



# Searching for Wholeness Amidst Traumatic Grief: The Role of Spiritual Practices that Reveal Compassion in Embodied, Relational, and Transcendent Ways

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Published online: 19 December 2018

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## Abstract

How can body-centered spiritual practices help those experiencing traumatic grief? Research on trauma recovery using Porges's polyvagal theory demonstrates the central role of body-centered practices in helping survivors experience safety before they can search for meanings. Research on religious coping and trauma emphasizes the search for meanings but does not pay as much attention to the role of spiritual practices. This article argues that spiritual practices revealing compassion and benevolence in embodied, relational, and transcendent ways help people in their search for meanings that are flexible, integrated, and complex enough to bear the weight of traumatic grief. The author illustrates this by describing the role of a spiritual practice in her grieving the death by suicide of her 27-year-old son. Listening to sacred choral music evoked grief and an embodied sense of being held within a relational web of love, which became a safe space to experience lament and religious struggles arising from her religiously multiple identity. The conclusion describes how intercultural, spiritually oriented care can help people find intrinsically meaningful body-aware spiritual practices that compassionately energize a collaborative search for meanings amidst traumatic grief.

**Keywords** Spiritual practices · Spiritual orienting systems · Traumatic grief · Ambiguous grief · Suicide · Religious coping · Religious and spiritual struggles · Music · Religious multiplicity

In this article, I describe the need for spiritual practices that help people experience compassion in the midst of grief involving the death of a loved one due to a traumatic event (Drescher and Foy 2010, p. 152). I draw upon research on trauma demonstrating that survivors need to find body-centered practices that help them feel safe. Research on religious coping and trauma emphasizes the role of meaning-making (Haynes et al. 2017; Park 2010, 2013; Park et al. 2017; Werdel et al. 2014; Wilt et al. 2016a, b; Wortmann and Parks 2008), but the role of spiritual practices in searching for meanings is not elaborated. This article argues that spiritual

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practices revealing compassion and benevolence in embodied, relational, and transcendent ways help people search for meanings that are flexible, integrated, and complex enough to bear the weight of suffering.

I illustrate this process by describing my own experience of grieving the death by suicide of my 27-year-old son Alex. Listening to sacred choral music evoked grief while making me feel held within a relational web of love, which became a safe space for experiencing lament and religious struggles as I searched for meanings. Simply put, this spiritual practice connected heart (the anguish of my grief) and head (my search for meanings). Working through my religious struggles helped me articulate a public contextual theology of my son's struggles with chronic mental illness and his death by suicide, notably in words I spoke at his memorial service, where I hoped that my contextual theology would be meaningful to other parents going through similar struggles and losses with their children. In concluding remarks, I describe how intercultural, spiritually oriented care can help people find intrinsically meaningful body-aware spiritual practices that compassionately energize a collaborative search for meanings amidst the religious, spiritual, and moral struggles arising from traumatic grief.

## The importance of body-centered practices in the aftermath of trauma

Traumatic stressors have their greatest initial impact physiologically. The trauma survivor's body "keeps the score" of life-threatening events in terms of its traumatic stress responses and accompanying emotions of shock, fear, guilt, shame, anger, and betrayal (van der Kolk 2014). In her seminal (1992) work *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman describes why trauma survivors need to experience safety before they can begin mourning traumatic losses and reconnecting with the ordinary goodness of life. The polyvagal theory of Stephen Porges (2011) elaborates the neurophysiology of trauma responses and how trauma survivors using body-aware practices are able to access an evolved somatic capacity to be relationally connected when they re-experience life-threatening danger (Levine 2007, 2008). "The polyvagal theory legitimates the study of age-old collective and religious practices such as communal chanting, various breathing techniques, and other methods that cause shifts in autonomic states" (van der Kolk 2011, p. xvi). Mindfulness meditation and yoga, for example, have proven to help trauma survivors identify and anticipate triggers and learn to ride out the emotional waves that accompany post-traumatic stress (van der Kolk 2011, 2014; van der Kolk et al. 2014).

Those grieving a death involving trauma often experience post-traumatic stress and emotions such as "anger, emotional numbing and detachment, feelings of a bleak/foreshortened future, and agitation that could manifest as anxiety or startle" (Drescher and Foy 2010, pp. 152–153). Building on research on the role of body-centered practices in trauma care, I propose that such practices help mourners experience compassion physiologically, emotionally, relationally, and in self-transcendent ways. I am using a broad understanding of body-centered intentional practices that help mourners (1) become more aware of how they experience traumatic stress and grief in their bodies and (2) experience an embodied sense of compassion for self and others that mediates a sense of transcendence, mystery and/or God's benevolence (for those in theistic traditions). Body-centered intentional practices have the potential to help mourners

- experience their bodies as good, even amidst the automatic stress response of traumatic grief that gives rise to emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, and shame;

- align core intentional values that they want to live out each day—values such as care for self and family, meaningful work and vocation, spirituality, justice, etc.; and
- search for complex meanings with others involving core beliefs about suffering.

