of this study. My final goal in this study is to offer suggestions to university faculty and staff that may guide them in offering support to other grieving doctoral students.

**Significance of Study**

Although variation exists between fields of study (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), overall doctoral attrition has remained between 40% and 50% (Bowen
Rudenstine, 1992; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Lovitts (2001) reported on the high personal cost to students when they fail to complete their degrees, which includes depression and even thoughts of suicide. Learning more about doctoral attrition and finding ways to combat this problem can help individual students complete a degree program and avoid the devastating feelings of failure that accompany leaving before graduation. In addition to the personal costs of time, money, and feelings of failure, institutions also suffer loss over doctoral attrition as well (Nerad & Miller, 1996). Faculty members spend a great deal of time working with students, so when students abandon their efforts before graduating, students and their institutions both suffer loss. The larger economic and social community loses valuable resources in the form of highly educated and highly credentialed individuals (Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Women with advanced degrees earn an average of 36% higher incomes than women with bachelor’s degrees (Perna, 2005), so society also benefits from increased tax revenue when women graduate with advanced degrees. In addition, these women provide significantly improved lifestyles for their families, especially single parents, and they offer society the additional benefit of children raised in a highly educated environment. Not only do doctoral graduates offer benefits to society and their employers in the form of their research and the improved outcomes for their companies, but they also increase the productivity of those working alongside them (Casey, 2009), so “Ph.D.s enhance not only the productivity of the individuals who possess them, but also the productivity of society as a whole” (p. 222). In other words, doctoral attrition impacts more than just the individual students who do not complete their degrees; rather, it also impacts institutions, families, and society.
Conceptual Framework

Two conceptual frameworks have helped me make sense of the data in this study: transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). Transition theory (a) served as a guide for organizing the narrative, (b) helped me understand and articulate how I have responded to the transitions in my life since my son died, and (c) helped me identify the phases I have gone through as a doctoral student and developing research writer working on my dissertation. The stages of grief served as a guide for mapping the process of my grief, which also helped me identify the progress of my transitions. Both theories combined to help analyze my narrative.

Transition Theory. Transition Theory helps individuals understand and make sense of the way they respond to changes in their lives. Schlossberg (1981) suggested that transition occur when an “event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) later updated this definition and defined a transition as “any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). According to Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson, an event is a concrete experience that occurs and results in change. It can be anticipated, such as a graduation or marriage, or unanticipated, such as the loss of a job or a loved one. A non-event occurs when individuals expect and want a desired outcome but are unable to attain it, such as not being accepted into a preferred college or university.

Schlossberg (1981) explained that a transition is also a process that occurs over time, and she has provided a model for analyzing how adults adapt to transition. The
phases of transition include “approaching change,” “taking stock,” and “taking charge,” also referred to as “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). We move in at the beginning of a transition, after a change occurs, and we become familiar with our new roles or expectations. When moving through a transition, we learn how to negotiate the changes in our daily lives. Moving out of a transition means adapting to the changes and moving forward. Outcomes of transitions can be positive or negative, often a combination of both, and the outcome is not always adaptation.

For this study, I focused on the stages of “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” of doctoral work. The “moving in” section examines the period of entering the doctoral program and becoming acclimated to my new cohort and the higher education department. The “moving through” section focuses on dissertation work and the shift from doctoral student to independent scholar. The “moving out” section of Chapter 4 examines specific ways I navigated the struggles of the dissertation process and continued working to finish my doctoral program.

Stages of Grief

According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014), the five stages of grief include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages “are a part of a framework that makes up our learning to live without the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling” (p. 7), but they are only typical responses. Individuals respond differently to loss because they are different. Some individuals do not go through all of the stages, while others may experience them in a circular rather than linear manner, returning to a previous stage more than once. Although
these stages do not prescribe a narrow, inflexible path, they do however serve as a guide for understanding our responses after experiencing significant loss.

For individuals grieving the loss of a loved one, the denial stage is symbolic rather than literal (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). In other words, our brains do technically know that our loved ones have died, but our hearts do not process the information yet. We still expect to see them and talk to them, and we may not grasp the reality of life without them. Rather, the way we experience denial may be through a state of shock that prevents us from feeling the full impact of our emotional pain. Instead, we may feel numb and do not yet fully comprehend the loss. We may wake up and wonder if the entire experience was a bad dream rather than a reality. This stage helps us unconsciously manage our feelings while the intensity of the loss sinks into our conscious minds. It helps us avoid becoming emotionally overwhelmed. We often talk about the loss repeatedly as we attempt to process the reality of it. As we start to slowly fade out of denial, we may begin to question how and why the loss occurred and wonder if there was anything we could have done to prevent it.

As we accept the reality of our loss and the feelings of denial begin to fade, the feelings we had denied or suppressed begin to emerge, such as anger. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014), anger does not surface until the grieving individual feels strong enough to survive the loss. The anger may be directed at the loved one for leaving and or at ourselves for not being able to save him or her. We may blame others and direct our anger toward them, and we may also feel anger at the general concept of life without our loved one. The anger need not be logical or rational, but the feelings are typical responses to significant loss and an important step in the grieving process. According to
Kubler-Ross and Kessler, the more we let ourselves feel our anger, “the more it will begin to dissipate” (p. 12) and we can heal.

The type of bargaining that takes place after a loss can be similar to the bargaining individuals experience before a loss, such as offering a trade in exchange for someone’s life. The bargain does not need to be logical, and we do not necessarily believe the bargain, but it can allow us to feel momentary control over the chaos in our lives. “If only...” and “what if...” thoughts begin to consume grieving individuals. Bargaining can be a temporary escape from the pain of loss and can help individuals move from one stage to another.

When we stop bargaining, we refocus our attention on the loss of the present rather than the wishful thinking of changing the past or the future. In doing so, we feel deeper grief than before and realize the finality of our loss, which often marks the onset of depression. Individuals become withdrawn and sad, lethargic, and unable to find pleasure or purpose in regular activities. According to Kubler-Ross & Kessler (2014), “In grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle” (p. 21). Grieving individuals should allow themselves to feel depressed without fighting it in order to move through and beyond this stage of grieving.

Most of us will never feel okay with the loss of our loved one, but “acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014, p. 26). We stop trying to resist the new norm of our lives and adjust to our new roles; however, the more intensely our identities were connected with our lost loved ones, the more difficult it is to adapt to life.
without them. When we do begin to accept our new life, the peace of acceptance will not manifest itself according to the time schedules of other individuals or based on social expectations. Rather, it may appear for a while and then go away; it may be a long process that is spread out over months and years rather than weeks. Little by little, we devote more energy to living, to moving forward, than we devote to experiencing the grief of our loss.

Theories are only a guide. Each individual is unique, so one individual may naturally respond to loss differently than another. Any time a theory is applied, individual differences need to be taken into consideration (Worden, 2015). For this study, I illustrated the stages of grief in vignettes to show readers how I felt as I coped with my grief, the way it influenced my dissertation work, and the way it influenced my perception of my own identity. Through vignettes, I also explored how I coped with my grief and continued working--both at my job and, after a break, on my dissertation. In Chapter 5, I offer strategies for managing grief after traumatic loss without it consuming the rest of our lives.

**Research Questions**

Although narrative studies do not always explicitly state research questions (Cresswell, 2007), this study sought to understand two issues. Using the nexus of grief and doctoral work, I asked the following questions: (a) What could I learn about my grief by using autoethnography to explore, write about, and analyze my experiences? (b) What can other doctoral students learn from my experience that may help their dissertation process and enable them to finish their degrees? How can I use my experiences to be of service to others by offering guidance to administration for assisting grieving doctoral
Definitions of Terms

Because every research study constructs and applies terms differently, the following terms and definitions were applied to this particular study:

Attrition: A delay or departure from college before degree completion.

Autoethnography: A research method that combines autobiography and ethnography and focuses on the intersections of personal experiences and the culture in which those experiences take place.

Narrative: An account or representation of connected events or situations.

Narrative Inquiry: A research method that utilizes the writing process to reflect on connected events and uncover meaning from people’s experiences.

Narrative Truth: Conveying a scene or experience as accurately as possible, with more focus on meaning than detail.

Reflectivity: Introspection intended to better understand self and others.

Resonance: A quality that renders a concept or experience personally meaningful or important to someone else.

Retention: Remaining in college until degree completion.

Socialization: Learning about and becoming a part of a particular culture.

Stages of Grief: The five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Transition Theory: The process of adapting to life changes (Schlossberg, 1981).

Verisimilitude: Depicting scenes, settings, and people honestly and realistically.

Vignette: A passage depicting a specific scene or experience.
Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, and Stroebe (2008) differentiate between bereavement, grief, and mourning. They define bereavement as the state individuals are left in after suffering a significant loss [to death], grief as the personal aspects of bereavement, and mourning as the social aspect of managing grief. All three terms will be used in this study; however, the terms “grieving,” “the bereaved,” and mourners may be used interchangeably.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter presents existing research literature about grief and doctoral attrition. First, I explain the three stages of the doctoral process: transition, development, and research (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1993) and clarify how these three stages correlate with the “moving in,” moving through,” and “moving out” stages of adult transition theory (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). Then I review existing literature about doctoral attrition and some specific dissertation-related difficulties that have led to attrition. Next, I review typical symptoms of grief, existing literature about the grieving process, and theories about grieving. I then review literature specific to grieving parents. Finally, I explore how the symptoms of grief can influence student attrition as well as dissertation-related issues that may influence grieving students, and, more specifically, graduate students.

The Doctoral Process

The doctoral process can be divided into three stages (see Figure 1): transition, development, and research (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1993). The transition stage takes place during students’ first year of the doctoral process. During this stage, students begin their socialization process (Golde, 1998, 2000). “Socialization encompasses the process of learning about a particular culture and its attributes” (Gardner, 2008a, p. 331), so students integrate into the academic community and become a part of their respective departments.
After students successfully complete the first year of coursework, they enter stage two, the development stage. During this stage, students continue their socialization by adapting to the doctoral environment, completing their coursework, and passing their final examinations or equivalent. In the final research stage, students research, write, and defend their dissertations. When students successfully complete the entire doctoral process, they earn their Ph.D. degree.

**Transition: Moving in.** In the first stage of doctoral study, the transition stage, students enter their first year of doctoral coursework. They transition into the new world of graduate study, both academically and socially. Research expectations in doctoral programs are significantly more demanding than those of master’s-level programs, so students must adapt to the increasingly difficult workload. During this “moving in” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) stage of adult transition, not only do new
doctoral students need to adapt to more demanding academic work than that required of bachelor’s or master’s students, but they also need to adapt socially to their respective academic departments and learn how to become members of the doctoral community. One of the most important aspects of doctoral culture is socialization (Gardner, 2007, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 2001). In the world of doctoral studies, this culture often includes the larger world of higher education, the specific culture of an individual institution, and the smaller sub-culture of students’ particular departments and discipline. Students need to socialize into all facets of the new culture of higher education, their university, and their departments to become successful doctoral students.

Socialization during the transition (moving in) stage requires obtaining information about course material, protocols and procedures, and expectations about academics, but it also includes social expectations and behaviors. In order to understand expectations, new students tend to listen carefully to directions and observe the behaviors of upper-level students (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Observation allows new students to see and then emulate successful behavior. New students also begin to form relationships with peers and faculty members. At this stage, both formal and informal interactions within the academic community become pivotal for doctoral students (Tinto, 1993). Formal interactions include conversations focused on scholarly achievement, and informal interactions include communication not directly linked to the doctoral program. In the formal academic settings of the classroom, as well as the informal social settings of hallways, offices, and libraries, students interact with faculty members and peers as a part of the adaptation process. Students need to acclimate to the new environment of doctoral study in order to successfully transition to the next stage. When students become
competent in their new roles and begin to identify themselves as doctoral students, they should feel as though they have become a member of the academic community.

**Development: Moving through.** After successfully completing the first year of study, students enter the next stage: development. In this stage, they complete their coursework and gain experience in the process of becoming researchers. As they traverse the “moving through” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) stage of adult transition, students gain the competences required to conduct doctoral research (Grover, 2007; Tinto, 1993). They must fulfill the requirements for their programs and complete coursework, but they also must assess their skills and identify any additional skills they may need to acquire before completing their classes.

Equally important during the development stage is continuing to engage with the academic community and build support networks of colleagues with similar interests and goals. Peer relationships within the department become a vital aspect of the socialization process (Lovitts, 2001), and relationships with faculty members during coursework will impact students’ decisions about dissertation advisors and committee members (Gardner, 2008a). At this point, academic and social interactions often blend together without distinction (Tinto, 1993). That is, social interactions influence academic skills, and academic responsibilities influence social exchanges. Time previously spent discussing non-academic life becomes absorbed with group study sessions, and academic issues often dominate conversations, even when they are not planned sessions. Unlike work at prior levels, there are no clear lines to distinguish between doctoral students’ social and scholastic lives. Distinctions do begin to form between students who are drawn to and appreciate a life dominated by higher education and students who feel less engaged with
the academic community. The latter category is comprised of students who may not want their social, academic, and professional lives dominated by their university and or their doctoral department.

In the development stage, peer relationships may be even more important for support than faculty relationships (Gardner, 2008b), although this dynamic will shift in the independent research stage, when the student-advisor relationship becomes the most significant aspect of the doctoral student’s academic development (Tinto, 1993). Throughout the development stage, students depend on one another for both academic and social support. Formal mentoring from more advanced students may help new doctoral students proceed through their learning and transition to research (Boyle & Boice, 1998) as they learn how to be successful from those who have recently gone through similar experiences in the doctoral process. Students with teaching assistantships may feel that their experiences help them develop relationships with peers (Gardner, 2008a), while people with research assistantships feel a sense of community with their research team (Golde & Dore, 2001; Nerad & Cerny, 1993). Both forms of assistantships offer students a support network to help them adapt both socially and professionally.

As students continue to engage with members of the academic world and develop resources to support their research and teaching professions, they may feel their identities shift between graduate student and professional academic (Weidman, 2001)--i.e., as if they have one foot in each domain. The development stage typically concludes when doctoral students successfully pass comprehensive exams (or equivalent) and select their dissertation topics, which marks the beginning of the transition into the research stage.

**Research: Moving out.** Research becomes the final stage of the doctoral process
and the “moving out” stage of adult transition (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). During this stage, students research, write, and defend their dissertations (Ampaw, 2010). The dissertation process typically includes a research proposal; response, feedback, and evaluation(s) by a dissertation committee; and a final defense (Cakmak et al., 2015). Although doctoral students may select a dissertation topic, advisor, and committee members toward the end of the developmental stage, most of the dissertation work is conducted during the research stage. The process of researching, writing, and defending the dissertation is yet another transitional stage, as students develop into independent researchers (Gardner, 2008a, 2008b).

The transition to the research stage involves leaving behind many of the relationships students developed during their coursework (Gardner, 2009). Because students are no longer working in the same classes and on the same research topics, they may pursue very different research topics from one another and communicate much less frequently. Interaction shifts from frequent meetings with multiple peers and faculty members (i.e., formal classroom meetings) to interactions with only a few. Socialization with the larger academic community enjoyed during the first two phases of doctoral study reduces to a much smaller community dominated by the dissertation advisor and, to a lesser extent, the other committee members.

The dissertation has been designed as an “educational tool used by staff to promote increased self-directed… independent learning” (Harrison & Whalley, 2008, p. 401); however, many doctoral students have a difficult time negotiating their independence at this stage (Gardner, 2008a), as independent work on the dissertation can feel significantly different than coursework during the previous years of increasing social
interaction. If doctoral students do not experience enough support and direction from faculty members, specifically the chair of their committee, they may not develop enough skills (or the correct skills) required to succeed at the research stage; however, with too much direction, students will not learn how to become independent researchers (Gardner, 2008a). Developing the ability to evaluate projects independently becomes pivotal, so students learn to determine when to ask for help and how to avoid relying too heavily on their professors for guidance.

Because the final stage in the doctoral process involves so few individuals, relationships within this smaller group of department members become crucial. In fact, students’ relationships with their advisors are potentially the most critical relationships within the entire dissertation process (Tinto, 1993) and frequently influence their entire doctoral experience (Gardner, 2008a). Because advisors guide and approve students’ work before sharing it with other committee members, advisors become students’ primary point of contact. Students must work well with their advisors in order to succeed and make enough progress with their research projects to open up the dissertation discussions to the wider group of committee members. Maintaining good working relationships with the entire committee while still working independently on research is essential in completing this transition successfully.

Students may feel surprised at the lack of structure during the dissertation stage (Golde, 2000). Regardless of how well organized or poorly organized the academic department may have been during coursework, construction of the dissertation is largely dependent on the individual student researcher. Doctoral students need to determine their own topic, method, and direction of study without both the guidance and limitations
provided by the previous classroom environment. Doctoral students may feel unprepared for the level of self-direction required to succeed (Gardner, 2008a). Not only must students guide their own research, but they also must take responsibility for their own socialization and for organizing their projects. Instead of a pre-arranged schedule for classes, students must take the initiative to set up appointments with advisors, committee members, and peer groups. Without the structure of the classroom environment, and without being guided and directed by faculty members, students rely on their personal motivation and the skills they have developed to design and carry out their own research and work schedules (Grover, 2007). Instead of meeting in the classroom under the frequent direction of faculty members, students manage their own itinerary and appointments; consequently, the ability to work independently becomes critical at the research stage.

Doctoral students achieve success at the research stage by completing and defending the dissertation. After successfully completing this process, students are encouraged to identify as professional academics rather than graduate students (Weidman et al., 2001). This “moving out” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) stage completes students’ successful transition to the world of doctoral study and enables them to move forward to the next chapter in their academic lives.

**Doctoral Attrition**

Only about 50% of the students entering doctoral programs succeed in finishing their dissertations and earning their Ph.D. degrees (Cassuto, 2013; Golde, 2005; Morrison, 2014; Nettles & Millett, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), the attrition rate for doctoral students increases significantly with each year of study. Unlike
undergraduate study, doctoral student attrition rate is the lowest during the first year. The dropout rate is only 6.6% during year one but increases steadily each year. In 2008, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) established the Ph.D. Completion Project, a seven-year initiative designed to address the issue of Ph.D. completion and attrition. The very existence of this initiative demonstrates the need to find ways to help doctoral students graduate. Although attrition rates vary both by field (Gardner, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Nerad & Cerny, 1991) and by institution (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Golde, 1998), and no one factor can typically account for student attrition (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001), several factors that influence doctoral attrition have been identified in previous research literature. A model of doctoral student persistence is more complicated than a model of undergraduate persistence, because doctoral student persistence changes throughout the three doctoral stages and within different fields of study; however, Tinto (1993) created a model (see Figure 2) to explain doctoral persistence across these stages. In the first stage of doctoral study, individual factors such as goals and commitments influence student persistence. Individual attributes, such as ability, age, gender, race, social class, and educational experiences before entering graduate school, combine to shape these goals and commitments. External commitments, such as work, family obligations, and financial resources, combine with goals and commitments to “establish the parameters of the student’s participation in graduate school” (Tinto, 1993, p. 239), and participation patterns, both academic and social interactions, affect persistence and attrition.
Student traits or characteristics. One of the student characteristics influencing doctoral attrition during the first stage of the doctoral process, the transition stage, is academic ability. Doctoral students must possess strong scholastic competence as a basic prerequisite for completing a doctoral program (Grover, 2007); however, many students still enter programs unprepared for doctoral work (Golde & Dore, 2001). If they are not capable of the more strenuous research and writing demands required of doctoral coursework, they are not likely to adapt and make a successful transition into the doctoral environment. Still other students feel disappointed in their classes. They may have enjoyed studying content as undergraduate students or master’s students but may not enjoy studying theory and methods (Golde, 1998). There are significant differences between (a) learning content material in a specific, chosen field that a student loves and (b) learning theory and research methods to apply to new studies within that field. Students disinterested in the theoretical and research aspects of their fields often fail to fully transition into the doctoral environment and leave

Figure 2. Tinto’s (1993, p. 240) model of doctoral persistence.
before graduation. Even when students are prepared for the rigors of doctoral study, they still may have difficulties managing the requirements of their program (Grover, 2007). Likewise, they often do not create an asset base, nor do they find research groups or make connections with faculty members that will help them as they progress in their studies and in their careers.

High personal motivation is another characteristic found among doctoral students who persist in their studies through completion (Grover, 2007; Lovvits, 2001). The need to complete their Ph.D. degrees may not be as vital to students as the need may have been to complete their bachelor’s or master’s degree, and when the motivation level to finish is insufficient, doctoral students often fail to experience an urgency to remain in their programs through graduation. In addition, when doctoral students are not as successful as they used to be academically, they may lose motivation and leave (Golde, 2000). Since the workload is much more difficult at the doctoral level, students not performing as well as they did in their previous programs may not feel inclined to continue with their studies. Particularly at the dissertation stage, high motivation to complete is typically found in students who remain with their program until the dissertation is complete (Flynn et al., 2012). Only when motivation level is high enough are students able to overcome common dissertation difficulties, such as setbacks, stress, and depression. These students accept struggle as a part of life and stick with it (Cakmak, Oztekin, Isci, Danisman, Uslu, & Karadag, 2015) when other students give up trying. They can cope with challenging situations as a natural part of life and meet those challenges rather than being defeated by them.

Some discrepancies exist within the research literature about individual factors
that lead to doctoral attrition. Some researchers have found that women are less likely than men to complete doctoral programs (Stiles, 2003), possibly due to traditional feminine roles of subordination and passivity (Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2013), while other studies have found no significant difference between genders regarding degree completion (Nerad & Cerny, 1991; Ott, Markewich, & Ochsner, 1984). Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) found no gender differences once researchers controlled for assistantships, so the differences in completion rates between genders might not directly relate to gender at all. Minority students have higher attrition rates, possibly because of issues with social integration (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1993), although no conclusive evidence has been presented confirming whether demographic variables influence attrition (Bair & Haworth, 2005).

**Student expectations.** Even when students possess the intellectual competence to complete dissertation work successfully, they do not always want to participate in the “all-consuming lifestyle” (Golde, 1998, p. 57) of the doctoral student. Because the duration of most doctoral programs can span five to seven years, some students realize during their first year of study that they do not want so many years of their lives dominated by doctoral study. At other times, external commitments interrupt coursework (Tinto, 1993), and this is when priorities shift from doctoral studies to other aspects of life. Many students find other factors in their lives, such as work obligations and family commitments, become more important to them than earning a Ph.D. When these external commitments become prioritized over school, students leave their programs to find a more balanced lifestyle.

Student satisfaction with their programs or their departments also may contribute
to doctoral attrition (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Golde, 1998, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). Because
doctoral work does become such a significant part of students’ lives, feeling dissatisfied
with either their program or their department can erode student persistence. Some
students realize that they are in the wrong department and simply switch departments
within the same institution (Nerad & Miller, 1996). Although this group of students still
completes their degrees, they complete their work in a different department in which they
started and still factor into the attrition rate of their original department. Particularly in
the sciences, this type of attrition accounts for nearly half of the first-year attrition in
some departments (Golde, 1998). For other students, gaining a close-up look at the
realities of faculty life help students decide that they do not want to pursue a terminal
degree (Golde, 2000).

**Education and career goals.** Students’ expectations and career goals influence
their decision to remain in school through degree completion. Students are more likely to
persist when their education goals and career goals require a completed doctorate
(Lovitts, 2001; Nerad & Cerny, 1991; Tinto, 1993). If students are interested in seeking a
faculty position at a research institution, they are more likely to persist than students
hoping for a community college teaching position, which often does not require a
doctorate. There are also occasions when students feel conflicted about their career goals
or enter their doctoral programs only to realize that they may have held unrealistic
expectations about finding a faculty position (Golde & Dore, 2001). After spending time
in their discipline conducting research and observing faculty members on a more frequent
and personal scale than during undergraduate or master’s work, some students realize that
the realities of faculty life may not match their desired lifestyle (Golde, 1998). Some
students may underestimate the solitude required to conduct research work, or they may not fully comprehend the time demands required to teach, research, and engage in service obligations (e.g., serving on committees)--all typical job responsibilities of faculty members at research universities.

**Socialization, engagement, and integration into the department culture.** Social isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007) and an inability to integrate into the academic community (Herzig, 2002) may contribute to students’ leaving a doctoral program before completion. Although it is essential for students to become independent during the research stage, social isolation actually inhibits student progress when they begin their transition into the doctoral environment, and it continues to impact their success throughout the development stage. When students feel as if they are not a member of their academic community, they are more likely to leave before completion than those students who do feel as if they belong to their academic community. Student involvement (Bair & Haworth, 2005) and increased participation can increase persistence (Church, 2009). Involvement can come in many forms: cooperative learning, peer study groups, tutoring, assistantships, working on a research project with a faculty member, participating in a campus organization, or other forms. As long as students actively engage with other members of their departments, they are more likely to feel as if they belong instead of feeling isolated. When students become more involved with their institutions, they are more likely to successfully integrate into the academic community.

One complication of socialization is the need to balance dependence and independence. Doctoral students are expected to become more independent than they were as undergraduate or master’s-level students. Work becomes more stressful and time
consuming. The university setting can be particularly intimidating to students entering their doctoral programs from small, liberal arts colleges (Garnder, 2008a). The move from an intimate campus to a large university with a much higher student-faculty ratio can make socialization particularly difficult during the first year.

The campus climate can also impact students’ satisfaction with their departments as well as integration to the academic community (Bair & Haworth, 2005). An unstructured department can leave students feeling unguided and uncertain about their progress and their future. A lack of structure can often lead to dissatisfaction with their program, driving students to leave before degree completion (Golde, 2000). It can also inhibit students’ ability to socialize well with peers and faculty members. When students feel both dissatisfied and confused about their programs, they may be less likely to reach out and participate, another potential hindrance to degree completion. In some cases, high attrition rates can be found among students who enter in large cohorts (Bair & Haworth, 2005). This may indicate that large cohorts defeat the purpose of the cohort model, which is to create a sub-group to provide mutual support and assistance throughout their programs. If there are too many students, they might not make connections with other students as readily as they could in a smaller cohort. This once again emphasizes the importance of socialization as a contributor to academic success.

**Relationships.** Students maintaining positive relationships both with peers and faculty members are more likely to persist than students who lack those relationships (Tinto, 1993). Peer interaction is important both for academic and social support. Peer relationships during the developmental stage directly influence both student retention as well as student satisfaction with their programs (Lovitts, 2001). Likewise, poor
relationships with peers and faculty members could lead to attrition as students try to develop the skills they need to persist in their doctoral programs (Bair & Haworth, 2005). Poor relationships, or even a lack of close relationships with peers, may leave students feeling too isolated and dissatisfied with their academic lives to continue, but creating and maintaining close relationships with a network of peers can offer students both academic and emotional support, thus providing with the motivation to persist. Formal mentoring from more advanced students also increases student persistence (Boyle & Boice, 1998).

In addition to developing and maintaining positive relationships with peers, maintaining positive relationships with faculty members and advisors can also lead to degree completion (Baird, 1990; Boyle & Boice, 1998). Without positive relationships with faculty members, students may lack guidance to help them understand their expectations and requirements. Working on a research project with faculty members in particular (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nerad & Cerny, 1993; Godle, 2000) can offer students support and encouragement in their studies while also helping them prepare for their careers.

During the initial transition stage, students with teaching assistantships are more likely to persist than students without teaching assistantships (Bowen & Rudenstein, 1992). This may be because the assistantship experience groups students into a sub-category, and they are able to discuss the classes they are teaching as well as the classes they are taking with their peers. This increased social interaction may help build relationships that provide support to students as they acclimate to their new doctoral environment. In the second stage of doctoral work, the development stage, students
continue to acquire skills needed to complete their courses, pass their comprehensive examinations, and conduct research. Assistantship experiences become an important part of the socialization process, which then leads to academic and professional growth in the developmental stage (Gardner, 2008a). At this stage, departmental relationships become increasingly important (Baird, 1990).

During the dissertation stage, relationships with peers and faculty members change but remain important. While the work of researchers is often independent, positive relationships with peers and faculty members remain key elements for student success. Support outside the classroom becomes vital, and peer groups become important as students no longer meet and commiserate with peers before or after their classes. In the dissertation stage of the doctoral process, the candidate-advisor relationship becomes crucial, as the advisor suddenly becomes one of the only faculty members with whom students meet in person (Tinto, 1993). The quality of the relationship between the student and advisor can often make the difference between persistence and departure at this stage. When students do not have a positive relationship with their advisor, or when conflicts develop with their advisor, students may not persist with dissertation work (Golde, 2000).

**External factors.** At times, external factors may interrupt coursework. Some of the external factors affecting doctoral student attrition already mentioned include external commitments, such as family and work (Tinto, 1993). Other external factors include financial support (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), unexpected costs (Pinson, 1997), and the labor market at the time (Amped, 2010).

Whether financial support comes in the form of financial aid, assistantships, employment, or family support, a student’s financial situation plays an important role in
doctoral persistence. Students with financial support are more likely to remain than students without financial support (Bair & Hayworth, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Finances directly influence persistence because students determine whether they can afford to pay for classes. Likewise, finances indirectly influence persistence in that attending part-time rather than full-time requires more time to complete a doctoral program, and the more time required to finish, the less likely students are to remain through degree completion (Pinson, 1997). Lack of finances can also drive students to spend more time working an outside job, which gives them less time to focus on research. Full-time work, in particular, can distract students from their research, extend the amount of time they spend on their doctoral studies, and reduce the likelihood that they will complete their programs (Tuckman, 1990); however, when students enter part-time student status during their research stage, they become more likely to persist (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012).

While finances impact the decision to remain in school or leave at any stage (Tinto, 1993), there are differences between stages in the effect of different types of financial assistance students receive. Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) found that it was during the transition stage that students with teaching assistantships are more likely than others to persist. They found no difference in persistence among individuals with teaching assistantships and other forms of financial assistance during the development stage; however, students with research assistantships are more likely to complete the research stage of doctoral study than students with other forms of financial assistance, including teaching assistantships. Teaching assistantships help prepare students for teaching, but they do not help prepare for the independent work of research, whereas research assistantships provide students much more research experience, preparing them better to
complete the final stages of their doctoral work. Tinto (1993) also pointed out that institution-based financial resources are more readily available through candidacy and are not as available at the dissertation stage, creating a potential obstacle to completion.

**Dissertation-specific attrition.** Doctoral students encounter several problems at the dissertation stage that can lead to attrition, even after they have transitioned successfully into the environment of their graduate school, completed their coursework, and passed their exams (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Bair & Haworth, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Some students encounter difficulty shifting from being dependent upon faculty members to conducting independent research (Gardner, 2008a, 2008b). Sometimes they find that the isolating environment of dissertation work is too much for them to bear and quit before graduating (Ali & Khun, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Sigafus, 1998). Oftentimes, students fail to develop and maintain positive relationships with their advisors, or they may experience problematic issues with their advisor or committee members (Wright, 2003). Many students also accept job offers before they finish their dissertations and do not find time to complete their dissertation work. Other students leave at the dissertation stage because they feel happy with their jobs, and those jobs do not require a completed Ph.D. (Grover, 2007). Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, doctoral attrition is higher during the dissertation stage than during any other stage of the doctoral process (Digest of Education Statistics, 2013).

At the dissertation stage, students need to become more independent to succeed. During coursework, they absorbed and synthesized knowledge from others, but at the dissertation stage, students must work alone and conduct original research (Delemont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). Not all students are up to the challenge and
remain dependent on others for guidance. Students may even begin dissertation work feeling independent but discover latent tendencies toward dependency that were previously dormant. Still other students may perceive themselves in a psychologically childlike state and view their chair, their committee members, and other faculty members in parental positions (Blum, 2010). Whether students are consciously aware of this transference or not, becoming an independent researcher becomes even more challenging. This issue can sometimes be minimized when institutions use a scaffolding method (Liechty, Schull, & Liao, 2009). This method allows students to make a gradual shift in their level of dependence level because each new project builds on knowledge gained from previous experience. This scaffolding method should include flexible support systems targeted to individual students. It should offer minimal direction for independent learning but responsive support when needed (Vygotsky, 1978).

The isolating environment of the dissertation process can also cause students to give up before graduating (Ali & Khun, 2006; Flynn, Chasek, Harper, Murphy, & Jorgensen, 2012; Gardner, 2009; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Sigafus, 1998). Some students realize that the independent work of a scholar is not the right fit for them socially and explore alternate career options, particularly if they are already feeling ambivalent about their careers (Gordon, 2003). Students in the sciences may feel the symptoms of isolation less than those in the humanities because collaborative research is common in the sciences, while independent research is more common in the humanities and social sciences (Gardner, 2008a; Golde, 2005). The laboratory environment of a collaborative research team may help students feel less isolated, and the support generated by the group could encourage completion.
Because success at the dissertation stage is dependent on the approval of an advisor/chair and committee members, maintaining positive relationships is essential. Advisors and students need to be complementary regarding roles and expectations, research topic, and timeline if students are to succeed (Gordon, 2003). Students encountering issues with their advisors often quit working on their dissertations (Wright, 2003); however, most students who complete their dissertations report a “positive and supportive relationship with their dissertation chairs” (Flynn et al., 2012, p. 248). Quality advising can make the difference in a student’s decision to give up or continue working on the dissertation (Nelson & Lovitts, 2001). There are so many obstacles standing in between the doctoral student and degree completion that failure to resolve issues with their advisor could seem like an insurmountable obstacle.

Stress (Baird, 1990; Smith et al., 2006), depression (Fullic, 2011), and lack of work-life balance (Wright, 2003) all may contribute to attrition at the dissertation stage. Doctoral candidates need to contribute something new to their field (Bum, 2010). When their research does not quickly yield the desired results, students can feel that the work creates too much stress. The demanding work and frequent setbacks of dissertation research can be additionally stressful. Sometimes a combination of external factors, such as lack of sleep, additional stress from work, or family issues, compound dissertation-related stressors until students feel too much stress to continue (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006). Long hours of isolated work without the gratification of grades, job offers, or promotions can also potentially lead to depression (Fullic, 2011). Anxiety and despair can often lead to a lack of concentration, which inhibits productive work (Cakmak et al., 2015), and this perpetuates increased anxiety, deeper depression, and
increasingly unproductive work. Both stress and depression can feel compounded and amplified in isolating environments, and a lack of balance between work and life sometimes causes students to quit working on their dissertations before they finish (Wright, 2003).

Personal characteristics such as strong motivation and perseverance can be found in students who persist (Flynn et al., 2012), while self-criticism, self-doubt (Gordon, 2003), and other self-sabotaging behaviors are more common among students who do not complete their dissertations (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshal, 2008). Students with self-sabotaging tendencies put themselves in self-destructive situations, such as frequent procrastination, low effort, and disorganization, which leave them unlikely to finish. Students who finish their dissertations typically plan regular work sessions, feel highly motivated to complete their programs, and are able to persevere through the many barriers they encounter. Students with a strong sense of responsibility to their studies may also be more likely to persist (Kluever & Green, 1998).

