***Moral Stress, Resilience & Spiritual Integration***

**Doehring Sample Assignment 4-1-2021**

**Part 1: Spiritual practices**

I do “box” breathing that combines a four-part breathing practice (inhale-hold-exhale-hold) with visualizing drawing four sides of a box. I do box breathing while listening to music (sacred choral music) that is personally meaningful. I adjust the timing of my box breathing to the tempo of the music, taking in the beauty of music with the goodness of breath.

I participate in two significant spiritual communities. On most Tuesday and Thursdays, I join a zoom meditation group under Iliff alumni William Jeavon’s leadership. William offers suggestions for a meditation theme, and then we meditate for 25 minutes. Afterwards, we talk over whether/how the theme evolved for each of us during our meditation. Often the theme stays with me during the week and helps me (1) track how I experience stress in my body and (2) use deep slow breathing to experience self-compassion.

I participate in worship at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Denver. Its choral music and liturgy connect me with my childhood spiritual experiences of the beauty of Christian music and symbols. Its progressive theology and social justice orientation co-create interpretation of the historical contexts of sacred texts, liturgy, and music and their meanings today.

These practices increase awareness of moments when I experience grief and lingering moral stress over caring for my son, Alex. When I am aware of experiencing grief, I put my hand over my heart, doing slow deep breathing and saying to myself, “I miss you, Alex.”

**Part 2: A life-changing experience**

Alex, the younger of my two sons, ended his life in June 2018 when he was 27. Many aspects of Alex’s life and death remain an ineffable mystery. What I know as a mother is that he faced extraordinary limits when depression took over, on and off for the last ten years of his life. His last six months were his worst experience of being sucked down into the pit of depression that constricted his life and made him feel so different from other people. Depression was a disability that limited his life in dramatic ways, especially in being able to take steps toward leaving home and living on his own.

Alex carried many wounds from struggles with depression. As his family, we carried invisible wounds, from harrowing times of helping him choose life and not death. Whenever depression was in the foreground, our experience of Alex narrowed to focusing on his wounds and diagnosis. It was hard to step back and see Alex in all of his complex beauty and mystery, especially throughout the first year of grieving his death.

**Part 3: The stress/emotion-based beliefs and values, and ways of coping that arose in the immediate aftermath of this experience**

**Stress-based emotions:** Shock, anguished grief, anxiety about immediate tasks related to his sudden, tragic death.

**Values**

1. ***Moral Foundations***

*Care:* For Alex’s last six months I had been trying to help him hold onto life until his depression eased. My stress responses often made me anxious and morally stressed, especially when I re-experienced childhood values of feeling overly responsible for the care of others—a role I had as child in looking after younger siblings.

*Fairness:* Alex and those with behavioral health struggles experience limitations that are hard to overcome on their own, especially in a culture that uses the moral foundation of fairness to reward people “in proportion to what they contribute, even if that guarantees unequal outcomes” (Haidt, 2012, p. 9). I experienced moral distress as a parent, in efforts to help him within social systems that disadvantage those with his struggles.

*Liberty and freedom from oppression*: During times when depression was so oppressive and isolating for Alex, his suffering overwhelmed the ‘ordinary ways’ that friends and family care for those they love. It was hard to sustain a sense of solidarity with him and each other, as his circle of family and friends. The depth of his depression threatened the web of life that held him and us.

*Loyalty:* I was raised in a family that kept emotional and psychological struggles private—even unnamed. Loyalty to family in childhood meant keeping struggles private. I struggled initially with what to say about Alex’s death in the announcements to communities, in his memorial service, and in talking and writing about his death.

*Authority*: In talking with the rector of our church about whether to have a memorial service that was based on an Episcopal liturgy, we decided that the beauty of the liturgy would provide family and community with ways to sanctify the mystery of Alex’s life and death.[[1]](#footnote-1) I struggled with the liturgy’s reliance on beliefs in resurrection, which I did not find meaningful in the immediate aftermath of tragic death. Childhood values about complying with religious authority made me struggle with whether I could question traditional Christian beliefs about resurrection, which are woven throughout funeral liturgies.

*Sanctity*: I wanted to care for Alex in death as I had cared in for him in life, by caring for the sanctity of his body, and using family and community gatherings, especially his memorial service, to cocreate meanings that connected us to the mystery of him and the mystery of life and death.

***Particular values***

*Spirituality and spiritual integration:* I struggled initially with how to find ways to connect with others and my memories of Alex in the intensity of grief, and how to search for meanings. The more I used spiritual practices that ‘held’ the intensity of my grief, the more able I was to reach out to others in spiritually meaningful ways.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Duty*: I struggled with how to fulfill work obligations while experiencing the intensity of grief.

*Self-differentiation:* I struggled with how to maintain healthy boundaries while experiencing the intensity of grief.