Such intentional practices in many religious traditions are called spiritual,<sup>1</sup> a term often associated with theistic traditions. When used to describe all intentional practices that align one's experiences of grief with one's values and beliefs, the term spiritual may feel like an inclusivist imposition of theism on those with nontheistic, humanist, or atheist worldviews. For example, mourners may experience running as a body-aware intentional practice that connects them with goodness in the midst of grief. To describe such a practice as spiritual may not fit the beliefs of those who do not self-identify as religious or spiritual—an important consideration for those offering intercultural spiritually oriented care.

I argue that body-aware practices help mourners experience their body's response to traumatic grief as essentially good, enabling them to journey into lament and a search for life-giving meanings. Without body-centered practices, lament can feel overwhelming, with waves of grief tempting mourners to default to consumer ways of coping such as overusing social media and/or substances (e.g., food, alcohol, and drugs) to numb grief and even disassociate from their bodies. When traumatic losses involve stigma, making the mourners socially unacceptable, grief may become disenfranchised (Doka 2002). The ambiguities of traumatic loss can complicate and prolong grief (Boss 2010), especially if mourners experience moral stress and responsibility for aspects of their loved ones' suffering and/or death, as pastoral theologians writing about moral stress and injury note (Doehring 2018a; Fawson 2018; Liebert 2018; Moon 2017; Yandell 2017). Meanings and beliefs—what psychologists call appraisals—of one's traumatic grief are more likely to remain simplistic or fragmented. This article argues that spiritual practices that reveal compassion, benevolence, and goodness in embodied, relational, and transcendent ways are needed in order for meanings to become flexible, integrated, and complex enough to bear the weight of suffering.

## Spiritual orienting systems as lived theologies

How do body-centered spiritual practices help the search for meanings and spiritual wholeness? Research on religious coping with trauma uses Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, which is based on the premise that events, in and of themselves, are not inherently stressful or traumatic. It is the meanings we give to such events that make them traumatic in their immediate impact or over time (Haynes et al. 2017; Park 2010, 2013; Park et al. 2017; Werdell et al. 2014; Wilt et al. 2016a, b; Wortmann and Parks 2008). Not as much attention has been given to the role of spiritual practices in coping, such as prayer and attending worship, which are items on Pargament's widely used Religious Coping Questionnaire (RCOPE; Pargament et al. 1998). Pargament et al.'s (2006) concept of spiritual orienting systems can be used to understand how religious and spiritual meanings and coping practices lead to post-traumatic growth or decline. An orienting system "consists of habits, values, relationships, belief and personality. .. [and] contains both helpful and unhelpful attributes, resources, and burdens... Spirituality is one aspect of the general orienting system

<sup>1</sup> There is a vast literature on spiritual practices, as well as pastoral theological discussions and examples (Bass et al. 2016; Liebert 2015; McClure 2013).

[that] contributes to the individual's framework for understanding and dealing with the world" (Pargament et al. 2006, p. 130).

Pargament et al. (2006) consolidate decades of research on religious coping to name four factors that contribute to orienting systems better able to spiritually cope with traumatic stress: "well-integrated, flexible, differentiated, and benevolent" (p. 130). *Spiritual integration* is "the extent to which spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences are organized into a coherent whole. .. [e.g.,] integration of spirituality into daily life, integration of spiritual beliefs and practices, and integration of spiritual motivation and practices" (p. 130). *Flexibility* involves "the ability to change spiritual beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and coping strategies in response to changes in the environment" (p. 131), especially when faced with religious and spiritual struggles that render pre-trauma spiritual practices bankrupt of spiritual significance and the person unable to connect with goodness or God. *Spiritual differentiation* "is defined by a 'tolerance of complexity, avoidance of simplification, openness to new ideas and information, and the ability to synthesize and incorporate disparate ideas' in the spiritual realm" (p. 131). Similarly, Drescher and Foy (2010) describe the need for a sense of coherence (comprehensibility, meaningfulness, and manageability) in grieving a traumatic death (p. 153). *Benevolence* is the degree to which "God is viewed or related to in benevolent ways" for theistically oriented people (p. 131) and the degree to which one's self, humanity, and creation is experienced as benevolent and life-affirming rather than nonbenevolent and life-limiting (Pargament et al. 2016, p. 386). Having compassion for oneself and others is part of this experience of benevolence. How do Pargament et al.'s (2006) four factors—benevolence, integration, flexibility, and differentiation—shape the search for spiritual wholeness amidst the brokenness of traumatic grief?

As a pastoral theologian,<sup>2</sup> I use theological and psychological studies of traumatic grief to describe the ways that one's stress reactions and associated emotions, such as anger, fear, shame, guilt, blame, sadness, and disgust, automatically generate an orienting system or "lived theology" of values, beliefs, and ways of coping with traumatic grief (Doehring 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2018a). These lived theologies oriented around the stress of traumatic grief include embedded beliefs and values about suffering and hope—"the implicit theology that [people of faith] live out in their everyday lives"—which may or may not be congruent with their deliberative beliefs and values—"the understanding of faith that emerges from a process of carefully reflecting on embedded theological convictions" (Stone and Duke 2006, pp. 13, 16). In similar ways, sociologists of religion describe lived religions as "the ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important" (McGuire 2008, p. 4). These highly contextual and automatic orienting systems of traumatic grief are shaped by one's history, family, and culture (especially Western consumer culture).<sup>3</sup> Intersectionality helps us