People deeply interested in their research projects and who enjoy the dissertation process are more likely to finish than people unhappy with their research and the process (Cakmak et al., 2015). The students, now doctoral candidates, who are able to work consistently on their projects, despite the many difficulties, have an emotional attachment to their research, and they tend to feel happy or excited when they talk about it. These students are also able to concentrate on their work despite disruptions, while students who are easily distracted from their dissertations often do not finish. This places a great deal of importance on students selecting the right research topic (Segol, 2014), since a lack of excitement or interest in research may put students at risk of not completing.
Other students become disappointed in their research findings and decide not to complete their educations (Flynn et al., 2012).

Environmental factors, such as family support, child care, doctoral or career support, and peer support, also influence students’ decision to persist or quit. Becoming a parent can reduce the importance of the dissertation (Blum, 2010). Other life-altering circumstances, such as a job loss or divorce, also can distract students from their dissertations (Flynn et al., 2012). Students with strong support from family and/or peers may be more likely to persist through the dissertation stage than students without such emotional and psychological support. Not surprisingly, having financial support also helps students persist throughout the dissertation stage.

Financial issues also can drive students to avoid their dissertations (Wright, 2003). When students encounter financial issues during the dissertation stage, they may find it much more desirable to quit working on the dissertation and work instead at a job that provides a financial income. Tinto (1993) pointed out that institution-based financial resources are more readily available through candidacy and are not as available at the dissertation stage, creating a potential obstacle to completion. Although students may accept job offers before completing the dissertation--a reasonable step since many students pursue doctoral studies in order to improve career options--it can be much more difficult for students to complete the dissertation after leaving an institution (Grover, 2007). Once they are away from the campus, it becomes more difficult to communicate with an advisor and committee members, which may hinder progress. In addition, the demands of a new job often interfere with the ability to devote time and energy to the dissertation because extra time will be needed to adapt to the new professional life and
Grief

Grief is a response to loss, and it can include both mental and physical symptoms. Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, and Stroebe (2008) differentiate between bereavement, grief, and mourning. They define bereavement as the state individuals are left in after suffering a significant loss [to death], grief as the personal aspects of bereavement, and mourning as the social aspect of managing grief. All three terms will be used in this study; however, the terms “grieving,” “the bereaved,” and mourners may be used interchangeably.

Responses to grief vary from person to person (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014; Neimeyer, 2013, 2015; Worden, 2009, 2015), but there are several common experiences found in many people suffering from grief. Grief can influence both physical and cognitive abilities (Ness & Pfeffier, 1990; VanDongen, 1991), which can lead to health problems, emotional issues, stress, isolation, and identity loss. Some may experience complicated grief (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson, Maciejewski, Reynolds, Bierhals, Newsom, Fasiczka, Frank, Doman, & Miller, 1995; Prigerson, Bierhals, Kasl, Reynolds, Shear, Newsom, & Jacobs, 1996) or disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002). There are also several different theories about the methods of coping with grief.

Health

Grief can influence one’s health in a variety of ways—e.g., physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Memory loss and cognitive impairment frequently occur in grieving people (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010; Xavier, Ferraz, Trentini, Freitas, & Moriguchi, 2002), so concentration can be much more difficult than it was prior to experiencing a significant loss. Newly bereaved people are often “disorganized and disabled by loss”
(Parks & Prigerson, 2010, p. 104). The ability to focus is often disrupted, so even basic tasks become more difficult and time consuming during grief. The ability to make decisions is often impaired (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, & Hlll, 1995). In addition to the individual loss of cognitive function, loss also disrupts family dynamics, which further complicates the ability to make decisions (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1998). Even simple decisions remind people of their loss, making concentration more difficult (Murphy, 2000). Grieving people may also deliberately avoid making decisions, since no choice will ever return them to their previous lives or bring back their loved ones (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995). The bereaved also report high levels of insomnia and sleeping problems, which can decrease both cognitive and physical health. Grieving people often report decreased health and an increase in the number of visits to the doctor when they are grieving--a process that can continue for years after the loss (Lannen, Wolfe, Prigerson, Oneloy, Kreicbergs, 2008). Grieving people can suffer from increased medical problems as well as anxiety issues, excess drinking, and withdrawal from society (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995).

The experience of grief impacts people biologically, psychosocially, and existentially (Schneider, 2008). The bereaved feel the impact of their loss through emotional distress, which often compounds their cognitive and physical impairment. Sadness, depression, anger, and guilt are all typical emotional responses to grief (Jacobs, Hansen, Berkman, Kasl, & Otsfeld, 1989; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014; Sanders, Mauger, & Strong, 1985; Zisook, DuVaul, & Click, 2004). Sadness and frequent outbursts of anger frequently occur in addition to “what the existential philosophers call nothingness” (Klass, 2013, p. 597) in both short-term and long-term grief.
Acknowledging these emotions is a necessary step in coping with grief (Worden, 2009). Although people need to process their emotions as a part of managing their grief, dwelling on negative emotion for too long can potentially inhibit the recovery process (Nolen-Hoekskema, 2001).

**Stress and Isolation**

Stress and isolation are both typical experiences for people when they are grieving. Unfortunately, the American culture discourages grieving. Many people do not know how to respond to grieving individuals and instead promote a “get over it” or “push ahead” attitude about loss. This cultural response adds additional stress on top of the stress already created directly by the loss of a loved one, which can lead to social isolation (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995), another typical symptom of grief. Stress does typically decrease with time. With each year that passes after the loss of a loved one, less stress may be experienced by the bereaved (Murphy, 2000). Stress can also sometimes serve as a catalyst for the bereaved to pursue activities that may help them find meaning in their lives and in their loss (Gillies & Neimyer, 2006).

Isolation can become problematic for the bereaved. When people grieve, they often isolate themselves from society (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014), preferring to avoid the outside world. The isolation may be self-imposed and stem from the sadness and depression typical of grieving. This isolation also could result from the discomfort other people seem to feel around the grieving. When people are not directly involved with the loss themselves, they typically do not comprehend the deep pain and suffering experienced by those people who are directly involved (Walker & Balk, 2013) and often do not know how to respond to the grieving. The isolation of mourning creates stress in
addition to the stress directly attributed to grief (Shilling, 1993).

People who have similar shared experiences can offer the most helpful support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). These shared experiences can provide grief-related support among people who have encountered similar losses. It can be comforting to talk with other people who have undergone similar experiences because they can offer a sense of understanding that others cannot provide (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995). Other specific support can also come from colleagues and those who can provide specific support rather than general or vague support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Unfortunately, many grieving people do not socialize unless forced to do so (Parkes & Prigerson, 2013).

Grieving people need social support, but American society currently is not set up to support them. Relocation for jobs and divorce have increased the distance separating many people from their families, so the systems that previously helped people adjust to their lives after the death of a loved one are no longer available. This can be combated through grief counseling or support groups; however, professional help is often stigmatized or expensive, which leads many people to avoid using these services (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995). Participating in work and other activities that did not include the deceased is often more easily accomplished and can be another way to participate in the world again (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). This can benefit grieving individuals by taking their minds off their pain for a while and also by helping them avoid extensive periods of isolation. People who typically benefit the most from grief counseling are those who reach out for help of their own accord (Schut, 2010).

Identity Loss

Grief changes people. The absence of a loved one can leave an empty hole in the
life of the bereaved, which can lead to an additional loss of goals, values, or identity (Klass, 2001). It can change the way people see themselves and the way in which they view the world. Whether the changes turn out to be positive or negative, the experience of suffering through grief changes how people look at the world, who they are, and even their relationships (Neimeyer, 2001).

Losing a loved one often changes the way in which the bereaved perceive the world. Worldviews, the activities people engage in, and the beliefs they hold are shaped by other people (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). People change their world views to correspond with the loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) or find a way to assimilate the loss into existing beliefs (Park & Folkman, 1997). When unexpected traumatic loss seems to contradict the way they previously viewed the world, the bereaved question their beliefs. This can lead survivors to reassess their worldviews and look for meaning behind the experience and in their lives (Park, 2010). Some people can find a way to fit their loss into their existing worldviews and beliefs. When they cannot do that, then the belief system must change to align with the loss. The bereaved need to reconstruct meaning when a traumatic event creates a “discrepancy between global meanings and event-specific meanings, resulting in changed understandings of the loss and/or of the world” (Hibberd, 2013, p. 676).

Some people are able to cope with these changes through their religious faith. Through prayer and contact with other people who share their beliefs, the bereaved can often feel connected to their lost loved ones, thereby assimilating the life change into their existing beliefs. For other people, the changes can result in a loss of faith (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006) because they wonder how the god they believed in could let something
so terrible happen. Whether the grieving find a way to fit the loss into their existing worldviews or whether they develop new beliefs to accommodate the loss, grief impacts the way people believe the world works.

Identity is also shaped by the roles people occupy in life. Grief often changes those roles. People often identify themselves by what they do and what roles they occupy (Parkes, 1971, 1993), so loss can cause changes in the way the grieving perceive themselves. Loss of self may also occur after losing a loved one. People are shaped by those around them and even define themselves by their relationships with others, so nearly all of roles an individual occupies, and therefore the “components of the self,” may be impacted by the loss of a loved one. The loss of a loved one becomes even more distressing when the bereaved have defined themselves through the deceased (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). If a person identifies herself as a wife or mother and then loses the person complementary to that role, the bereaved may feel as though she lost a part of her identity.

When someone dies, the roles they occupied in life are often taken on by other people (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). When a spouse dies, the survivor needs to take on the responsibilities that had previously been managed by the deceased. As the grieving assimilate new roles into their lives, their identities change. The bereaved may take on new roles previously held by the deceased. These roles may include paying bills or cooking or shoveling snow, but there will be tasks previously performed by the deceased that may need to be absorbed into the roles of the survivor. The bereaved may also pick up new activities that remind them of the deceased, which creates additional change in their identities.
Complicated Grief

When people suffer so deeply from their grief that they seem to get stuck in it, they may be experiencing complicated grief (Boelen, VandeBout, & deKeijer, 2003; Prigerson et al., 1995). Complicated grief is “the failure to return to pre-loss levels of performance or states of emotion” (p. 23). Complicated grief occurs when the bereaved cannot move beyond the pain of their loss (Balk, Walker & Baker, 2010) and may stem from the bereaved feeling so overwhelmed by the changes in their lives without their loved one that they resort to passive rumination rather than productive functioning (Stroebe, Boelen, van den Hout, Stroebe, Salemink, & van den Bout, 2007). Those with complicated grief suffer from more severe symptoms of social, general, and physical health problems than those suffering from non-complicated grief. Typical symptoms include anxiety—such as nervous, restless, or irritable behavior—as well as depression, guilt, and apathy. Those suffering from complicated grief may experience increased anxiety and depression, preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, frequent crying, disbelief regarding death, feeling stunned by the death, and lack of acceptance of the death (Prigerson, 1996). In addition, symptoms can also include higher rates of suicidal thoughts and health-related issues (such as high blood pressure) and higher rates of cancer, heart problems, stroke, smoking, and alcohol consumption (Prigerson, 1997).

Treatments for complicated grief, also referred to as traumatic grief or prolonged grief (Prigerson, Horowitz, Jacobs, Parkes, Asland, Goodkin, Maciejewski, 2009), include modified interpersonal therapy (Shear & Shair, 2005), cognitive restructuring (Boelen, de Keijser, van den Hout, Salemink, & van den Bout, 2007), writing therapy (Boelen, 2006; Shear, 2006), and behavior activation (Stroebe et al., 2007). Behavior
activation may include promoting social reengagement, engagement in previous or new pastimes, managing loss-related tasks, and identifying new goals and then working toward them to find new meaning in life. Rando (1993) suggested that to cope with their complicated grief, mourners should take the following steps: (1) Recognize the loss, (2) react to the separation, (3) remember the loved one and re-experience times with him, (4) relinquish attachments and assumptions from the pre-loss period, (5) re-adjust to a new world without the loved one, and (6) reinvest in new activities and new relationships.

**Disenfranchised Grief**

People can also suffer from disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002), grief “that is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned” (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010, p. 158). People grieving someone from an unrecognized relationship, such as homosexual or extramarital relationships; unrecognized losses, such as abortions; or unrecognized grief, such as young children, do not receive emotional support for their grief. Schneider (1991) reported an increase in suicidal tendencies in men who had lost a partner to AIDS. Because those suffering from AIDS often conceal the disease and society often ignores those afflicted with it, the grief of the bereaved is often unrecognized. Young children, people with brain injuries, and people with learning disabilities may not have the communication skills to express their grief, so their grief often goes unrecognized. When the bereaved do not share their pain with others, they receive no support, and all the expressions of their grief become intensified, so they may be at greater risk of complicated grief.

**Positive Outcomes**

The bereaved may feel that life loses significance after the death of a loved one;
however, they may also discover new paths for their post-loss lives and find new appreciation for life. Responses to grief can include resilience and unexpected growth as well as chronic difficulties (Bonanno, Boener, & Wortman, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008), and finding something positive in the loss can sometimes help people cope with their grief (Davis, 2008; Michael & Snyder, 2005; Neimeyer, 2006). After losing a loved one and going through the grieving process, some people respond by finding a new appreciation for life (Janoff-Bullman, 1992; McPherson, 1997) or new purpose in life (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Hershberger & Walsh, 1990). Although they may not actually look for a benefit in their loss, people may begin to enjoy and appreciate life more than they did before their tragedy (Lykins, Sergerstrom, Averill, Evans, & Kemeny, 2007; Wheeler, 2001). The process of suffering so much can put smaller issues in perspective, and people may not react negatively to things that used to bother them.

Finding solace can serve as a consolation after losing someone close. “Solace is found within the sense of being connected to a reality that transcends the self” (Klass, 2013, p. 610). It can provide some comfort and soothe some of the ache. It can alleviate some of the pain and sorrow of grief but not completely remove them. Human interaction can provide solace. A trusted friend or family member can help console the grieving by being available and offering “to share the suffering” (Norberg, Bergsten, Lundman, 2001). While it is not truly possible to share pain, the experience of feeling some else’s presence can be comforting as is the knowledge that another person is willing to help, or at least try to help. People also derive comfort from human contact and soothing language (Brenner, 2004). Something as simple as touching another person’s hand or offering a kind word can offer moments of solace.
People are also able to comfort themselves through the use of transitional objects. They can think of a comforting place or loved one and find solace in the memory (Horton, 1981). They may hold something physical, such as a book or sweater that belonged to the deceased, and feel a link or bond with the lost loved one (Volkan, 1981). Some people find solace in their faith, feeling comfort in prayer and in the connection the prayer brings with both their deity and their loved one (Klass, 1999). Sometimes, the process of finding positive outcomes can also lead the bereaved to find meaning in their lives again (Davies, 2008).

**Meaning**

The experience of losing someone close can also leave the grieving feeling as if their lives no longer have meaning. As a reaction, the bereaved may look for meaning in their lives and in their loss (Park, 2010). The search for meaning becomes an important part of adapting to life after traumatic loss (Gillies & Neimayer, 2006; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). According to Neimeyer (2000, 2001), meaning reconstruction after a significant loss is actually central to the grieving process. If the bereaved (a) redefine themselves and (b) redefine the way in which they engage with the world, they will be better equipped to move forward with a meaningful life. Worden’s (2009) mediators for mourning take individual differences into account, and Attig’s (2001, 2011) theory of relearning the world focus on individual differences as a means of establishing a new place in the world after loss.

Sense making helps the bereaved adapt to life after significant loss (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006). Gillies and Neimayer (2006) described three ways of reconstructing meaning after a significant loss: sense-making, identity change, and benefit finding. Sense making involves asking ourselves
why, why our loss occurred or why we survived when our loved one did not (Hibberd, 2013). When the bereaved can find some sense in their loss, they are able to accept it and move forward with their lives (Bonanno et al., 2006; Currier et al., 2006)

In cases of sudden, violent loss, survivors are often unable to make sense of the loss or find any benefit from it. When this occurs, relying on life’s significance (Currier, Holland, & Neimyer, 2006; Hibberd, 2013) or finding new purpose in life (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Hershberger & Walsh, 1990) can help the bereaved. Some survivors find new purpose in preventing similar tragedies, while others may respond by becoming violent themselves (Armour, 2003). Some people are easily able to find meaning in their post-loss lives while others struggle to find meaning (Worden, 2015). The closer the relationship to the deceased, the more difficult it can be for the grieving to find significance in life without their loved one (Wheeler, 2001).

Learning how to live a meaningful life after a significant loss can be difficult. Continuing to bond with the deceased can be one way that the bereaved are able to live a meaningful life again (Attig, 2011), and it may also contribute to positive outcomes after a loss (Wheeler, 2001). When people are very close, their emotional bonds with one another do not end in death. Remaining connected to the deceased may help some people cope with their grief. By making a conscious effort to connect, many bereaved can maintain relationships with their loved ones while still moving forward with their lives (Klass, 1988; Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992; Worden, 1996). The grieving can still love the deceased even though they are separated (Attig, 2000). Talking to their loved one or writing them letters can help move the grieving process along in a manner that allows the bereaved to move forward with a meaningful life without getting stuck
(Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014); however, people who may have had anxious or ambivalent relationships with the deceased should remain cautious about devoting too much time thinking about past relationships and may benefit more from managing their anxiety (Schut, Stroebe, & Boelen, 2006; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Positive growth can occur after losing someone important, but it is not an inevitable outcome, just a possibility (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). People can feel depressed, grieve deeply, and still grow. It does not need to be one or the other (Klass, 2013).

**Coping Theories**

“Bereavement is a life crisis” (Walker & Balk, 2013, p. 340). When people cope with crisis, they look for meaning in the experience, try to maintain relationships, and try to find emotional balance—all while trying to also preserve self-efficacy. Coping mechanisms can include seeking information and support; however, typical coping mechanisms may not be sufficient for people grieving the death of a loved one (Moos & Schaefer, 1986).

Kubler-Ross (1969) proposed the theory that grief is a process. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014), the process of grieving over the loss of a loved one includes five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the denial stage, people are not ready to process the loss of their loved one. They may still wake up and expect to see the deceased, temporarily forgetting what happened. In the anger stage, people are angry with themselves for losing a loved one and also angry at the deceased for leaving them. They may also blame others and feel angry with them or even feel angry with life in general. In the bargaining stage, people may pray to make an exchange for the return of their loved one or wonder what would have happened if events had
transpired differently. When people realize that their bargaining and fantasizing will not change the reality of the loss, they become depressed. They become sad and withdraw as they process the finality of their loss. As they begin to resume their lives without sadness permeating every waking moment, they begin to experience acceptance. In the acceptance stage, people acknowledge the reality of the death and move forward with their lives. These stages “are a part of a framework that makes up our learning to live without the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling” (p. 7), but they are only typical responses. These stages are also not necessarily linear, as people may move back and forth from one stage to another; some stages may overlap with another, and some people may skip stages. Each person responds to grief differently, so the stages are a general guide that may vary from one person to another. Neimeyer (2013, 2015) criticized the stage theory because it does not focus enough attention on cognitive or behavioral responses to loss but solely focuses on emotion. He also argued that Kubler-Ross’s stage theory fails to account for cultural variations in the grieving process.

Worden’s (2015; 2009) model of grieving was designed to help the bereaved as well as healthcare professionals attempting to provide support for the grieving. His theory divides the grieving process into four tasks rather than stages: (1) accept the reality of the loss; (2) process the pain; (3) adjust to a new environment without the loved one; and (4) emotionally relocate and memorialize the deceased but in a way that allows the bereaved to move forward with their lives. How people process these different tasks is different for each individual.

The two-track model of grieving (Rubin, 1999; Rubin, Malkingson, & Watztum,
2003) asserts that people simultaneously process their grief in two ways. One is biopsychosocial, such as through changes in health, mood, social interaction, or work. The other track focuses on the relationship to the deceased both before and after death.

The dual process model (DPM) of grieving (Stroeb & Schut, 1999, 2010) suggests that the bereaved oscillate between behaviors as coping strategies. Stroeb and Schut suggested that people experience two types of stress when grieving: (a) stress associated with the loss and (b) stress associated with reconstructing life after the loss. According to the DPM model, oscillating between confronting and avoiding these stresses is the key to adapting after significant loss. Rather than tackling one stage at a time, the grieving ease into adaptation. At one moment, they focus on engaging with the world without their loved one, and at other moments they feel absorbed with their grief and their loss.

**Grieving Parents**

The death of a child is one of the most stressful and long-lasting transitions parents will ever endure (Wing, Burge-Callaway, & Armistead, 2001). When parents lose their children, they have a difficult time finding meaning in the loss (Murphy, 2000), they often experience marital problems (Wing, Burge-Callaway, & Armistead, 2001), and they have difficulty maintaining social relationships; it can also impact their health (Kavanaugh et al., 2004; Malacrida, 1999). It is the worst event that can happen to parents, and their lives will never be the same as they had been before their loss.

How the grieving perceive their loss impacts the grief process more than the actual loss (Gillies & Neimayer, 2006; Hibberd, 2013; Nandeau, 1998; Neimeyer, 2001). Losing a child is typically perceived as the worst thing that can ever happen to a parent, so the grieving process for parents is often long and intense. Parents have reported high
levels of depression, low well-being, and frequent health-related problems while grieving the death of a child (Rogers, Floyd, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Hong, 2008). Parents also have reported “difficulty concentrating, problem-solving, and perceptions of non-productivity at work” (Murphy, 2000, p. 590) after the sudden loss of a child.

If the family perceives the death as a release from pain, such as after a long struggle with illness or disease, they may feel relief. If the death was unexpected, they may feel more guilt and anger about the loss. Talbott (1997) described two categories of grieving parents: survivors and perpetual grievers. Survivors eventually find meaning and purpose in life again after losing a child. These parents often accomplish this by looking for ways that they can maintain bonds with their children and continue to feel their presence as they move forward with their lives (Klass, 1988; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Perpetual grievers, on the other hand, do not find new meaning in life and cannot seem to move beyond their loss (Talbott, 1997). This category of grieving parent may be at higher risk of experiencing complicated grief. When complicated grief occurs, the bereaved cannot move beyond the pain of their loss (Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010). They may feel so overwhelmed by the changes in their lives without their child that they resort to passive rumination rather than productive functioning, getting stuck in their grief and not moving forward with their lives (Stroebe, Boelen, van den Hout, Stroebe, Salemink, & van den Bout, 2007).

Men and women tend to respond differently to grief. While both parents experience the pain and suffering inherent during the grieving process, mothers and fathers often respond differently after the death of a child. Women often gravitate to other people, actively seeking out the company of others, talking about their loss, reading about
grief, writing journals, and other creative activities (such as scrapbooking) as a means of coping with their loss (Davidson, 1984). Women also tend to benefit from interventions and support groups more than men, but they also typically report higher levels of distress than men do (Murphy, 2000). Simonds and Rothman (1992) observed that in the nineteenth century, mothers processed grief intellectually as well as emotionally; however, American society now perceives grief as a predominantly emotional process. From an American perspective, overlooking the intellectual element of grief marginalizes the pain and enormity of losing a child.

Fathers tend to avoid talking and prefer action when grieving. They remain silent but immerse themselves in physical activities, such as running or walking; they may also repair items around the house or initiate legal action after losing a child (Staudacher, 1991). Because fathers also tend to internalize emotions more than mothers do, pulling away from relationships and avoiding people, they frequently miss out on potentially helpful social support (Aho, Tarkka, & Kaunonen, 2006; Aho et al., 2010). They may develop a fatalist attitude or a loss of faith (Klass, 2013). In addition to anger and guilt, grieving fathers also feel bitter and are prone to prolonged depression and even mental illness (Aho, Tarkka, & Kaunonen, 2006). While they did not specifically study a sample of grieving parents, Strobe and Shut (1999, 2010) found that women tend to respond more emotionally and loss-oriented while men tend to be more problem focused and restoration oriented. The different expressions of grief between mothers and fathers are expressed in terms of generalities. People are individuals and may respond differently.

Klass (2013) observed that parents can assimilate the loss of their child into their existing worldviews, change their worldviews, and grow from their sorrow all at the same
time. They can acknowledge personal growth or positive change but still feel devastated over their child’s death. Parents’ sorrow may linger even after they have accepted their loss and reconstructed their lives and identities. The world will never be as good to them as it was with their child in it, and they perpetually feel as if they would trade their new lives, even the improvements, if they could have their lost child back with them again.

**Grieving Students**

Just as parents experience grief symptoms specifically related to the loss of a child, students experience grief in ways that are specially related to their lives as students. Grief among college students influences the overall college experience (Balk, 1997, 2001, 2008; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Wrenn, 1991). Grief can influence students’ ability to integrate both academically and socially in college (Servarty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). It hinders their identity development and the ability to develop close relationships (Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010). All of these issues can combine to place grieving college students at high risk for attrition (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Between 30% and 39% of undergraduate college students have lost someone close in the past two years (Balk, 2008; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Wrenn, 1999). This gives us between five and seven million grieving students enrolled in college at any given time. One study reported that 25% of graduate students surveyed reported losing someone significant within two years (Varga, 2013); however, this sample only include 37.5% (507) doctoral students at a single university. In 2013, approximately 266,220 new students enrolled in doctoral programs (Allum, 2014). If the percentage of grieving doctoral students is similar to Varga’s (2013) study or data about grieving undergraduate students, we could potentially have as many as 66,555 to 103,825 grieving students.
enrolled in doctoral programs. This number is too high to ignore. While the lack of data alone suggests a need for research into the area of grief and doctoral attrition, these students also deserve research recognition of their problems. By examining grief and doctoral students more closely, we may uncover ways of alleviating their problems and find meaning in their shared experiences.

Integration

Many grieving students have a difficult time academically integrating into the college environment. This may be in part because the environment of a college campus is not conducive to grieving. Recreational drug and alcohol use surrounds students. They are separated from their usual support systems consisting of close friends and family and trying to keep up with coursework at the same time (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Grieving students have reported difficulty concentrating and studying (Balk & Vesta, 1998; Silverman, 1987), which can easily inhibit the learning process and decrease academic standing. Grieving students reported significantly lower GPAs than non-grieving students, and they were also more likely to withdraw, drop, or be placed on academic probation (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Because GPA is a predictor of academic integration, and academic integration is a predictor of persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993), grieving college students may be at a higher risk of attrition than non-grieving students. In addition, many grieving students have reported problems with insomnia and other sleeping issues (Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005), while other students reported problems with eating disorders as a result of their bereavement (Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010). These problematic issues can lead to poor health and poor academic performance.
Grieving college students also have reported difficulty integrating socially into the college environment. Students typically want to talk about their loss, but peers seem uncomfortable with the topic (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). This dilemma leaves students in a particularly isolating environment (Balk, 2001; Balk, Tyson,-Ranson, & Colletti-Wetzel, 1993; Silverman, 1987), suffering secondary loss as peers act uncomfortable when around them (Oltjenbruns, 1996). The avoidance responses that grieving students receive from peers may also lead to high anxiety among some students (Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010), which puts them at higher risk of poor academic performance and attrition (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Although students have indicated a willingness to help others (Davies, McCrae, Frank, Dochnahl, Pickering, Harrison, & Wilson, 2000), they are not always sure how to go about providing this help. Sadly, most college students actually desire more information on health-related topics than they receive regarding grief and loss (Wagner & Rhee, 2009). They want to know how to manage these difficulties for themselves but also learn how to help others in distress.

Many grieving college students experience trouble with identity and relationship development. The transitional nature of college makes loss during the college years inevitable. College students often experience non-death related issues that lead to grief symptoms, such as moving away from home, changes in or loss of friendships, romantic relationship breakups, sexual assaults, and parental divorce. These non-death-related losses may not be taken as seriously by peers as death-related losses are, so the bereaved may not receive social support. Such losses can still hinder students’ development (Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010), and grief due to the death of a loved one can be damaging to students’ sense of identity development as well. When students cannot
identify themselves as students, they may decide to separate from their college or university. At the dissertation stage of a doctoral program, students should begin an identity shift from student to professional (Tinto, 1993); however, grief may hinder this identity development. If students never identify as researchers, writers, or professional academics, they are not likely to graduate.

**Coping Mechanisms**

Coping mechanisms that students use include confronting reality and situational demands, preserving emotional balance and self-image, preserving relationships, and finding meaning in their loss. Students from religious schools are more likely to express religious coping themes than students from secular universities, but they also encounter more spiritual struggles (Walker & Balk, 2010). Spiritual struggles can increase both stress and depression as loss leads these students to doubt their previous beliefs; however, these same spiritual struggles may also result in positive outcomes for students finding meaning in their struggles and understanding themselves better than before their loss (Wortman, Park, & Edmondson, 2012).

Positive outcomes can occur when students implement positive reappraisal strategies (Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe, 2010). When students perceive low levels of social support and satisfaction with life, they are likely to feel a loss of control, while students feeling more in control also feel satisfied with their lives. In a longitudinal study, Cooley et al. (2010) found that students reported more negative feelings shortly after the loss and more positive feelings toward the end of the semester. Students also reported fewer positive feelings about loss toward the end of the semester, which could be related to academic stress. Positive outcomes reflect resilience and adaptation to loss.
Graduate Students and Grief

While data have clearly identified a high percentage of undergraduate students struggling with grief in college (Balk, 2008; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Wrenn, 1999), only limited research has been conducted on graduate students and grief. Varga (2013) reported that 25% of graduate students at one research university lost someone significant in their lives within 24 months; however, only 37.5% of their sample, or 597 students, were doctoral students. With this limited data, I proceeded with the assumption that the statistics relating to grieving doctoral students at the university surveyed may be similar at other universities and potentially similar to the statistics of grieving undergraduate students.

Responses and behavior of graduate students differ from that of undergraduate students. Almost half the population of graduate students have reported experiencing stress-related or emotional issues (Hyun, Quinn, Mado, & Lustig). Graduate students are at high risk for suicide (Silverman, Meyer, Raffel, & Pratt, 1997) and complicated grief (Bolen, 2011; Schoal et al., 2012); however, they do not reach out for support as readily as undergraduate students do (McCarthy, Bruno, & Sherman, 2010). In her study of graduate students at one large research university, Varga (2013) reported that 25% of the surveyed students had lost someone significant in their lives within the 24 months prior to administering her online survey. Although this quantitative study contacted participants via e-mail, many participants reached out to thank the researcher for conducting a study on “such an important and crucial topic” (Varga, 2013, p. 76). This unsolicited outreach suggests a need for further study regarding graduate student grief.

In their study of graduate students’ ability to cope with grieving in patients or
clients, Supiano and Vaughn-Cole (2011) relied on assumptions that the statistics describing grieving graduate students may be similar to the statistics describing grieving undergraduate students. These researchers studied graduate students in health-related fields to evaluate a new grief-education project for graduate students in nursing, social work, counseling, and pastoral care to determine whether students in care-providing fields were being trained thoroughly enough to cope with grief and loss. They found the sharing workshop session to be beneficial for students’ understanding about how to facilitate future discussions about coping with grieving patients or clients; however, they admitted that this same benefit may not carry over to other students suffering from a significant loss. In a previous study on the impact of a grief course for graduate social work students, Kramer (1997) also found that students benefited from the course and left it with a perception of an improvement in their ability to work with grieving clients. Both studies promote the benefit of the specific workshops they examined, but these studies have not fully illuminated the experiences of grieving graduate students. In addition, the samples for these studies consisted of graduate students and not exclusively doctoral students. This lack of data again suggests a need for studies exploring the experiences of grieving doctoral students.

**Summary**

Social isolation and an inability to integrate into the academic community (Herzig, 2002) may contribute to students’ leaving doctoral programs before completion, and the isolating environment of the dissertation process can further cause students to give up before graduating (Ali & Khun, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Sigafus, 1998). Possible institutional factors contributing to high attrition rates include poor student selection
processes, program inflexibility, and program structures that inadequately prepare students for
dissertation writing (Gumport & Syndmany, 2002; Lipschutz, 1993; Lovitts, 2001). Financial
difficulties and other external factors additionally impact student attrition.

Responses to grief vary from person to person (Kubler-Ross, & Kessler, 2014;
Neimeyer, 2013, 2015; Worden, 2009, 2015), but there are several related themes found in
many people suffering from grief. Grief can influence both physical and cognitive abilities
(Ness & Pfeffier, 1990; VanDongen, 1991). Many grieving people suffer health problems,
emotional issues, stress, and identity loss. Some may experience complicated grief (Prigerson,
& Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson, Maciejewski, Reynolds, Bierhals, Newsom, Fasiczka, Frank,
Doman, & Miller, 1995; Prigerson, Bierhals, Kasl, Reynolds, Shear, Newsom, & Jacobs,
1996) or disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002).

Depression, anxiety, and loneliness frequently develop in people suffering from grief,
and these symptoms become especially problematic for college students because they are
already in a difficult transitional period in their lives (Balk, 1997; Cooley, Toray, & Roscoe,
2010). Grief can influence the ability of students to integrate both academically and socially
into the college environment (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Hardison, Neimeyer, and
Lichstein (2005) also discovered that college students experience high levels of insomnia
when grieving, which can contribute to a loss of motivation and an inability to concentrate
and focus well enough to study (Balk & Vesta, 1998; Janowiak, Mei-tal, & Drapkin, 1995),
all of which can be detrimental to degree completion. The combination of these typical
bereavement responses place grieving students at high risk of complicated grief (Hardison,
Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005), which has been defined as deep grief that impairs day-to-day
activity, including social and cognitive performance (Prigerson, & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson
et al., 1995). Deep grief during this important time may lead to difficulty making decisions (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995), which may also contribute to student attrition. The role of grief in the lives of these students should be explored to help identify ways of alleviating the problem and to identify meaning in their shared experiences.
Chapter Three

Methodology

In this chapter, I explain my research design, which consists of a form of narrative inquiry using the research method of autoethnography. I also explain the five key features of autoethnography: visibility of self, strong reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability, and open-endedness (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Then I explain my data collection method and the qualitative evaluative criteria of truth, resonance, and verisimilitude. I then explain the cautions and limitations of the study. Finally, I present the theoretical frameworks used to help analyze the data, which consist of a combination of Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Research Design

The narrative research design for this study was intended to elucidate personal experiences, develop a better understanding of self, improve understanding of the larger cultural group of grieving doctoral students, and engage readers with the text. Autoethnography was the lens through which I explained my experiences as a struggling doctoral student in order to better understand myself and to better understand the wider group of other struggling doctoral students. I begin with a discussion of narrative as a research tool before moving on to a discussion of the specific autoethnographic research method and its components.

Narrative Inquiry

Before the autoethnographic research design can be understood, readers should first understand the broader category of narrative inquiry, since my autoethnography used narrative as the medium for sharing personal experiences. Narrative inquiry is a research
method in which researchers use the writing process to reflect on connected events and uncover meaning from people’s experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Human beings are narrative, “storytelling organisms” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). People are drawn to stories, telling them and hearing them, reading them, and writing them. Narrative offers researchers the ability to be a part of the research as well as part of the research process--to be intimately involved in the study rather than a passive observer--and this process of getting close to the text provides knowledge not found from passive observation (Dewey, 1980). For this study, my personal experiences and perspectives were an integral part of the research rather than my observations of others. I used writing as a tool to construct knowledge for my personal use, to share my experiences with others, to connect with them, and to touch them emotionally as well as intellectually.