**Initial Beliefs:**

*Struggles with individualistic moral theologies of suffering:* Individualistic moral theologies about suffering (Nelson, 2003)—that Alex’s death was his and my fault—increased my moral stress of feeling overly responsible for Alex’s suffering and death, and my fears of being judged by those in authority (God/psychiatric experts). These beliefs came of my internalization of my mother’s Roman Catholicism, from negative experiences with priests and within Catholic school systems, and from struggles of the patriarchy of my childhood and adolescent experience of the Roman Catholic Church. These moral theologies could easily make me experience

* God as judge
* mental health as an individual, private moral duty
* failure to maintain one’s or a family member’s mental health as sin, which could lead to being shunned by one’s community.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Struggles with traditional references to the resurrection in funeral services*: Resurrection beliefs in the immediate aftermath of a tragic death were jarring. For me, such beliefs were premature reassurances that foreclosed sharing lament and anguish. My struggles with resurrection beliefs came from

* my childhood and adolescent experience of my father’s skepticism,
* my undergraduate studies in post-structural literary criticism that made me appreciate biblical texts as literary texts
* my graduate studies in biblical critical interpretation which made me interpret (1) the original ending of Mark’s gospel as representing mystery of the empty tomb and (2) the account in Acts of the Holy Spirit as a resurrection of the community/body of followers.

*Struggles with exclusive childhood meanings*: My childhood experiences of conflicts between the ‘absolute truths’ of (a) my father’s skepticism and (b) my mother’s Catholicism made me anxious about how to respect others’ beliefs in sharing my search for lifegiving beliefs and values.

*Struggles with inclusivism*: In my search for meanings, I did not want to imply that my search for meanings was either exclusively true for all of those who mourn a death like Alex’s, or inclusively true, as though my meanings would apply to all those who mourn tragic deaths like Alex’s. As Hedges notes, “The most telling critique against an inclusivist approach is that it forms the other religion into the pattern of one’s own, thereby denying its inherent integrity” (Hedges, 2010, p. 159).

**Initial Coping:**

*Work harder:* a default way of coping from the past is to work harder at tasks in which I feel competent.

*Caring for Alex:* Caring for Alex’s body and settling his financial matters as a mother could have increased my stress-related

* value of feeling solely responsible for going through what he left behind
* value of privacy: ambivalence about sharing grief arising from going through what he left behind
* moral beliefs that others would judge him
* coping by getting this done without spiritually integrating grief

*Searching for meanings* was initially challenging because of the immediate necessity of deciding how to word announcements of his death to the Iliff community, my church community, the Presbytery of Denver, and the Society for Pastoral Theology (I was scheduled to depart the morning after he died for their annual conference). This immediate search for meanings to share with others could have been life limiting if I made public meanings that I regretted later.

**Part 4:** **How was your experience of moral stress shaped by intersecting social systems, like religious sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ableism….?**

*Religious sexism:*My values of feeling solely responsible for others’ well-being along with my duty to conform to absolute religious beliefs increased moral stress. These aspects of my social identity came from trying to be a good girl raised in Catholic churches and schools; also, from my birth order as the eldest sibling who looked after my younger siblings.

*Classism:* My father’s education provided social status that moved him from a working-class childhood to professional status as a professor. His success instilled a work ethic linking hard work to achievement and financial security, which increased family judgment of those whose work did not lead to such achievements.

*Current social class:* Being a licensed psychologist was an advantage within behavioral health and legal systems, especially when my son needed emergency mental health care and legal care. These social advantages gave me access to behavioral health research, perspectives, and colleagues who helped me search for complex moral perspectives on chronic behavioral struggles and suicide.

*Racism*: Being identified as white was an enormous social advantage for both me and my son, especially in receiving medical care.

*Citizenship:* Being a US citizen gave my son access to Medicaid, which covered costs of hospitalizations and behavioral health care.

*My political and religious identity as progressive:* Being part of political and religious movements that valued care and fairness/justice helped me search for moral values that enhanced a sense of purpose when I was caring for Alex and grieving his death. Working at Iliff gave me ways to search for meanings that were complex enough to bear the weight of suffering. It would have been morally distressing to work and live among those who used moral foundations to judge behavioral health struggles and suicide.

**Part 5. Describe intentional beliefs and values**

***Emotions:*** Compassion, grief

***Spiritual practices:*** Music helped me experience goodness and grieve Alex.

**Values:**

***Moral Foundations***

*Care:* Having access to trusted others and circles of people who are not overwhelmed by moral struggles over tragic death helps me integrate my moral struggles into (a) a lifegiving search for meanings and (b) ways of being spiritually connected with Alex’s memory and others who struggle in similar ways. Spiritual integration of moral struggles helps me practice core moral foundations of spiritually caring for self in order to care for others.