<sup>2</sup> I use a pastoral theological method that begins with lived experience rather than a deductive use of sources of religious authority such as doctrine or sacred texts. In the 1920s, Anton Boisen's personal and clinical experiences of mental illness prompted him to develop a pedagogy of clinical pastoral education (CPE) that begins with what he calls "the living human document" (Boisen 1936, 1946, 1960). Boisen's legacy continued in the work of Princeton pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner (1958), Black pastoral theologians who began their pastoral theologies with the lived experience African Americans in the late 1970s (Smith 1982; Wimberly 1979), and feminist and womanist theologians who began with their lived experiences as women in the 1990s (Glaz and Moessner 1991; E. Graham 1995, 1996; Hollies 1992; Miller-McLemore 1994; Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern 1999; Watkins Ali 1999; Way 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Pastoral theologians are making use of scholarship on the social construction of emotions (McClure 2010) and particularly Cvetkovich's (2012) scholarship on cultural emotions to describe the role of neoliberalism and a market society (Helsel 2015) and consumer ways of coping, especially substance use disorders (Waters 2018).

understand how intersecting social advantages and privileges shape these embedded orienting systems (Ramsay 2017).

I teach students in intercultural spiritual care to reflect upon a personal experience—a traumatic or life-changing experience, for example—in terms of their initial stress reactions and related emotions and then on the embedded values, beliefs, and ways of coping that were generated in the event's immediate aftermath. Next, they consider how their initial or embedded orienting system was shaped by their history, family, and culture, especially in terms of intersecting social privileges and disadvantages (e.g., racism, religious sexism/heterosexism, ableism, classism, etc.). During these reflections, they use body-aware spiritual practices that foster self-compassion and help them construct intentional values and beliefs about the overwhelming event. Each week, they share how particular body-aware practices help them experience self-compassion as they remember overwhelming life events and search for meanings. These weekly exchanges demonstrate the infinite variety of such practices, which may be traditional (prayer, contemplative meditative practices, and devotional readings of sacred texts) or more particular to them or their traditions (e.g., running for those who are humanists or skeptics or earth-based practices for those in Wiccan or pagan traditions). I model this process of theological reflexivity by doing sample assignments based on my own experiences. I completed such an assignment about grieving my son's death in preparation for writing this article and teaching a course on intercultural, evidence-based, and socially just spiritual care.

My years of using this kind of assignment to teach theological reflexivity have given me qualitative data on how stress and related emotions generate lived orienting systems/theologies of values, beliefs, and ways of coping that may be life-giving or life-limiting in terms of Pargament et al.'s (2006) four factors, which I order as follows:

- an embodied, relational, and transcendent experience of *benevolence* in the form of compassion and self-compassion generated by spiritual practices and one's relational systems;
- *flexibility in coping*—especially in not automatically using consumer-oriented and avoidant ways of coping—and *flexibility in searching for meanings*, especially those arising from religious and spiritual struggles and moral stress;
- *a search for meanings* that is grounded in life-giving spiritual practices and in conversations with trusted others, especially about one's religious and spiritual struggles; and
- an ongoing search for *integration and spiritual wholeness* that aligns spiritual practices, intentional values, beliefs, and coping, especially for those with religiously multiple identities.

In teaching students how to experience this search for spiritual wholeness in their own lives and in their care of others, and in my own commitment to this search for wholeness, I have come to realize the central role of spiritual practices in fostering compassion experienced in one's body and relationships. I have also come to appreciate how often stress that generates shame, guilt, anger, and disgust (often the emotions of trauma, moral stress, and moral injury) will give rise to an initial and often embedded orienting system involving judgment of self and others (and perhaps a judging God and judging religious authorities) that may be reinforced by one's religion and culture. Spiritual orienting systems generated by what Jonathan Haidt (2002) calls negative moral emotions, such as shame, guilt, and disgust (negative because they cut people off from seeking social support), are difficult to articulate and share and may

operate outside of one's awareness. In my experience, it is the experience of compassion in spiritual practices and spiritual care conversations that reveals the shame-, fear-, and/or guilt-based initial or embedded orienting systems and also opens up a search for much more flexible and complex values and beliefs about life-changing experience. In other words, students experiencing compassion through body-centered spiritual practices and with each other in their learning circles become able to identify shame-based initial or embedded contextual orienting systems/theologies of their life-changing experience and then to articulate more complex intentional values and beliefs. I turn now to illustrating this process by describing how I relied upon the spiritual practice of listening to sacred choral music as a way to experience embodied compassion.<sup>4</sup> This practice helped me share my religious struggles, search for meanings, and co-create rituals and a memorial service that I hoped would be complex enough to bear the weight of our suffering.<sup>5</sup>

### **Traumatic grief: Grieving the death of a son who takes his life**

The younger of my two sons, Alex Jones, ended his life at the age of 27 on June 13, 2018. Many aspects of Alex's life and death remain an ineffable mystery. What I know as a mother is that Alex faced extraordinary limits when depression took over his life, on and off, over his last ten years. His last six months were his worst experience of being sucked down into the pit of depression that constricted his life, made him feel so different from other people, and made it so hard to take steps toward leaving home and living on his own. Alex carried many wounds from his struggles with depression. As his family, we carried invisible wounds from the harrowing times of helping him choose life instead of death. Whenever Alex's disability was in the foreground, as it was in his last six months, our experience of Alex narrowed to focusing on his wounds and diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> It was hard to step back and see Alex in all of his complex beauty and mystery, especially later in grieving his death and understanding why he ended his life.