When we use narrative as a method of inquiry, we construct knowledge through the process of writing (Richardson, 1994). Because writing involves cognitive understanding as we process our lived experiences (Denzin, 1984), the act of writing itself helps us generate thoughts, uncover new conclusions, and make sense of what we uncover. Our ideas grow and develop as we write. When we then share our writing with readers, social scientists function as narrators and help readers interpret and understand the data of lived experiences (Bochner, 1994). By writing, we learn how to talk about our experiences, how to understand them, and hopefully how to deal with them. Richardson (1990) reported that “narrative is the best way to understand the human experience, because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (p. 65). Because facts are unable to “interpret themselves,” interpret what they might mean, or tell us how people feel about them, narrative provides researchers with a way to extract meaning from
experience that might otherwise be missing from our literature.

Each reader interprets a story differently, depending on what that person brings to the story from personal experience. Readers connect with the text, and this connection among readers, writers/authors, text, and what the text represents exemplifies the key difference between narrative and other research methods (Ellis, 1995). Readers actively participate in narrative text; they become a part of the process, so the text is interactive. Readers find elements of their own lives in the experiences of others and feel connected to those others. They construct the text (Denzin, 1989), applying what they read, what they learn, and what they feel to their own situations. In this way, many people can benefit from a single story, each reader uncovering meaning applicable to his or her specific circumstances. In the months she spent preparing for the death of her partner, Ellis (1995) read many personal accounts of coping with death and the loss of a loved one because she “might learn from others’ experiences” (p. 206). She did not feel this connection or comfort from reading surveys or interviews but from reading personal stories. Just as reading personal narratives of other people helped Ellis cope with her own experiences, I hope to help other people who have shared experiences similar to mine.

Although it can be extremely difficult to tell and to hear painful experiences (Frank, 1995), or to read and write about them, sharing stories has therapeutic and transformational possibilities (Smith, 1999) that can help us get through some of the difficult periods in our lives. According to Karen Blixen, a.k.a. Isak Deniesen, “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (as cited in Arendt, 1968, p. 104). Arendt (1968) also added that “the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” (p. 104).
Because a narrative should be evaluated by “the consequences it produces” (Bochner, 1994, p. 31), one consequence, or goal, of my narrative is to learn how to live with my sorrow, and another goal is to help other people in similar circumstances cope with their traumatic losses. Writing about my experiences has helped me bear my son’s death, and reading my narrative may help other people through similar losses.

I chose to design this study using autoethnography as my research method because it offers a way to “blur the edges between text, representation, and criticism” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 12). I used my narrative as a way to work through my grief, to help me better understand the larger world of grieving doctoral students, and to share my story with others. My hope is that my experiences will help them cope with the difficulties they may encounter in their own experiences.

**Autoethnography**

Creswell (2007) has recommended using autoethnography when researchers seek to understand “cultural perspectives” (p. 123) through their own personal experiences. A combination of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography focuses on the intersections of personal experiences and the culture in which those experiences take place. It begins with personal accounts of the author (*auto*), and analyzes (*graphy*) them in order to understand cultural practices (*ethno*) (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bocher, 2000; Holman Jones, 2005; Read-Danahay, 1997, 2009). Madison (2012) described the purpose of autoethnography by using the ancient Greek terms (a) *mimesis*, a mirror or reflection of life that improves understanding; (b) *poiesis*, to make or transform, and (c) *kinesis*, creating of movement or change. Beginning with the reflection and engagement of mimesis, moving through the awareness and enlightenment of poiesis,
and then eventually to the intervention of kinesis, autoethnographers...

use personal experiences to promote social change by compelling readers to think about taken-for-granted cultural experiences in astonishing, unique, and often problematic ways and, further, to take new and different action in the world based on the insights generated by the research. (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 35)

Autoethnography integrates the research process with the self and the social world so that the personal, the social, and the researcher aspects of the author’s personality are woven together (Atkinson, Coffee, & Delmont, 2003). For this study, I integrated aspects of my personal life, the social world of higher education, and the researcher aspects of my personality to examine the impact of grief on dissertation writing. I began by writing and reflecting on my personal experiences with doctoral study and grief, using writing as a method of inquiry to learn from those experiences, engage readers with my story, and try to create social change in the way people respond to grief and the grieving.

Ethnography is the study of a particular cultural group primarily based on extended observations, interviews, and immersion in the culture by the author (Creswell, 2007). Traditional ethnography specifically separates the researcher from the participants under study, but autoethnography distinctly intertwines them; the researcher and the participant are one. As a method, autoethnography is more flexible and more open to creativity than other research methods (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). It “expands the paradigm” (p. 58) of ethnography to include both academic and personal elements of the cultural world. Using traditional ethnography, my study would have explored the effect of grief on other doctoral students as they tried to write their dissertations. This would have involved observing and interviewing a participant group while they endured
personal trauma and struggled to proceed with their lives. As a researcher, I would not have felt comfortable violating this private, personal, and painful environment to study another participant, nor would I want any other researcher violating the grieving period of others. By expanding the paradigm of traditional ethnography, autoethnography instead allowed me to conduct a self-study and explore my personal experiences without infringing on the suffering and recovery of others. Instead, the creativity of this flexible research tool forced me to examine my experiences and responses to grief, which has helped me move forward with my doctoral studies and with other elements of my life. I became both researcher and subject.

Autobiography is biographical writing in which the author writes about her life rather than the life of another person (Creswell, 2007). Autoethnography differs from autobiography in that it is written by “an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). It uses story to understand cultural issues. Rather than writing an autobiography about my experiences, my autoethnography situated the story of my grief within the cultural context of doctoral experiences and dissertation struggles. Excerpts of my specific story helped me and others understand larger societal issues of grieving, doctoral study, and the dissertation process.

Although autoethnography sometimes incorporates elements of fiction, such as showing versus telling and evocative description, it also differs from fiction. In fiction, authors might manipulate the truth in order to improve the story (Ellis, 1995, 2004). Autoethnographers restrict the story to truth, personal experiences, notes, and artifacts (Krieger, 1984), and they keep close to what really happened (Richardson, 1992). The
goal is to tell a story that contains meaningful experience, not to tell a story just to entertain. Storytelling elements are used to evoke emotional response from readers, as evocation is a means of knowing (Maru, 1986; Tyler, 1986), but storytelling elements are only a part of autoethnographic work. Autoethnographers maintain narrative truth throughout their stories. While it may not be verifiable through objective means, narrative truth seeks to be as honest as possible, trying to convey events and experiences accurately and not trying to mislead or misrepresent; in this way, narrative truth is closer to ethical truth than fact (Nash, 2004). Autoethnographers can use literary devices to condense scenes, maintain a narrative flow, and protect characters, but they also can convey narrative truth while being flexible with the details (Spence, 1982). They do not need to write about specifics to convey meaning. Autoethnographers should capture the spirit of the situation and be selective with the details. I have incorporated elements of fiction within my study in order to condense scenes and protect the privacy of others or myself, but I remained committed to narrative truth and have done my best to capture the spirit and the meaning of each scene and situation without misleading anyone or misrepresenting the narrative truth of these experiences.

Autoethnography relies on ethnographic methods and autobiographical data to interpret culture and connect the self with others (Chang, 2008). In fact, “Good autoethnography… is a provocative weave of story and theory” (Spry, 2001, p. 713), evocative, compelling, and revelatory (Adams & Jones, 2008). It should “set a scene, tell a story, and create a text that demands attention and participation” (p. 375). Autoethnographic writing is a “form of self-narration that places the self within the social context. Using the “autoethnographic approach enables the researcher to look inward,
studying himself or herself to create a reflexive dialogue with the readers” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 852). It allows us to study ourselves in the context of our culture (Nash & Bradley, 2011) and helps make the study of the human sciences less alienating and more human (Bochner, 2013). For this study, I did not simply write a story. I reflected on the events and actions, analyzed them, and made connections between my specific situation and the larger social world of higher education and grief.

Hayano (1979) first coined the term “autoethnography”; however, incorporating personal stories into social research also has been referred to as self-stories (Denzin, 1989), narrative of the self (Richardson, 1994), ethnographic memoir (Tedlock, 1991), ethnographic novel (Jackson, 1989), personal ethnography (Crawford, 1996), experimental ethnography (Marcus & Cushman, 1982), introspective ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988), and reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). “One characteristic that binds all autoethnographies is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience” (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 22). Autoethnographies include collections of stories (or poetry, plays, art, etc.) around a common theme, “connections between personal troubles and public issues” (Denzin, 2014, p. 31). To help distinguish this method from other forms, five key features separate autoethnography from traditional ethnography: visibility of self, strong reflectivity, engagement, vulnerability, and open-endedness (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

Visibility of Self

Visibility of self refers to authors’ clear presence in their work, and it represents the essence of autoethnographic research and writing (Meneley & Young, 2005), which consists of personal, lived experiences recreated for readers. Researchers need to be
visible in the research process, not distant observers. Ellis (2004) refers to this distinct presence of researchers and reference to self as the “Ethnographic I.” Rather than concealing themselves behind distant, objective language to present findings about observations of others, autoethnographers expose their lives, their experiences, and their feelings, even those that are not flattering. For my study, this meant reliving experiences that were pivotal to the transitional phases of my doctoral work, dissertation, and losing my son. I needed to expose my life, my experiences, and my feelings—i.e., make those visible for readers—and show them what it was like to be me during those difficult times.

**Strong Reflexivity**

Strong reflexivity “entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 73). Researchers examine their lives as they would examine others, autoethnography acting as a mirror or reflection of those lives in order to improve their understanding of themselves and others. We examine our personal lived experiences in reference to the experiences of others, purposefully commenting on culture and cultural practices in order to “illuminate more general cultural phenomena” (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 23). According to Richardson (2000a), strong reflexivity is essential in autoethnography as autoethnographers seek to show “two selves”—the “before self” and the “after self” that emerges after a transformational experience (Bochner, 2000). For this study, I reflected on and evaluated who I was in relation to the larger social world of higher education. I reflected on my personal experiences as a struggling doctoral student both before and after my son died, evaluated my reactions to those experiences, considered how they transformed me, and then analyzed those experiences in relation to other grieving,
struggling doctoral students, sharing what I learned to help them through similar situations.

**Engagement**

In autoethnography, the author intentionally tries to engage readers in a reciprocal relationship with the text. Personal engagement is used as a “medium through which deeper understanding is achieved and communicated” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 74). Because autoethnographers work from inside knowledge rather than just textbook knowledge or observation, they are able to make a connection with readers and use collective experiences and intersections to understand self and others. This active engagement creates reciprocity with readers, which compels a response from them (Holman Jones, 2005). For this study, I tried to compel readers to make connections with my story. A peer check confirmed that readers felt drawn into my life. They felt both emotional and intellectual connections with my experiences. I described scenes, people, and events but also tried to convey what my colleagues and I were feeling and thinking during crucial moments of our doctoral work and what my family and I felt during our grieving process. Doing so not only gave readers a sense of our experiences but also guided them toward making connections with their own similar experiences, taking what they read from my story and applying it to their own stories. Evocative writing (Ellis, 2000, 2009) and concrete detail (Bochner, 2000) will help readers feel what it was like to live through my experiences, think about their own similar struggles, make connections, actively engage with the text, and feel what it was like to live through my experiences. Narrative should possess aesthetic merit (Richardson, 2000a) to capture and maintain reader interest and make work accessible to a wide range of readers by using clear and
compelling writing instead of pedantic rhetoric (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

Not only must autoethnographers be visible in their work, reflect on personal experiences, engage with readers, and evoke emotional response in readers, autoethnographers also need to analyze the story and connect it to relevant literature; that is, the text should demonstrate “knowledge of past research on a topic” (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 23) and make a substantive contribution to the field of social science research (Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000a; Richardson, 2000b). This contribution should offer something new or a new angle to existing research (Ellis, 2009). Because prior studies have not examined the impact of grief on doctoral work and dissertation writing through autoethnographic examination, my study offers a new contribution to the field of higher education. While Anderson (2006; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013) has reminded us to keep analysis as an essential element of autoethnographic writing, Ellis and Bochner (2006) also have asserted that “good analysis can be evocative” (p. 443).

**Vulnerability**

Another key element of autoethnographic writing is vulnerability (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). The early stages of autoethnographic writing force authors to relive painful experiences. Reflection and analysis may reveal unpleasant characteristics, and sharing our personal experiences with readers may require a public display of flaws, weaknesses, descriptive struggles, and sometimes unflattering scenes. The stories should deeply move readers, but sharing intimate details with the public leaves autoethnographers vulnerable and open to criticism or embarrassment, and it may even put their careers at risk. Although this process offers a possibility of therapy, growth, and resolution, reliving and analyzing past traumas can be a traumatic experience as well.
Since our lives and experiences are a part of larger communities of family, colleagues, and friends, autoethnographers also risk exposing personal details about other people. To avoid this exposure, Richardson (2001) suggested that autoethnographers remain open and vulnerable in field notes and reflections but more cautious with material we publish. Not only will this caution in publication protect other people in an autoethnographic narrative, it may also protect the researcher as well. Since I live with other people in my personal and academic life, other people entered my narrative as they related to or interacted with me. I followed Richardson’s advice; that is, I remained open and vulnerable in my field notes and reflections but more cautious with the material that I presented at my dissertation defense and more cautious still when submitting my work for publication to protect my peers, my family, and myself. I also used pseudonyms for my doctoral cohort peers to protect their identities.

Another method of protection from harm included focusing on narrative truth rather than trying to relive events literally. I chose to omit certain details if I thought allowing people to read them might hurt me or other characters in my narrative. Focusing on narrative truth as a guide, autoethnographers choose which elements to leave out of the narrative and which to include. Because I have been true to the events of my story and have remained truthful to the experiences recorded, I was free to decide what details were necessary to my study and what details could be omitted for personal protection and ethical consideration of others (Spence, 1982).

Public presentation of vulnerable subject matter may leave autoethnographers more open to criticism than researchers employing other research methods (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), but the payoff for such vulnerability is that by exploring and
sharing our own experiences of pain, anger, and confusion, we connect with readers and try to make life better for others in similar circumstances. For me, the payoffs of personal growth and helping other students learn to cope with their struggles overpowered the risk of being vulnerable during the writing process. The potential gains of finishing my dissertation and earning my Ph.D. also outweighed the potential career risks of publishing personal and unflattering events. For me, the risks were all worth it.

**Open-Endedness**

Open-endedness is a central component of autoethnographic research. This means that autoethnographic work avoids providing readers with definite endings and “undebatable conclusions” (Elis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744); instead, it offers possibilities. Stories open up our experiences rather than provide with solutions (Coles, 1989). Autoethnography examines insights about a particular moment in time. It stimulates discussion (Ellis & Bocher, 2000), encourages exchange, and remains fluid and flexible rather than fixed (Adams & Jones, 2008). It does not offer definitive conclusions or final endings, but it does “confirm and humanize tragic experience” (Bochner, 2000, p. 271) and offer the possibility of transformation (Maddison, 2012; Richardson, 1994). My study offers insights into the grief process, dissertation struggles, and coping with some of life’s more traumatic transitions, but it does not offer a conclusive ending. Although there was an end to my transitional period as a doctoral student, there will certainly be no end of my grieving, nor did I present a standard “how to” guide for grieving students. People respond differently to stressful situations, such as the dissertation process, and people respond differently to grief, so my study has offered others the possibility of learning from my experiences, but it does not offer them a definitive conclusion.
Bochner (2013) refers to autoethnography as “a response to an existential crisis—a desire to do meaningful work and lead a meaningful life” (p. 53). My son’s death began an existential crisis for me, and using autoethnography is my way of trying to begin doing meaningful work and live a meaningful life again. In this specific case, the story of my grieving process is situated within the cultural context of doctoral education and dissertation writing; the historical setting begins with doctoral coursework and spans the period of dissertation writing both before and after my son’s death. Autoethnography becomes both method and text (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Just as I became both researcher and subject, my study became both process and product (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Some experiences are only understood “when feelings are a significant part of the research process” (Ellis, 1993, p. 724). Deep grief is one of those experiences. Smith (1999) began an autoethnographic article on clinical depression by inviting readers into his pain. He wrote, “Come and join me. Join my pulsating body. Join my fragmented self. Join my life. Join a story. Feel a statistic” (p. 264). His emotional, personal narrative drew me into the world of clinical depression in a way that traditional studies never did. I cried at several points in his story, putting the article down and walking away, just as I do when I write my own journal entries and field notes about losing my son. Styron (1990) wrote his memoir to bring readers into the world of suffering from severe depression so they could understand his ongoing feelings of hopelessness, lethargy, and gloom that led up to his suicide attempt and last minute change of heart. Reading their stories (Smith, 1999; Styron, 1990) connected me with these individuals, with their suffering, and with their depression. My story has offered and will continue to offer similar connections to
other grieving students, which makes an autoethnographic study of grief and doctoral attrition so important. My story connects suffering doctoral students struggling with their dissertations and provides them a sense of community. As Ellis (1995) asked, “Don’t we all need to know we are not suffering alone?” (p. 308).

Before deciding on autoethnography as a research method, researchers should clarify goals and make sure that another method would not reach those goals more effectively (Ellis, 2009). My specific personal goals were to cope with my grief; finish my dissertation; and learn how to be an active participant in the world again. My research goals included sharing my narrative as a way to help other struggling doctoral students to cope with their pain, provide direction and encouragement for them to keep working, and offer advice to higher education faculty and staff members to help students adjust to the transitions brought on by traumatic experiences. Beyond the world of higher education, my study also may benefit other grieving parents and people struggling with difficulties beyond the dissertation because writing a dissertation is only one of many ways in which people struggle in life. Each of these benefits outweighed the emotional cost of remembering painful events, so autoethnography was clearly the best method to achieve my goals, possibly the only method.

**Data Collection**

The primary source of data collection for this study was my field notes. These field notes had been developed through my grief journals and class notes from my doctoral coursework. Additional artifacts also included saved e-mails and text messages, papers from coursework, and old pictures to improve memory recall and incorporate as many specific details of past events as possible. After the field notes were compiled, I
used them to create a series of vignettes rather than a chronological narrative, each vignette capturing a specific scene pivotal to my transitions as a doctoral student or to the stages of my grief (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Data-to-narrative process.

Use of personal introspection instead of observations and interviews of grieving doctoral candidates allowed me to avoid infringing on the grief of others. In this way, I avoided the many ethical issues involved in gathering data from grieving participants (Balk, 1995; Cook, 2001).

Autoethnographers’ “ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making” (Atkins, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 62). In traditional ethnographic data gathering, the researcher enters the field to observe participants in a specific cultural setting. She immerses herself in the environment of participants for an extended period and records notes in response to her observations, conversations, and interviews. She develops overall impressions of the culture and identifies patterns of behavior in the people. Field notes are based on observers’ experiences in the world of the participants. Autoethnography is a methodology in which “we make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data” (Jackson, 1989, p. 4).
The researcher is the participant and “the field is a state of mind” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 67). The researcher is already a part of the world she is studying, so observations are internal. Autoethnographic field notes require autoethnographers to recall memories of pivotal experiences in their lives and as many details about those experiences as possible, so rather than gathering field notes by observing others, autoethnographers gather data by looking inward at past experiences. As we write about our experiences, we also reflect on them and their meaning because writing is a method of inquiry, discovery, and analysis. “By writing [about our experiences] in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it” (Richardson, 1994, p. 516). The writing process enhances our reflection, and we uncover meaning from our experiences.

Personal documents and artifacts help contribute details during the writing process. Journals, diaries, university transcripts, essays and other coursework covered in marginalia, and other documents remind authors of dates and activities but also responses and feelings. E-mails, text messages, blog posts or other social media provide additional sources of information. Likewise, pictures, photographs, and videos offer another dimension of visual imagery to help evoke memories (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

Interviews can serve as another form of data collection for autoethnographers. Sometimes, a close friend, family member, or colleague can interview autoethnographers to help generate new ideas or new angles to the experience and thereby help autoethnographers with recall (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographers can also participate in interviews with other people involved in the experience at the time it occurred to offer insight into what other people thought and felt about the experience (Ellis & Berger,
Self-interview is another technique used (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013) to ensure a thorough account of past events. In a self-interview, autoethnographers try to construct a “dialogue between one’s past and present selves” (p. 69), reliving past experiences and examining them from a present perspective.

My data collection for this study began with field notes generated primarily from notes I wrote during doctoral courses and entries from a grief journal begun after my son’s death. Additional artifacts included text messages and e-mail exchanges with colleagues about dissertation progress. Notes from doctoral classes contained comments about coursework, and when these notes mingled with my diary-style marginalia, they revealed my state of mind, reactions to classmates, conversations, and peer behavior throughout all my doctoral classes. Conversations, text messages, and e-mail exchanges between my peers and me about the slow, frustrating progress of dissertation writing demonstrate the difficulty of the work even without the added roadblock of grief. My grief journals chronicled the events surrounding Taylor’s death and reactions to it, mine and those around me.

In the field-note stage, autoethnographers capture as many details and descriptions as possible while giving only minor consideration to the writing quality or flowing prose and simply accumulating the details that will later help comprise the first draft. After the details have been recorded and arranged, the next phase of writing involves negotiating and integrating the “narrative truth” with the “historic truth.” Narrative truth is “the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction” (Spence, 1982, p. 28). Conveying meaning and emotion become central rather than exact details. The author moves from telling to showing (Ellis,
1995, 2004). General descriptions converge into conversations; repeated themes can be merged into single scenes. Multiple characters can be represented as one, and narrative writing strategies are incorporated to improve the flow of the story without interrupting the emotional experience. Writing becomes more vivid and present; the goal is to convey the emotional experience to readers, to show them what it felt like to be the autoethnographer at specific moments in time. At the revision stage, I used old pictures and self-dialogue (Ellis, 2009) to help the reliability of my memories. Documenting specific events helped me relive my feelings in a process termed “emotional recall” (Ellis, 1993, p. 726) in which I placed myself back in situations, re-creating as many images and details as possible to feel emotionally immersed in the events. These images helped me add detail and emotion as I created my personal narrative about writing a dissertation while grieving, and then I analyzed my behavior to uncover themes that may guide other doctoral students suffering with grief through their dissertation writing process.

Narratives can be generated through a chronological representation of events or through a series of vignettes. Humphreys (2005) has advocated the use of vignettes in autoethnographic writing as an “alternative representational strategy” (p. 852) in order to connect readers with the autoethnographer’s narrative and to help them “relive the experience through the writer’s eyes” (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). These evocative accounts illustrate specific episodes in the writer’s life by recreating scenes that exemplify their experiences and feelings. These vignettes are based on field notes (Erickson, 1986) and compiled from sources such as “diaries and free-writing, self-introspection and interactive introspection” (Smith, 1999, p. 267).
My vignettes begin with my first day as a doctoral student and then shift to the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014), each scene representing pivotal times in my academic career and illustrating transitions in identity. A reflection section follows each vignette, following the example of Humphreys (2005). I reflected on what each particular scene meant to me and how it connected me to the social world of higher education. My goal in these vignettes was for readers to feel what I felt at those moments in time, which may evoke emotional responses in them based on their own lives and their past experiences. In creating these vignettes, I tried to “elicit emotional identification and understanding” (Denzin, 1989, p. 740) from readers that would provide readers with a “window” (Humphrey’s, 2005, 842) into my experiences. By adding depth, description, and insights, I tried to give readers “a sense of being there in the scene” (Erikson, 1986, p. 150) and allow them to live my experiences vicariously (Bruner, 1990). Reading the first-person, present-tense account of how nervous Humphrey’s felt before presenting his first paper as a researcher gave me a strong feeling of warmth and comfort. I thought, I am not alone. Other people have felt the way I have, and they went on to succeed. Maybe I am not a failure. It helped me decide to continue working on my dissertation instead of quitting and to select autoethnography as my research method. If I could offer similar support to other wavering doctoral students by sharing my story, I believed that I needed to try.

**Evaluative Criteria: Truth, Resonance, and Verisimilitude**

Narrative writers should use language appropriate to qualitative research rather than using quantitative terms, such as “validity,” “reliability,” and “generalization” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Personal, human experiences and emotions cannot be
measured quantitatively, so we need to replace traditional evaluative criteria with criteria suitable for those human experiences. Ellis (2004) suggested that truth and resonance are more appropriate standards for autoethnographic work than validity or generalization. Accounts need to be truthful and accurate, and the story should resonate with readers. My narrative has been truthful and accurate, although it does also reflect narrative truth. Because qualitative researchers often strive for verisimilitude as a criterion for evaluating research (Leavy, 2013), I also relied on verisimilitude, depicting scenes, settings, and people honestly in order to create a truthful and realistic account of my experiences. The responses of readers will gauge my success (Ellis, 1995, 2004). If readers believe the story and feel the experiences I described, if they feel pulled into “the reality of the story” (Parry, 1991, p. 42), then the work achieved verisimilitude. If the story resonates with their personal experiences and is useful to them, then the writing has been valuable (Bochner, 2001).

When using autoethnography as a research method, autoethnographers must ask themselves several questions in order to evaluate their writing. Do readers want to share the story with others because it speaks to them (Frank, 2007)? How useful would it be as a guide to help others in similar situations (Birth, 1999)? Does the story shed light on readers’ lived experiences (Ellis, 1995)? Does the story illustrate patterns and connections between events (Richardson, 1990)? I asked myself and my readers these questions throughout the writing process to make sure this study achieved truthful accounts of the experiences described and drew readers into the narrative. My hope was that the story would resonate with them and that they would believe the study provided a meaningful contribution.
Cautions and Limitations

Because open-endedness is a specific trait of autoethnography, some researchers might consider the absence of conclusions a limitation, although not every researcher would agree (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Criticism of autoethnography has included possible self-indulgence and narcissism (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). To avoid narcissism or self-absorption, the autoethnographer’s “exposure of the self…has to take us [readers] somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go” (Behar, 1996, p. 14). It needs to serve a distinct purpose in contributing to the knowledge of a broad social problem and helping others in similar circumstances. I did not share scenes gratuitously but instead made sure each scene contained meaningful information or emotional content for readers. The reflection sections following my vignettes include literature that connects my narrative to the wider social world of higher education and the world of grieving, and in these sections my primary focus was on analytic writing rather than evocative writing.

Bochner (2000), Ellis, (2009), and Richardson (2001) have reminded autoethnographers to be considerate of loved ones when reliving our experiences. Personal accounts can be very painful to read, and they have the potential to awaken painful memories for some readers. If our stories impact others, as stories always do (Denzin, 2014), we need to maintain high ethical standards and concern for others in telling the story. Reflecting on the perspectives and emotional histories that readers bring to the story, autoethnographers should consider any negative implications the story could present to a vulnerable audience. Likewise, autoethnographers also are emotionally exposed and vulnerable, and they also should exercise just as much caution to protect themselves as they do to protect others. In my study, I used pseudonyms to protect the
privacy of other characters. In addition, I was selective about which scenes to include as a means of protecting others and myself. I also included a warning message to readers that the material was sensitive, painful, and potentially disturbing to people in similar circumstances.

**Conceptual Framework**

Two conceptual frameworks helped make sense of the data in this study: transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler 2014). Transition Theory served as a guide for organizing the narrative and helped me articulate how I have responded to the transitions in my life since my son died. It also helped me identify the phases I have gone through as a doctoral student and developing research writer working on my dissertation. The stages of grief served as a guide for mapping the process of my grief, which also helped me determine the progress of my adult transitions. Both theories combined to help me express and analyze my narrative.

**Transition theory.** Transition theory helps us understand and make sense of the way adults respond to changes in their lives. Schlossberg (1981) recognized transition as occurring when an “event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) later updated this definition as “any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). An event is something concrete that happens to create change. It can be anticipated, such as a graduation or marriage, or unanticipated, such the loss of a job or a loved one. A non-event occurs when we expect and want something that we do not get, such as not getting a particular job or being accepted into a school. Whether the changes that take place in our
lives occur because of an event or non-event, the key factor in identifying transition is our perception of the change. If we do not attach significance to a change, then the change cannot be considered a transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).

Schlossberg (1981) explained that a transition is also a process that occurs over time and offers a model for analyzing how adults adapt to transition. According to Schlossberg’s theory, people react differently to transition based on the interaction of three variables: (a) the individual’s perception of transition, (b) characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments, and (c) characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Individual responses to change vary with each individual, and according to the interaction of these variables, individuals can react differently at different times (Schlossberg, 1995).

The phases of transition include “approaching change,” “taking stock,” and “taking charge,” also phrased as “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). We “move in” at the beginning of a transition, after a change occurs, and as we become familiar with our new roles or expectations. When “moving through” a transition, we learn how to negotiate the changes in our daily lives. “Moving out” of a transition means adapting to the changes and moving forward. Outcomes of transition can be positive or negative, and they are often a combination of both. In addition, the result of change is not always adaptation.

As we learn how to negotiate our lives after significant change, we take stock of our assets and liabilities by evaluating the Four S’s: situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Our situation will depend on the trigger precipitating the change, the timing of the change, our level of control over the change,
our potential role changes, the duration of the change, previous experience with similar changes, other concurrent stressors, and our assessment of the change. “Self” refers to personal, demographic, and psychological factors, such as gender, socio-economic status, ego development, outlook, and spirituality. Support may come from intimate relationships, family, friends, and the community. It serves to affirm, aid, and provide honest feedback. Some forms of support are stable, such as ties with close family members, and other forms of support vary according to the situation, such as post-traumatic counseling that may be offered at a specific school or job. A strategy refers to the methods people use to cope with transition. Typical strategies include gathering information, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. These methods can be categorized as ways to modify the situation, ways to control the meaning of the problem, or aids in managing the stress of the transition (Evans, et al., 2010). How well we adapt to change depends largely on our resources in those areas.

For this study, I primarily focused on the stages of moving in, moving through, and moving out of doctoral work. The “moving in” section examines the period of entering the doctoral program, becoming acclimated to my new cohort, and gaining familiarity with the higher education department. The “moving through” section focuses on completing coursework and identifying as a doctoral student. The “moving out” section of chapter four examines my dissertation work and the shift from doctoral student to independent scholar. In this section, I examine specific strategies I used to navigate my dissertation struggles and continue working to finish my doctoral program.

**Stages of Grief**

According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014), the five stages of grief include
denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages “are a part of a framework that makes up our learning to live without the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling” (p. 7), but they are only typical responses and provide a general overview of the grieving process. People respond differently to loss because people are different. Some people do not experience all of the stages, while others may experience them in a circular rather than linear manner, going back to a previous stage more than once. Although these stages do not prescribe a detailed and specific map, they do serve as a guide for understanding our responses after significant loss.

For people grieving the loss of a loved one, the denial stage is symbolic rather than literal (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). Our brains do technically understand that our loved ones have died, but our hearts are unable to process the information fully. We still expect to see them, talk to them, and we may not grasp the reality of life without them. People in denial may be in a state of shock that prevents them from feeling the full impact of their emotional pain. Instead, they feel numb and do not yet fully comprehend the loss. We may wake up and wonder if the entire experience was a bad dream rather than a reality. This stage helps us unconsciously manage our feelings while the reality of the loss sinks in to our conscious minds. This stage helps us avoid becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Grieving individuals often talk about the loss repeatedly, processing the reality of it. As we start to slowly emerge out of denial, we may begin to question how and why the loss occurred and wonder if there was anything we could have done to prevent it.

As we accept the reality of our loss and feelings of denial fade, the feelings we
denied emerge, such as anger. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014), anger does not surface until grieving individuals are strong enough to experience and sustain the feelings of loss. The anger may be directed at the loved ones for leaving and at ourselves for not being able to save them. We may blame others and direct our anger toward them, and we may also feel anger at the general concept of life without them. The anger need not be logical or rational, but the feelings are typical responses to significant loss and an important step in the grieving process. The more we let ourselves feel our anger, “the more it will begin to dissipate” (p. 12) and we can heal.

The type of bargaining that takes place after a loss can be similar to the bargaining people experience before a loss, such as offering a trade in exchange for someone’s life. The bargain does not need to be logical, and we do not necessarily believe in or plan to adhere to the bargain, but it can allow us to feel momentary control over the chaos in our lives. “If only” and “what if…” thoughts often consume grieving individuals. Bargaining can be a temporary escape from the pain of loss and can help grieving individuals move from one stage to another.

When we stop bargaining, we re-focus our attention on the loss of the present rather than engaging in wishful thinking about changing the past and the future. In doing so, we feel deeper grief than before and realize the finality of our loss, which often gives rise to the onset of depression. Grieving individuals become withdrawn, sad, lethargic, and unable to find pleasure or purpose in regular activities. “In grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014, p. 21). Grieving individuals should allow themselves to feel depressed without fighting it in order to move
through and beyond this stage of grieving.

Most of us will never feel okay with the loss of our loved one, but “acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014, p. 26). We stop trying to resist the new norm of life and adjust to our new roles; however, the more our identities were connected with our loved ones, the more difficult it may be to adapt to life without them. When we do begin to accept our new life, the peace of acceptance will not appear when others have decided that we have mourned long enough. Rather, it will appear for a while and then go away; it will be a long process, spread out over months and years rather than weeks. Little by little, we devote more energy to living, to moving forward, than we devote to our loss.

Theories are only a guide. Each person is an individual, so one individual may naturally respond differently to loss than another. Any time a theory is applied, individual differences need to be considered (Worden, 2015). For this study, I illustrated the stages of grief in vignettes to show readers how I felt as I coped with my grief, the way it influenced my dissertation work, and the way it influenced my perception of my own identity. One section of Chapter 4 explores how I coped with my grief and continued working both at my job and, after a break, on my dissertation. In Chapter 4, I also offer strategies for managing grief after traumatic loss and not letting it consume the rest of our lives.

**Summary**

Personal stories can help researchers express their understanding of the social world (Van Maanen, 1998). Ellis has referred to her article about the death of her brother
as an “introspective case study in emotional sociology” (1993, p. 724). I strove to accomplish similar goals in this study. Through the process of writing about and analyzing this experience, I examined the grief of losing my son and found some meaning in it. Even though I would happily trade that meaning to have him back, finding it helped me keep going with my life and my work. Writing, reading, and analyzing my experiences helped me connect with other struggling doctoral students and other grieving people in general. My story may have begun with myself, but as others read and related to the story, they became a part of the story. This “collective story” (Richardson, 1990, p. 26) helped me and others overcome some of the isolation and alienation we felt when trying to navigate some of the more difficult times of our lives.

I took precautions in my particular study by remaining vigilant regarding unnecessary digressions, self-abortion, and self-pity; sharing only those scenes that I felt were helpful to my audience; using pseudonyms to protect the identity of peers; and sharing my writing with identifiable characters who appeared in my story to make sure they were not uncomfortable with the story being read by others. I also included a warning message to readers that the material is sensitive, painful, and potentially disturbing to those in similar circumstances.
Chapter Four

Data and Analysis

In this chapter, I share the results from my data collection, reflection, and analysis on the subject of grief and doctoral attrition. The purposes of this study were to (a) use my personal experiences to understand cultural ideas about being a doctoral student and dealing with grief; (b) share my personal experiences of coping with grief and dissertation work at the same time; and (c) by example help other doctoral students face and overcome the challenges in the struggle to complete their degrees. To accomplish these goals, I used the autoethnographic research method. I shared personal experiences and connected those experiences to the larger population of grieving doctoral students. The data gathering process consisted of using the writing process to reflect on connected events and uncover meaning from my experiences.