*Fairness:* Theologies of disabilities help me articulate the injustices experienced by those with chronic behavioral health struggles. Rejecting a work ethic that judges one’s children by what they have achieved helps me embrace and honor the mystery of who Alex was, and not focus on the times when his chronic illness was in the foreground, when he sometimes experienced discrimination because of his limitations.

*Loyalty:* Sharing with others that Alex ended his life after struggling for many years of depression helps me experience social support. I realize that loyalty to his memory is not about keeping his struggles or suicide private; rather, it is about staying connected to the mystery of his life and death and speaking publicly about trusting grief as a process of spiritual integration.

*Liberty and freedom from oppression*: Over the years of grieving Alex’s death, I have found comfort in knowing Alex’s death freed him from the terrible oppression of depression. I now experience a sense of solidarity with those who struggle as he did, and their families who love them.

*Authority*: Voicing my struggles with resurrection beliefs in funeral liturgies helped me claim my own authority and find trusted others with whom to search for meanings. Having a rector or colleagues who honored my meaning making and shared this search with me was enormously lifegiving.

*Sanctity*: I honored the sanctity of my son’s life through caring for his body, ashes, and material possessions. For example, my family and I attended the cremation of Alex’s body. We read some of his poetry, offered prayers, and commended his body to be cremated. At the beginning of Alex’s memorial service, his brother Jordan and I carried his ashes to the front of the church.  At the end of the service, we placed his ashes in the columbarium that is part of the altar.

***Particular values***

*Seeking physical and psychological health:* I am grateful for the ways I supported Alex in finding good mental health care for him. I have used Iliff’s EAP to find a therapist specializing in complex grief.

*Spirituality and spiritual integration:* Connecting with others is enormously helpful in my search for spiritual practices and meanings that sanctify the mystery of Alex’s life. I use life-giving spiritual practices and meanings that

* connect me with beauty/goodness/love through ritual and music,
* help me search for complex contextual meanings that can bear the weight of suffering
* foster flexible ways of sharing anguish, meanings, and sources of hope

These practices facilitate spiritual wholeness (Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). Trusting grief as process of spiritual integration helps me identify how grief generates feelings of moral responsibility arising from childhood values of feeling overly responsible for others’ well-being. Spiritually connecting to the mystery of Alex and his life helps me practice values of interconnected responsibility.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Meaningful work:* Having meaningful work has been part of integrating grief, although it sometimes makes it complex to know how to practice values of self-differentiation, given the ways that intense grief can make me blur boundaries between self and others.

**Beliefs:**

*Interrogating and protesting individualistic moral theologies of suffering; moving toward radical theologies of suffering:* Like feminist theologian Susan Nelson (2003), I question a moral understanding of Alex’s suffering: “Would a good God let radical suffering so erode the human spirit that all hope is lost (and would that lost hope be justly charged to the sufferer as the sin of despair)?” (Nelson, 2003, p. 402). Over the years I have developed a more complex moral understanding of his struggles. Debbie Creamer’s theology of limits is meaningful for reflecting on Alex’s struggles with depression: “Human life is, in so many ways, an experience of limits….Instead of cementing disability as a distinct and separate category of otherness,…consider the ways in which limits are normal, unsurprising, fluid and even good” (Creamer, 2012, p. 341). “When we dismiss disability as being an exceptional and othering experience, we deny the normality of limits in all of our lives, pretend that we do not experience increasing limits as we age, and even refuse to acknowledge the future limit of death” (Creamer, 2009, p. 119).

Rejecting an individualistic moral paradigm of Alex’s suffering allows me to lament using a radical paradigm: “The paradigm of radical suffering stands in this place of suffering and incoherence, recognizes everything such evil threatens, realizes that this evil cannot be justified but must be resisted, and asks in the face of such evil, ‘Where is God?’ or ‘What kind of God... ? or ‘Is there a God at all?’” (Nelson, 2003, p. 403). I understand his genetic predisposition and struggles with depression as a tragedy: “The essential tragic experience is irreparable human loss” (Eagleton, 2003, p. 4) that often cannot be redeemed through heroic ways of coping with disability. “Tragedy stresses how we are acted upon rather than robustly enterprising, as well as what meager space for maneuver we often have available” (Eagleton, 2003, p. xvi).

*Affirming beliefs in God’s love that seeks justice and embraces outcasts:* We used the New Zealand *Book of Prayer* funeral service as the basis for our memorial service because its contemporary language fits my religious world better than the *Book of Common Prayer*. I set aside most of the references to resurrection/heaven and chose prayers and sacred texts that spoke about God’s love and the love of community as what sustains us and helps us find hope in the face of death. It was challenging to find a gospel reading focusing on God’s love for those who are lost that didn’t reference sinners. Conversations with trusted others helped me decide on the parable of the good Samaritan as the gospel reading for the memorial service.