<sup>4</sup> I experienced the spiritual practice of listening to sacred choral music as my central resource in grieving my son's death. I know that many other aspects of my life sustained me in this traumatic loss as well as past losses: a stable and loving marriage and family, meaningful work, a supportive church family and academic community, financial stability, and intercultural spiritual care and behavioral healthcare. Without all of these resources, my spiritual practice would not have been as effective.

<sup>5</sup> It may seem unusual and even questionable to draw explicitly on my life experience as an illustration. This tradition of using oneself as the "living human document" for theological reflection and teaching is rooted in both the clinical pastoral education movement and the work of its founder, Anton Boisen (Asquith 2010; Boisen 1936), and in the therapeutic approach in pastoral care, counseling, and theology that draws upon psychodynamic psychologies in conversation with theology to understand suffering. Understanding one's own suffering in conversation with teachers, supervisors, and colleagues is part of becoming self-differentiated and theologically empathic so that one does not impose one's beliefs, values, spiritual practices, and ways of coping—especially those formed in the crucible of suffering—on others. Theological empathy is the reflexive capacity to imagine how another's emotions generate a lived theology or orienting system that "makes sense" given their family and cultural contexts (Doehring 2018b).

<sup>6</sup> "Caregivers may think chronic illness is only of concern during the acute crisis stage surrounding diagnosis, but people continue to incur losses over the ensuing years" (Arora 2009, p. 22).

"As the focus on chronic illness shifts from background to foreground and new losses or crises occur, care seekers may need new ways of making sense of their illnesses, including new theological understandings of their experiences" (Arora 2009, p. 34).

## A spiritual practice in the midst of traumatic grief: Listening to sacred choral music

Listening to sacred choral music helped me experience self-compassion amidst grief. After Alex's death, I immersed myself in listening to sacred choral works on death as soon as I awoke each morning to the raw anguish of grief. Choral music has been a spiritual practice for me since singing in a choir in third grade, when I experienced through music a transfiguring sense of beauty that held me. This profoundly spiritual experience pierced through my childhood religious experiences of shame induced by my internalization of a judging God. I held onto music as a spiritual lifeline to beauty throughout childhood and adolescence, first by singing, and then through my adolescent years of listening to classical music. In my final year of completing an undergraduate degree in music, my enchantment with choral music led me back into the church as a church musician and then into theological studies and ministry.

In recent years, I have realized that listening to choral music is a mind-altering spiritual practice that shifts me out of a habitual anxious orientation to stress and life in general into an orientation to self and world energized by love. Accessing compassion amidst grief helps me be compassionate toward myself and Alex and helps me receive the love and support that has poured in around me. Listening to choral music about death after Alex died helped me search for meanings in integrated ways that connected my physical and emotional grief with the meanings grief had for me. This integrative process of connecting body to heart to head helped me identify my religious struggles as I began to envision a memorial service for Alex. For example, I was immediately drawn to a choral work sung by the choir Seraphic Fire that I happened to be listening to at the time of Alex's death: "Good Night, Dear Heart" by Dan Forrest. The piece incorporates words from a poem by Robert Richardson that were chosen by Mark Twain for the tombstone for his daughter Sarah, who died at age 20:

Warm summer sun, shine kindly here,  
Warm summer wind, blow softly here,  
Green sod above, lie light, lie light;  
Good night, dear heart, good night, good night.

Choosing to have this choral work sung at Alex's memorial service was the first step in beginning to plan his service. I knew this music would provide an experience of beauty that connected heart to head. Addressing aspects of nature was a way to acknowledge how, especially in his last months, Alex often wrote haiku poems that began with an image from nature. The farewell words "Good night, dear heart" expressed my love and my wish that his death was, indeed, a good night of release from struggles. I hoped that the beauty of such music would generate for the assembled congregation at Alex's memorial service a sense of home that transcends death. As pastoral theologian James Nelson (2004), writing about his struggles with alcohol addiction, said so simply, "Beauty can draw us home" (p. 168).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Pastoral theologian Robert Dykstra (personal correspondence) writes, "Aesthetic experiences, whether involving our *being held* by a religious icon, a poem, a piece of music, a work of art, or a landscape, become then a form of *déjà vu*." Dykstra uses *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (Bollas 1987) to understand such aesthetic experiences as "an existential memory: A non-representational recollection conveyed through a sense of the uncanny. Such moments feel familiar, sacred, reverential, but are fundamentally outside cognitive coherence . . . because they express that part of us where the experience of rapport with the other was the essence of life before words existed."