In stage one of the data gathering process, I reviewed journals I had kept that recounted my experiences as a doctoral student and as a grieving mother. After reading my journals, I wrote field notes based on those journals. Those field notes recorded as many details about specific events as possible. After recording field notes, I read, reviewed, and reflected on the field notes and subsequently used their content to create a series of vignettes. Each vignette captures a significant moment during my time as a doctoral student and as a grieving mother. This narrative is a collection of those vignettes, followed by a reflection section in which I try to learn from my experiences and find meaning in them. After writing my reflections, I read through the vignettes and reflections again to incorporate analysis and create what Richardson (1997) has referred to as a “pleated text”: evocative narrative side by side with reflection and analysis.
Autoethnographic analysis should occur in pieces after the story and reflections have been written (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), so the analysis section of this work weaves together the reflection and analysis section of each vignette rather than presenting them in isolated chapters. As I reflected on and analyzed my experiences, I tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What can I learn about my grief by using autoethnography to explore, write about, and analyze my experiences?
2. What can other doctoral students learn from my experiences that may help their dissertation process so they finish their degrees?
3. How can I use my experiences to be of service to others by offering guidance to administration for assisting grieving doctoral students?

1. First Day

July, 2009--my hands shook so much that I thought the steering wheel might vibrate loose, and the 40-minute drive felt interminable but also too brief at the same time. It took too long to get started but not nearly long enough for me to collect myself. Our meeting room seemed cold and empty, gray and lifeless. Vinyl floors, colorless walls, and square windows created a dismal atmosphere; no people filled up the emptiness of the space yet. The overall feeling was distant and stark, a sharp contrast to the intimate roundtable setting of a literature or writing class. This higher education doctoral program would be nothing like earning a master’s degree from the English department.

I found a seat close to the door at the end of a row and took out my notebook, keeping my nose buried in freewriting while others wandered into the room talking and
filling the 35-chair room to capacity. Each time I looked up from my notes to glance around the room, I thought that all the other students appeared to be younger than I was. I guess not too many people decide to start working on their Ph.D.s after turning 40. Can’t say I blame them. Not everyone wants to be a perpetual student, like I do. Fewer people still probably shift away from the field that has been their life for decades. Now let’s see how that brilliant strategy works out for me. The last of the students slipped into the room just before the clock struck 8 a.m., and the introductions began.

“Good morning! For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Dr. Caugh of the higher education program, and I’ll be teaching this course on the independent college.” He handed out the syllabus and started talking about how the day would progress. My stomach turned when I looked down and saw that we would have a team presentation on day two of the class, and the week would wrap up with large group presentations.

Team work with people I’ve never even met before? Blah! They wouldn’t have pulled that on us in the English department. I wonder if they do that in the botany department?

“Okay, I know that most of you already know each other, but let’s go around the room and introduce ourselves. John, we’ll start with you and then go up and down the aisles.” We went around the room learning who was who and what each of us did for a living. Nearly all the other students worked in non-teaching positions at a college or university, and many already knew each other from work. People here know each other already? Weird. This is not what I expected.

After introductions, we listened to our first lecture on the history of private
colleges. Possible threats to liberal arts colleges. What do I know about that?

Competitive marketing, merit-based aid, private support for state schools? Good grief!

How will I ever hold up my end of an intelligent conversation with these people?

Everybody here works in administration: admissions, financial aid, career services. What does “provost” even mean? What the heck is an “HBCU” or the “NCES”? What’s with the love of acronyms? These people use a different language! They know about the whole college operation, not just the tiny bubble surrounding their classroom. Why did I not poke my head out of the books more often to learn about the rest of the college? These people know the attrition rate in their schools off the top of their heads. Attrition, attrition… what the hell is attrition? I’m drawing a blank! What am I doing here? Why did I pick this instead of trying to finish my Ph.D. in English? What was I thinking?

Reflection: The outsider. The first stage of adult transition begins after a change occurs and we learn our new roles and expectations (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). The new roles and expectations of being a doctoral student surprised me, and I felt a high level of anxiety at the beginning of this transition. My feelings about starting doctoral work were not at all similar to my feelings about starting my master’s work in English. Instead of looking forward to the books we would read and discuss, I dreaded the upcoming conversations. They would not be about character, motivation, or rhetorical maneuvers. Instead, they would focus on policy, practice, and administration in higher education, preparing us for careers at universities. Some people would go on to conduct research, writing about and developing theories related to the teaching/learning process, student retention, or program funding. They would develop theories that help enlighten our knowledge and perception of higher education, theories that could help universities
provide a better teaching environment for faculty, a better learning environment for students, or a more successful university. Most of the students in this program, however, would go on to work as administrators at universities. That was a future I had imagined for myself too, but I felt horribly underprepared that first day. I had known I needed to learn more about how colleges function outside of my tiny classroom bubble, but I hadn’t realized just how much I needed to learn until I listened to the other students talk about their jobs. Although filling a gap in my understanding was a part of my motivation for returning to school to earn my Ph.D. in higher education rather than English, most of my motivation came from pragmatism. I wanted to open up job possibilities for the future. I was about to tackle something that needed to be tackled rather than embracing and enjoying something I loved. College had never felt like this for me before--i.e., a chore instead of a pleasure.

When the reality of their program falls short of student expectations, students often leave before graduating (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Golde, 1996, 1998; Golde & Dore, 2010; Lovitts, 1996). Unfortunately, I did not love the setup of the program either—a cohort model with specific class requirements instead of choices. The course requirements were very specific rather than a list of possible classes. Instead of enrolling in classes that looked interesting to me during any given semester, I would need to take what was offered, what I was told to take, and what all the other cohort members would also take—no choices, no flexibility, no freedom. In addition to a lack of choices about which classes I would take, there was also little choice about when I would take them. Each new cohort had class on the same day and time every single semester for three years. While this made sense to me as a means of accommodating adult learners with day
jobs, I was not accustomed to the lack of freedom. For my entire undergraduate and graduate education, I had looked forward to reading the new schedule of classes each semester, looking through my selections, going to the bookstore to see the reading lists, planning out my schedule. Freedom of choice was not a part of this new doctoral program. Right away, this left me feeling that I held very little control, and it left me feeling unsatisfied.

Not only did I lack control over my education path for the next several years, but I also felt insecure and a little intimidated about the subject matter: Most of the other students already had been working as administrators at their respective colleges. Only four other students were also faculty members, like I was, but they were full-time faculty, not part-time faculty, like me, so they also had more knowledge about the actual workings of a university that I did not. Even the language they used felt foreign to me, and the first day started out with an almost overwhelming sense of trepidation about my choice in doctoral programs, even about the very idea of earning a Ph.D. in any subject.

Just a few weeks before writing this reflection, I smiled with relief at Bochner’s (2014) reaction after looking at the syllabus in his first day of doctoral class: “My excitement turned to fear. I didn’t recognize a single author on the reading list, no one. I felt utterly unprepared and intimidated” (p. 60). If someone as successful as Bochner felt intimidated by reading the syllabus during his first class, it could happen to any of us. He might have felt nervous on that first day, but he stuck with it and finished. Not only did he complete his Ph.D. program, but he also went on to become a tenured faculty member and publish a number of well-respected books and articles. He accomplished what I felt afraid to dream of, even though he stumbled at the starting line. Apprehension must just
be a natural part of the education process. We enter it feeling as though we do not belong there. We don’t know if we can finish or not. Not everyone does, and we are each at risk of being one of the 50% of doctoral students who drop before degree completion. On the first day, we feel as if we do not belong, and then we need to experience a long adaptation process to feel that we do belong. When that happens, we know that we have successfully socialized into the world of higher education and that we do belong.

2. Day Two: Presentations

The first group of two took the floor as Dr. Caught slid into a chair in the back of the room. Tom bumped into the podium and dropped his notes, spilling pages in a three-foot radius around his feet. While Tom fumbled to collect his scattered pages, Harry stood as stiff as a mannequin and stared at the podium. Neither of them spoke or looked at their audience while they pulled up their PowerPoint presentation.

My jaw dropped and eyebrows shot up while I watched how awkward and uncomfortable they were. *These guys don’t do a lot of public speaking, do they?*

Tom took a deep breath and pulled his shoulders back before his faltering voice enlightened us about electronic teaching posing a threat to small, liberal arts colleges. Harry hid behind the podium, nodding his head and changing slides.

From my seat in the front row, I swiveled my head back and forth between both speakers, nodding my head, hoping to appear both interested and informed. I tried to make eye contact with one of them and smile while I took notes. I wanted to hear some specific examples to back up their general comments but worried that asking them questions while they spoke might throw them off and fluster them. *They do not need to feel more nervous than they already feel.*
After ten minutes of monotones broken by the occasional voice crack, team one wrapped up with sighs of relief and hurried to their seats. Jay and I walked up front. I pulled up our presentation about different economic strategies liberal arts colleges have tried to remain competitive with state schools while Jay raised his voice two or three octaves and shouted out, “How is everyone doing today?!?” The audience laughed, of course, appreciating the comic relief, but I saw the sweat on his forehead and heard a slight tremor in his booming voice. Jay worked as a high school principle in Detroit, so he probably shouted at his audience on a daily basis. At least we both know how to speak to an audience.

Reflection: Maybe not as far outside as I thought/connections and belonging.

While my “moving in” phase of adult transition (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) had already started when entering the doctoral program, I did not feel as though I truly began my transition into becoming a doctoral student until that second day of classes. On the first day, I had not been able to read the anxiety of my peers. They appeared perfectly at ease and seem to feel comfortable, while I felt as though I did not and could not belong. Our second day revealed their uncertainty, and it became even more evident during their presentations. Most of my peers worked in administrative positions, which gave them an advantage over me as far as knowledge of the daily operations involved in higher education, but they had very little experience speaking in front of large groups. At least I had been doing that for years and no longer felt anxiety about public speaking. Maybe I didn’t know about financial aid or shared governance yet, but at least I felt confident speaking in public.

It seemed strange and extremely surprising for these adults to seem nervous, and
then it hit me: Most of these people do not speak in public daily the way faculty do. They communicate one-on-one during most of the workday, not in front of a room filled with people. They were more nervous than I was. Empathy washed over me, and I felt much more at ease with the cohort.

Observing this vulnerability in my peers also gave me a boost of confidence before our presentation. Jay opened our presentation with a boisterous welcome to everyone, but I heard the catch in his voice and saw the sweat break out on his forehead. He felt nervous too, and he tried to overcompensate for his anxiety with a display of bravado. I loved seeing both the weakness and bravery in him. It made him so human. I had been practicing my section so often that I used the slides only as a reference point for the class, just like I do when I teach. It felt good--knowing the material well enough to appear calm and confident and knowledgeable. What a relief to know that I did not ruin my chances for success by picking the wrong program. I could keep up with the other students. *I might actually be good enough to succeed at this.*

Faculty members stood out from the crowd of presenters that week; they were comfortable talking in front of a crowd, displaying relaxed body language without the edge of tension that was visible in the presentations of the majority of the cohort. There were only a small handful of us, and we spanned the disciplines, but it still felt like a connection, the kind of arm's-length connection to others that I tend to develop when initially meeting people.

Seeing their nerves and insecurities was a pivotal time for me. It reminded me that we were all in the same boat. We just climbed aboard with a unique set of equipment, and each of us would need to adapt in different ways. When reassuring my students, I remind
them that they are in college to learn. They are not expected to know everything going in
to the class. Learning is a process, and it takes time. No one is expected to be an expert
on the first day. Knowing that my peers felt just as anxious about their doctoral work as I
did, albeit in different ways, helped remind me that I was not expected to be an expert
during my first week of class either. I was here to learn, and that process would take time.
My peers felt just as nervous about our new workload as I did. We just each handled it
differently. We all have different strengths and weaknesses, but I could still be a part of
this cohort. This ended up being extremely fortunate for me because an inability to
socialize into the doctoral environment often leads to doctoral attrition (Golde, 1996,
2000; Tinto, 1993).

Our second day of classes presenting chapter summaries in front of the class not
only helped me feel more connected with my peers, but it also reminded me of how I
ended up here in the first place. Deciding what to major in as an undergraduate had been
easy: I needed to be an English major. Although I had always been a strong student and
thoroughly enjoyed history, biology, and astronomy, there was nothing I wanted to study
more than English. At that point in my life, my primary passion was reading. Nothing
surpassed books in my heart, so of course I would become an English major. At the
graduate level, deciding on a Master of Arts in English had been just as easy a decision to
make. Undergraduate discussions in literature classes were good, but discussions in the
handful of graduate classes I had taken my senior year surpassed them all by leaps and
bounds. Everyone in the room loved books as much as I did; we belonged to the same
world of stories and storytelling and critiques. For the first time in my life, book lovers
surrounded me. I wasn’t the only person in the room who recognized the allusions to
Hamlet in Strange Brew, watched Bronte movies for fun, or read poems on Tennyson’s birthday. I finally had peers who preferred Arthur Miller to Seinfeld, and I was not considered an oddball for watching You Can’t Take it with You instead of The Simpsons. I fit in with the other MA students and loved being surrounded by other literature lovers.

Picking a focus for my doctoral work was not as clear or as easy. At first, my dilemma concerned only my preferred area of study: Do I apply to colleges with a strong medieval department? On the other hand, I love George Elliot and Thomas Hardy as much as Chaucer, so maybe Victorian British literature would be a better primary focus with a secondary focus on the medieval period. Drama classes were some of my favorites, but I should I really focus on drama? Wouldn’t I need to take theater classes and study theater? Do I really want a Ph.D. in theater? No. Wouldn’t it be better to switch to history and apply for a medieval studies degree? Then I could keep taking foreign language classes and linguistics classes and history classes in addition to the literature classes. Would that make sense?

Indecision ultimately left me not applying anywhere and taking a teaching job at a community college. The environment was wonderful, and I loved teaching, so I postponed my doctoral studies indefinitely, working and teaching and raising a family for a few years instead.

The day I discovered that I could actually make higher education a focus of study, I barely took the time to mull it over before filling out the application and finding the best writing sample I had. I knew that higher education was for me the second I saw it listed as an actual focus area. I love books, but I also love college and university libraries and students and professors. It is the best environment for me to live and work. I can study
forever--different history classes, new foreign languages, and someday maybe botany. I can let myself become a perpetual student and still find a paying job to support my habits of school and books. Higher education is perfect for me. It may have felt intimidating at first, but maybe it is not completely ridiculous that I am here.

3. Rewards

June 19, 1993

Contractions startled me awake at four that morning--sharp knife stabs and a simultaneous squeezing in my abdomen. “Finally,” I grunted. Jim popped up, eyes glazed with sleep. We stayed up watching Chicago lose to Phoenix by ten points in the fifth game of the NBA playoffs, and the devastating loss capped off a week of disappointed waiting.

“Is it time?” he asked, eyebrows raised, quickly alert.

I smiled and raised my arms over my head, goal.

“Finally!” Jim jumped up and grabbed the suitcase that had been packed and waiting by the door for a week. “I don’t think I could have waited another day”

“This has definitely been the longest week of my life.” I pushed myself out of bed and started grabbing clothes. These days, doctors won’t let pregnant women go over a week past their due date without inducing labor, but in 1993, they still do. We were still in our 20s back then, and waiting for anything felt torturous, but this week had been agonizing and painful, and not just on my back.

“Thank goodness I don’t have to watch you pacing the house anymore.”

“And you won’t try to feed me any more castor oil,” I said, sticking out my tongue and blanching at the memory of the taste and texture that gagged me and left me
nauseated two days earlier. Our due date had passed a week ago, and we started getting antsy about the wait, doing anything we could to speed up my contractions, stopping just short of jumping up and down on a trampoline.

On the way to the hospital, tree branches littered the roads, and a powerful wind blew branches, brush, and dirt through the air. Our tiny Ford Tempo swerved off the road twice on the drive. Fortunately, we saw no other cars on the way to the hospital. The whole sky looked gray, like Dorothy’s Kansas, and tornado warnings blared on the radio.

The lights in the hospital flickered on and off just minutes after we registered, and they went out completely by the time we set up in a delivery room. The back-up generator didn’t power the entire facility, so staff members relocated us to a small, dark room with stand-up lights that reminded me of the kind used in a garage when working on a car. They felt more like spotlights after they shined directly on me, blocking my vision from the rest of the staff even though I could hear their voices. I felt like I was in an episode of *Twilight Zone*.

A large man with short, gray hair strode into the room. “I’m Dr. Cairn,” he barked, in a voice the polar opposite of the peppy, excited voice I was expecting. “Dr. Blackwell can’t make it, so she called me, one of the perks of living so close to the hospital.” His fists perched on either of his hips as he hovered over me. “Okay, what do we have here?”

Oh, great, I’m going to love this jerk!

The staff started talking about dilation and how hard it was to see properly in the poor, generator-produced lighting. A couple of them, including the doctor, kept complaining about getting called into work at such inconvenient times. *Nothing like a*
thoroughly disinterested staff to help ease my anxiety. I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up images of the Hundred Acre Woods with Winnie-the-Pooh.

Jim squeezed my hand. “Are you trying the visualization technique?” I nodded my head. The instructor of our prenatal class suggested slow, deep breathing and trying to visualize something pleasant and relaxing to avoid stress and panic while in labor. I pictured a fictional world of A.A. Milne and personified animal friends. Images of Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet were just starting to appear in my mind when a nurse pulled me out of it by taking my blood pressure.

“So, you a Bulls fan?” Dr. Sunshine asked from his position between my legs.

My eyebrows shot up in surprise, “yes.”

He turned away from me and addressed his support staff again. “I just hate Michael Jordan. What an arrogant showboat.”

This just keeps getting better and better.

“Do you want any painkillers yet?” an unfamiliar female voice called from above. I couldn’t see her face through the spotlight glare and my terrific angle of the ceiling.

“No thanks.”

“If you wait too long, you could miss your chance. We don’t give any meds close to the delivery time.”

“No thanks.” I’m about to be rewarded for every horrible experience I’m going through. I’m not about to ruin it by poisoning my prize.

He felt so tiny and fragile. I couldn’t put him down, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Jim held him while I showered the next morning; otherwise, I couldn’t look away from him. After dinner on our second and last night in the hospital, we closed the
door to our room and watched the Bulls beat the Suns while I walked back and forth, holding Taylor and swaying back and forth with him gripped tightly in my arms, only handing him off to my husband while I climbed back into bed. Can’t risk dropping him.

Taylor slept in a bassinet in my hospital room, and Jim curled up on a loveseat by the window. The bassinet was thick but clear plastic, so we could look at him while he slept. I could turn on my side and watch him as I lay in my hospital bed if I put him down, that is, but I didn’t want to let go of him unless I planned on sleeping; otherwise, I kept him with me, snuggled in close to my heart so I could feel his warmth and breathe in the fragrance of his newness.

**Reflection.** Adjusting to motherhood was not a long or difficult transition for me. Maybe the actual “moving in” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) stage took time, as parents constantly learn and grow while their children grow, but I felt less worried and nervous than I felt during the “moving in” phase of my transition to doctoral student. Although I had not spent my youth dreaming of children, taking care of dolls, or devoting hours to family-style role-playing games, like some other girls I knew, I adjusted more quickly to motherhood than to any other significant change in life—quicker than adapting to initial college life, to marriage, or to my doctoral program. If the doctor said to quit drinking coffee or eating nuts, I did it. If I never had a chance to go running, so what? If I suddenly slept in 90 minute increments, fine. It felt right. I felt like a mother.

The months of suffering from nausea, from vomiting every time I smelled something odd, from my back hurting every day, and from no longer being able to jog were just a natural part of life, and I was terrifically rewarded for the suffering by the prize of my new baby. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I felt a need to care for him and
protect him, but I also loved looking at him, feeling the weight of him in my arms and breathing in his new baby smell. Entire days passed when I did little other than take care of him and watch over him. I could stare at him all day.

4. Teamwork

“I’ll send around this sign-up sheet for team presentations,” Dr. Nichols announced while pausing from our syllabus review to wave a piece of paper in front of our class. More teamwork? Great. Does every class require group presentations? Why? Why can’t I just work alone?

The sign-up sheet started at one end of the room and pretty well filled up by the time it arrived to me. The two women sitting on either side of me, Karen and Cassandra, and I decided that we three could collaborate on a project together since we all worked on campus and could meet easily during the week, but there were no open slots for three people available, only individual slots for each of us to join an existing group.

“ Damn it,” Karen whispered under her breath. While she looked over the list to find a day she could present and a team she wanted to work with, I looked up and found Kendra trying to make eye contact with me and mouthing “work with us,” pointing to Mara, the woman beside her.

While I did not know Mara yet, Kendra had been a part of the larger group I had been in during our first class. When our lectures and discussions finished each day, the class had broken off into smaller teams of four or five so we could focus on our last-day-of-class research presentations. One isolated slacker failed to show up for class and meetings on a regular basis. When she did attend, the research she dug up was neither relevant nor academically rigorous enough to use. Fortunately, the worker bees
outnumber her four to one and compensated for her slack. The rest of us worked well together, eager for a good presentation and good grades, anxious personality types willing to stay up late and skip out on leisure activities or a good night’s sleep to finish the job successfully--not just passably but impressively.

The memory of that success placated me a little, but I still sighed at the enforced group work. Disgruntled, I bit my lip and nodded my head, adding my name to the sign-up sheet alongside Kendra and Mara. *Happy about it or not, I really have no choice. Why can’t I just work alone?*

**Reflection.** Despite my initial resistance to group projects, collaboratively working on presentations helped my academic and social adaptation to the world of doctoral education, both of which are essential to success during the first transitional year of doctoral study (Tinto, 1993). Some researchers even have argued that socialization is one of the most important aspects of doctoral study during the first year (Gardner, 2007, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 2001). The first two team projects for our first class went well partially because we had been assigned our teams and topics ahead of time. By the time we met to work together, we were prepared and knew what we were doing. For the first two-person project, I had no idea what to expect from an unknown partner. I had no information to go on other than he had not responded to any of my e-mail queries. I entered class that first day armed with a PowerPoint presentation and ready to share. I was ready to revise, collaborate, scrap it and start over, or finish it on my own if necessary. One never knows what to expect out of group work, especially with strangers, and I would not let anyone pull me down on my first day. Fortunately, Jay was very laid back and friendly. Although he had not prepared any work ahead of time, as I
had, he had read the class textbook and was ready to discuss its contents. He also did not seem offended that I started work without him, which was a relief. We divided the slides and decided who would present each section; he suggested we reduce the word count on each slide, a good suggestion. I can be excessively wordy. The larger group consisted of five of us, and we collaborated every day, at first via e-mail and then in person. That project went well too, but again, one never knows what to expect of strangers.

When it came time to sign up for groups yet again in our second class, I felt renewed annoyance at being forced to depend on other people. I wanted to work alone and resented the forced teams. A woman from our first class made eye contact with me and mouthed “sign up for our group.” Although I wasn’t happy about working in a group again, I still felt relieved that a group was willing to accept me. I nodded and joined Kendra’s team. Kendra was, and probably still is, a hardworking, ambitious person and straight-A student. She never would have invited me to participate unless she felt confident that I would pull my own weight and do a good job. Someone who worked with me before wanted to work with me again. This feels good. Kendra’s acceptance and approval reminded me that I was good enough to be successful, and that encouragement helped me keep going when my doctoral program became stressful and I felt like quitting.

During those first few classes, other students visited with each other before classes started while I jotted down notes about what I saw and how I felt. Perpetually the loner, I devoted far more attention to my notebook than the living, breathing human beings around me. This could have prevented my academic success because social isolation often leads to attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007) while positive peer
interaction and good relationships with peers is an important aspect of doctoral socialization (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Golde, 2000). Thank goodness for our small-group work. I would not have sought out a peer community on my own, stubbornly clinging to my independence. Whether it was designed intentionally or not, our enforced group presentations helped us build a community of practice, a group of people sharing the same interests or needs, working together regularly, and creating a bond while collectively learning (Wenger, 1998). Working in smaller groups helped me adapt to the larger community of our cohort, which, in turn, helped me adapt not only to the community within the higher education department but also the university community.

The sense of being an outsider and not belonging faded during those years of coursework. While I enjoyed the company of several peers, I preferred keeping the focus on school or work, away from anything personal. Talking about our classes and our research was a true pleasure. We were able to help each other in little ways but little ways that seemed to add up to big help. Gwynne showed a few of us how to compute our math work in Excel spreadsheets to avoid the long-hand and time-consuming math. I kept Mara from changing the direction of her presentations and papers when she panicked at the last minute, which she did regularly for each and every project right up through exams. Kendra, Robert, Shannon, and I supported each other through our dreaded online Quantitative Research Methods II class. I helped Jay organize and edit his papers. We gave each other job leads and offered recommendations. I found myself jumping at any opportunity to help a member of our cohort, and they seemed just as eager to help me. The entire cohort model offended me at first--always seeing the same faces again and again, not having a choice of classes--but it actually became a valuable source of support.
Without my colleagues within the cohort, I don’t know how long it would have taken me to feel like a doctoral student, but I eventually did. By the time our second year of classes began, I realized with some surprise that I really felt like a doctoral student. I learned how to negotiate the changes in my life brought on by doctoral study, and I entered the “moving through” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) stage of adult development almost without noticing it.

5. Death in the News

November 3, 1994

I tiptoed out of bed early in the morning and carefully skirted the minefield of toys scattered on the floor. As soon as the bedroom door clicked shut, I let out a heavy breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding in, flipped on the coffee pot, and grabbed the notebook I kept hidden underneath the couch. After 30 minutes of staring at a blank page, I dropped the notebook on my lap, wrapped both hands around my coffee cup, and gazed out the window. The dark night sky started to lighten, black mingling with midnight blue.

I sipped coffee while watching nighttime slip away. The sound of movement issued from the baby’s room and alerted me that my early morning solitude had come to an end, so I closed my notebook, pages still blank, and slipped it back under the couch before heading to his room.

“Morning, Taylor! How did you sleep?” My little boy smiled up at me and held out his arms. I pulled him out of his crib and hugged him close to my heart, breathing in the scent of him. “Let’s go watch the news while we eat and find out if the police found poor Susan’s boys yet.”

Although not typically an advocate of watching television while eating, the search
for Susan Smith’s little boys captured my attention a few days earlier. A man carjacked Smith, threw her out of the car, and drove away with three-year-old Michael and 14-month-old Alex still in the back seat. I thought about them frequently during the day and even woke up out of a dead sleep one night thinking about them, worried about how frightened they must feel without their mother. I anxiously looked forward to hearing updates about the case each morning, listening to the news every day, hoping the poor mother would find her boys. The youngest boy, Alex, reminded me so much of Taylor. They were nearly the same age, and my eyes watered every time I thought about what it might feel like to lose him, to not know whether he was safe or not. I turned on the Today Show and sat down to feed my son, hoping that the police had found little Michael and Alex.

I settled Taylor in his highchair at the dining table, which nestled between the kitchen and living room of our tiny apartment, then spooned small bites of oatmeal into his smiling mouth and wiped his lips with a damp rag to make sure the food wouldn’t irritate his sensitive skin. News droned chaotically in the background.

“Smith’s car was recovered this morning from John D. Long Lake.”

Okay, they found the car, but where are the boys?

“…both boys still strapped into their seats.”

No, that can’t be right.

“Police searched the lake after Smith’s confession…”

Confession?

“In tears, Smith admitted her plan to kill herself, taking the boys with her”

That can’t be right. She wouldn’t have done that. She couldn’t have done that!
“Smith claims she got out of the car to push, and the car rolled into the water before she could climb back in.”

*No, that’s not right. She would have gone in after them. Anyone would have gone in after them. She would have drowned before walking away. That didn’t happen! It couldn’t happen, it couldn’t happen, it couldn’t happen!*

The wind left my body. I couldn’t breathe, and the world became blurry.

Taylor raised his hands over his head, “up.” Seeing how he wanted me cleared my head a bit. I lifted my boy out of his highchair and held him tightly against my chest holding onto him for the rest of the morning, kissing him and hugging him, staring out the window at the Black River below.

**Reflection.** Susan Smith’s youngest boy, Alex, had been 14 months old when the brothers were first reported missing, just four months younger than Taylor had been at the time. I listened to the news non-stop during those days of phony searching, hoping that the carjacker would drop off the boys someplace safe. A car thief is not a kidnapper, so each day I expected to learn that the boys were found outside a police station, fire station, or hospital. My heart wept for his parents, particularly his mother. I knew she must feel worried and wracked with guilt that she had not been able to save them.

Smith’s confession that she actually killed her boys, strapped them into their car seats and drove them into the lake to drown, stunned me. *How could she do that?* It was incomprehensible. Most parents feel that their lives take on increased meaning after their children are born. Jim and I certainly did.

We were very young to be parents, still in our twenties and barely out of college. Graduating from college had been our primary goal, and it had not been replaced with
specific aspirations yet. Our only goals were to work our way out of entry-level jobs and travel as much as possible to see the world both on and off the job. Life moved from one story to another, vacation to vacation, one concert to the next, and from football to basketball to baseball season. As soon as we learned we would become parents though, life shifted almost instantly. We once again defined what we wanted and worked toward it, and the entire future revolved around what would be best for our kids.

Our career trajectories were the first to change. My job as a reporter was not at all conducive to family life. I did not want to receive phone calls in the middle of the night to cover a story about a house fire or gas station shooting. I also did not want to travel, wondering whether it would be worse to take my son with me or leave him home with Jim and be away from him, so I left the newspaper job I’d been working at for years and started taking on small, freelance jobs covering town meetings and conducting local interviews--short pieces that would have previously seemed trite. This career shift had not been a part of my plan, but it was still an easy decision to make. It felt necessary to adapt, and I needed a job that would accommodate my family, not the other way around. Jim’s job in the Air Force offered similar challenges to our family life. He could be deployed at any time. Sometimes I could go with him and sometime not, but neither one of us wanted to bring a baby into a potentially dangerous zone, and he could not stand the thought of possibly getting deployed for months at a time, completely missing out on Taylor’s first steps and first words. He finished his tour and did not sign up for another, instead taking a boring job in the auto industry. These unplanned changes and adaptations did not seem like a big deal at the time. We were happy to shift gears and point our lives in new directions, the changes offering renewed energy and enthusiasm for life.
The thought of losing my child crushed me, left me stupefied. How could I ever go on without him? So how could any other parent ever consider losing her children on purpose? Children give our lives increased meaning. Losing them would also take away that meaning and leave parents empty. So how could anyone bear losing that love and meaning, much less try to get rid of it intentionally?

At that time in my life, I did not understand deep sadness and depression, anxiety, insecurity, and confusion the way I do now. At that point in my life, it did not occur to me that other people respond differently to situations than I would. We do not all react the same to having children, to feeling stress, or to any other event, for that matter. None of us adapt to transitions in exactly the same way as someone else (Schlossber, 1981). The manner in which we respond to change varies with each individual, and individuals can even react differently at different times their lives. Much of our response depends on (a) how we perceive the transition, (b) our environments, and (c) the personal characteristics of the person experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1995). Smith’s perception of her children could not have been identical to mine. Her environment both before and after having children was different from mine, and her personal characteristics did not match mine, so of course she responded differently to motherhood than I did.

6. ABD

June, 2011

The phone rang. I thought about ignoring it but saw Mara’s name pop up on the caller ID. The phone hadn’t even touched my ear yet when I heard her shout, “I passed the exam! I’m ABD!”

“Excellent! I’m so happy for you!”
“I can’t even tell you what a relief this is. I felt so nervous! I kept thinking I was blowing it. Thank goodness, it’s over. It’s over, it’s over, it’s over!”

“Yay, good for you!”

“What time is your meeting?”

“Tomorrow morning at eight.”

“Hah,” she chuckled. “Good luck getting your committee members there by eight in the morning.”

I laughed but knew she was right and still felt too nervous to enjoy the humor.

“You’ll be fine. Cripes, if I can pass, of course you can passed. Call me as soon as you leave. We can toast our success over margaritas at lunch.”

“Presumptuous, but it still sounds good. Talk to you tomorrow.” I hung up the phone. *Celebration or consolation--either way, I’ll be ready for those drinks.*

Just as Mara predicted, I was the only person in the lobby at ten minutes until eight. The secretary let me in when she arrived, but the committee evaluating my comprehensive exams did not begin rolling in to the office until fifteen minutes past the hour. The wait did nothing to soothe my shaking nerves. Even though my brain kept telling me that everything would be fine, acid still seeped into my stomach, and my head felt like it was floating over my shoulders instead of attached to the rest of my body.

They may not have been punctual, but at least my evaluators were kind. Part of my comprehensive exam consisted of planning and proposing a research study with the idea that this might help streamline the transition into my dissertation. They said that my topic was relevant, well researched, and interesting. They also offered advice on changing methods before asking me to wait outside for a few minutes. While waiting, I
commiserated with Janelle, the 9 a.m. appointment.

“How did it go?”

“They are discussing my work as we speak.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.” Janelle shook her head and waved dismissively. “What was your topic again?”

“Student retention in online English classes.”

“Right, cool. I’m still dancing around my topic. I wrote my exam about medical school admissions, but I’m not interested enough to stick with that topic for the whole dissertation. I’m not sure what I’ll do yet.” The door opened for me to join the conference again.

“Good luck.”

I smiled and bit my lower lip as I took my seat again and waited for their decision.

“Congratulations, you passed your exams.” Relief washed over me, and I felt my muscles unclench and unwind.

“We do think you’ll want to reconsider your research method. Your questions align with quantitative research as of now, so consider whether you are willing to do quantitative research. I think your topic would be better examined through qualitative methods, but you would need to reframe your research questions and your research method a bit more and think about what you really want to know.”

“Thanks.” I smiled as I got up to leave. I gave Janelle a thumbs up on my way out of the conference room.

“Yay, good for you! Hey, give me your number before you leave.” We exchanged phone numbers quickly before she took her turn under the magnifying glass.
“Good luck with yours.”

I walked out of Mundy Hall feeling lighter than I had in weeks. I called Mara right away to give her the good news and then called my husband, realizing as I dialed that I thought of sharing my news with him only after sharing it with my cohort peers. July, 2011

As soon as the waitress sat me in a booth way in the back, my phone buzzed. It was Mara sending me a text: RUNING LATE. ORDER APPETIZERS. ALMOST THERE.

NO PROB. I ordered spinach dip and a chardonnay, then pulled out my notes to review before she arrived. My topic had shifted quite a bit since our last conversation, so I felt eager to hear her feedback.

Mara arrived breathless but settled in, quickly and ordered a tomato basil pizza and cabernet. I ordered mushroom ravioli and dove into the spinach dip while she filled me in on her new job.

“I travel all the time. They keep me so busy, but I’m still working on my concept paper.” She raised one first in the air and said “I’m on fire!” before raising her wine glass toward mine for a toast. “Okay, down to business. What have you got?”

“Okay, so I started out hoping that I could just revise my comprehensive exam paper about retention in online composition courses.”

“Good, don’t waste time.”

“But my research questions keep coming up quantitative.”

“Perfect, do a regression analysis, like me. You did a good job in our statistics and research classes. I know you got a better grade than I did in both of them.”
“Yeah, but I didn’t like it, and I felt lost all the time. It could take me two more years to finish this, and I don’t want to feel lost for two whole years. If that happened, I’m afraid that I would just get frustrated and quit.”

“You’re not quitting.” Mara shook her head and scooped more spinach onto her bread.

“I think I need to work with words instead of numbers.”