*Affirming a God of love who suffers with us:*I am drawn to process theology’s way of describing God’s power as a relational process of becoming. “God’s power is persuasive and relational rather than unilateral; ordered by love and compassionate judgment” (Graham, 2006, pp. 11-12). A redemptive understanding of Alex’s death has become relevant in the long-term retrospective process of meaning-making. I now look back on his suffering and hold onto the horror of suffering even as I experience and reclaim the goodness of life.

*Acknowledging and lamenting the limits of our love:* Tragically, moments of hope and goodness weren’t enough to help Alex climb out of the pit of depression. I rely on religious traditions of lament in naming the limits Alex experienced

* through genetics that predisposed him to depression.
* through a society that so often measures worth in terms of accomplishments
* through lack of affordable housing, which made it so hard for Alex to leave home, or for those with mental illness to find shelter.

In the end, I lament the limits of family love, which could not safeguard Alex once he had made his decision to end his life.

*Honoring the complexity and mystery of Alex and respecting his decision to end his life:*  Whenever Alex’s limits were in the foreground, as it had been in his last six months, our experience of Alex narrowed to focusing on his wounds and diagnosis. I affirm the words spoken by my rector, Elizabeth Randall in her homily:

Alex’s experience is uniquely his own.

Some of it we know,

About some of it we can wonder,

And some of it will remain hidden.

His life, his struggles,

His ultimate choice are his.

Alex’s story belongs to him.

**Coping**

*Focus on tasks related to caring for Alex:* My immediate focus on tasks related to caring for Alex, his body, his possessions, and his finances could easily have been a private way to quickly dispense with guilt–inducing aspects of Alex’s life and death. Instead of feeling solely responsible for doing these tasks privately, I found ways to share these tasks by including immediate family in Alex’s cremation and in sorting through Alex’s belongings.

I experienced these tasks as particular ways of sharing anguish and lament. I took the time needed to fully experience what it meant to pray over Alex’s body and release it to be cremated. I went through the same process of experiencing lament over possessions that represented him, such as his cell phone. Being grounded in compassion through spiritual practices helped me lovingly care for Alex’s body, his possession, and settling his financial matters as a mother, which became a way to materially grieve bit by bit.

*Sharing anguish helps us bear it:* Sharing anguish helps us bear it, as my dear friend Larry Graham (2017, p. xiii) wrote. Confessing our limits helps us knit together those webs that hold us in love. Larry Graham’s words offer encouragement. He gently asks, “Where is your web still torn, even after your efforts to repair and heal? What are the strands in the web that remain that give *you* life and keep you going?” (Graham, 2017, p. 128).What gives us life and keeps us going? What helps us take up the strands of life and once again knit webs of love connecting us to each other? What can we carry forward from Alex’s life and death? As I said at his funeral service, I believe that we need to continue to do our best in supporting each other, especially when we come up against our limits. We need to work together to protest moral attitudes toward disabilities that make us feel like failures if we don’t heroically overcome our limits or disabilities. We need to protest the marginalization of people who are stigmatized because of their limits and disabilities. We need to do our best to protect and hold onto each other, when death seems the only way to end pain. And when our loved ones end their lives, we need to hold each other: sharing anguish, searching for meanings, and reclaiming goodness (Graham, 2017).

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1. In a qualitative study of 50 people grieving a death by suicide, Dransart (2018, p. 14) found that “Spiritual and/or religious rites were paramount in saying farewell, honoring and keeping the memory of the deceased. All the survivors participated in, and most of them contributed to organizing, religious ceremonies; even the agnostic and atheistic ones felt the need to resort to symbolic and spiritual procedures.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A qualitative study of 1301 participants bereaved by suicide, who provided 2443 ‘free’ responses about their spiritual experiences found that “[for] the overwhelming majority of participants, spiritual experiences such as a sense of presence have deep meaning and are often regarded as a positive source of healing and transformation after a suicide death” (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2018, p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a qualitative study of 50 people grieving a death by suicide, Dransart found that, even among those identifying as atheist or agnostic, “Spiritual or religious issues play an important role in the process of reconstruction for survivors, notably in meaning-making and responsibility-clarifying processes, in forging a continuing bond with the deceased and in honoring their life and memory. Nevertheless, this role is complex and can either support or make the recovery difficult (or both)” (Dransart, 2018, p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In qualitative interviews with 50 people grieving a death by suicide, Dransart (2018, p. 13) found moral struggles arising from feelings of responsibility were often part of a grief as a process of spiritual integration: “Feelings of guilt with regard to the departed can subside through the bereaved undertaking a spiritual journey which both restores the bond with the deceased spiritually and widens the understanding of death by including the notion of the other’s spiritual pathway.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)