## Religious and spiritual struggles

### Struggles with resurrection

Beginning each day by listening to sacred choral music helped me pay compassionate attention to the struggles I experienced with beliefs about Alex's suffering and death, in particular with many traditional Christian beliefs about death used in funeral liturgies. As someone well practiced in searching for contextual meanings amidst suffering, I was surprised by the persistence of my religious struggles as I began to plan Alex's memorial service. I struggled with beliefs in resurrection that came out of a premodern worldview of heaven above/earth below and which, it seemed to me, prematurely removed the sting of death through visions of heaven. Resurrection beliefs shared in the immediate aftermath of a tragic death could easily foreclose sharing my lament and anguish.<sup>8</sup> Struggles with resurrection beliefs made me question my identity as a Christian and my relationship with God and made me want to withdraw from those who seemed to represent those resurrection beliefs. Childhood values about complying with religious authority made me question whether I could make public my search for meanings if I didn't include traditional Christian beliefs about resurrection in a memorial service mourning my son's traumatic death.

I confessed these religious struggles to my Episcopal rector, Elizabeth Randall, who was compassionate and understanding. She was open to working with me in my search for meanings as we planned Alex's memorial service. We agreed to use the New Zealand *Book of Prayer* funeral service because I found its contemporary language fit my religious worldview better than the *Book of Common Prayer*. I began creating a liturgy by setting aside most of the references to resurrection and heaven in this liturgy's statements and prayers and chose its prayers and texts about God's love and the love of community as what sustain us and help us find hope in the face of traumatic death. In retrospect, I can see how my daily spiritual practice of listening to sacred choral music helped me become more compassionate toward myself. Music helped me trust the ways I reacted to beliefs that were not meaningful at this time. Music helped me trust that others would be compassionate toward my struggles. The self-transcendent experiences fostered by music helped me become flexible in my search for meanings that were complex and integrated around my core spiritual experiences of compassion, love, and benevolence.

### Struggles with moral theologies of suffering

I also struggled with moral theologies for understanding Alex's suffering, which increased my moral stress of feeling responsible for Alex's suffering and death and my fears of being judged by those in authority (God, psychiatric experts). Like feminist theologian Susan Nelson, I question the use of moral theology to judge the complex suffering arising from mental illnesses: "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

<sup>8</sup> A redemptive understanding of Alex's death may become relevant in my long-term retrospective search for meanings. At some future time, I will likely look back and reclaim more fully the goodness of life amidst the horror of suffering. As Shelly Rambo (2017) notes, traumatic memories often continue, over time, to co-exist with resurrection beliefs.



sufferer as the sin of despair)?” (S. L. Nelson 2003, p. 402). A more insidious moral theology of mental illness can be experienced in the ways that mental health is assessed in terms of functioning that conforms to educational and occupational “successes,” increasing stigma when markers of success are not met.

Over the years, I have developed a more complex moral understanding of struggles with depression and mental illness. When used to think about collective rather than individual sin, a moral approach helps me understand how familial, social, and cultural systems contribute to the suffering of those struggling with mental illness and that we all, as a society, need to be held accountable for such suffering. Spiritual care is not just about caring for persons; it’s about social justice that challenges life-limiting and destructive systems that exacerbate suffering.<sup>9</sup> Debbie Creamer’s (2009) theology of limits is meaningful in reflecting morally on how Alex’s struggles with depression are continuous with everyone’s moral struggles with limits:

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. (p. 119)

Rejecting an individualistic moral paradigm of Alex’s suffering allowed me to lament using a radical paradigm<sup>10</sup> of suffering that “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?’” (S. L. Nelson 2003, p. 403). I understood Alex’s genetic predisposition to and struggles with mental illness as a tragedy whose essence 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). Whenever I recall an aspect of my care of Alex that makes me question whether I provided the best help I could, I remember Eagleton’s (2003) tragic perspective:

Our free actions are inherently alienable, lodging obstructively in the lives of others and ourselves, merging with the stray shards and fragments of others’ estranged actions to redound on our own heads in alien form. Indeed they would not be free actions at all without this perpetual possibility of going astray. (p. 110)

## Struggles with exclusive childhood beliefs

Some of my initial struggles with articulating a public theology in the music, prayers, readings, and words sung and spoken at Alex’s memorial service arose from my perceiving Alex’s

<sup>9</sup> LaMothe (2018) offers a complex pastoral political theology of care that examines human suffering and flourishing in light of the macro political, economic, and cultural forces and institutions that contribute to both. I find his descriptions of love and care as related but distinct helpful in understanding my love for Alex and the ways I tried to work with his behavioral health team to care for him: “Love includes care, but to care does not necessarily include love. . . . The Samaritan cared for the injured man, but I do not think he loved him. . . . Care, then, from my perspective, is a more fundamental human reality and a more fundamental political concept” (p. 30).