Mara shrugged her shoulders. “Okay, then you should do a qualitative study,” she nodded. “Sounds yucky to me, but it makes sense for you.”

“So, I started exploring some of the variables about retention more closely.

“Good.”

“One of the main variables is student satisfaction.”

“Do you really want to hear a bunch of whiny freshman carry on about how they feel about their composition classes? Yuck!”

“No, not really, plus a ton of work already exists on it. But we actually don’t know a whole lot about faculty satisfaction.”

“Nobody cares whether we’re satisfied, happy, or miserable.”

“True, it could be an uphill battle, which is why I would need to interview both students and faculty members. Get both perspectives.”

“Sounds like a headache. What are your research questions?”

“Pretty vague and general so far. What areas of teaching or learning online give you the most satisfaction? What areas of teaching or learning online give you the least satisfaction?”

“Yep, those are pretty generic. I think you’ll need to focus on something more
specific to convince a committee that the study is important.”

I nodded my head as our food arrived. “Oh, yes, I’m still working on it.”

“You’ll have it nailed down before we meet next month.”

“Thanks for the confidence. Now let’s look at what you have so far.” Lunch tasted better after our talk.

August, 2011

My cell phone beeped, alerting me to a text from Mara: SWAMPED TODAY.

CAN WE RESCHEDULE?

ME TOO, BUT NEXT WEEK IS ALL BOOKED.

I’M ON VACATION AFTER THAT.

FIRST FRIDAY IN SEPTEMBER?

GOOD. NOON?

OK

September, 2011

CAN’T MAKE IT THIS WEEK.

OK, RESCHEDULE LATER.

October, 2011

No contact

**Reflection.** As silly as it seems now, these scenes did not connect for me at the time I lived them or at the time I wrote about the occasions in my field notes. After reading through the field notes and freewriting the first draft of this section, however, I finally realized how these scenes pointed to the importance of peer support. They also reveal how relieved I felt after passing my comprehensive exams and how stressed out I
felt while working on the concept paper for my dissertation. They also touch on the long, slow process of evolving from a capable student to an independent researcher. For me, this process illustrates why so many doctoral students encounter problems at the dissertation stage. They remain at risk of attrition, even after they successfully transition into the environment of their graduate school, complete their coursework, and pass their comprehensive exams (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Bair & Haworth, 2005; Lovitts, 2001).

It took me quite a while to realize it, but my peers clearly influenced me much more than I expected. While initially unhappy with the lack of freedom my doctoral program allowed and the monotony of seeing the same faces in each class, the cohort became a good source of support during coursework. At times, the members of the cohort offered even more support than my family. We shared a specific connection that family and friends outside of academia did not share, so they became a valuable support network. After we finished our exams, a few of us had ambitions of remaining in smaller groups and sharing updates on our dissertations. Although we started out strong, other events in our lives distracted us. The time between meeting and sharing work continued to increase until many of our groups fell out of touch completely. Before I experienced this isolation first hand, I expected to flourish in the solitary environment of a writer. Going through it showed me just how the isolating environment of dissertation work can feel like too much to manage, which is another reason people quit before graduating (Ali & Khun, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Nerad & Miller, 1997; Sigafus, 1998).

While passing my comprehensive exams felt like a positive move forward, it also left me very well aware of my amateur status as researcher. A 20-page paper became something that I knew how to research and design without stress or strain. Even the
higher expectations of writing papers for doctoral classes did not stump me, but the dissertation was completely different and more complicated, not just longer. The process requires identifying a problem that has not yet been explored in detail, proposing a plan to research that problem, and convincing others that the study could provide useful information to address the problem. This is a sharp contrast to the papers I wrote during my coursework, which did not include convincing readers of a problem or gathering my own data. I had written about problems and different theories that might help to address those problems, but I did so using existing research and literature. I took theoretical classes in research methods, but did not conduct empirical research. Identifying a new issue related to higher education became more difficult and more time consuming than I expected because so many different angles and areas needed to be examined before an experienced committee would be convinced that a particular research project is worthwhile. The differences between the work of a researcher and the papers I had written during my coursework were huge, and writing a dissertation would not be as simple as each paper from my coursework becoming a separate chapter, as one of my peers so naively suggested during our first year. At the time the idea spewed out of her mouth, I knew the whole concept felt wrong and did not make sense according to the outline we were required to follow to complete the dissertation, and I also underestimated how much work would go into forming each chapter.

In addition to the differences in the content we all were focusing on, there was also a noticeable difference in the level of expected dependence. When writing research papers for classes, we could receive peer feedback and assurance from our professors on a weekly basis or even more frequently. If we wandered in the wrong direction, it did not
take a long time or a lot of energy to redirect the work and return to the right path. However, with the dissertation, we were required to carve our own direction. A lot of time and energy is required to explore research that already exists about any given area. Even more time and energy is required to prove that a problem exists and that it is relevant. If we fail to convince the members of our committee that our research topic is meaningful, it takes a great deal of work, time, and energy to find enough evidence to convince people that it is relevant or continue adjusting, refining, and modifying the topic until it is relevant. We needed to develop the ability to make those judgment calls on our own. For me and for many of my peers, this shift took much longer than expected. I personally felt the crushing weight of the dissertation and understood why so many doctoral students have a difficult time negotiating their independence at the dissertation stage (Gardner, 2008a).

7. Car Crashes, Cancer, and Other Distractions

January, 2012

My phone still gave me no reply from Jim. He hadn’t responded all day, which is completely out of character for him. I sighed and bit my lip, then loaded books and papers in my car, letting the engine warm up for the long drive home from classes. While the car heated up, I called home to let them know I was on my way. Taylor picked the up the phone on the first ring.

“Mom?”

“Hey, Sweetie, I’m on my way. It’s snowing pretty hard though, so it might take me longer than usual.” On the other end of the line, Taylor opened his mouth to interject but wasn’t quick enough. “I’ve tried to call Dad, but he isn’t answering his phone.”
“Mom,” he said more forcefully to make sure that he stopped her from talking anymore. “He was in an accident.” His words hung in the air, cold.


“Dad was in a car accident.”

“When? How? What happened? Where is he?”

“He’s on his way now.”

“He’s on his way now? So he’s okay? He’s driving? Jeez...” I slumped my head on the steering wheel in relief.

“He didn’t tell me much, but he’s on his way.”

“I thought there might be something wrong when he didn’t reply to me this morning.”

“It just happened”

“What?”

“Yeah, he was in meetings all morning and left early. That’s when it happened.”

“Oh, okay.” I still felt confused but wanted to focus on the road. “Thanks, Honey. I’ll be home as soon as I can.” I threw the car in reverse and started the long cruise home, trying to concentrate on the road and not let my thoughts wander home.

Jim’s car had lost traction on the ice, spun around, and crashed into the guardrail on the side of the road. He hit his head but still drove home, claiming afterward that he felt sore and tired but fine. At 2:00 in the morning, I woke up and found him standing in front of the dresser moving his hands around.

“Jim, what are you doing?” He mumbled something to himself and kept moving his hands in the air. “Jim,” I called a little louder, “what are you doing?”
“Working on the reactor.”

“What?” Nothing people say makes sense today.

Jim picked up an imaginary tool and started maneuvering it into the air. “We need to start up tomorrow, so I have to fix the reactor.” My jaw dropped as it finally dawned on me what was happening. He thinks he’s at work. Oh, good grief!

“Honey, you’re not at work. Wake up; you’re at home.”

Jim looked around the room with a blank expression on his face. He sat down on the edge of the bed and stared off into space.

I helped him into bed and then sat up watching him for the rest of the night.

Reflection. A few months after starting work on my dissertation, my husband suffered from a concussion after a car crash. Unfortunately, he had suffered other concussions in his life—first in high school, then again in the service—so this was the third time he had scrambled his brain. He recovered quickly and suffered only a few side effects from the first two concussions, but not this time. Middle-aged people do not recover as quickly as younger people, and the human brain does not appreciate being banged around repeatedly. While his CT scan revealed no permanent damage, it still took him several months to recover.

He couldn’t work for three months and could not drive for four months. He forgot simple things and repeated himself four and five times within a two-hour period. He developed terrible sensitivity to noise and light. He continuously hallucinated at night—e.g., kittens crawling on the floor, a rodeo in our backyard, my hair on fire. The hallucinations varied, but they certainly kept him from sleeping. Sadly, rest and water were the two most vital elements the neurologist could prescribe to him for recovery.
Since he often could not focus on anything, or even form complete sentences, he regressed significantly during those months.

Surprise transitions can be emotionally exhausting and strain our coping skills. The strategies we develop for expected changes in our lives may not work for unexpected changes (Schlossber, 2008). This surprise could have been a breaking point for my doctoral work. When we returned home from his CAT scan the day after the accident, a message from Lincoln Tech was on the answering machine. They wanted me to “join the team.” Although they did not offer any details over the phone, I knew it was a full-time job with benefits. We had no idea whether the effects of Jim’s concussion would be permanent or whether he would ever return to work again, so the full-time salary of Lincoln came as a blessing.

The job interview was only supposed to be practice for me. My interview skills were rusty. I never wanted to work at a for-profit college, but I did feel comfortable enough sending them my job application. If they called me, it meant that my CV was starting to look good. It had looked good to colleges hiring part-time instructors for years, but I wanted a full-time position. I sent out quite a few applications for full-time jobs after finishing my M.A., but I went on only two interviews, neither of which went well enough to yield a job offer. I did not want to practice my interviewing skills with colleges that I might actually want to work for one day, so I decided to practice with a school in which my interest was marginal. Even during the interview, I thought about how frustrating it would be to go to work for a school whose primary mission was making a profit, while providing education and opportunity for students remained secondary.

There it was though--Dave’s message on our answering machine inviting me to
join the Lincoln team. I needed a full-time job, so I accepted.

The for-profit world operated much differently than the traditional colleges I had worked in previously. The full-time instructors all taught seven classes each session. The sessions ran for ten weeks—one extra week for final exams and grading—and new sessions started the following Monday. The money-making world of business wastes no time on vacations for students or faculty members.

Faculty members were treated like pariah in this college. They were expendable. Admissions representatives who met their quota of new students were sent somewhere sunny every February as a reward for a job well done, but faculty members were expected to spend 35 hours each week standing in front of a classroom full of students. Grading, planning, professional service, office hours, and professional development could occur on our own time, but we were ordered to claim that we worked 40 hours each week on our time cards. Yes, we filled out time cards, just like any other assembly line worker.

At this point in my progress, it was easy for me to understand why external factors contribute to doctoral attrition (Tinto, 1993). During the day, I worked at a job I hated while worrying whether or not my husband would ever recover from his brain damage. Most nights, I stayed awake to watch over him, afraid he might stop breathing in his sleep or fall down the stairs chasing imaginary burglars. The stress of worry, lack of sleep, and an overload of work left my dissertation fairly low on my priority list. While this was a completely reasonable response and a natural part of life, it still added another element of stress and frustration to an already stressful and frustrating situation. Because stress (Baird, 1990; Smith et al., 2006), depression (Fullic, 2011), and lack of work-life
balance (Wright, 2003) are all factors contributing to doctoral attrition at the dissertation stage. I felt there was a good chance that I would give up at this point and not finish my program.

Technically, I could have stopped working on the dissertation. It would have been an easy decision to make. If I had a full-time position already, I might not even have applied to work on my Ph.D. in the first place. I had the job at Southwestern, so I could have easily quit thinking about the dissertation altogether, taught at my unpleasant job for two years, and then looked for a position with another college. It would have been a fairly reasonable decision given the circumstances; however, I would have been disappointed in myself for quitting. Failing while trying is one thing, but admitting defeat and giving up is another. I would have looked back on my decision to quit as weakness and hated myself for it.

Flynn et al (2012) point out the personal characteristics of high motivation and perseverance as factors contributing to persistence. Tenacity contributes similarly to success at the dissertation stage (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Brien, 1992). At that particular stage in my studies, those traits prevented me from quitting. If I kept going, I could eventually apply for jobs I would not otherwise be able to consider. Working on the dissertation with so much other stress going on in my life would feel torturous, but it wouldn’t last forever. Most of my current students are adults with families and full-time jobs, about 80% of them military jobs. When my students feel overwhelmed with their school work and want to quit, I tell them to compare school to being pregnant or deployed: it’s a lot of work and sometimes it’s awful, but it does not last forever. It ends, and after the end of the pain comes a reward. An education may not be as good as a baby,
but it still improves our lives, opens up opportunities that we would not otherwise be available to us. I applied that advice to myself and knew that on the other side of the boring, stressful dissertation work, all the extra time in front of the computer, all the missed sleep and added stress, I would find better job opportunities that could improve my life. I looked at the bigger picture and knew I would stay. It was hard and stressful, but I kept working on it, even for just a few minutes at a time.

This period did nothing to speed along my concept paper progress, but my headaches and roadblocks were far from unique. Other members of my cohort suffered from natural life events that created obstacles between them and their dissertation work as well. Jeff and Laura both landed new jobs. Mara found a new job but was fired from it after one year. Rachel got married. Jon’s wife left him. Brenda and Tonya each had babies. Mark’s wife gave birth to both a boy and a girl. Bob learned that his wife had cancer. These were all natural events in life, both the good and the bad, common roadblocks that derail people from the path they are following. All of these issues distracted us from our dissertations, something that occurs with many doctoral students at the dissertation stage.

8. False Starts: Topics

- First try—Student retention in online composition courses
- Next try—Student satisfaction in online composition courses
- Again—Student/faculty satisfaction in online composition courses
- And again—The impact of personality traits on student/faculty satisfaction in online composition courses
- And yet again—Faculty satisfaction with student/faculty interaction in online composition courses
Reflection. Humphrey’s (2005) acknowledges that false starts are a typical part of dissertation work. Unfortunately, I did not know that then. Silly as it seems now, I truly believed that I already had my topic selected and focused before even finishing my coursework. For some of my classes, I was able to research and write about various aspects of online composition courses, so I thought my progress was going very well. For my comprehensive examination, I needed to pinpoint a specific issue in higher education today and write a brief concept paper to address the issue. I explained the problem of low retention rates in first year composition courses, illustrated the importance of the problem, and summarized how the research would be conducted. While my work may have been good enough to pass the exam, it fell short of impressing people on my committee. Each time I turned around I was told to re-work the focus of my project. Each time I found myself excited about a new direction my project would take, one or another committee member would find a flaw in my plan and steer me in another direction.

Reflecting on that time period now, I realize that I underestimated the amount of research required in order to convince a group of knowledgeable academics that a study could become a contribution to a field. I only scratched the surface of my research and thought that would be good enough. I also specifically deluded myself about the amount of work needed to complete the concept paper: a summary of the entire intended project including the topic, problem statement and significance of the problem, research questions, conceptual framework, research methods, and timeline. Looking at more examples of existing concept papers would have been a smart idea that showed me how short my research was falling, and I cannot remember why I failed to take that seemingly
obvious step. Instead, I looked at examples of completed dissertations, which only included the final draft of chapter one, or the revised and abbreviated version of the revised concept paper. I truly did not realize how different the concept paper was from chapter one. Because of this, I was not prepared for the demands of the concept paper and spent a year after exams narrowing the focus of my topic, even though I had already been gathering research for a year before exams.

Methods

- Historical research—I love history and would have enjoyed conducting historical research for a project but never managed to pinpoint a topic of interest that could be conducted via historical research. The history of distance education had already been published, more than once. I wrote a paper for my first class about the history of the English Department at the University of Toledo and tried several variations on that topic but could not intelligently articulate a higher education problem from it, nor could I articulate a problem to be resolved through historical research.

- Case studies—The case study research method appealed to me as a researcher because it looks at specific cases in detail and from several angles, but I uncovered no specific cases from which to glean useful information about distance education.

- Regression analysis—Although regressions analysis and quantitative research overall appealed to me like the plague, my research questions kept coming up quantitative, specifically those quantitative questions involving predictability, which links to regression. Blah! Why not just quit now and become a
restaurant manager, go to work wearing a polyester uniform and return home smelling like grease? At least it wouldn’t bore me to death.

- Phenomenology—The phenomenon of online classes felt like a logical approach to studying satisfaction with teaching and learning experiences, but this idea never came to fruition.
- Grounded theory—I ended up selecting grounded theory because I liked the idea of going into my research without preconceived notions about the outcome. My grasp of the approach lacked a certain rigor though.

**Reflection.** Looking back on it now, I realize that I was not as prepared as I should have been for conducting research. I should have taken more research methods classes instead of trying to plough through all my coursework quickly, but I was too impatient. Taking my time would have benefited my ability to conduct research and finish my dissertation in a timelier and less stressful manner, but I felt too rushed to take extra classes or slow down. Feeling rushed, I plunged ahead before I was truly prepared, and plunging ahead without the tools to succeed is not an efficient way to complete any project. If I were giving advice to my freshman about conducting research or picking a major, I would suggest that they take their time, learn their strengths and weaknesses, figure out what they really feel passionate about, and prepare themselves as much as possible. Many freshmen ignore that advice, just as many of us doctoral students ignored the same advice presented by our professors and advisors. This leads me to issue of the ego.

One of the reasons I did not slow down, enjoy soaking up the knowledge of research gathering, and take more classes was because I felt convinced that I could learn
whatever I needed to learn on my own. I had always been good at writing research papers, so surely I could adapt to conducting larger scale research projects. My ego would not allow me to realize how badly I needed help in that area. Knowing how prevalent large egos are in higher education also leads me to wonder how many other doctoral students suffer from that same affliction of pride which ultimately prevents them from finishing. Method feedback after one year of work and drafting what I thought would be the final version of the concept paper:

There are methodological issues that you must address to my satisfaction prior to your proposal defense. I will not let you move forward beyond the proposal if these concerns are not addressed, which will negatively affect your timeline.

This comment left me far more defeated than it should have. I should have sat down and pulled together more material on grounded theory, so I would be able to verbally defend the method in more detail at the concept paper defense meeting, receive feedback and guidance at the meeting, and then applied that feedback to my research proposal. Instead, I decided to push it aside and think about it again the following Monday. It turns out that it would not have mattered whether I started working on it right away or not. I went away for the weekend with my husband and daughter, and then returned home on Sunday to find my son dead.

Maybe the world of higher education fails to acknowledge the need for a variety of research methods. Maybe doctoral students should devote more class time to research methodology. Maybe research project participation should be required before the independent research work of the dissertation.

Note: The following vignette is written in third person. I did this initially as a
way to distance myself from the pain of these experiences. In first person, the more emotionally wrenching scenes came out flat and lacked detail, but when I wrote in third person, I was able to include more detail and delve into the insights and feelings of other people, not just myself. By presenting each different person involved as a character rather than a loved one, I am able to step back and look at the events unfold from a different perspective. This process of switching perspectives allow a writer to view their trauma through the point of view of another person and benefit from that new perspective (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Several additional vignettes were also drafted in third person, though I changed most of them to first person point of view to minimize reader confusion by shifting point of view. This particular vignette as well as two others remain in third person feels, because I believe that perspective does a better job of capturing the scene for readers.

9. Unthinkable

“I don’t see or feel any breathing. I blew air into his mouth, and I’m pumping up and down on his chest, but his chest won’t rise again. It’s not rising. It’s supposed to rise after I breathe air into his lungs, but it’s not rising” Scott barked this into a phone that lay on the floor while he continued blowing air into his son’s lungs.

Elizabeth backed out of the room, her back against the wall, her mind hazed over with a blanket of confusion. *This can’t really be happening. This can’t be real.* It didn’t feel real. It felt detached, an outer plane of existence. Elizabeth was not really a participant in these horrific events. She was a spectator.

Her daughter stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up at them. *She can’t come up here and see this.* “Emily, can you unlock the front the door and wait for the ambulance?”
Emily nodded quickly and ran to the front door. Elizabeth felt relieved only for a second, and then began to worry. *I can’t leave her out there alone.*

Elizabeth fell down the stairs and joined her daughter in the front yard. The waited speechlessly, hugging each other until they heard sirens. After letting the emergency crew into the house, they waited next to each other in the living room, holding hands, not able to say anything.

Time froze. It refused to move. Liz couldn’t feel any breath in her lungs, couldn’t feel her heart beating. She kept looking around the room, not sure where she was or what was happening or whether she was awake or dreaming. Emily wondered how long her brother would be in the hospital, what happened to hurt him, worried he might be in pain.

They sat on the couch in stunned, depressed silence, thinking he must still be alive somehow. Voices from the paramedics carried down the stairs, but the family couldn’t hear what they said or what any of it meant. Although she did not want to acknowledge it, a part of Liz’s brain realized the sounds which had not floated down from above yet. No one shrieked out any noises of hope, no sudden gasping of breath, no one shouted out “okay, okay, let’s help him sit up,” or “stand back and give him some air.” Nothing good.

After 20 or 30 minutes, minutes that didn’t really tick away, they heard footsteps walking down the stairs and both jumped up, anxious and hopeful.

He stood in front of them and shook his head. “There was nothing we could do. It had been too long.” Emily slumped down and started crying. Liz stared at him, confused, not comprehending. He avoided Emily’s tears and looked at Liz instead. “Are you a friend of the family?”

“I’m his mother.”
The phone rang again, somewhat shaking them out of their dazed state. Liz knew it would be her brother, calling for the third time since they returned home.

“Hi, it’s me again.” Robert’s voice sounded extremely tense and strained this time. “Please call me back as soon as you get this. Let me know you got home alright.”

“We’re gonna have to tell him,” Scott whispered, eyes still red and watery.

“Not until they leave. I’ll call him back after they leave,” Liz choked out in a scarcely audible voice.

The three of them sat in sad silence as murmured voices carried downstairs to their living room. Liz stared vaguely into space, not focusing on anything, her ears only hearing muffled noise, no distinct words. Her face blank, empty, eyes drawn, mouth turned down slightly at the corners. Scott sat next to her, his head in his hands. Emily, their ten-year-old daughter, stared at the floor with her eyebrows knit together. No one spoke as the emergency crew worked above them, occasionally bumping into furniture, or moving something around.

The sound of movement caught Liz’s attention. She wanted to crawl up the stairs and peek in on them, see what they were doing to help her son. But they already said it was too late, so what are they doing up there now? They were wrong, of course. Of course, it wasn’t too late. They were just mistaken. They’re getting him to breathe right now. It just took longer than expected. Sometimes that happens. They’ll need to take him to the ER soon.

The urge to crawl up the stairs and look into his bedroom grew. Liz slowly started to inch her way toward the stairs, her movement scarcely discernible. No one seemed to
notice as she crept along, hugging the wall sitting on one step and catching her breathe before inching her way up one more step, creeping up toward his bedroom to see him.

Liz blinked and found herself back on the couch next to her husband, head whirling.

One of the paramedics walked downstairs to the family. “Excuse me, sir, may I speak with you?” He remained at a distance, so Scott stood up and walked toward him. “We’re about to bring him down now. It might be a good idea for you and your family to wait in another room, so you don’t have to see us carry him out.” Scott nodded his head.

“Let’s go downstairs for a while,” he suggested, no longer crying but focusing instead on protecting the other two. Liz looked upstairs, did not want to go downstairs. She wanted to go upstairs and be with her son, but she didn’t have the power to make it. No strength, just weak and useless. Instead of fighting her way upstairs, she stood up without talking or making eye contact with anyone and allowed herself to be herded mindlessly into the basement.

The temperature dropped considerably, but none of them noticed. They sat in dumb silence. A giant bubble surrounded them, thick and dense, distorting reality like they were underwater. Nothing looked or sounded quite right.

Liz curled up in the corner of a couch. Scott covered her with a blanket. Emily looked around the room as if she had never seen it before.

Bumping and thudding from above suggested movement, heavy footsteps and something slamming against one of the walls. Liz closed eyes tightly but still saw images of her son being carried out of her house by others, stretched out on a gurney, zipped up inside a body bag.
The county sheriff walked down to the basement to talk to the family. “I’m so sorry this happened. I have some material in my car I want to give to you, but we’re finished upstairs, if you want to go back up again.” They shuffled up to the living room, which felt abnormally bright and warm after their time in the basement. Liz noticed a gouge in the corner of a wall that lead to the bedroom staircase. They banged him into the wall carrying him outside. Tears formed in her eyes then as she looked at the missing paint, scraped off the wall by paramedics carrying her son’s body away from her house forever.

**Reflection.** This short piece took me several days and boxes of tissue to write, just the initial draft, no expansions, edits, or revisions. The experience hurt so much that I could barely write a sentence without sobbing uncontrollably, then getting up and walking away for a while. Writing it in third person made it possible; otherwise, I don’t think I could have written about that day again. It was hard enough to write the first time, in my journal, hard to read the words 18 months later, but I eventually did. My early journal entries were short and flat, as was my state of mind at that time. Even so, it took me a long time to read it from start to finish, and I felt renewed ache the entire time and needed to put the journal down and walk away from it. I eventually did manage to write about it again here, and I felt somewhat better for writing it. Though the writing process certainly did not improve the situation of life without my son, it left me with a slightly relieved feeling after finishing, as if I purged myself.

Husband’s concussion was a surprise transition that could have prevented me from moving forward with my dissertation, but my son’s death could have prevented me
moving forward with anything. The experience of grief impacts us biologically, psychosocially, and existentially (Schneider, 2008). It changes everything, every aspect of our lives from what we do during the day to how we think and feel. Nothing will ever be the same as it was before the loss. We aren’t even really the same people. The grief changes us forever.

Wheeler (2001) reminds us that people react differently to grief. Jim and Sylvia cried, and I just sat like a zombie, not reacting more than being confused. That day seemed pretend, imaginary, like a book or a play rather than something real. The people around me, the activity, Taylor’s death, it felt impossible, too horrible to actually happen. The whole day was a nightmare. That is completely cliché, but apparently, it became a cliché because that is precisely how to describe such a catastrophic loss, too terrible to believe, an incomprehensible nightmare. Accepting the reality of it took a very long time.

How could it be real? How could he be dead? How could I let him die? Why didn’t I take better care of him or pay more attention to him or encourage him to go away to college or at least attend a traditional college instead of working and going to school online? Why did I let Jim push him so hard to succeed, to find a second job, something that required him to leave the house? Why, why did I do what I did that led directly to that day? Why couldn’t I have done something differently, something that could have changed the outcome of that day?

10. Unknown

We sat together, the three of us lined up on the couch, waiting for Sheriff Cole to return with whatever he wanted to give us.

_Pamphlets about counselors. Tips for not feeling guilty._
Cole knocked on the door as he walked through and then stopped in front of us, the grieving family. Each of us stood up to avoid being towered over by this uniformed stranger.

“So at first, we thought this was intentional, but after looking through his things, I’m pretty sure this was an accident.”

Accident?

Relief and doubt rushed through my body at the same time.

*How could that be an accident? Only someone incredibly stupid would put a bag over his head and breathe in helium by accident, and Taylor was not stupid. He was frighteningly smart.*

“You think it was an accident?” Jim repeated.

Cole nodded his head. “Yeah, we’re pretty sure. Kids do stuff like that sometimes, trying to get high. I’m so sorry.”

*That doesn’t add up, it doesn’t even fit.* I tried not to shake my head in front of everyone. They did not need to share my doubt.

“I left some brochures for you on the entry table. People to call.” He nodded his head while he talked and let out a heavy sigh. “Try not to second guess yourselves and think about how you could have stopped it. You’ll drive yourself crazy that way.”

*Oh, sure.*

**Reflection.** When the sheriff told us that he thought Taylor’s death was an accident, I felt relieved and doubtful at the same time. A part of me felt better believing that he did not kill himself on purpose, that he could have felt so sad and broken that he couldn’t stand to be alive anymore. He was always a stickler for the rules, for the letter of
the law. It seemed ingrained in his nature to avoid breaking any rules. He always drove under the speed limit, five miles an hour in good weather and ten in inclement conditions. His girlfriend tried to sneak a soup tureen out of Bravo’s one day. He took it out of her purse and put it on another dirty table so she couldn’t grab it again. We went to Mexico when he was 19, where he told us he could taste his first wine. I keep wine in house all the time and offered him sips on more than one holiday, but he wouldn’t touch it while he was underage, not even a taste. Apparently, he wasn’t resisting out of teetotaling propensity but out of a desire to follow rules. The drinking age is lower in Mexico. He could legally drink wine there, so he felt comfortable trying it.

It may be possible that he wanted to unwind without technically breaking any laws and found this strange technique. I actually remember hearing about it on the news and talking about how odd that was, kids putting bags over their heads and breathing in helium. It does not make sense. How could anyone think that was a good idea?

How the grieving perceive their loss impacts the grief process more than the actual loss (Hibberd, 2013; Gillies & Neimayer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001). Believing that Taylor had killed himself intentionally was too horrible for me to believe. Thinking that it was an accident changed the way we perceived his death. It somehow felt less horrible. I wondered if the good sheriff just said that it looked like an accident to help us feel better, avoid feeling guilty about it. I spent the better part of a year trying to figure out what happened, finding evidence to support both theories. One day I felt convinced that he killed himself because his play ended, his car broke down, and he suddenly spent too much of his time alone on the computer, either working, taking classes, or playing games. Another day I felt equally sure that he would not have done that, because we talked about
new plays he wanted to try out for, he went car shopping with his friends, and already had Christmas presents wrapped and hidden in his closet for Sylvia and Jocelyn. Ultimately, I do not know what really happened and will probably never know.

Accident or intentional, how in the world could we NOT feel guiltily and wonder what we could have done to prevent it?

Weeks after his death, Sylvia said it was her fault, because she didn’t try harder to convince her brother that he should go with us for the weekend. If anyone could have talked him into it, she could. If he would have gone away with us, he wouldn’t have died, she reasoned.

More than two years after his death, Jim sobbed as he told me it was his fault, because he didn’t try to hurry us out the door earlier that morning, which he typically does. If he would have just rushed us, we could have returned home sooner and been there in time to revive him. He felt convinced of it.

I used to backtrack in my mind, trying to figure out how far back in time I would need to travel and what events I would need to change to avoid his death. Should I go back one day and arrive home sooner? Three days and bring him with us? Three months and talk him into going to a traditional college instead of an online school, even though it would cost more? How far would I need to go and what, exactly would I need to change?

I told both Jim and Sylvia that they should feel no blame, and I believed that, but I still couldn’t stop myself from wondering what I could have done differently. How could it be possible for anyone to avoid feeling guilt over the death of a child?

11. Neighbors

Laura walked in the front door as one of the paramedics walked out. “What’s
wrong? I saw the ambulance. Is everybody okay?"

I shook my head but didn’t say a word, kept my mouth shut tight, eyes glazed, not seeing. Jim walked over to our neighbor, eyes red from crying, “Taylor,” he whispered.

“Oh, no.” Laura wanted to ask for more details but couldn’t bring herself to do it. She wanted to say more but couldn’t, offer more comfort, but what else could she say? Instead of speaking, she just stood with her mouth open, stunned.

Jim turned away to cry with his back to everyone. I stood frozen, expressionless, zombielike, staring off into space. Sylvia’s face crumpled, her shoulders hunched forward as if she were collapsing in on herself. Laura put her arms around the girl and held her, “oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

**Reflection.** When people witness suffering, they want to help. Unfortunately, no one really knows how. In many ways, there is little they can do. They know it and the bereaved know it. Nothing they can do will change the loss or ease the suffering and pain created by the loss. Little things brought brief periods of solace though. While it is not truly possible to share pain, the experience of feeling some else’s presence can be comforting as is the knowledge that another person is willing to help, or at least try to help. People also find comfort from human contact and soothing language (Brenner, 2004). Something as simple as feeling another person’s hand on their back or hearing a kind word can offer moments of solace. Hugging my daughter helped bring her human contact that comforted her. Even the tiniest sliver of comfort can offer temporary moments of consolation to those grieving a terrible loss. I am grateful to my neighbor for giving my daughter that human contact and moment of comfort.

My husband covered his face and turned away, so our neighbor would not see him
crying. He wasn’t ready to share his pain with a neighbor, so she left him alone.

I sat expressionless and wanted no one near me. Laura sensed that and gave me distance, which I eventually appreciated, once I started thinking again.

Our neighbors brought us food, so we would remember to eat. That used to seem silly to me. I never want to eat when feeling terrible stress. Having people shove food in my face aggravates me, but now I can appreciate the gesture of kindness. Bringing food to grieving people means they do not need to think about it themselves. It is also a way to encourage others to take care of themselves at a time when they probably have no room in their minds to think of nourishments. I may not want to eat, but without others forcing it on me, I would not have bothered.

The parents of my daughter’s closest friends were wonderful. They took her to the movies or picked her up to hang out at their house for a few hours. Being out of her sad situation for brief periods was good for her. Spending time with cheerful people and being active helped her from sinking too far down into her own depression.

The typical “let me know if there is anything I can do” response does not help anyone, but very specific gestures can help the grieving move beyond their most painful periods of mourning.

12. Sharing the News

Laura left. The sheriff and the paramedics left. Taylor was gone. Even his body was gone, and we would never see him again.

Silence overwhelmed the house, suffocated it. No one had anything to say, because there was nothing good to say. No one said “let’s go to the hospital” or “I’ll ride along in the ambulance, and you follow behind in the car.” We should have been able to
say that, but we couldn’t. No sirens blared as the emergency vehicle raced toward the hospital. No more sounds of the emergency crew trying to bring him back. He was gone. He was gone, and he left behind a tremendous hole.

I knew I needed to call my brother but dreaded the conversation. How can I put this into words? How can say this out loud?

He sounded so panicked during his last message, so I couldn’t delay much longer. I squeezed Jim’s hand, kissed Sylvia on the top of her head and said, “Okay, I guess I need to call Gary now.” I picked up the phone and carried it outside, closing the door behind me, so they wouldn’t have to hear what I was about to say.

His phone only rang once before he picked up. “Hello,” the urgency still in his voice.

“Hey, it’s me. Sorry it took me so long to get back with you.”

“That’s alright, I was just getting worried. Is everything okay?”

“No,” my throat constricted, tried to close around those words. As they I tried to form words in my mouth, tears welled up and starting spilling down my face. “Taylor,” I whispered. I took a deep breath, and then another, in and out, in and out, tried to work up the strength to say more. “We found him when we got home.”

“What?”

Don’t make me say this out loud! I hadn’t thought about how to say this, how to phrase it. “We found him. He had an accident.”

“Oh, no, I knew something was wrong! But he’s okay now?” He must be. He needs to be.

But he isn’t. I can’t say it; I can’t say it. I shook my head slowly from side to
side, not finding any words. Gary needed to hear words though. He needed me to say something out loud, so he could understand. “No,” I choked out in a whispered voice as the tears ran faster and faster down my face. “No he’s not okay.”

**Reflection.** Speaking about my son’s death aloud startled me out of my shocked state and into a torrent of tears. Putting the horror into words, saying and hearing them, wrenched my heart, left me choking and sobbing. Words made it real. My son was dead. He was really, truly dead, not a book, not a play, not temporary. Taylor was permanently and irrevocably dead.

The initial agony came and left in waves, swapping places with periods of empty stupor, slipping in and out of denial again, perhaps. Some moments felt eternal, as if I kept waiting for something to happen that never did. Other moments dragged on and on, useless, empty space stretched out in front of me, never ending nothingness. At other times, hours slipped away while I seemed to have no thoughts in my head at all the entire time. I just floated mindlessly through the hours, accomplishing nothing, thinking nothing. My head and heart nothing but vacant shells. I felt “what the existential philosophers call nothingness” (Klass, 2013, p. 597).

**13. Packing**

Three stacks of file folders stood knee deep along one side of my desk. A similar stack lined the other side, and several piles of books threatened to topple onto the floor. Papers covered my desk so thoroughly that I couldn’t see the wood underneath.

All of it useless. All of it needed to go.

I brought an empty Staples box and a 50-gallon garbage bag into the office, sat on the floor, and started loading them. One garbage bag turned into two as I stuffed all of
those wasted months of work into the trash. *All garbage, useless, useless garbage!* 

*Months and years of wasted time. No more. I never plan to look at any of this tedious, pedantic, useless trash again!*

**Reflection.** We scheduled the funeral, picked out urns, a locket for Sylvia, death announcements, and thank you notes. I wrote an obituary. My daughter wrote a short speech she wanted to give at his service. We picked out pictures for a slide show, music he liked, and some mementos to scatter around the room when people came in to pay their respects.

My brother was already with us, but other people would stay over for a while after the funeral. I wanted to tidy up my office before they arrived, since stacks of books and file folders full of articles and drafts of my concept paper littered the office floor. I hadn’t gotten around to those revisions yet and saw no possible future in which I would ever do so.

I completely washed the dissertation out of my life. Cleared and tidied the floor, threw away papers, shelved books, cleaned away all the cluttered. No papers hid the beautiful woodwork of my desk and no pointless articles crowded my mind. Everything appeared neat and orderly. More importantly, no more worthless research would plague my sleep or distract my days. I completely cleaned that dissertation out of my life with no plans to ever resurrect it again.

Moving in to this particular transition, entering grief and leaving doctoral work, was not planned, not desired, and there was no guarantee that I would adapt to my new life, as not all transitions conclude with adaptation. (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). Some people get stuck. Talbott (1996-7, 1997-8) describes two categories of
grieving parents: survivors and perpetual grievers. Survivors eventually find meaning and purpose in life again after losing a child. Perpetual grievers do not find new meaning in life and cannot seem to move beyond their loss. At that point, I did not care if I got stuck.

14. Stories

“Taylor was the best brother in the world. I always looked up to him. He read me books, he took me to movies and plays, he took me trick-or-treating. He was my best friend. I love him and I miss him so much.” Sylvia sat back down and continued crying while Jocelyn’s parents helped her to the podium.

“I remember the first day I met Taylor. It was in sixth grade. He was on a bench reading. I knew him from a distance and thought he was cool, but we weren’t friends yet. I sat down next to him, hoping we could talk, but he just scooted farther away on the bench and kept on reading.” She laughed at the memory and the seated crowd joined in before she continued. “In seventh grade, we had classes together, and that’s when we became friends. He understood me in a way that nobody else could. He was my best friend. If this would have happened a year ago, I don’t think I could have handled it. Now though, I just want to feel grateful that I had a chance to know him when he was alive.”

“I absolutely love Taylor. I couldn’t have asked for anybody better for my daughter.” Her eyes misted over, but she smiled as she talked. “About a year ago, Jocelyn went into the hospital. Taylor came over as soon as I called him. He got out of his car and right away gave me a hug, and he hugged me so completely, so thoroughly, so close. It was one of the best hugs I’ve ever had. I told him, ‘now that I know how good you are at giving hugs, I’m going want them all the time.’
“High school was really hard for a lot of us. Back then, my fiancé got picked on a lot. Not many people were nice to her, but Taylor was. He was always nice to us.” The young woman crumpled into tears and couldn’t talk anymore.

“I’ll never forget the time in health class when Mr. Speeder was lecturing and Taylor was reading a book. He walked up the aisle and grabbed the book right out of Taylor’s hands. Taylor didn’t even blink. He just unzipped his backpack, took out another book, and continued reading.”

“Our senior year, we had geometry class right before orchestra, and he used to bring his violin to school every day. One day Mr. Lorenz offered him extra credit if Taylor would play something for the whole class. I don’t know if he was joking or not, but Taylor didn’t hesitate for a second. He just dropped his books, pulled out his violin, and played “Waltz of the flowers.”

“Halloween won’t be the same without seeing him dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera, fishing through the candy bowl for something good to take Sylvia.”

“He was such an incredible cook. I just loved it when made dinner for us, even though the kitchen looked like something exploded after he finished. He actually got sauce on the ceiling once. It took me days to clean up after him, but I will miss that.”

**Reflection.** Hearing other people talk about my son helped me feel so much better than I expected. Elementary teachers, high school, and college professors came to pay their respects. One of his theatre directors made a scrapbook of photos and news clippings for me. One of his English professors gave me a CD of one of his classroom poetry readings and a note about what a wonderful student and reader of poetry he was.

While I did not necessarily want the society of others during the early stages of
my grieving process, our reactions to the funeral and hearing other peoples’ stories about Taylor illustrate the benefit grieving people can feel from human interaction ((Brenner, 2004; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014; Norberg, Bergsten, Lundman, 2001). So many more people came than I expected and told such lovely stories about him. Some people drove for hours to be there and offer their sympathy. People I hadn’t seen in years and others I had never met came to the funeral to say how great my son was. Hearing their stories let me know that other people realized how special he was. It wasn’t just me or his immediate family. Other people knew as well. Knowing that helped me feel so much comfort.

15. Schedule

Sometime after midnight—fall asleep crying
Between midnight and 3AM—restless sleep
3 or 4 AM—wake up, remember what happened, resume crying
5 AM—crawl out of bed quietly
5-6 AM—write in journal, drink coffee, stare into space
6-7 AM—keep Jim and Sylvia company while they get ready for school and work
8-10 AM—exercise
10-11:59—shower and sit at desk to work
Noon—classical music switches to talk and news, my queue to eat lunch
Noon-1 PM—eat lunch, drink wine, feel emptiness of the house close around me. Cry and drink myself to sleep.

Reflection. During his first two years in college, Taylor did not have any Friday classes. We both fell into a Friday routine. I worked and exercised early in the morning.
When he woke up later, he made breakfast burritos, and then we split up cleaning duties, him taking on the jobs that hurt my back, such as vacuuming and cleaning the bathrooms. When we finished cleaning and working at our computers for the morning, we took a long lunch break over a movie. At some point, we started picking out which movie or play we planned on watching each Friday: *West Side Story, Grease, Camelot, Spamalot, Hello Dolly, Sweeney Todd, Sunset Boulevard, Suspicion, Arsenic and Old Lace*. He usually did not have rehearsal or go out until evening, so we had a whole afternoon together. I loved that time.

After he died, my world fell apart. After the funeral and everyone returned to their jobs, their school, their lives, I remained at home alone. I’d been working full-time online and did not leave the house for work each day. I just walked into my office to work and walked out of it again to finish work. I tried to create a routine again, because I like routine. I like structure, the illusion of control. But no matter how the day started, by the time 1:00 PM rolled around, I ended up on the couch crying. It was the time of day when I felt his loss the strongest, and the emptiness almost overwhelmed me. Within a few weeks of his death, I looked forward to getting out of bed in the morning to escape. Lying in bed wondering what I did wrong and what I could have done differently wore me out, so I was glad to get away from the night-time torture.

Drinking coffee felt good, writing felt productive, keeping Jim and Sylvia company while they got ready for work and school felt good, normal, even stable. Exercising was probably my favorite time of day, because I didn’t think of anything other than the present, running, riding, sweating, nothing else permeated my pain except the endorphin kick I gave myself each day. That feeling always faded at lunchtime, when my
son did not appear beside me. I drank myself into an afternoon nap.

This avoidance of reality illustrates my denial. When we grieve a loved one, we often feel unwilling to believe what happened, not denying the death but hesitant to accept it. My brain knew that Taylor was dead, but my heart was not ready for the reality of life without him. I felt his loss most acutely during the afternoon. I did not want to feel present and aware of the emptiness in my life, so I avoided it. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014) the reality of painful losses need to sink in gradually. I did not want the reality of this loss, so I avoided or denied it when my pain felt too overwhelming and the crying would stop no other way.

16. Listening

I sat at a table in the back of the room making eye contact with no one while my daughter made bracelets out of multi-colored rubber bands and talked with the other children.

“Time for circle.” The kids all put away their crafts and then sat in a large circle on the carpet while Sidney, their grief counselor, grabbed a candle and lighter. “We have two new students with us today, Sylvia and Mallory.” Sydney smiled at both girls. “In just a few minutes, we’ll introduce ourselves, sharing something we love about the person we lost. First, we each light this candle for someone we love but is no longer with us. Are we ready?” Sidney placed the candle in the middle of their human circle. “I light this candle for my brother.” She passed the candle to the boy sitting to her left. He must have been about nine.

“This light is for my aunt,” he said before passing the candle to a slightly older looking boy next to him wearing a neon green camp shirt identical to his.
“This light is for my mom.” The candle passed from child to child around the circle.

“This light is for my uncle.”

“This light is for my grandma.”

“This light is for my brother.”

I watched them sharing happy memories of times with their loved ones out of my peripheral vision, mouth clamped shut tight, gritting my teeth while tears stormed down my face.

Sylvia smiled at me when we climbed into the car to leave. “That was much better than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“I thought it would be sad and depressing the whole time, but it wasn’t. It was nice, and it wasn’t too sad.”

“Good, do you want to go again next week?” She nodded and showed me Margo’s phone number, the other ‘new girl,’ who lost her uncle to cancer.

**Reflection.** When we initially suggested it, Sylvia felt extremely hesitant about going to a support group for grieving children, but I asked her to try it anyway a few months after losing Taylor. Her brother was a significant person in her life, and she would not be the same without him. My husband and I knew that we lacked the tools to help her, other than being there for her and showing her love. If we had been good at supporting grief stricken children, which we certainly were not, our abilities still would have been hindered by our own grief. Long before we felt ready to accept any help for ourselves, we sought it out for her. We had not done enough for Taylor, so we wanted
more than ever to do the right things for her.

Talking about her brother helped Sylvia grieve. She cried, of course, but she felt better after talking. I could even see some of the tension leave her body after talking, her facial expressions more relaxed, her posture less slumped and defeated. Theoretically, I knew that talking could help me as well, but I had nothing to say yet. Talking about it would have made it feel too real, and I wasn’t ready for that yet. Instead, I sat in a back corner or stood just outside the open door and listened to the others talk. I listened to their stories and cried for their losses and my own. Everyone in the room lost someone close to them, an important person in their lives, someone they loved. They lost people to disease, accidents, drugs, and birth defects, different circumstances leaving similar traces of agony in everyone’s lives. So many people lost loved ones. Pain and suffering suffused everyone’s life, even children. Listening to their stories hurt, but it also felt nice in a way that I would not have been able to articulate at the time.

Now, I think the possibility of community, of shared experiences even though they were horrific losses, bonds with other people gave me comfort and drew me to their meetings. Now I understand that social support helps people cope with their loss (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995), but at the time I did not care. Though I was not ready to talk myself yet, I still listened to the others talking about their grief rather than dropping off my daughter and then waiting in the car. I listened to their stories, listened to them sharing their pain with each other, listened to their kind and supportive words. Even before I realized that other people could offer comfort and support during the agonizing times in life, I benefitted from it.
17. Nightmares and Seclusion

Sometime after midnight, I finally fell asleep, tears still trickling down my face. My daytime, conscious nightmare was temporarily replaced by subconscious nightmares. There was no escape, not even in sleep.

The four of us appeared at a giant water park, Taylor, Sylvia, Jim, and me. It was a huge combination of both outdoor and indoor activities, most of them repulsive to me. Ceilings several hundred feet high and long tunnels so big that a semi-truck could drive through them revealed a maze. We needed to navigate that maze in order to move from one area of the park to another. People crowded everywhere, packed so closely together I could barely breathe.

Taylor clutched his sister’s hand, so they wouldn’t get separated. I held her other hand, but a large woman wearing a red and white polka dot dress and big, floppy hat fell into me, knocking us both to the ground. The rest of my family was herded through the crowd by the crushing hordes of people, while I tumbled off to the side with a stranger.

I jumped out of the way of the stampede and shouted out to the others, but no sound came out of my mouth, certainly nothing that could be heard above the roar of the obnoxious crowd. I tried to focus my eyes on the back of my families’ heads, but I lost sight of them almost immediately. The woman who knocked into me disappeared, and my purse flew out of my hands. My phone was in my purse, gone, so I couldn’t call them and ask them to step to the side and wait for me. They were gone, and I couldn’t reach them.

I fought my way through the crowds to a customer service kiosk and told them what happened. A hostile woman cut me off before I could finish.
“Sorry Ma’am,” she said as she shrugged her shoulders. “We don’t have lost and
found here. Do you have your ticket stub?”

“It’s in my purse.”

“Then you can’t come in.”

“I need someone to page my family for me, so they know where I am.”

“We don’t do that.” She turned her back on me and started talking to someone
else.

When I woke up from this strange nightmare, my heart raced with fear, fresh tears
still kept my face wet, my pillow damp.

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My phone buzzed, and I saw a text from my friend Marina, someone I hadn’t seen
since the funeral.

MARINA: HEY, JUST WONDERED HOW YOU WERE DOING.

ME: OK

MARINA: FEEL LIKE GETTING OUT?

ME: NOT REALLY

MARINA: MY SYMPHONY TICKETS JUST CAME IN THE MAIL FOR THE
SEASON. YOU SHOULD JOIN ME? A LITTLE MUSIC THERAPY CAN DO
WONDERS FOR THE SOUL.

ME: SOUNDS NICE

MARINA: GREAT! DATES ARE BELOW. JUST LET ME KNOW WHICH DAYS
YOU WANT TO GO. MARK WILL BE THRILLED TO GET OUT OF GOING WITH
ME. HE CAN STAY HOME AND PLAY WITH JIM WHILE WE HAVE A GIRL’S
ME: SORRY TO CANCEL AT THE LAST MINUTE AGAIN, BUT I CAN’T LEAVE THE HOUSE.

**Reflection.** Isolation (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995) and sleeping issues (Hardison et al., 2005) are typical of people grieving, and anxiety over the fear of losing anyone else exacerbated my hesitance to leave the house and increased my isolation. Before my son died, I had not been prone to nightmares. I did not sleep a lot, just heavily for short periods. After losing him, I seemed to have a bad dream every time I fell asleep to compliment the bad dream I lived through during the day. I understood that Sylvia would probably harbor fears of losing her parents, because that was a typical symptom for children who lose a loved one. For some reason though, it did not occur to me that I would be afraid of losing someone else. I am supposed to be logical person and think with my mind instead of my emotions. I’ve lost people close to me before, starting with my father. I shouldn’t fall apart like other people, but my brain had a tough time controlling my irrational thoughts. The dreams may have served a purpose though. “Regardless of their meaning, dreams help us deal with incomprehensible feelings while we sleep, an aid to the grief process” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2014, p. 53). Maybe I should have understood this from the start, but it took me months to realize that my strange dreams represented my fear of losing the rest of my family. Shortly after I made this realization, I stopped having that particular type of bad dream.

My sleep-time nightmares decreased but my daytime fear of being away from my daughter did not. A part of me really did want to get out of my house and back into the
world again with other people, but I couldn’t seem to force myself to take those steps. It wasn’t just that I felt like being alone or did not want to burst into tears in public, though both of those issues were true; it was also because I felt too afraid to go any place without Sylvia. I walked her to the school bus in the morning and waited for to walk through the front door after school. Any errands I did needed to be completed well before she returned, though I despised leaving the house alone and only did so when I couldn’t avoid it. I drove her to karate, watched her practice and drove her home. I wanted nothing to do with the outside world, only the world inside my house.

Sylvia had always kept busy and moved from one activity to another. Her friends and their parents were wonderful about inviting her out and making sure that she spent at least some time forgetting about her pain and her loss. My friends tried to do the same, but I resisted. I could not bring myself to leave the house while she was still in it: not with her father, not with grandparents, not with a baby sitter. She didn’t really have any babysitters. The few times Jim and I went out in the evening without the kids, Sylvia was having a sleepover at a friend’s house, visiting one of her grandparents or at home with her brother. I couldn’t leave the house if she was in it.

My brain told me that I was being too clingy. She needed time away from the house and so did I, but I just couldn’t. Much like my reaction to the nightmares, it took me several months cancelling plans or refusing to make plans until I realized that I was afraid of losing my daughter the same way I lost my son. The same horrible thing that happened to her brother was not necessarily going to happen to her, but all the same, I couldn’t risk the possibility that it might happen. We felt perfectly fine leaving for the weekend while her brother stayed at home, and that turned into a disaster.
18. Twenty-One

The three of us sat quietly through dinner, picking at our food and trying to talk. No one had much to say though. What could we say? We were all here eating, and he wasn’t here. He should have been sitting next to his sister. He should have ordered lobster bisque and flashed his driver’s license at the waitress after ordering a glass of wine to go with it. He should have left us after dinner to join Jocelyn, Matthew, and Jennifer in Auburn Hills to see *Wicked*. Jennifer already volunteered to be designated driver, and Matthew’s parents lived just a few minutes from The Palace, so they planned to spend the night with them. That was the plan, a fun celebration of Taylor’s 21st birthday that included a few of his favorite things: good food, the theatre, a reason to wear a suit, and the people he loved.

**Reflection.** This vignette feels flat and lifeless, just the way we felt that day. We felt empty and lifeless. It should have been a fun day. We had it planned over six months in advance. Instead, the day held nothing but pain for so many people. The sharp contrast between what we planned, wanted, and expected and the reality of our emptiness left all of us feeling extremely depressed that day. Our minds can let us avoid feeling depressed for certain periods of time during our grief, intervals of anger or denial, but depression does inevitably force its way into the hearts of the bereaved.

“Sorrow is the defining characteristic of grief” (Klass, 2013, p. 598). We certainly did that. Jim, Sylvia, and I felt his absence during dinner. We went out anyway, though not to Bravo, his favorite place. We wanted to remember him and honor him in some way, but none of us had anything to say. An important piece of us was gone and wouldn’t return. We sat there with our watery eyes, pushing food around on our plates, and felt
sad. Jocelyn, Matthew, and Jennifer may have gone to see Wicked as well, but I imagine that their evening felt just as lifeless as ours. We all felt his loss acutely that depressing birthday. Unfortunately, allowing ourselves to feel our sadness is a necessary part of the grieving process (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Note: The following vignette remains in third person point of view, as I initially wrote it.

19. Adopting the Winchesters

Sarah woke up at 4:00 AM. She lay there quietly with her eyes closed for a few minutes, just in case she fell back asleep. It didn’t happen, as expected, so she crawled away as quietly as possible. The alarm clock would not start ringing for another hour.

While coffee brewed, Sarah sat her desk working, answering e-mail questions from students, replying to forum posts. At 5:30, she took her coffee cup upstairs to make sure her husband woke up for work, and then she returned to her desk to grade late work. When her daughter stumbled sleepy eyed into the office, Sarah logged out of work and moved in to the kitchen to visit while the girl ate breakfast and got ready for school. At 6:45, they walked to the bus stop. Sarah returned home at 7:05 and exercised until 8:30. Then she showered, grabbed her laptop, and made sure to be in the living room in front of the television set before 9:00.

Monday through Friday, TNT aired four hours of Supernatural from 9 until 1, each episode in consecutive order from the beginning of the series. Sarah sat glued to the TV screen each day, only checking her computer on commercial breaks to avoid missing anything. She sat riveted as Sam and Dean Winchester drove across country in their 1967 Chevy Impala, fighting demons, shape shifters, ghouls, and ghosts.

“I think Dad wants us to pick up where he left off. Saving people, hunting
things,” Dean’s low whispered voice sounded better each time she heard it.

“They look so young in season one, just babies” she said out loud of the 23 and
26-year-old young men.

The phone rang but she ignored it, not wanting to miss anything. Her husband left
a message on the answering machine. “Hi, it’s me, just called to see what you were
doing. Tim and Natasha invited us to some comedy club this Friday. Let me know if you
want to go. Call me back. Love you.”

Sarah waited for a commercial break, muted the television, and called her
husband. “Hi, I was outside with the dogs when you called.”

“Good, have you eaten yet?”

NO. “I ate an apple for breakfast.”

“What about lunch?”

“No yet.”

“I took leftover chicken, but there is still some left for you.”

“Okay.”

“Or you could have soup. I bought a bunch the other day when they were on sale.
I tried to get the stuff you like.”

“Okay.”

The commercial ended and the television screen lit up with Sam and Dean
Winchester driving and talking. Sarah gave the television a tiny bit of volume. She could
hear their voices but not make out what they were saying and felt impatient to get her
husband off the phone.

“So, Tim and Natasha invited us to go with them to a comedy club this Friday. Do
you want to go?”

Sam and Dean stopped the car and stepped out, then walked along a lonely bridge under the darkness of night. Sam pointed to the water below while talking to his brother.

What are they saying?

“Do you want to go?”

“What?”

“Do you want to go?”

“Where?”

Too distracted to wait for the answer, Sarah watched as the impala started without anyone in it, headlights catching both boys’ startled expressions in their beams before they turned around and ran. Sarah held her breath and watched as the driverless car sped toward them.

“What do you think?”

“What?” Cut to commercial, Sarah turned back to the phone, tense, neck muscles knotting. Please don’t let this be a long break. “Did you ask me something?”

“Do you want to go to the comedy club this Friday with Tim and Natasha?”

“Oh, no.” Hell no!

“Kim and Bob might go too. They’ve been there before and said it was a good time.”

“I don’t think so.” Crowds of people crammed together, cackling, while some idiot cracks stupid joke at the expense of everyone around him. No fucking way!

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes.”
“Okay, I’ll tell them.

Commercial ended and the cameras showed Sam and Dean running from the headlights again. The boys jumped over a guard rail just before the car reached them. Sarah sighed heavily with relief as she watched Sam land in the dirt and Dean tumble forward into the mud. *Their safe.*

“Make sure you eat.”

“What?”

“Don’t forget to eat.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Okay, well, I guess I’ll let you go. I shouldn’t be late. I’ll call before I leave. Love you.”

“Love you too, bye.”

“Bye.”

Sarah hung up the phone and opened a can of chicken vegetable soup, just barely getting it on the stove to heat before the show came back on again. She turned up the volume and stared at the boys on the screen until the next commercial. Then she stirred her soup, poured a glass of pinot grigio, and sat back down in front of the television set.

**Reflection.** People often withdraw from society and drink excessively while grieving (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995), and I certainly did both. I could not bear the company of other people for a long time and kept to myself as much as possible. My teaching job was full-time now but exclusively online, so leaving the house wasn’t necessary. Being around other people was not necessary. I could still work, still focus on something outside of my own pain for a few hours a day, but I did not need to pull myself
together for it as I would have needed to do for face-to-face classes. I could work in exercise clothes or pajamas, cry, drink, listen to music or the television. The flexible work gave me the freedom to grieve as many other people cannot, and that was a terrific blessing to me. As with most things in life, nothing can ever be all good. The downside of this freedom was a lack of human contact that I did not even realize I was missing.

Without being aware of what I was doing, I started integrating fictional characters into my life to replace the human beings I no longer saw every day. Apparently, I felt the need to hear other people speak, not just on the news or the radio, but carry on adult conversations about their lives, their problems, not my life and not my problems. To fill this space in my day, I adopted a pair of fictional young men I could see and hear every day. I could watch them work, see their absurd and unrealistic problems, and know that they would always be okay in the end. They would be safe. They would show up again tomorrow morning at the same time. I would not ever lose them.

Without realizing what I was doing, I found ways to move through my transition (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989), finding ways to adapt to life without my son. Television was a fairly harmless distraction, but I would not recommend wine as a lunch-time escape for anyone. Although I was avoiding certain health problems that may occur when the bereaved try to manage painful emotions before they are ready to handle them, such as chest pain, stomach upset, and cold or flu symptoms (Bonannano et al, 1995), I could have opened the door to a number of other serious problems. Not only does drinking cause health problems and increase depression, it can be horribly addictive. For me, it worked without lasting repercussions, but that might not be the case for everyone. I consumed less and less wine gradually over time, as I felt less need to escape the pain in
my life. Eating lunch alone felt unbearably empty the first year after Taylor died, so I filled the void with fictional characters and a numbing agent. It took a long time, but I eventually felt less empty. Schlossberg (2008) reminds us that transitions are a process. Moving through the transition if living without my son took years, but as I gradually became able to cope with the pain of loss, I felt less need to feel numb. As I slowly became more and more engaged in the reality of my life, I depended less and less on my connection to the fictional world of *Supernatural*.

20. Wave Master

White hot rage radiated from my body as I screamed at a car that blew through a stop sign. “What the hell? You blind or you just don’t need to follow the rules? Stop signs just for the rest of us? Idiot!” One hand stayed on the steering wheel while the other reached out to punch the dashboard. Again and again and again I pounded plastic until it cracked and then moved on to the steering wheel, lashing out until I felt drained.

I parked my car as far away from every other car as I could get and sat sobbing in the Kroger parking lot while shoppers went in and out of the store.

After a few minutes, I pulled myself together long enough to drive back home without any groceries.

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The box wasn’t as heavy as I expected. “Oh, yeah, we haven’t filled it yet, hah!” After we fill the base with sand, it will weigh 270 lbs., but now it still felt light enough for me to carry. “Good.” I slit the seams of the cardboard packaging box with a razor blade and then locked the blade carefully in place again before putting it away on a high shelf and reaching inside the box. Our new Century Wave Master XXL punching bag
stood six feet tall with an 18-inch diameter, perfect for both punching or kicking.

“Jim can complain about this later.” I carried our new treasure down to the basement, knowing exactly what my husband would say but not caring.

“You shouldn’t do that. You’ll hurt your back. You should wait for me to carry heavy stuff.” His eyebrows would knit together while he talked, and he’d look at me suspiciously for any sign of injury.

“Oh well, I want it now.” I drug it past the elliptical machine and treadmill and propped it up in a corner. After we fill the base with sand, we can move it away from the walls, but for now, I propped up my victim in a corner so it wouldn’t tip over when I hit it.

Bare hands clenched into fists and I felt my adrenalin rise. Jab right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three. Cross right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three. Hook right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three.

Blood smeared across the bright, blue surface of my target, so I looked down at my hands. One more thing for Jim to worry about. Great! We need to buy gloves. My temper flared up again and I released it on my inanimate prey. Palm strike right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three. Round kick right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three. Elbow strike right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three.
two-three; left, one-two-three.

Sweat trickled down the back of my neck and soaked my shirt. My assault on the blue vinyl drove other thoughts from my mind, loosened the tension in my neck. The blood actually pumped through my body instead of freezing in a stagnant pool, leaving me cold and lifeless. I almost felt alive. Jab right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three. Cross right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three. Hook right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three; right, one-two-three; left, one-two-three.

Reflection. Anger is a common reaction to grief (Faschingbauer, Zisook, & DuVaul, 1987; Sanders, Mauger, & Strong, 1985; Zisook, DuVaul, & Click, 2004). After the initial shock of losing Taylor wore off, I spent months flashing back and forth between dejection and fury. Parents often feel angry because they didn’t know beforehand what was about to happen, angry at themselves for failing to help, and even angry at their child for not sharing his pain with them (Lindqvist, Johansson, & Karlson, 2008), but yet again, knowing this does not stop us feeling it. One minute I flew into a rage over traffic and the next minute I could be sitting alone in the car with the doors locked crying. The least little problem sent me into a rage. I felt angry with myself for not saving him, angry with Taylor for dying, angry with the world for letting it happen. My anger lasted for so long, much longer than anyone else’s. My sadness and seclusion worried people, but my anger frustrated them as well as giving them cause for concern. It inconvenienced people; it wasn’t fair to them and I knew it, but I still couldn’t seem to
control it.

Most of my tantrums remain a blur, and I did not record them in my journal very well. Apparently, I am not inclined to sit down and write when I feel uncontrollably angry; however, what I do vividly remember taking out my frustrations on the punching bag. When I let my hands clench into fists and assault the sturdy, six-foot therapy tool, I felt less pain. Acknowledging emotions is a necessary aspect of coping with grief (Worden, 2009), so I let myself feel angry. My anger felt justified. I wanted to feel it. I drank in the rage, and I enjoyed exhausting my physical strength until I felt less stress and less fury, less agony. I allowed myself to feel as angry as I needed to feel for as long as I needed to feel it, and taking out my aggressions on the punching bag helped me get through those times without doing serious or irrevocable damage to anything or anyone else.

21. Pit Bulls

I sat in the waiting room at Bell Tire with half a dozen other people and tried to get a connection on my laptop so I could work. The shop’s sluggish Internet speed would not keep up with the needs of Blackboard though and I’d forgotten to bring a book to read, so I stared at my computer and wondered what to do offline.

Instinctively, I opened my grief journal. Looking at the words already on the pages brought tears to my eyes. *What will all the people in this waiting room do if I sit hear staring at my computer and crying?* I read some of the more recent passages anyway.

*This writing is flat and lifeless, which I guess makes sense, since I’m pretty flat and lifeless right now.* I opened one of the less depressing passages and decided to copy
and paste it into a new document. Let’s try third person. And so I started writing:

Amanda stares out of the office window and imagines an intruder, a burglar dressed in gray work clothes, an electrician or cable worker’s uniform, the kind of uniform that blends in with people and buildings, street camouflage. He rattles at the front door for only moments, less than a minute, before the front door glides easily open. He quickly slides in and notices Amanda sitting at her desk, eyes and mouth startled wide open like the door.

Burglar clearly expected the house to be empty, but his surprise doesn’t last long. A wide smile cracks through his lips and creases his face when he notices Amanda sitting alone. Confidence radiates from his eyes and nose and skin, showing her that he controls the situation. He knows it. He thinks he knows it.

One grungy shoe steps toward her desk, but then Amanda surprises him with a baseball bat kept standing in the corner for just such an occasion. One quick, unexpected hit to his knees, knocked him down in surprise, another to the stomach knocked the wind out of his lungs and left him writhing on the floor.

Energy surges through her body. She feels excited, elated, full of life. A rib cracks under the weight of her weapon, and Amanda licks her lips at the delicious feel of the body giving way under her assault.

Burglar groans and rolls to his side, writhing in pain on the tile, down but not out for good. He could spring back up again and punish me for the audacity of fighting back. My arms never felt as strong as they should be, not strong like a burglar, not big and powerful from physical work, weight machines, football. He could still recover, struggle up and overpower me. He may look hurt, the agony contorted on his face may appear
debilitating, but he could still spring up and crush me in his hands.

Feeling justified, Amanda lifts the bat high over her head, gaining as much speed and momentum as she can muster, loving the excitement of the adrenaline rush she feels from beating on someone who thought he could beat her. The wood crashes down on his skull with a satisfying thud. A shudder of pure pleasure runs through Amanda while she imagines bringing the bat down again and again, spreading the remains of the stranger’s head and chest over the tile. The tile cracks as well, ending the fantasy.

Amanda smiles at her favorite daydream before turning her attention back to her work.

**Reflection.** Just as my state of denial seemed to last longer than it did in anyone else around me, my anger also lingered beyond what anyone else thought reasonable. For several months, any little thing could enrage me, the dogs barking too loudly while they ran around the yard, someone tries to step in front of me in line, the neighbors’ leaves blowing in my yard, a fork sticking the wrong way in the dishwasher. I directed most of my anger at myself or toward the world in general, trying not to punish my daughter or husband, but I also didn’t want to stop it. I let myself feel angry. I let myself yell. We even bought a punching bag, so we could take out some of our aggression on a well-cushioned inanimate object. I used it almost every day. I would not listen to my husband tell me that I needed to stop being so angry, because I was angry, and there was no stopping it, only letting it out and feeling it. As Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014) explain, the more we let ourselves feel our anger, “the more it will begin to dissipate” (p. 12) and we can heal.

My anger phase lasted long enough to worry people around me, so I tried to direct
it to constructive rather than destructive outlets. Writing the short story Pit-bulls, a segment of which comprises the above vignette, helped me direct my rage outward, feeling my anger without guilt or restriction. I took segments from my grief journal and copied them into a new story, which helped me feel as though I was moving instead of stagnating. Turning our names into fictional characters gave me a distance that felt good. I could control the characters and events in my story in a way that I could not control people and my life. This allusion of control felt both empowering and liberating, giving me the freedom to imagine the world differently and reconstruct it from a new angle.

When I finished revising Pit-bulls and submitted it to a publisher, I felt a cathartic release of my anger more powerful and more noticeable than the slow release I felt while writing the story. Anger still comes back into me, of course, but it does not feel as strong or intense as those initial months after Taylor’s death. It feels like typical, everyday anger instead of a nearly uncontrollable rage. Schlossberg (1981) reminds us that not all of our transitions end in adaptation, because some of us get stuck and fail to adapt to our new lives. Feeling the anger and then directing it outward helped the ‘moving through’ stage of my transition, a place where I could have easily gotten stuck.

22. Criminal Minds

I sat at my computer, working and eating a salad, when Taylor came downstairs.

“Do you want to take a lunch break today?”

“I already ate, because I was so hungry, but I ate at my desk, so we can still take a Criminal Minds break if you want.

“Excellent!”

Half an hour later we were watching Joe Mantegna, Thomas Gibson, and the rest
of the FBI profilers on the team try to get into the minds of a serial killer. “So this guy blows through his $500,000 trust fund and goes to Daddy behind his mother’s back. Dad drops another fifty grand in his bank account every six months.”

“He has virtually unlimited funds, a college education, and no day job.”

“He has all the time in the world to stalk and then torture his victims,” cut to commercial.

Taylor muted the television so we would not hear the commercials. “A five hundred-thousand-dollar trust fund, another fifty thousand dollars every six months, and this guy chooses to spend his time killing people?”

“I’m pretty sure I could find something better to do with my time and money.”

“Pretty sure?”

“Pretty darn sure.” I said with a smile. “What would you do?”

Taylor thought for a minute, tilting his head to the side and looking off into space.

“I’d move to London to become an actor.”

“Not New York?”

He raised his eyebrows and opened his eyes wider, looking both shocked and confused by my response. Then broke into a smile and laughed.

_OKay, but here’s the deal: “if you move all the way to London, the three of us would need to buy a cottage in the Cotswalds. If you moved to New York, we could just get a place in Connecticut, and then we could come into town to see all of your plays.”_ Taylor laughed out loud while I talked. “We won’t live too close, I promise. You would still have your privacy and your own place, but we will need to see all of your shows, so we need a place close. Not in the city, of course, but a nice train ride away, roughly an
hour so but not too much farther than that.” He laughed harder, possibly relieved to hear that we wouldn’t actually try to move in with him, as Sylvia always suggested when we talked about Taylor moving away for law school. “Dad might argue against it for the sake of your growing up and being independent, but I’ve got Sylvia on my side. We will win.

Why didn’t I say that out loud?

Reflection: What I didn’t say. Relationships that are significant to us include many small experiences which may also contain a great deal of significance (Klass, 2001). The vignette above recounts one of those small experiences that I continue to think about frequently. In the months before his death, all of Taylor’s classes were online. He also worked online as a proofreader, so he was home more often than not during the day. We would not have had enough time to turn everyday into our previously special Fridays, but whenever we felt stressed out from work or just had enough time, we would take a lunch break together. We started watching a television show called Criminal Minds. It was too scary to watch with Sylvia home, so we started watching it during lunch breaks.