<sup>10</sup> “The term “radical suffering” is borrowed from Farley’s (1990) *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*. Farley defines radical suffering as suffering that destroys the human spirit and cannot be justified” (as cited in S. L. Nelson 2003, p. 399).

orienting system of values and beliefs as exclusive<sup>11</sup> (both skeptical and Buddhist)—as though, for Alex, the only truth was his Buddhist worldview and a questioning/skeptical approach to religion. I also was worried about being judged by those who might be judgmental of my religious multiplicity (I was raised within the Catholicism of my mother’s religious tradition and the skepticism of my father’s intellectual orienting system, followed by my own skepticism, my ordination and ministry within the Presbyterian church, and my worshipping in an Episcopal church that values sacred classical choral music, liturgy, and progressive theology). I imagined that I would be judged for not conforming to the Presbyterian tradition in which I am ordained and practice my ministry as a scholar, teacher, and pastoral caregiver. I realized that these struggles with envisioning Alex’s orienting system as exclusively skeptical or imagining some of my Presbyterian colleagues as judgmental of my religious multiplicity were grounded in my childhood, and my experience of my father’s skepticism and my mother’s Catholicism, which seemed to me to be irreconcilable because each orientation (skepticism and Catholicism) was supposed to be absolutely true. Imagining that Alex and others held exclusivist beliefs made me anxious initially about constructing a public theology that would respect others’ beliefs and also represent the multiplicity of my religious identity. My struggles with exclusivism made my initial search for meanings rigid. Using the spiritual practice of listening to sacred choral music fostered self-compassion, especially when I followed my heart in choosing music and then had conversations with others about the music, prayers, and readings for Alex’s memorial service. After reflection and helpful conversations, I was able to set aside my childhood experiences with exclusive beliefs and speak to the diversity of my beliefs, Alex’s beliefs, and the beliefs of those who gathered to share our grief.

Reading about religious multiplicity<sup>12</sup> (Bidwell 2018) helped me see how my religious struggles initially might arise from my being spiritually fluid: “Spiritually fluid people evoke prejudice and curiosity, uncover assumptions, and disrupt our typical labels; they undermine religious authority, complicate religious communities, and blur social categories. Their lives question ordinary assumptions about pure, static, and singular religious identities” (p. 2). I also realized that the millennial generation does not experience the same struggles with religious conformity as I do. Nor does that generation tend to hold exclusivist beliefs. Those gathering to support me were similar to me in this way and would likely find the music, prayers, readings, homily, and remembrances of Alex’s memorial service meaningful.

<sup>11</sup> A threefold typology of comparative approaches to religion as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist was first proposed by Race (1983). The category of particularism was added by Hedges (2010). Here are simple descriptions of these comparative approaches:

Exclusivism: radical discontinuity among religions (e.g., Christianity is the only truth)

Inclusivism: belief that many religious paths lead to the same end, such as the “one God” of Christianity (Prothero 2010)

Pluralism: openness to the ways that all religions may be true and may have common categories, such as symbolic worldviews, contemplative practices, moral teachings, etc., some of which may be studied using quantitative and qualitative methods in psychological and sociological studies.

Particularism: preservation of the distinctiveness and integral wholeness of particular religious traditions, often rejecting efforts to search for and measure categories of religious or spiritual phenomena

<sup>12</sup> “Religious multiplicity—the experience of being shaped by, or maintaining bonds to, more than one spiritual or religious community at the same time—is occurring more frequently in the United States and Europe. In other parts of the world, religious multiplicity has long been a norm. As more and more people transgress religious boundaries, this multiplicity becomes more visible. We increasingly encounter spiritually fluid people in public life, at school, at work, at backyard cookouts, and at the health club” (Bidwell 2018, pp. 1–2).

## Struggles with inclusivism

Another struggle in planning my son's memorial service, especially in drafting my words of remembrance, was that I did not want to imply that my search for meanings was inclusively true—as though my meanings would apply to all those who mourn tragic deaths similar to Alex's. As scholar of religious studies Paul 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” (2010, p. 159). I echo Bidwell's (2018) rejection of inclusivism: “I do not believe that God is one or that all paths reach the same mountain. Religions are not different descriptions of a single reality; they describe different (and sometimes related) realities” (p. 7). I hear Bidwell affirming respect for contextual religious truths when he asks and answers the question,

How can there be more than one ultimate reality? I'm not sure; it's a paradox. I've decided to live with that unknowing. For me, it's more important to preserve the possibility of multiplicity than to reconcile it all with a logical solution. To insist on a singular ultimate reality beyond or behind all religious expressions becomes, for me, a type of violence; it risks the erasure of real differences. (p. 7)

I wanted to represent my search for meanings as particular to me, using in this way a particularist approach to religions in the world that rejects efforts to look for and measure commonalities across religious traditions. However, a particularist approach, with its premise that religions are “monolithic cultural islands,” might not be meaningful for younger generations who are more spiritually fluid. “Religious identities always have fluid edges marked by hybridity and multiplicity” (Hedges 2010, p. 229). In my search for meanings, I didn't want to assume that my meanings were wholly particular to me. I have found the pluralist approach used in psychological research on religious coping helpful in my own self-reflections and spiritual care. This pluralist approach uses operational definitions of aspects of religion, such as religious and spiritual struggles, in order to collect quantitative data on when religion or spirituality helps or harms. As someone presenting a public contextual theology for grieving Alex's death in the interfaith context of a memorial service, I wanted to be responsible for understanding research on the ways that religion and spirituality have the potential to help or harm. I wanted to combine the particularist approach, with its respect for religious difference, and the pluralist approach used in psychological studies of how aspects that are common across religions, such as religious struggles, may harm and/or help.<sup>13</sup>

In sharing my search for meanings in a public context, I wanted to function as both a mother and a pastoral theologian who combines particularist and pluralistic approaches that respect religious differences, religious multiplicity, and spiritual fluidity. Knowing about religious and spiritual struggles and their potential for exacerbating moral injury, I wanted to use life-giving religious practices and meanings that would

- connect with beauty, compassion, and love through ritual and music;
- search for complex contextual meanings that could bear the weight of suffering;
- foster flexible ways of sharing anguish, meanings, and sources of hope; and
- facilitate spiritual wholeness and integration as persons, families and communities.

<sup>13</sup> For the complexities of how to use a particularist comparative approach to understand the pluralist approach of Pargament, see Taves (2013).

## Spiritual care conversations amidst religious struggles

As I have illustrated, I found it helpful to understand the research on religious struggles and their potential to deepen moral stress and injury and/or become a means of spiritual growth. For example, research on military moral injury and religious struggles in a sample of 155 veterans has demonstrated that religious and spiritual struggles fully mediate the relationship between potentially morally injurious events and anxiety as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (Evans et al. 2017). My religious struggles could easily have made me give in to the temptation to keep my struggles private and “go along” with traditional funeral services that used beliefs I found jarring. Without my spiritual practice, my access to compassionate spiritual care, and a community of faith that supported my search for meanings, I could easily have judged myself for my unbelief. For example, my pastoral theology colleague at Iliff, Rubén Arjona, helped me articulate my struggles to pray individually to my process theology “God of becoming” and to appreciate the importance of my participation in communal prayer within liturgies and music that span centuries of Christian traditions. Sheila Davaney, a feminist theologian and the life partner of my departed colleague Larry Graham, pointed me to the parable of the Good Samaritan as the gospel reading for the memorial service after I rejected the usual funeral gospel readings and parables about heaven, sinners, and the righteous. My rector Elizabeth Randall was respectful of my spiritually fluid religious identity. Her homily offered a public theology of God’s love that included my worldview and spoke to common values and beliefs of the religiously diverse gathering of family and friends. These spiritual care partners were part of my relational search for meanings amidst religious and spiritual struggles and helped me find ways to share anguish, belief in a loving God, and a deep respect for the mystery of Alex’s life and death.

## Sharing anguish

Pastoral theologian Larry Graham (2017) describes three interacting poles of lamentation: sharing anguish, interrogating suffering, and reinvesting in hope, especially in the goodness of life (p. 139). Knowing the need for lament, I drew upon music as a primary spiritual practice and then followed my heart on what might help me and my family share lament. I discovered that the materiality of caring for Alex’s body and his ashes offered an immediate and deeply meaningful way to share lament. I chose to attend the cremation of Alex’s body as a way to care for and release his body. My husband and I, my older son and his wife, and my brother and sister laid hands on the covering over Alex’s body. We read his poetry, offered prayers, and commended his body to be cremated. Then we bore witness as his body entered into the fire that reduced his body to ashes. I was surprised at how meaningful it was to include Alex’s ashes in his memorial service. During the first hymn of the memorial service, Alex’s brother Jordan and I carried his ashes up to the front of the church. We placed them on a table in front of the altar. At the end of the service, Jordan and I went up together, and I carried Alex’s ashes up to the altar, where the rector blessed them, and then I placed them in a drawer under the altar (the columbarium), where they will remain. I’d like to have my ashes mixed with Alex’s when the time comes.

We also made the decision to inter some of Alex’s ashes under a fig tree beside a family home on Vashon Island off of West Seattle, where Alex spent many summer

days with cousins from the age of five onwards. We used two slabs of granite. On one, we wrote this poem by Alex:

You call that art?  
This is art  
Going for a walk.

We propped the slab with the poem against the base of the tree and then laid the other slab flat, over the ashes. Earlier in the day, we had visited a family beach to collect flat sea stones. After the interment, we offered these stones to family members to write words on them and to use to build cairns, which Alex liked to do.

These ways of caring for Alex's body and incorporating his ashes into our remembrances helped us share lament as a family. Sharing anguish helps us bear it, as my dear friend Larry Graham (2017, p. xiii) wrote. I recalled a question in a reading from his (2017) book *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls* that Graham selected for me to read at his memorial service: "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?" (p. 128). These questions helped me experience the ways Alex's traumatic death both tore my web of life and made me knit it together as I searched for beliefs to carry forward. For example, I believe that the web of life needs to hold and sustain us in

- protesting moral attitudes toward disabilities that make us feel like failures if we don't heroically overcome our limits or disabilities,
- protecting each other when death seems to be the only way to end suffering, and
- sharing anguish and forgiveness when loved ones choose death to end their suffering.

## Sharing beliefs in God's love that seeks justice and embraces outcasts

My lifelong love of music, especially sacred choral music, has drawn me 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" (L. K. Graham 2006, pp. 11–12). "The alternative to omnipotence lies in the risky interactivity of relationship. In the language of process theology [God's power] 'lures' [us] collectively and individually toward self-actualization" (Keller 2008, p. 89). This process God of becoming fits my worldview and theology of tragic and ambiguous suffering. Music has become the way I express my faith and pray to God. For example, when I recite a creed during worship, I am more inclined to experience struggles with its historical exclusivism. But when I sing a creed in the congregation, I experience embodied, relational, communal, and historical ways of searching for meanings with integrity and authenticity. My experience of a God of love is mediated within the worshipping community, much as my experience of beauty was mediated as a child through the communal experience of singing.