A few weeks before he died, we were watching an episode about a serial killer whose father put $50,000 into his bank account every sixth months, after the young man blew threw his $500,000 trust fund. We talked about what we would do under similar circumstances, preferring not to kill people but find some other way to spend our energy. When Taylor admitted to me that he would move to London to become an actor, I knew he was opening up a subject for which he expected heavy criticism. The plan he shared with us out loud was law school. He loved all of the law classes he took for school, but he
also loved acting. We all knew that, but he expected me to criticize his dream of being an actor instead of a lawyer. He expected me to want something more academic for him and was ready for a discussion about intellectual responsibility.

When my reaction was just “not New York?” his relief was clearly evident on his face. He didn’t expect me to accept what he wanted, and I showed him no indication that I would have rejected his choices. I felt thrilled, warm inside that I was able to alleviate some of his fears.

What I did not tell him was the thought I kept to myself: “but if you move to London, then we would need to buy a cottage in the Cotswalds. If you moved to New York, we could get a place in Connecticut, and then we could come into town to see all of your plays.”

*Why didn’t I say that out loud?*

Regret often plagues the bereaved (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014), but I never understood how bad it could feel until after my son died. My husband, daughter, and I all felt it. We each wished that we would have done something differently to change the outcome of that horrible day. During that first year, we all thought about how we could have acted differently to prevent his death. In addition to that enormous regret, I also kept thinking about the one day described above and regretted not saying all that I wanted to say.

Both anger and guilt inevitably follow the regret that I feel each time I remember this conversation. Knowing that anger and guilt are common responses to grief (Faschingbauer, Zisook, & DuVaul, 1987; Sanders, Mauger, & Strong, 1985; Zisook, DuVaul, & Click, 2004) did not leave me feeling any better about myself. Taylor looked
so pleased that I didn’t criticize his dream. He would have been even more pleased to hear that I would support him know matter what he wanted to do, that I wanted him to be happy, and that I also thought about being able to watch him. What else might he have shared with me if I had opened up to him more, if he hadn’t died?

23. Talking

“We have a small group today,” Sydney announced as she looked out at the smaller than usual sea of children attending grief therapy this week. “Why don’t you join us?”

I looked up from my spot in a corner and shook my head, not interested in opening my mouth.

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to; just sit down here with us.” Margo’s mom, who had been sitting near me at the back table, stood up to join the kids’ circle. Savanna’s grandfather, who had been leaning against the doorway also joined. I ground my teeth together and found a spot on the floor next to my daughter.

“Great,” Sydney continued. “Now let’s go around the room and share one thing we will miss doing with our lost loved ones. I’ll start. My son was stillborn, so I miss being able to feed him.”

“Playing catch.”

“Baking cookies.”

“Dancing.”

“Coloring.”

“Reading.”

My throat constricted as the circle looked my way, sympathy and understanding
on everyone’s faces. “Talking to him,” I whispered while fresh tears filled up my eyes and threatened to spill.

***

“Angela, pick up the phone. If you are really not there, then call me back when you get home.” Mara’s voice sounded more firm and parental than worried, as she had in the past. She had sent me a few texts and left messages inviting me to lunch, but I only responded via e-mail to decline. “We need to meet, and you are going to talk to me. I’ll drive down there, and if you do not call me back today to make plans, I am showing up at your house tomorrow at noon. If you try to cancel again, I’ll sit right on your doorstep and wait for Jim to get home from work and let me in. You know I’ll do it.”

Against my will, I smiled and picked up the phone.

“Well, hello, Stranger! Are you done screening your calls?”

“Not likely, but I don’t like the idea of being stalked either.”

“I don’t want you to dwell on it for long, but I do want you to talk to me. When can I come over?”

I felt trapped but agreed, knowing I couldn’t avoid the real world forever but not sure I felt ready to join it again either. “Tomorrow, before I change my mind.”

**Reflection.** For other people, talking about loss helps them cope. Both Jim and Sylvia had friends they would talk to about their suffering when they felt bad, and talking seemed to help them find room in their lives for feelings other than sadness, anger, or pain. Talking about my son’s death proved to be a horribly painful and difficult obstacle. I wrote about it but avoided verbal discussion. Talking at all seemed pointless, so I didn’t do it much. Instead, I sent people occasional e-mail, mainly because I hoped it would
stop them from calling me. I didn’t want the immediacy of texts and certainly did not want to talk or see anyone. Although I didn’t think about it consciously, I withdrew from the world.

Not talking about it may have been my way of avoiding the pain of Taylor’s death. Even though I wrote about it, I wrote for myself. Talking involved other people, and I felt extremely reluctant to share my thoughts of feelings about this with anyone. Since that time, I learned that some people attribute illnesses to the bereaved when they try to tackle painful emotions before they are ready (Bonanno, 2004). Talking about it took a long time, and I didn’t do it until other people encouraged me.

Even though the isolation of mourning creates stress in addition to the stress directly attributed to grief (Shilling, 1993), I was not willing to give up that isolation. I don’t know how long it would have taken me on my own to reach out and share my pain with people, so it helped having others near and able to coerce me in just the right way. Telling me it was time to get on with my life did nothing to open my mouth or change my behavior, but I did finally respond to specific, direct questions. The therapist asked what I would miss about son, and my friend asked me to tell her what happened. We did not dwell on painful feelings for long. We talked about it for a bit and then moved on to talk about other things. This method may not work for everyone, as we are all different, but talking infrequently in small segments helped me.

24. Alternative Universe

How far back in time would we need to travel to bring him back for good, to change my son’s early death, let him live a long life and then die of old age but not until his dad and I die of old age first?
Scenario one: We go back to change the weekend. We talk Taylor into going to Gary’s with us, so he doesn’t stay home, and we do not return to find him dead.

Result: He would have been alive at the end of the weekend, but for how long? Whatever was troubling him would not have gone away in a weekend. Whether it was an accident or not wouldn’t change that. He felt troubled. Changing the weekend might ultimately change very little about that. Sadly, it may only change the time frame.

Scenario Two: We still go away for the weekend, but we leave to return home two hours sooner.

Result: Maybe we return home in time to resuscitate him. He goes to the hospital. He goes to therapy. We get him whatever help he needed, and maybe he is still alive. Or maybe not. I don’t know.

Scenario three: We go back and convince him to attend a traditional college and not an online school. He seemed to thrive his second year of college, before transferring online. He loved his law classes, served as defense attorney for their mock trial, participated in every theatre activity he could. Although he was busy, he enjoyed it. When he started his third year of college, he decided to take the economic route. Instead of applying to U of M or UT as planned, he applied to APUS, the online university where I teach. It saved money but sucked away human contact. Combined with working an online job, online college left him too isolated. After his last show ended, maybe he felt that too much was gone from his life. I don’t know.

Result: Maybe a traditional college would have given him the socialization he needed. He might have remained busy and not felt depressed or overwhelmed. He might have graduated and gone on to find a job, to live a life, to be alive. I don’t know.
Scenario four: Go back to his birth and raise him differently, the question is how.

What would we do differently? What would we change? How would we know the right track?

Result: I don’t know. I can’t know. There are too many variables.

Reflection. People often feel guilt after losing a loved one, and bargaining often accompanies that guilt (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). It frequently comes in the form of wishing we would have done things differently and imagining that we could have changed enough to have prevented the loss. Sylvia thought it was her fault. She thought she should have tried harder to convince him to go with us that weekend. It wasn’t her fault, but she still felt frustrated and angry and sad because she had not been able to help. Jim thought it was his fault. He thought if he hurried us out the door earlier that morning we would have gotten home in time to save him. It wasn’t Jim’s fault either, but it was impossible to convince him of that. I was his mother. Final responsibility for his well-being was left to me. I failed. People could try to tell me that was not true, but I would not believe them either. All of us felt the weight of the responsibility to make a difference in Taylor’s life, make the significant change that would save him and keep him with us, happy and healthy. We wanted that control but never had it.

“The truth is, doing things differently may have changed the process but would not have prevented the death” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014, p. 41). There may have been certain things I could have done differently to change the ultimate outcome of my son’s death, or at least to alter the time frame, push it back beyond my own death-from-old-age. Our lives touch so many other lives; countless people touch each one of our lives. Innumerous individual moments hold the capacity to change our lives. Since so
many variables interact with one another to produce our actions and reactions in a variety of different scenarios, how can we ever know what change would be the right change? How can we even know the level of influence any one person has over others? Maybe we can’t. Maybe we don’t really have that much control.

As a mother, I like to think that I have more influence over my children than the rest of the world, but that doesn’t make it true. How did Dr. Jekyll phrase it when writing about Mr. Hyde? “I felt unconditional love for him that a parent feels for a child, and he felt the disregard for me that a child feels for a parent” or something like that. My influence over him was not as strong as I would have wanted it, which is the way of the world, the way of growth. Am I just trying to make myself feel better, feel less responsible? Maybe I am, and maybe there are too many variables in the world for me to have the type of control I want to have.

25. Fire

The clean smell of cedar wafted up, still strong after all these years. I breathed it in deeply before unpacking the chest, a Christmas present from my father, the last gift he gave me before he died. A box of pictures, my dad’s old pipe, my wedding dress, treasures I used to take out and look at when I felt like remembering. Now, I folded the dress neatly next to the chest then walked to my son’s room.

We cleaned out a few things already, clothes to donate and mementos for a few loved ones, but most of the room remained as he had left it. His bright blue afghan lay crumpled at the foot of the bed. My mother knitted it for him several years ago, and he used it all winter long every year. I wrapped it around my body, cocooned in its warmth and rubbed the yarn against my cheek. It still smelled like him. I haven’t washed it since
before he died.

An old Winnie-the-Pooh stuffed animal sat perched on a shelf of his closet. I smiled thinking how he kept it all this time. How sentimental. I reached up and grabbed it, holding it close as I walked to the garage and thinking about how small he was when my friend, Julie, gave it to him, even smaller than the bear.

Gas cans sat on the far wall of the garage opposite the house next to the lawn mower and emergency generator, so I flipped on the light to avoid tripping along the way. Grabbing the fullest can, I walked back to my closet and shut the door.

The smell of gasoline overpowered the scent of memories while I poured it out, spreading gas across the floor, on the dress, the pictures, and finally on top of the chest. I shook the last drops of gas out of the can and climbed inside the cedar chest. Still wrapped in my son’s afghan and clutching his old bear, I lit the flames and shut the door.

**Reflection.** Klass (2013) considers sorrow “the defining characteristic of grief” (p. 598). A combination of longing for the deceased and depression, sorrow leaved the bereaved feeling deep sadness and even emptiness. I experienced this deep sorrow for a long time.

When the reality and finality of their loss final sinks in to the hearts of the bereaved, depression and emptiness often follow (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). “In grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle” (p. 21). Although I never seriously contemplated suicide, there were many times when I wanted to kill myself and end my pain. I didn’t because I couldn’t bring myself to add that suffering onto the burdens that my daughter and husband already carry. They suffer from losing
Taylor as much as I do, and I couldn’t hurt them any more to ease my own pain, but I still let myself fantasize about it. I imagined climbing into the cedar chest in my closet and setting it on fire. I imagined steering my car underneath the wheels of a semi-truck loaded with heavy cargo and wondered how many aspirin it would take to kill someone. Although these were just fantasies, they were frequent and recurring and I didn’t share them with anyone until now.

In his memoir about his experience with severe depression, William Styron (1990) wrote about the night he nearly killed himself. He had been planning it for some time and even wrote a suicide letter for his wife, but before going through with it, he heard a piece of music he loved. Enjoying the song reminded him of things in life that felt worth living for before he fell into his bout of despair, and that music inspired him to reach out for help rather than dying. Other people had been prodding me to be good to myself and indulge in things I enjoy, but I procrastinated, did not think I deserved to feel better. I did, however, finally agree to one-on-one therapy sessions with a grief counselor.

26. One-on-One

“I’m glad to see you. I was just thinking about you the other day,” Sydney held a clipboard on her lap while she talked. “Someone donated a book about how grief changes after the first years, and it made me wonder how you were doing.”

“Better.”

“I can see that. You’re standing up straight instead of slumped over, and you look me in the eye when we talk. A year ago you still avoided everyone’s gaze, just sat hunched over by yourself.” I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just nodded.

“How is Sylvia? We haven’t seen her in group for a while.”
“She’s good. She has a conflict with karate class; otherwise, she’d still go. She liked it. It helped her.”

“Good.”

“She loves talking, so the group sessions were good for her. She has a good group of friends though and a lot of different people to talk to.”

“I remember that,” Sydney smiled. “She did not need much encouragement to share.”

“No, she seems to have no problem sharing, telling me when she feels sad or depressed or just wishes her brother were here.”

“She didn’t get that from you, did she?”

“No.”

“I’m glad she’s doing well. Does she keep busy?”

“Yeah, and she’s busy. Between singing in the choir, karate, her writer’s club, she has something to do all the time.”

“As long she’s not too busy that’s good. It’s important to do things we enjoy and not just work all the time.” I briefly nodded my head in agreement. “What about you?”

I stared at her blankly.

“What do you do, other than work?”

*What do I do?*

“What do you enjoy? What do you look forward to doing?”

*What do I look forward to doing?*

“Do you leave the house, just to get out and go somewhere? Errands and doctor appointments don’t count either.”
More blank staring.

“Do you like shopping, and I don’t mean groceries?” I shook my head and wrinkled my nose but my mind couldn’t conjure up anything I enjoyed. I used to enjoy music. Now it reminds me of the operas Taylor and I would never see. I used to like movies, but we watched them together. I used to enjoy writing middle grade or young adult stories. Now those stories remind me that my primary reader is gone and it reminds me of my chronic failure.

**Reflection.** I waited well over a year before scheduling a one-on-one appointment with a grief counselor. I wanted to feel my pain, to live with it during those moments in between other moments when I avoided it. Grief serves a purpose, and if we do not let ourselves feel it, it can’t serve that purpose (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). Here again, I could have gotten stuck, failed to adapt to life without my son and never transitioned beyond my depression. Instead of getting stuck though, I just ended up taking my time. Everyone needs to adjust in their own time, not a pre-charted schedule designed by someone else.

Trying to talk to a grief counselor on-on-one before I felt ready also would have been a waste of time, because I had nothing to say. The counselor even told me that during our first session. She said that counseling won’t really help people until they feel ready for it. Finding words to say to people gave me a lot of trouble, even after 18 months. Talking to people felt so strained and uncomfortably difficult, sometimes I actually felt as if I were losing the power of speech. I was losing the ability to communicate with other people and cared about it only marginally. I could not think of anything to say on my own, but I did answer direct questions. My counselor recognized
that and loosened me up by asking about Sylvia before moving on to me and my feelings. Once we made that shift, I cried for the rest of the hour.

During that first session, we talked about my feelings of guilt and high expectations of myself. We also talked about forcing me out of my house, socializing more with other people, being more active, and doing things that gave me pleasure. People had been giving me this advice for two years, but I ignored them. After that first session, I started meeting with the grief counselor once a week and one other day each week I met someone for lunch or took a walk in the botanical gardens, something I used to look forward to and love doing. Nothing felt as relaxing as it used to feel, and I rarely looked forward to my forced outings. People who have never lived through serious trauma or deep depression may not understand, but thinking of anything that might give me pleasure seemed impossible. I just forced myself to go through the motions until I very slowly and sporadically starting enjoying bits and pieces of my life again.

27. Dear Taylor,

There was so much I wanted to say to you that I never said, so many little things that I regret. It feels cliché, but it really is true. All of us want to go back in time and change things, fix everything for you, make everything better. I wish you would have talked to me more. That seems greedy by many standards, because I think you did spend more time with me and share more than most teenage boys would, but sill…I know that pestering you to open up more would have gotten me nowhere. That’s how I react when people try to get things out of me by force, and I know you were always the same way. But still, I wish I could have thought of something, been more open or less demanding and critical, something so you would have felt comfortable and safe opening up and
sharing with me. If not with me, then someone else, anything so you would not feel under so much pressure, so alone.

Even though it is so much cheaper for you to take classes at my school, I think you should still go to UT. You could take all the same pre-law classes you could take at APUS but also take part in the campus activities, such as the mock trial and student government you so clearly enjoyed at MCCC last year. They also have a theatre department, which APUS does not have. How could they online? You could major in English and minor in theatre or political science. You could take all of the literature, writing, theatre, and law classes you wanted. I know those classes cost money, but you could appreciate college so much more if you were there in person, enjoying other people who like the same things you do. The college puts on a lot of plays, so you could try out for different roles, not just characters but behind-the-scenes work as well. I’m not trying to tell you what to do, exactly, but I want to point out your options and encourage you to think about more than just money. You do have responsibilities, but you should also enjoy yourself, even when you are on the road that carries you to where you want to be in life. If we don’t, then what’s the point?

While we are sort of on the topic, do you remember when we watched the episode of Criminal Minds when a man collected his inheritance, received money from his father to live, and still chose to spend his time and energy becoming a serial killer? You said that if you were in a similar situation, could do whatever you wanted with your time without factoring in finances, you would move to London and become an actor. I didn’t tell you this at the time, but if you moved all the way to London, I would want to buy a place in the country, about an hour or so by train, so we could still be close to you and
visit often. Why didn’t I tell you that?

You are so smart and so talented; you would be great at a lot of different things. I know I told you that many times, but I’ve also made derisive comments about actors, and I wish I would have tried harder to clarify, let you know I would support your decisions. Don’t pick what you want to do with your life based on what anyone else thinks, including me.

At some point after you died, I heard a theatre critic talking about London having a wider culture of theater goers than New York, because theatre is considered entertainment for all social and economic groups in London. I walked to your room to tell you about that but then remembered that you are no longer here. I wish you were still here.

Your brain knew most of the things I wanted to tell you already, but I still wish we could have had those conversations. I would have done anything to help ease your heartache. I love you so much. You were my first reason for living, and I miss you every day.

Love,

Mom

**Reflection.** My grief counselor asked me if I had ever written to my son. I hadn’t at the time, but I wanted to talk to him every day, so I did. I wrote him a letter, an excerpt from which is copied above, the original still in one of my grief journals. Tears poured down my face through the entire letter, but I kept writing, pressed on, and finished it. Although writing the letter felt crushingly painful, one of the most emotionally difficult tasks I’ve ever performed, I felt better afterword. I felt a little bit lighter, less weighed
down by heartache. This lightness helped give me the energy and desire to start doing things again, not only things that gave me pleasure in the moment but things that left me feeling worthwhile and productive.

The emotional catharsis felt during and after expressive writing can actually promote both health and happiness (Pennebaker, & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker, & Smyth, 2016; Sloan, Feinstein, & Marx, 2009), which I certainly experienced after writing my letter to Taylor. I had been keeping grief journals before that, but they were not nearly as emotional or expressive as that first letter. Writing it hurt, but it also allowed me to let go of pent up guilt and depression that could conceivably have paralyzed me. I could have circled around those negative feelings for years or indefinitely, never successfully transitioning and adapting to my new life.

Just as looking at my journals from a new perspective and turning some of the segments into the short story “Pitt-bull” helped me move beyond my anger, writing letters to Taylor helped me move beyond guilt and depression. Not all at once, but gradually I opened up more, found things to look forward to, and started making plans again. I write short stories and contribute to a learning tips blog at work. I also write Taylor letters in my grief journal. I talk to him often about little things, but when it feels important, I write him.

One of the things writing that first letter helped me do was think about working on my dissertation again. I registered for one dissertation credit hour for the following semester, even though I had absolutely no idea what I would do with it yet. I had been stuck in my “moving through” (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) stage of adult transition and given up trying to “move out” of it for a long time, so I would need to
backtrack a little bit before I could move forward with it.

28. Campus

No snow had fallen yet though the air felt cold enough; most tree branches bare, only a few colored leaves still clung to life. Fortunately, I left the house early enough to find a parking spot and skipped cruising the parking lot, waiting for someone else to pull out before sneaking in behind them, not one of the fun times I missed about school.

Students crowded the library, taking up nearly all of the available computers. I walked up to the fourth floor and sat in an oversize chair by the children’s books before pulling out my notebook.

*What do I enjoy?*

I used to look forward to fall. I used to look forward to my classes and my books. Everyone else seems busy and focused. I would definitely like to feel focused and productive again. *But doing what? I can’t pick up where I left off, studying student/faculty interaction in online classes. Who cares about that? Not me.*

Packing my notebook away, I found an empty computer and started searching recent dissertations. A phenomenological look at adult specialists in the field of gifted education. *Who cares?* A narrative inquiry into how individual epistemological beliefs and teaching practices are affected by participation in study groups. *Who cares?* The relationship of undergraduate first-time-in-college students’ expectations of interactions with faculty and four-year degree completion. *Who cares?*

These studies all fulfilled their missions. They were complete, finished. Their authors all held Ph.Ds., but they all seemed trivial. *If good studies seem indifferent to me, how will I care about a study of my own? If I don’t care about it, and I cannot think of*
any topics I might care about, how will I possibly argue a defense for it?

My dissertation needs to be something that distracts me during the day so I catch myself thinking about it when I’m vacuuming or watering plants, something I climb out of bed at four in the morning to write before an idea slips away from me. But what?

Dejected, my feet carried me mindlessly to Dr. Collins’ office. I barged in without an appointment and spilled my guts. “I want to finish but don’t know if I can. Changing my topic again seems useless. I won’t care about a new topic any more than old one. Nothing matters enough for me to research and write about.”

“Why can’t you write about grief? Why can’t you write about your experiences?”

“How could I include my own experiences? Isn’t this supposed to be about other people?”


“Can I do that?”

“Why not?” she shrugged her shoulders and looked me in the eye waiting for an answer.

“How could I get that approved?”

“I think it’s a good idea, and I think you can find a way. Start researching”

Blood shot through my body all the way up to my brain. Ideas popped into my head. I grabbed a pencil off of her desk and starting jotting down notes.

**Reflection.** I took a walk through campus to think about what I enjoy. Since I used to enjoy walking on campus in between classes that seemed like a good place to
start. I used to enjoy being a student, gathering research, reading, and writing, though I felt skeptical about my ability to finish the dissertation. Even if I did resume working on it again, I knew that I couldn’t go back to my previous topic and previous study, endure daily flashbacks of the period I spent gathering data and writing the concept paper before Taylor died. I also knew that selecting the right topic could make the difference between success or failure (Rogers, & Earnshaw, 2015). I looked through other dissertations to find ideas that might spark my interest. These were all completed dissertations; their authors held Ph.Ds. in their hands and moved forward with their careers. They all represented success, but none of them mattered to me any more than my topic did. The titles and the topics all seemed flat.

My brain knew that I needed a topic that mattered to my heart, but I didn’t let myself find it. My chair actually suggested I write about grief. This was a tremendous help to me, since grieving people often benefit from social support for decision making after terrible loss (Gentry & Goodwin, 2015; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1998). She had suggested I consider this avenue before, but I never took it seriously, so she dropped it. That day in March, after writing the letter to my son and after acknowledging that I could not go on with a topic I did not feel invested in, we took it more seriously. A new topic meant starting a new concept paper from scratch and trying to argue the validity of an alternative research method no other student at UT had used before. After accepting life without my son, it seemed much easier to accept a new research topic and start from scratch. I needed something I cared about if I could ever successfully argue for it in front of a committee, and I found it. I could write about finding my way down the difficult road and offer my story as a way of connecting with other doctoral students traveling a
similar path. When I think about how many other people feel pain as deeply and as often as I do while still getting out of bed and moving through life each day, I am amazed and impressed with them and suspect that maybe I can do it as well.

29. No Agatha Christie

“What are you reading?” he asked, glancing over my shoulder.

“Post-mortem, it’s Patricia Cornwell’s first novel.”

“Any good?”

I shrugged my shoulders and nodded my head. “It’s not bad. This is the second book of hers that I’ve read, and I’ve enjoyed them both. In the first book though, I pegged the killer less than half way through, very predictable. This early book might be less obvious.”

“So she’s no Agatha Christie.”

“Right.”

“More like Mary Higgins-Clark?”

“Yep. she’s popular, entertaining, but not much of a brain teaser. The book cover of the first one I read claimed that she’s the second best-selling female writer ever, just behind J.K. Rowling.”

“I thought our lady Agatha Christie was the best seller.”

“At one point her books sold more copies than any other book except for the bible, but that was a few years ago. Maybe these two passed her up since then.”

“Shame.”

I nodded my head in agreement as I looked at the empty space in the empty chair on the other side of my desk.
Reflection. There are so many times I do something or read something or hear something that I want to share with Taylor. The first time it happened after his death, I was listening to Writer’s Almanac on the radio in the morning and automatically walked to his room to tell him about why E.L. Doctorow used his initials instead of his first name, Edgar. My hand hung in the air, poised to knock on his door, when I remembered that he wasn’t on the other side anymore. I went into his room, cluttered with boxes of things we were very slowly organizing but still refused to let go, curled up on his bed, and cried. I can’t remember how long it took before I stopped looking for him when I thought of something to share with him, and I can’t remember when I stopped crying when I remember he was gone, but that didn’t stop me from talking to him anyway.

Continuing to share bonds with the deceased can help some people grieve and give them comfort (Attig, 2001, 2011; Klass, 1988; Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992; Worden, 1996). Feeling close to Taylor helps me. Phantom conversations with him became pretty common at some point. I talk to him every day, sad because he doesn’t answer me but carrying on the conversation anyway, imagining how he would respond or veering off on a tangent wondering what he would say. Even though he’s not here anymore, talking to him still feels good.

It’s hard for me to acknowledge that I accept my son’s death. I do not want it to be real. I still hate that he is dead, but “acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014, p. 26). There are still times when I resist the reality of it and imagine him still with us. I’ve had very nice dreams about visiting him in college or him being at home again. Nothing dramatic happens. He is just there, an integral part of our
lives as he might have been if he were still alive. As much as I do not want his death to be real, it is real, and I’ve learned how to live with the loss, so I guess that means that I have accepted it.

30. Defense

My voice wavered less as I talked on, just as I used to hear in my students when they delivered oral presentation, though much less acid filled my stomach during this meeting than during my concept paper defense meeting the previous fall. Succeeding at that first meeting gave me much more confidence for this, the research proposal defense meeting, even though this is the more formal meeting. Even so, these people can stop me in tracks. They can tell me I’m wrong, that this won’t work and I need to scrap all of my work and start over again, yet again. In 60 minutes they can prevent me from moving forward, keep me from moving out.

No, that’s not quite right. They won’t stop me. They will simply point out my inadequacies and tell me it needs to be better for them to approve.

Reflection. The recording of my Concept Paper defense meeting played on the computer while I wrote the above vignette. I remembered feeling significantly less nervous going into this meeting than I had been going into the first concept paper meeting, so I was surprised to hear my voice quake during the first few minutes. As I summed up the research proposal for my dissertation, hesitation seeped into my voice at first, and my confidence grew as I continued talking. My brain knew that my committee was there to help. Our first meeting certainly reassured me of that, but they also needed to evaluate whether or not my work was academically rigorous enough to approve. If it wasn’t, they could not approve it.
What I really heard in my trembling voice was a nervousness that proved to me that I cared. I cared whether or not I succeeded at this, evidence that I could eventually move out of my doctoral stage (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989) and go on with my life.
Chapter Five

Reflection, Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

This chapter contains my reflections on the autoethnographic writing process and the dissertation process. It also includes a discussion about how my personal experiences connect with the experiences of other doctoral students and related literature. In addition, the chapter presents implications for students, staff members, and administrators designed to help future grieving doctoral students are additionally examined. Finally, I share the conclusions I have drawn from my experience.

Epilogue: Reflecting on the Writing Process

My mother used to say the most difficult things in life were also the most rewarding. She was referring to childbirth and motherhood, but her theory applies to other work as well, including my work on this project. Finishing Chapter Four of this dissertation was by far the most difficult writing I have ever attempted. Other autoethnographers have provided warnings about how painful it feels to relive our most harrowing moments, reflect on them, and then even analyze them. Anticipating this difficulty ahead of time in no way prepared me for the emotional overload I felt while engaging in this type of writing. Each vignette drained me, some more than others, but at the same time, writing them also felt cathartic. This process is certainly not right for everyone who has suffered a tragedy, but it was a blessing to me. Writing helped me work through issues that I may never have addressed, and it helped me keep moving ahead with my life instead of giving up on it.

I felt completely excited to defend my research proposal and start writing Chapter Four, but I still avoided work on the difficult scenes. Writing them was ultimately much
more difficult than I had anticipated. Most writing projects are exciting to begin, but I dug my feet on this one, day after day finding something else more pressing to do with my time. Maybe I was avoiding the pain of reliving such heart-shattering moments. Whatever the reason, this project did not proceed like other writing.

Usually when I write a short story or an article, I wake up early to start writing. Each day, I write at least one page. If I am doing well, I will keep going; otherwise, I am satisfied with having written one page per day. That did not happen when I began writing the vignettes, at least not with the most painful scenes. I did not make any progress until forcing myself to finish a page, forcing myself in a way that I had never needed to before when writing. The excruciating agony of reliving that horror paralyzed my mind and my heart. Writing our stories helps us understand and make sense of our lives (Richardson, 1997), but writing about painful experiences can be incredibly difficult. It took me several days just to write a single draft of one particular scene, even though it only consisted of 400 words. I might write a few words, save the work, and then get up to pace the house or walk outside with the dogs. After a 15-minute break, I could sit back down, write a sentence, and then needed to get away from it again. Each day I cried while I wrote and looked away when my vision blurred too much to see the computer screen. Just to write, “this was painful” feels too serious an understatement. It was the kind of pain that can drive people crazy or hurt so much that we constantly avoid it, pain so intense that we expect it to kill us.

Avoiding the pain could have resulted in my remaining stuck though, not processing the changes in my life. However, experiencing it, enduring it, living through it allowed me to move through it, to heal at least somewhat, and then go on living life. If I
had not decided to write my way through the process of grieving, I may have eventually found another way out of my hazy, lethargic existence, or I may not have. I may have stopped there, gotten stuck, and failed to move on with life. Humans do not always adapt successfully to change (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). Sometimes, people get stuck in the grieving process (Michael & Snyder, 2005; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999), and the death of my son could easily have been such a shocking and unacceptable change that I could have easily refused to adapt to it. Refusing to accept his death would not have changed his death, but it would have stopped me from living in the here-and-now, choosing instead to live in a distorted dream-world of how I wished life would be.

Weeks before I necessarily needed to work on the vignette depicting the death of my son, I started feeling anxious. Hives popped up all over my skin, acid constantly filled my stomach, and I woke up in the middle of the night unable to sleep. When I finally realized what bothered me (Yes, one might have expected this to be obvious right away, but it was not. Maybe I was too immersed in it to see clearly), I decided to take the advice of Pennebaker and Evans (2014) and write about the experience in 20-minute increments for four days in a row. Even with my writing knocked down to only 20 minutes at a time, I found it extremely difficult to write the entire time, finding distractions all around me, anything to pull me away from the painful memories of reliving the worst days of my life.

Writing in third-person helped because switching perspectives can allow individuals to examine traumatic experiences from a new perspective (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Wilson & Ross, 2003). In fact, maybe it would have been impossible for me
to share this while writing in first-person voice during the initial draft. Although my field notes were certainly written in first-person point of view, writing the first draft of these painful vignettes in third person helped me examine the situation through a different lens. It created a distance that helped me think about perspectives from other people, not just myself, and it also increased my ability to transition out of my individual bubble of pain and position my pain in a world of other people and their suffering. As a result, the exercise of writing in third-person voice benefitted me much more than simply enabling me to finish writing. It helped me transition out of my grief and isolation, back into the world of the living, the society of other people.

I do recommend that anyone trying to write about such a painful experience wait until they feel ready. Trying to engage in this type of writing too soon could be emotionally dangerous rather than beneficial. Personal indicators letting us know that we are ready is most likely different for every individual (Kubler-Ross & Kesler, 2014). One indicator can be the experience of looking forward more often than looking backward, or maybe we just spend more time thinking ahead and know that we want to keep on living. This feeling may be a bit different for each of us, but we need to feel prepared to relive painful experiences and move on with our lives anyway, even though they still feel empty and not nearly as good as before our loss.

Ellis (1995) described the relief she felt after thinking and writing about the impending death of her partner. This writing served as field notes for her future book about negotiating the many complexities of experiencing significant loss, but it also served as a tool for her to prepare for his death. These “death rehearsals” allowed her to plunge “into the agony” (p. 51) of her pain, but afterward, she also felt relieved. I feel
something like that after writing about Taylor. I cry while I write and often for a long

time afterward, but then I also feel better, lighter, and less burdened.

After I finished writing the vignettes and reflections for Chapter Four, I took three
or four weeks to step away from my dissertation while my committee read and reviewed
it. I busied myself with work for my job so I could free up more time for revisions and
Chapter Five after digesting the feedback from my committee at the Chapter Four
meeting. After receiving recommendations from committee members and hearing their
advice and recommendations for revisions, I wanted to sequester myself for a month and
do nothing but work on the dissertation until I completed it. Life would not stand still for
me though, and I was not able to focus solely on finishing the dissertation.

It turned out that my inability to purge everything else from my life was a
blessing in disguise. I expected the revision and analysis process to be less painful than
writing the vignettes and engaging in reflective writing, but the work did not turn out as
easily or quickly as I had expected. Instead of maintaining an analytical frame of mind
for the remainder of my writing, I kept feeling drawn back into the pain of reading my
own writing. My writing sessions only lasted for only an hour or two each day, and from
an emotional standpoint, I do not think I could have written more than that even with all
the time in the world.

For that period of my work, I am grateful to have had other responsibilities to
focus on for part of each day. These responsibilities provided me time to think about
tasks and events and chores—anything other than my pain and loss. Without those
distractions, I may have written for only an hour or two each day but then slipped into
escapism for lunch, wine, and fictional television characters. Instead of slipping back into
those dangerous habits, I devoted the afternoons to my job-related responsibilities. At first, I was not even conscious of this shift; however, one day, I noticed one day that I had eaten lunch while standing in the kitchen and looking out the windows into the backyard, and I realized that work filled my afternoons. I did not dread it; in fact, I even mildly enjoyed some of it, early steps back into the realm of the living.

Feeling a sense of identity loss after losing a loved one is common (Papa & Lancaster, 2006). I vividly remember how lost, empty, and confused I felt after Taylor died, when I felt like a terrible mother. Although my daughter has helped reaffirm my identity as a mother, knowing how desolate I felt when the mothering part of me died with my son has driven me to fill that space with something else. I thought to myself, If I tie up so much of my identity with being a mother, how will I react when my daughter goes to college or accepts a job offer across the country? It won’t be the same crushing devastation of death. She will still be alive. I will still have her and feel proud and happy for her, but she will not be a part of my daily life. I want to remember other parts of myself before she leaves, i.e. access those aspects of my personality that identify as a student, a writer, a teacher, and value their importance in my life. Maybe I will find new aspects of myself as well. I don’t know, but I do know that I do not ever again want to feel as empty and lost as I felt during those first two years after losing Taylor.

According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014), stages of grief can sometimes last for minutes or hours, while other stages can linger for months or years. This has certainly been true for me. My acceptance has not or is not exactly a single event. Days of horrific sobbing and depression continue to be interspersed with short periods of productivity and peace, but the moods or frames of mind are switching, changing places. Now I spend
more time being productive and less time feeling sad. I oscillate back and forth between these states, and I suspect the rest of my life might be like that. Maybe that is a part of acceptance—knowing that I will not ever feel the same as before. It is one thing to say it or to theoretically acknowledge that my loss and the following grief will leave me forever a different person than I was before Taylor died. It is another situation completely to feel the reality that I will continue living, my son will not continue living, and know that my family and I will spend the rest of our lives without him.

Maybe a part of acceptance is when we no longer want to simply give up when we think about our pain. We start making plans for the future instead of letting the days drift by us while our hearts freeze or shatter. When I started to accept life without Taylor, I wanted to start being more productive, stop spending my days in a haze and have something to show for the effort of getting through the day. One of the many steps in my acceptance was to resume work on my dissertation. Maybe Karen Blixen was right. Maybe “all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (as cited in Arendt, 1968, p. 104).

**Discussion**

Autoethnography does not provide definitive conclusions (Glesne, 1997; Smith, 1999; Sparkes, 1996), and my story certainly does not end with a “transcendent epiphany” (Hawkings, 1997, p. 161). The pain of losing my son will not ever go away but rather will be a constant part of me for the rest of my life. Although my grief will never conclude, there are conclusions about grieving and being a doctoral student that I can draw from this study. Categorizing themes for the insights developed during the data gathering process can be one way to begin making sense of autoethnographic data
(Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015), which is the framework within I present this discussion. I examined my data, created categories, and identified themes about succeeding as a doctoral student while grieving. Since people encounter many different aspects of grief in life, not exclusively the death of a loved one, the categories I identified span the times both before and after the death of my son. To theorize, I connected my experiences with those of others (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and asked myself what my story had to do with other doctoral students and other grieving individuals.

Several cohort peers and doctoral graduates read my work as a form of member checking. If their interpretations had differed greatly from mine, I would have realized that I needed to analyze my work more thoroughly and re-visit my theories. Instead, they confirmed my analysis and identified with many of the struggles I wrote about as issues they also faced. They connected with my work and appreciated reading about the many struggles we shared. I felt extremely gratified when they related to and understood so many thoughts and feelings that I had written about. They felt connection and satisfaction in knowing that others felt the same way they did, as students and as grievers, and I loved knowing that I connected with my readers, with my peers. Those connections can be valuable both in helping doctoral students persist in their studies and in helping the bereaved grieve their loss without giving up on life.

**Doctoral Coursework**

During the first year of doctoral work, students begin to transition into the doctoral environment (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1993). My experiences suggest that during this crucial year, students need to (a) decide whether doctoral studies will be the right move for them; (b) discover whether or not they are up to the challenge of
doctoral work; and (c) determine whether they can and want to integrate into the academic community. These decisions cannot be made once and then forgotten. Changes in our lives will continue to influence our studies, and with each significant change to our lives, we may need to reevaluate the importance that doctoral work plays in our lives.

In my particular cohort, I may have been one of the only students wondering whether I selected the right program of doctoral study; however, students moving from one department to another to finish their doctorates account for nearly half of first year attrition, particularly in the sciences (Golde, 1998). Many of my peers wondered whether they were on the right path by trying to pursue a doctorate at all. Students should evaluate whether a doctoral program fits their future career goals (Boes, Ullery, & Milner, 1999). If their careers did not require a doctorate, they may have been less likely to finish classes, while students whose career aspirations required a completed doctorate may have been more likely to persist (Lovitts, 2001; Nerad & Cerny, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

To make these decisions, we needed to ask ourselves why we were there. Is this the best fit for me and my future? The honest answer to that question can help us decide whether we should invest the time, energy, and money into finishing the doctoral program. Students should also start learning about various research methods early in their matriculation to help determine whether they are on the right paths. Many people enjoy learning content but do not enjoy studying method or theory (Golde, 1998), which could indicate that doctoral work would not be a good fit. My experiences and those of my peers suggested that doctoral students should start studying research method early. This early exposure will help them decide whether they are on the right path, and it will also help prepare them early for the dissertation work ahead.
The workload and expectations increase at the doctoral level. Some students may not be prepared for this work (Golde & Dore, 2001), which is a good indication that doctoral studies may not be the best fit. Many students in my cohort capable of stepping up to the challenge of doctoral work still felt intimidated by the rigorous workload and higher expectations at first and worried that we might not be up to the challenge. Member checking from peers confirmed that I was not alone feeling this uncertainty. Even Art Bochner (2014) felt intimidated at first. Doctoral students should know that their peers feel intimidated as well and they are not alone in that regard.

Even when students can adapt to the academic rigors of doctoral work, they may not want to participate in the “all-consuming lifestyle” (Golde, 1998, p. 57) of the doctoral student. If this is the case, then students may not persist. Even if students feel willing to incorporate their programs into their lives, students still need to consider the timing and decide whether they can fit the work into their lives (Boes, Ullery, & Milner, 1999). Although I felt happy to be a part of the academic world, I also felt a resistance to the frequent group projects and forced socialization at first. Fortunately, I moved past that and learned to contribute to, benefit from, and even enjoy working in teams with my peers. When students do not make that adjustment, remain isolated, and do not integrating into the academic community, they often leave the program (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007; Herzig, 2002). Students who feel as if they belong to the academic community are more likely to remain involved; as a result, socialization becomes a vital aspect of successfully transitioning into the world of doctoral study (Gardner, 2007, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 2001).

As we develop into doctoral students, we continue to engage with the academic
community and build support networks of colleagues with similar interests and goals. At some point in my coursework, I realized that a small group of us continued to communicate and meet outside of classes, not just to work on group projects but also to study together or drink coffee and talk about family. Peer relationships within the department increased in importance (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Church, 2009; Lovitts, 2001), and meeting together it felt like a personal choice rather than an academic requirement. Academic and social interactions blended together without distinction (Tinto, 1993), social interactions influenced academic skills, and academic responsibilities influenced social exchanges. There were no clear lines to define my social and scholastic life. I also noticed that we each began gravitating toward certain professors, developing relationships with specific faculty members and discussing dissertation topics, methods, and committee members (Gardner, 2008a). These support networks helped us avoid feeling isolated (Ali & Kohun, 2007) and allowed me to continue with my coursework when other aspects of my life could have derailed me.

Even after we acclimate to the more rigorous workloads and higher expectations of doctoral work and use peers as support systems, changes may occur in our lives that alter the importance of doctoral studies. Life will not stand still while we finish our degrees. External factors will continue to change and to influence our doctoral work (Tinto, 1993), so we need to continually reevaluate whether remaining with the program is right for us at each various stages in our lives. The doctoral program may be a good fit for graduate students during the first year of their program, but if life changes, death, birth, marriage, divorce, illness, job loss, job change, etc., we need to reassess whether the program is still the right place for us at that time.
Just as I do not believe undergraduate students should rush through their coursework to make sure they satisfy a four-year deadline for graduation, I also do not believe that doctoral students should rush through their coursework. Since some students never finish their degrees because they are not adequately prepared for the dissertation process (Gumport & Syndmany, 2002; Lipschutz, 1993; Lovitts, 2001), rushing through coursework too quickly could also be detrimental. Doctoral students should learn about research methods and how to conduct research before finishing classes and trying to work on the dissertation independently. While exploring research methods might seem like an unnecessary use of time initially, it might benefit students overall to explore research methods in more detail before committing to one for the dissertation. When students collaborate on research projects, they are more likely to persist (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ethington & Pisani, 1993; Golde & Dore, 2001; Nerad & Cerny, 1993), and the experience of working as a part of a team would also offer students an opportunity to become familiar with the research process before the independent work of the dissertation. Whether they explore research methods by working on a project or enroll in additional classes, doctoral students would benefit from learning a variety of research methods before beginning their dissertations.

The dissertation

The dissertation stage leaves doctoral students at high risk of attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007; Bair & Haiworth, 2005; DiPierro, 2007; Liechty et al., 2009). When I began the dissertation stage, I understood that the possibility of failing to finish loomed frighteningly in front of me. Surprisingly, not everyone in my cohort seemed to understand that the risk applied to all of us. No one was exempt, and the risk of attrition
applied to everyone, although we all experienced a unique set of difficulties. People are not identical robots. Each one of us needs to find our own path to succeed, but my experiences may well apply to some other doctoral students. Several key elements needed to come together for me to complete my dissertation: finding the right topic, selecting a research method that would allow me to find my own voice as a researcher and writer, building a strong committee, and remaining tenacious enough to focus on my goals, and persevering after setbacks or when the work became unexpectedly difficult. The dissertation process is long and hard, so I also needed to exercise patience while I slowly gained confidence and developed my skills as an independent researcher.

**Research Topic**

In our final year of coursework, our instructors and advisors told us to choose topics we felt strongly about. If we did not feel passionate about our subject, we would not continue the gut-wrenching process of finishing it. They were right. Although I worked steadily on it a little bit each day, my initial topic gave me no pleasure. I did not eagerly read about it or write about it. When an unexpected complication arose and forced me into a new direction, I procrastinated. I dreaded even thinking about it, but when I switched topics and started all over again, I felt extremely reinvigorated about my work. I noticed a significant difference between my energy level and dedication after shifting to a topic I felt passionate about, and this phenomenon is not unique to me. Simply put, when students enjoy their research topics and the research process, they finish (Cakmak et al., 2015; Gordon, 2003). I noticed this passion and enthusiasm in the voices of peers when they described their work. Those students who were excited about their work completed their dissertations. When we feel strongly about a topic, we can
find a way to support our stance and convince the committee that our ideas are worth studying or our methods represent the most appropriate approach. We accomplish this by creating a good argument, digging through the literature, and finding support for our stance.

**Research Method**

Just as finding the right topic gave me the motivation to persevere, finding the right research method also made a great deal of difference to me. The thought of crunching numbers by conducting quantitative study gave me a headache, but my research questions would not align with any of the qualitative methods I had studied during my coursework. I greatly benefited from using an alternative or non-traditional research method, and other students might benefit from doing so as well. Some researchers believe that higher education would benefit from additional use of alternative research methods at the dissertation stage (Brookfield, 2013; Couch, 1995; Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011), which I discuss more in the section entitled “Implications for Institutions.”

According to Bruner (1986), narrative and traditional scientific methods are both “ways of knowing,” complementary and equally valuable. The contributions of one do not negate the scholarship of the other but rather expand our knowledge and offer a deeper understanding of what we study. There is enough room in the world of human science for a wide range of research goals as well as a wide range of research methods (Bochner, 2013). Gathering data and conducting statistical analysis about prediction and control are beneficial, but understanding and interpreting the data of our experiences can be beneficial as well. Stories can help us learn valuable lessons, make meaning of
difficult material, and even help us understand ourselves and those around us (Adams & Jones, 2008; Bochner, 2002; Fisher, 1984).

**Chair and Committee Selection**

Selecting the right dissertation chair and organizing a strong committee was another vital aspect of the dissertation process for me. Students often have given up on their dissertation if they have not maintained a good relationship with their advisor (Golde, 2000; Wright, 2003) and other committee members (Flynn et al., 2012; Grover, 2007; Kennedy, 2013). Fortunately, I never experienced difficulty in this area, because I found a chair with whom I communicated well and who took a strong interest in my research and my progress; however, several of my peers felt frustrated because they were not able to communicate readily with their chairs. Another issue my peers complained about was committee members arguing and offering conflicting advice. Again, I avoided this issue by carefully considering my needs before selecting each individual member, and I evaluated those needs again when considering the committee as a unit. The building process may have taken me more time for me than it took other students, but the cohesiveness of the committee benefitted me greatly during the planning and writing process.

My initial inclination when organizing and choosing committee members was to find professors I liked, people who already had a high opinion of my work and would be willing to work with me and with each other. These are reasonable steps, but they would not have been enough to help me reach the end goal of a completed dissertation. In addition to finding faculty members we can work with well and communicate with clearly, we need to make sure the committee members have experience with our subject.
(Boes, Ullery, & Milner, 1999). In my case, that meant looking for committee members with expertise in different areas of study. After finding the right topic and the right method for writing about it, my chair and I carefully considered who might be a good fit for the rest of the committee. We looked at the different topic areas of my project and thought about which individuals would be able to contribute in these different areas. First, and most difficult, was the task of finding someone knowledgeable about autoethnography. Neither my chair nor I had experience with this method of research and writing before, and no one from the University of Toledo had ever written an autoethnographic dissertation before. We were starting from the bottom and needed to find someone with experience in this method to guide us. Another vital element of building the committee was finding someone with experience dealing with grief, so we looked to the Counseling Department. The last requirement for the committee was a person steeped in narrative. The English Department was a natural place to look for help in that arena. What I ended up with was a collection of individuals with an interest in my topic as well as a specialized knowledge in a particular area of my work and not a room full of people interested in arguing with one another.

My committee members gave me more helpful and useful advice than I ever expected. Therefore, my advice to doctoral candidates is to take any criticism offered by the committee members and learn from it. It is important for candidates to remember that no one is attacking candidates personally when a draft needs revision. The advice of committee members is designed to make our dissertations better, not to prevent us from finishing. After all, it is in the best interest of the university for us to complete our degree programs, so they are only trying to help, even if it feels as though the revision process is
never-ending.

**Tenacity**

At some point in my doctoral career, I believed that the ability to conduct research and write effectively were the most important personal characteristics required to complete a dissertation. Now, having completed the process and watch others do the same, I believe the most important characteristic may be tenacity. Fear and anxiety (Strachan, Murray, & Grierson, 2004), self-criticism and self-doubt (Gordon, 2003) are all a natural part of the dissertation process. However, students with a tenacious (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Brien, 1992) or persistent (Flynn et al., 2012) attitude may be more likely to continue working despite these difficulties. Successful people do not give up hope. If they fail, they try to learn from their mistakes and keep going (Cakmak et al., 2015).

As doctoral candidates, when we work independently rather than as a part of a team, we often encounter false starts (Humphreys, 2005). We can devote a great deal of time and effort only to eventually learn that we were working in the wrong direction or interpreting a requirement of the dissertation process incorrectly. Moments like these can feel incredibly frustrating, but the students who are tenacious enough to keep trying are the ones to who finish. For example, one of my peers who was working on a quantitative dissertation made a mistake running a regression analysis. By the time she was able to meet with her advisor and learned of the error, she had already devoted a significant amount of time to writing her analysis and discussion. Since the data input had been incorrect, her interpretation of the results and analysis were also consequently incorrect. Weeks of work yielded no substantial pages to pass on to her committee. When setbacks like this occur, some students give up and lose the will to keep working. My colleague,
however, did not let this setback deter her though. Instead of sulking about it or giving up, she corrected her mistake, moved on, and finished her dissertation. Setbacks are a part of research, and we need to keep working at it if we hope to succeed.

The dissertation process requires a great deal of time and energy. Sometimes, my progress felt so slow I wanted to cry. Several of my colleagues felt similar frustrations while they struggled along as well. The middle of the dissertation journey is an easy place to quit, and I watched many people do just that. At this point, exercising patience can help us keep working (Kupfer, 2007; Marcus & Gould, 2000). One of my peers at work told me that her advisor suggested she work on the dissertation for one hour each day. It helped her make steady progress but did not force her to work on it so much at one time that she felt frustrated and quit. This method worked for her. She finished, even though she did it slowly. I applied this method to my dissertation in a similar way by using a technique I had used years earlier. My goal was to write one page a day. Some days I could finish one page while drinking my morning coffee; other days I didn’t write a full page until bedtime, but the goal of writing one short page a day helped me steadily increase my work production without feeling too overwhelmed. It helped me get through the first three chapters, as did thinking of the dissertation in smaller chunks or in terms of one chapter at a time (Dittmann, 2005). Thinking about the entire project at once felt overwhelming, but knowing my goal was to write only one page at a time and tackle one chapter at a time felt much more manageable.

Some of the frustration my cohort peers felt when working on their dissertations was the result of an inability to get in touch with their chairs, which again emphasizes the importance of carefully selecting our chair (Golde, 2000; Wright, 2003) and the rest of
the committee (Flynn et al., 2012; Grover, 2007; Kennedy, 2013). While I did not experience this exact frustration, I did experience the long process of trying to find a day and time when five people with busy schedules could meet in one room. This was frustrating, but I think exercising more patience was a helpful strategy. Even if our dissertations are the center of our lives, they will not be the center of everyone else’s universe. Our advisors and our committee members are all busy working with other students, other dissertations, and other responsibilities in their lives, and we need to be patient enough to accept that and keep working.

Maintaining a sense of gratitude also helped me feel patient enough to finish. On its own, feeling gratitude may not contribute to achieving one’s goals, but “there is an energizing and motivating quality to gratitude” (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010) that can contribute to achieving goals (Vallerand & Rousseau, 2001). Gratitude can also alleviate the symptoms of depression (Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014), a condition that affects many students working on their dissertations (Fullick, 2011). I knew that I had already benefitted from my academic program. Just being enrolled in a doctoral program helped me land my current job, so I felt that I had already been rewarded for the time, energy, and money I invested in the program. Whether I finished the dissertation or not, the doctoral program was already worthwhile for me. Believing that could have made it easier for me to quit; however, knowing I could quit at any time alleviated some of the pressure to finish, and I think that helped me persist.

Support

Support can also help doctoral candidates persevere when the dissertation work threatens to overwhelm them (Dittmann, 2005). Support can come in many forms: family
members, friends, coworkers, or cohort, but a lack of emotional support sometimes drives students to quit the dissertation before completing it (Harsch, 2008). I was lucky to have a combination of support systems available for a variety of issues. My family supported my decision to resume dissertation work, and they assumed responsibilities that I had neglected because my research or writing kept me busy. Friends met me for coffee or lunch so that I could get out of the house and away from the computer, and they offered stress relief by breaking up some of my days. Talking with members of my cohort helped as well, specifically since neither family members nor my non-academic friends understood dissertation-specific stress. My cohort peers and I could commiserate about dissertation work and offer advice to one another as well as support. Whatever form of support, the key for me was to stay connected and avoid isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006 & 2007; Harsch, 2008).

**Focus on Goals**

It is also important to stay on track (Dittmann, 2005). Rather than dwelling on the overwhelming nature of the process as we conduct research or write each day, we should think about the end goal. Why did any of the members of my cohort want to earn our Ph.D.s? Whether our goals are to become full-time faculty members at the university level, earn promotions at the administrative level, or become qualified independent researchers, our goals influence our education (Cakmak et al., 2015). When our goals clearly align with our educational paths, we are more likely to persist (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). I entered a doctoral program because my career needed a change. Although I loved the college environment and my students, I wanted to enjoy the environment in a different capacity. My goals were vague, so I could have easily given
up before graduating. To help give those goals stronger direction, my dissertation chair recommended that I visualize what I wanted out of my completed degree program. Visualizing forced me to articulate my goals in more detail and make them specific, which helped me to focus on them as a motivational tool to keep working even when the work became difficult.

Using visualization techniques can improve performance (Fulk, 2000; Howland, 2007), and when combined with goal setting, visualization can increase the likelihood of achieving goals (Munezane, 2015). It was difficult to do sometimes, but visualizing myself teaching graduate students in a traditional college setting helped keep me working. That future is within reach now. It is not just a pipe dream but a tangible possibility. I can clearly see myself chatting in an office with students, walking across campus, and enjoying summer vacations again. Teaching new classes has always been fun for me—choosing new textbooks, creating new assignments, and designing new lectures. That creative process has always been an enjoyable aspect of teaching and one that I do not experience in my current job at my present university. My daughter will not start college for another five years, so by that time, I will hopefully be able to offer her tuition assistance at a four-year college in a traditional setting. She clearly told me in no uncertain terms that she would not attend an online school, and I do not blame her one bit. I want to give her a traditional college experience, and now I think I can. Having the future within my grasp helps keep me going when I feel like quitting. Other doctoral students will have different dreams and different goals, but visualizing those specific goals may help keep students working on their dissertations.
External Commitments

The process of assessing our priorities and deciding whether the doctoral program is right for us continues during the dissertation stage. Many external commitments, such as work, family obligations, and financial responsibilities, can reduce the importance of the dissertation on our list of priorities (Tinto, 1993). Some doctoral students find new jobs or promotions that kept them too busy to work on research, but they felt happy with the direction of their careers and did not seem to mind abandoning their doctoral programs. This occurs with many doctoral candidates who chose to leave their program at the dissertation stage (Grover, 2007). Other people lost their jobs and felt too nervous about finances to focus their minds and time on research. Finances certainly contribute to some students leavenging at the dissertation stage (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Wright, 2003). Even once we reach the dissertation stage, life changes, death, birth, marriage, divorce, illness, job loss, job change, and other factors cause us to re-assess whether completing the dissertation is still the right choice.

Grief

How grieving individuals perceive their loss impacts the grief process more than the actual loss (Hibberd, 2013; Gillies & Neimayer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001). I cannot imagine a more significant loss or a more difficult transition for a parent than losing a child. It is one of the most stressful and long-lasting transitions parents will ever endure (Wing, Burge-Callaway, & Armistead, 2001). Many changes in life can be difficult, but learning to live without a child can be impossible for some people. Not everyone adapts to the loss. Even when they do, that kind of adaptation takes years (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). The process is incredibly slow and painful, there are no shortcuts, and I
do not believe the pain ever truly ends. It just feels less sharp and cuts less frequently, because at some point we are able to focus on other aspects of our lives that matter.

The loss of a loved one becomes even more distressing when the bereaved have defined themselves though the deceased (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). I had not realized how much I defined myself by my children, but I certainly experienced a loss of self after Taylor died. I did not just lose my son. I also lost a large piece of myself. If I was not a good mother, what was I?

Wheeler (2001) has reminded us that people react differently to grief; however, there are several typical responses to grief that many of us experience after a terrible loss. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross & Kesler, 2014) are all typical responses to grief, and I experienced variations of each of these emotions. I needed to give myself time to heal: time to empty my head and think of nothing, time to cry, time to avoid the world, time to feel angry without worrying about what the rest of the world thought about it, and time to learn how to live even though my son was dead.

When we grieve the loss of a loved one, the denial stage is symbolic rather than literal (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). This denial can express itself as a state of shock or numbness before we are ready to process our loss. My brain technically knew that Taylor died, but my heart would not believe it or accept it. It did not feel real. Reality felt distant, under water or a part of an alternate universe. My universe needed both of my kids in it.

When my shock began to wear off, I isolated myself from the outside world as much as possible. This was not unusual behavior. The bereaved often do not socialize unless forced to do so (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). For me, avoidance was not perpetual but a means of letting the pain of my loss trickle into my daily life little by little. Many of
my friends and acquaintances worried that I had avoided the world too much for too long, but I needed to grieve in my own way and in my own time. No one else’s time frame mattered.

Anger is a typical response after losing someone important (Faschingbauer, Zisook, & DuVaul, 1987; Sanders, Mauger, & Strong, 1985; Zisook, DuVaul, & Click, 2004). For several months, I felt angry at everything and everyone: Taylor, my husband, my dogs, myself, and the whole world. Parents feel angry because they didn’t know beforehand what was about to happen, angry at themselves for failing to help, angry at their child for dying, and then guilty for feeling angry with child (Lindqvist, Johansson, & Karlson, 2008). The anger may not be logical or rational, but the more we let ourselves feel our anger, “the more it will begin to dissipate” (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2014, p. 12). As the anger slowly diminished, we can begin to heal. For me, the anger lasted a long time, so I used exercise and writing as therapy tools to get through it.

Depression is another typical response to grief, both short-term and long-term grief (Jacobs et al., 1989; Kubler-Ross & Kesler, 2014). For me, depression wove in and out of the other stages, and there were several months when depression seemed to overpower everything else. It saturated my whole life. The depression of grief is different from typical depression. Grief’s depression is a feeling of emptiness, “what the existential philosophers call nothingness” (Klass, 2014, p. 597). Nothing seemed to matter anymore (Lindqvist, Johansson, & Karlson, 2008). My depression continued to come and go, but it remained at bay for longer stretches as time passed. Keeping busy helped as well—busy with work, with friends, and with family. I work more than I had before, and we began go places as a family more than before, not with the goal of staying busy, but also to try and appreciate life. I
consider both of these outcomes positive changes that occurred after the loss.

Although the bereaved may not actually look for a benefit in their loss, they may begin to enjoy and appreciate life more (Lykins, Sergerstrom, Averill, Evans, & Kemeny, 2007; Wheeler, 2001). Parents can acknowledge personal growth or positive change but still feel devastated over their child’s death. Their sorrow will linger even after they have accepted their loss and reconstructed their lives and identities. The world will never be as good to them as it was with their child in it (Klass, 2014).

Talking to Taylor has helped me remain connected even after his death. I still write in my grief journal, though not daily anymore. I also talk to him a lot. I talk to him about anything I would have wanted to share with him when he was alive. By making a conscious effort to connect, many bereaved can maintain relationships with their loved ones while still moving forward with their lives (Klass, 1988; Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992; Worden, 1996). Continuing bonds with the deceased is also a healthy, honest behavior, and some people find comfort in it (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Continuing to bond with the deceased can be one way that the bereaved are able to live a meaningful life again (Attig, 2011). I have not stopped loving my son just because he is dead, and I have not forgotten about him because he is not here with me anymore.

**Institutional Implications**

Grief among college students influences their overall college experience (Balk, 1997, 2001, 2008; Balk & Vesta, 1998; LaGradn, 1985, 1986; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Wrenn, 1991), including identity development and developing close relationships. Grief can influence the ability of college students to integrate both academically and socially in college. Grieving students earned significantly lower GPAs than the non-
grieving students, and they were also more likely to withdraw, drop, or be placed on academic probation (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Since GPA is a predictor of academic integration, and academic integration is a predictor of persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993), grieving college students may be at a higher risk of attrition than non-grieving students.

What did my experience do to provide guidance that could help other grieving doctoral students and students struggling with their dissertations? Based on what I went through and what I observed of my cohort peers’ experiences, I drew the following conclusions: Offering dissertation writing workshops and additional methods courses to students will help prepare them before the dissertation work begins. Dissertation counseling or support groups would offer students advice and assistance that could make the difference between students deciding to give up or deciding to keep working until they finish. Allowing, and even encouraging, alternative research methods would offer doctoral students choices that might better suit their research needs and would provide data that could not otherwise be discovered through traditional research methods. Additionally, I believe that holding Chapter Four committee meetings benefits students by offering them opportunities to receive feedback on their data gathering and analysis before discussing the entire dissertation and the final defense meetings. Doctoral students may not reach out for help on their own, so it could be helpful for faculty or staff members to reach out to students. Educating faculty, staff, and students about how to help the bereaved would offer improved insight into how best to respond to grieving students in a way that could benefit everyone involved.
Research and Writing

Research methods courses that go beyond introductory quantitative and qualitative methods should be required during the coursework phase so that students become competent in a variety of research methods. These offerings may help better prepare doctoral students for the independent research required during the dissertation and beyond, and it also provides them with exposure to a larger variety of choices to help them utilize the best method for each research project. Dissertation writing workshops could also provide students with directed guidance at the dissertation stage, potentially reducing some of the floundering I experienced on my own and watched my peers struggle through as well.

Alternative research methods, such as autoethnography and other creative analytic practices (CAP) should be offered (Brookfield, 2013; Couch, 1995; Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011). This could open up a wider range of future research opportunities and help each student find his or her individual voice as a research writer. A greater variety of research methods will yield more types of data and more thorough analysis. Additionally, some members of the scholarly community respond better to stories than to numbers (Ellis, Adams, & Bocher, 2011). I am one of these people. I can understand material presented to me through stories more clearly than I can through other methods. When reading an article, I skim over the charts and graphs, preferring to read the textual description than look at the visual images or the numbers. If the author fails to articulate the ideas fully in text and relies too heavily on the numbers to stand alone, I think to myself, why can’t we all just use our words? When listening to a presentation in which the speaker dwells on charts, I listen carefully to the words in hopes with the hope that
they will help me make sense of the images and numbers. Stories make sense to me in a way that other mediums do not, so narrative inquiry feels natural to me, and I am not alone. Seidman (1991) suggested that social narratives should replace social theories in serving as social critiques and promoting social change. These narratives should illustrate the possible outcomes of that change on both the individual and collective level.

One form of narrative has is Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN). SPN integrates research and existing literature with the author’s personal experience to create a scholarly narrative intended to elucidate broader social issues, and this method of research should be more widely promoted and used in doctoral dissertation research (Brookfield, 2013; Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011). This type of scholarship begins with the self and then shifts away from the self to the outside world through ongoing research. Writers begin by gathering preliminary research to determine a central idea and direction for the study. Then they develop the personal narrative, move into additional research to elucidate the narrative and substantiate discoveries, and finally identify general themes or professional implications (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Richardson (2000b) has referred to the combination of research and narrative as creative analytic practices (CAP), which reach beyond conventional research and writing to include alternate forms of inquiry, forms that “blur the edges between text, representation, and criticism” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 12). To truly understand the topics and phenomena we study, we need to understand more than numbers. We need to interpret experiences and explore the meaning behind the facts. Alternative research blends scholarship and personal reference, weaving together academic research with self-narrative (Chang, 2008). Although not widely used to conduct dissertation research yet, forms of SPN or CAP could offer a new
way to examine many current topics in higher education today; reveal new insights about
difficult topics, allowing researchers to explore, examine, and write in new ways,
uncovering new data and interpretations not available through other methods.

Not all universities offer a Chapter Four meeting, but I highly recommend it. This
short, informal meeting with my committee allowed me to confirm that I was working in
the right direction. The committee provided me with valuable revision suggestions and
offered excellent advice for the direction of Chapter Five before I submitted the
completed dissertation for the final defense meeting. If the Chapter Four meeting seems
like an unnecessary step, I would point out that several of my peers submitted drafts of
Chapter Four in their final defense that had not been approved by the committee. They
then needed to make substantial revisions and meet again a second time to obtain final
approval. Meeting informally with my committee for 40 minutes to discuss my progress
on Chapter Four allowed me to avoid such a devastating setback at the final defense
stage.

**Outreach**

Many studies have supported the theory that reaching out to students helps
promote retention (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; McClenney &
Waiwiole, 2005), yet many of my cohort peers felt neglected by their chairs due to
unanswered messages or non-responsive feedback. Doctoral students at the dissertation
stage need to become independent. This is a vital part of their development process, yet
my experience suggests that grieving doctoral students benefit from meaningful contact
with their chair and committee members. My chair regularly reached out and asked about
me during my separation from the university, not asking about my dissertation work but
about my personal well being. When I began to consider resuming research and working on my dissertation, memories of this contact helped assure me that she would support my return and help me finish; however, this type of outreach seems to be an anomaly.

Graduate students do not reach out for support as readily as undergraduate students do (McCarthy, Bruno, & Sherman, 2010). Even without the added complication of grief, research has suggested that graduate students are at high risk for suicide (Huan, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Silverman, Meyer, Raffel, & Pratt, 1997). When grief adds to their existing stresses, graduate students then experience an even higher risk of complicated grief (Bolen, 2011; Schoal et al., 2012). Grieving students want to talk about their loss, but peers seem uncomfortable with the topic. This leaves students in a particularly isolating environment. Secondary loss as peers react with discomfort around their grieving peers (Oltjenbruns, 1996); however, individuals who have similar shared experiences can offer the most helpful support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). These shared experiences can include grief-related support from people with similar losses. It can be comforting to talk with other people who have undergone similar experiences, because they can offer a sense of understanding that others lack. (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995).

Whether they are students or not, grieving people need social support, but our current society is not set up to support them. Relocation for school, jobs, and divorce has increased the distance separating many people from their families, so the systems that previously helped people adjust to their lives after the death of a loved one are no longer available (Gentry & Goodwin, 2015). Dissertation counseling and dissertation support groups could also offer additional help persisting instead of quitting. In cases when
doctoral students become additionally burdened with grief, simple outreach could make a significant contribution to their mental health and increase the possibility of persistence.

**Education**

Our current society does not support the grieving the way it used to, surrounding them with family and friends until they felt strong enough to accept their loss (Gentry & Goodwin, 2015). People often do not know how to respond to the grieving. When people are not directly involved with the loss themselves, they typically do not comprehend the deep pain and suffering experienced by those people involved (Walker & Balk, 2013). Our culture discourages grieving, but this discouragement adds to extra stress on top of the stress created directly by the loss of a loved one. This discouragement also creates isolation, and the isolation of mourning creates even more stress (Shilling, 1993).

Students want more information on health-related topics than they are receiving regarding grief and loss. They want to know how to manage these difficulties for themselves, and they also want to learn how to help others in distress (Wagner & Rhee, 2013). Students have indicated a willingness to help others (Davies, et al., 2000) but are not sure how to go about it. If students, faculty, and staff were better educated about how to respond to the bereaved, they would lose much of the discomfort they feel around grieving people and offer helpful support to them instead of social awkwardness.

My experiences and those of my peers attest to the need for this education and training. Grieving people do not think clearly. In my case, vague offers of “let me know if I can do anything” felt empty and frustrating rather than helpful, because the primary need of the bereaved is the return of what we lost, and no one can provide that. Since no one can give us that, we often have difficulty trying to identify anything we need.
Providing specific support, showing up with food; offering to contact students or family or write thank-you letters, or offering to take a child to the movies or meet for coffee can significantly benefit the bereaved. While many of these actions may extend beyond the relationship with the bereaved, the offer patiently listen instead of running away can also help suffering people. Grieving people need to talk about their loss to process it, and that cannot be accomplished when others feel too uncomfortable to listen. When my cohort peer, Mara, met me for coffee, she wanted me to tell her what happened but was wise enough to also suggest we not dwell on the topic for too long. We talked about that terrible day, and then she brought up other topics, such as specific issues we had discussed before and she knew that talking about these issues would distract me from my pain for a little while. These simple conversations helped me a great deal, but few people seem to be aware of how to respond to or behave with the grieving. I believe if more people knew how to respond to the bereaved, they would actively try to help.

Conclusion

The goals for this study were to share my narrative to help other struggling doctoral students cope with their pain, provide direction and encouragement for them to keep working, and offer advice to higher education faculty and staff that helps students adjust to the transitions brought on by traumatic experiences. When we articulate how sociological categories or historical processes influences our lives, we can position our personal experiences as a part of a collective story and make sense of those experiences, and we can even offer the possibility of change (Richardson, 1997). For me, the desire to complete my Ph.D. would not have been enough to keep me working after each new stress or traumatic experience. Each time a terrible event occurred in my life, I needed to
step back, examine my doctoral work, and evaluate whether the reward gained from staying in the program would still be worth the sacrifice of my time and energy along the way.

At the dissertation stage, continuing to work after experiencing terrible grief would not have been possible if not for several factors: (a) finding a topic that mattered to me on a personal level as well as on an academic level; (b) using a research method that allowed me to enjoy the process and benefit from the information gleaned from the process; and (c) working with a chair and committee members who cared about and believed in the value of my project. If I had not changed my initial topic, research method, and committee, I do not believe I would have completed my Ph.D. I needed to find purpose in what I researched and what I wrote—purpose for me and for others that transcended academic conventions and considered doctoral students in a more holistic fashion. These are only my personal conclusions. I expect that readers will draw their own conclusions based on their own experiences, perceptions, and environments.
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