The public theology offered through Alex's memorial service was deeply enhanced through the homily delivered by the rector, Elizabeth Randall, who used the texts I had chosen from the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 49:8b–15) and the gospel (the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25–37). Here are excerpts from her homily, used with her permission, which I found deeply comforting and meaningful:

From the words of the prophet Isaiah, Who comforted the comfortless  
In a time of terrible loss and sorrow,  
We hear of a God  
Whose will is always for renewal of life,  
Renewal of life in concrete, real terms:  
Food for the hungry,  
Freedom for prisoners,  
Healing for the sick,  
A clear path for the lost.  
And most of all,  
The prophet speaks of a God who remembers.  
Always and forever.  
As a mother would not forget her child,  
So, even more so, would God never forget  
Anything in all creation.  
It is the essence of God to be  
The one who remembers.

And from the parable of the Good Samaritan,  
What can we hear and hold today?  
There are many ways to open and enjoy a parable;  
One of them is to set ourselves inside it,  
And to invite it to come live within us.  
So I wonder,  
What happens for you,  
When you enter this story today?  
One thing I would share with you  
From my own reflections  
Is the image of Alex,  
Wounded and in pain.  
But what I see is this.  
Many people stopped to help him.  
Many people crossed the road to come alongside him.  
But only one could lift him,  
Hold and carry him,  
And bring him to a place of rest.

There is, beyond our knowing  
But intimately near,  
Palpable, elusive,  
Mysterious and vibrant,  
A more, a vastness,  
An infinite power and goodness  
That flows through all things,  
Bringing life and health,  
Making love and healing harms,

Regathering all things at their end.  
 Whether you know this more,  
 This beyond  
 As a personal God,  
 Whether you understand yourself  
 As interwoven in the web of all that is,  
 Whether you wonder  
 What or who or why is there,  
 At a time like this,  
 Faced with a loss that is at the edge of what we can bear,  
 I invite you to reach for,  
 To consider,  
 Perhaps to embrace these images and promises of scripture:

There is one who will never forget.  
 That one will remember Alex  
 Beyond time and forever.

There is one who mends, heals,  
 Restores, and makes new.  
 That one has gathered up the brokenness of Alex  
 And made him whole.

## **Honoring the complexity and mystery of Alex and respecting his decision to end his life**

I affirm these words spoken by 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.  
 But he was generous in sharing much of it,  
 And, having chosen to end his life,  
 Gracious in the way he left this world.

Let him remain as a precious, unique,  
 Irreplaceable individual.  
 And set him as one star in the vast, uncountable  
 Constellations of the human family,  
 Whose story is gathered and shared  
 Through the generations.



On the night before Alex took his life, I watched him as he sat for a long time looking out at the beauty of the sun setting on the mountains. His face was calm. He was not angry. He seemed at peace. He seemed open to the beauty of the world. He told me not to worry. I hear his words now as a blessing—his way of saying goodbye. I find solace in this haiku poem he wrote in April:

I went into the dark  
Boldly, sweetly, crazy  
It held me.

This poem frames the process I have described in this paper. My spiritual practice of listening to choral music connected me to compassion—an embodied, relational, communal, creational, and transcendent compassion that draws together flexible and authentic ways to share anguish and use religious struggles in searching for meanings with trusted others. These spiritual practices and conversations enabled me and others to co-construct a contextual public theology in Alex's memorial service.

## Conclusion

Music helped me express lament and accompanied me into the darkness of traumatic grief after the suicide of my son. I was able to go into the dark boldly and sweetly, to encounter religious struggles and the craziness of making sense of incomprehensible loss. Spiritual practices revealing embodied, relational, and transcendent compassion, benevolence, and goodness energized my process of seeking spiritual wholeness collaboratively, even in the midst of traumatic grief.

How can spiritual care help those who experience religious and spiritual struggles in the midst of traumatic grief? In this article, I have argued that the first step is to explore body-aware, intrinsically meaningful, intentional practices that help people experience traumatic grief without feeling overwhelmed. Research on religious coping can be used to assess whether, over time, such practices connect mourners with a sense of compassion, goodness, and the benevolence of God (for those in theistic traditions) (Pargament et al. 2016). Once that connection with goodness is established through the use of spiritual practices, then mourners will be more able to identify and respond to their spiritual and religious struggles with self-compassion and begin to explore these struggles with trusted others. Experienced compassionately, such struggles will prompt mourners to assess beliefs about their traumatic losses and become more differentiated from childhood and cultural beliefs and values about suffering that are no longer relevant and might even be harmful if they increase moral struggles and struggles with a judging God and/or faith community. When this search for spiritual practices and meanings with trusted others remains connected with goodness, it will likely become more differentiated, flexible, and integrated into the everyday eruptions of traumatic grief, enabling mourners to experience spiritual wholeness in the midst of brokenness.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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