Turning a Tragedy into a Tribute: A Qualitative Exploration of Creating Meaning after the Loss of a Parent

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Abstract

Death prompts us to reexamine our assumptions about life. We are affected on the physical, spiritual, and emotional levels when someone we care for dies. If we are not able to effectively cope with such loss, we may be vulnerable to exhaustion, illness, and even premature death. Coping with the death of a loved one is more than getting over the experience and moving on. The literature and research suggests that creating meaning is an important strategy in recovering from loss. The purpose of this study was to explore how men and women who are middle-class and of various race, ethnicity, and cultural and religious backgrounds who reside in New York created meaning from the death of their first parent. Participants were 18 and older, 2–5 years into the grieving process, with one living parent. This phenomenological, qualitative study used in-depth, semistructured interviews to discover if and how the participants created meaning from the death of a parent. This study was to discover whether creating meaning is a tool to remember and celebrate the lives of the participants' parents and maintain a relationship with their lost loved ones and, if so, how. Grief counselors may also benefit from the results of this study. This study found evidence that stories and other creative forms of expression increase or provide a resolution enabling one to create meaning as a result of the grief process.

Key Terms

Creating meaning. People remembering their deceased parents in ways that add value to their life and the life of their deceased parent. This may be done through artistic expressions and various other methods. By inspiring meaning, the survivor perpetuates the value and importance of his or her parent's life by living out that meaning. Living out meaning involves the courage to overcome the pain of loss while continuing to affirm inwardly that life with all its sorrows is good. One thus transcends the loss and develops a permanent link between oneself and one's deceased parent because one understands that everything is meaningful even if in a sense beyond one's understanding and that there is always tomorrow.

Creative expression. "Imaginative and inspired work through which people can find personal representation, articulation, and development. Creative expression activities that support self-expression are singing, cooking, gardening, crafts, writing, organizing a group, and volunteering, to name just a few" (Fisher & Specht, 1999, para. 99).

Deceased parent. In this research, *deceased parent* refers to a parent who has died 2–5 years before the interview. The participants had one other living parent.

Section 1. Introduction

> After the death of a loved one, we find ourselves in a place we do not know. Things are familiar, but deeply, irrevocably changed. Our families, friends, neighbors and coworkers seem to be speaking a language we no longer understand. The whole world is off-kilter. We have no balance. We feel dizzy, dazed, numb and nauseous. We are set adrift in a sea of sorrow, no longer anchored by our loved one's presence.

—Brice

1.1 Introduction the Problem

We have many significant relationships throughout our lifetime; however, the relationship with our parents is one of the most important we will ever have. When a parent dies, the event is life-changing. The death of a parent is difficult at any stage of life and may result in mental, physical, financial, and emotional trauma. Becvar (2007) suggested that creating meaning in the wake of the death of a loved one enables us to live with the pain and survive the loss.

Creating meaning is a process by which one remembers one's deceased parent in ways that add value to one's life and the memory of one's deceased parent. By creating meaning, the survivor may perpetuate the loved one's value and importance of his or her life and has a chance to live out that meaning. *Living out meaning* involves mustering the courage necessary to overcome the pain of loss while continuing to affirm inwardly that life with all its sorrows is good, and can be used to help us to become better people (Seligman & Pawelski, 2006). Through this process, one is able to transcend the loss and develop a permanent link between oneself and one's deceased parent. Because people grieve in different ways, the journey involved in creating meaning in response to a loss is unique to each person (Matthews, 2006). For others, the journey may involve other methods to cope with the loss.

According to Cimete and Kuguoglu (2006), spiritual and cultural beliefs play a significant role in how people deal with death. Each religion and culture has its own approach to dealing with loss that uniquely influences each individual, including how each person speaks, thinks, acts, and deals with death. This study examined if the participants' grief process was guided by spiritual and cultural beliefs, and whether and in what way these beliefs contributed to their ability to create meaning after the death of their parent.

1.2 Background of the Study

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross was a doctor in Switzerland who spent a lot of time both comforting and studying dying people. She noticed that grief is a process that comes in stages. Her book, *On Death and Dying* (1969), has become the definitive text on understanding the process of grief. In the text, she detailed a cycle of emotional states that occur when dealing with grief. The stages of grief include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross originally applied these stages to the people suffering from terminal illness but later expanded them to include any form of catastrophic personal loss (death, job, income).

After losing a loved one, in the stage of *denial*, one may say, "I feel fine. This can't be happening to me." Denial is usually only a temporary defense for the individual. This feeling is generally replaced by anger, which is accompanied by a heightened awareness of situations and individuals who will be left behind after death. The symptoms of this stage may include attempts to keep the body in the house, keeping possessions ready for use when the deceased returns, or keeping the room of the deceased untouched for years.

With the stage of *anger*, one might say, "Why me? It's not fair!" "How can this happen to me?" "Who is to blame?" Once in the second stage, the individual recognizes that denial cannot continue. Because of anger, the person may be very difficult to reason with due to his or her misplaced feelings of rage and envy. Any individual who symbolizes life or energy may be subject to projected resentment and jealousy.

The *bargaining* stage does not apply to a grieving person unless one is trying to bring back the deceased person. Bargaining rarely provides a sustainable solution, especially if it is a matter of life or death.

The *depression* stage is the final realization of the inevitable. At this stage, a person would say something pertaining to his or her sadness such as, "I'm so sad, why bother with anything?" "I miss my loved one, why go on?" It is not recommended to attempt to cheer up an individual who is in this stage. It is an important time for grieving that must be processed (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

The *acceptance* stage varies according to the person's situation. It is an indication that some emotional distance and objectivity have developed. People dying can enter this stage a long time before the people they leave behind, who must necessarily pass through their own individual stages of dealing with the grief. Finally, at the stage of acceptance, a person may feel that everything is going to be all right. "I have to accept this and go on with my life. That is what my parent would want me to do."

As a person moves through the stages of grief, he or she may begin a process of creating meaning of the deceased person's life and death. This research sought to understand at what stage people begin to create meaning (those who do create meaning) after the death of a parent, in addition to how and why they create meaning. For example, one person may begin creating meaning after the acceptance stage, while another may create meaning as a result of the depression stage. Creating meaning is a viable part of healthy recovery from death, helping us to grow psychologically and cope with changes (Fisher & Specht, 1999; Goff, 1992).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In 2006, Matthews completed a dissertation that showed that surviving adult daughters constructed personal meaning after the loss of both parents by using other forms of creative expression. Her phenomenological study used in-depth interviews to understand the potential for creative expression in the grief process. Creative expressions included activities such as writing, making music, dancing, artwork, and singing. Seven women, between the ages of 39 and 57, who had lost both parents and were at least 2 years into the grieving process, were interviewed. Of the seven women interviewed, six were White and one was African American.

Five themes emerged from the study: relationships, stories of loss, changes, importance of family, and, creative expression after loss. All of the participants used forms of creative expression to construct meaning after the loss of their parents (Matthews, 2006). This current study included men and women who had lost one parent, as participants of this research. They did not have the experience of losing both parents; thus, this is the first time they are experiencing this phenomenon, unlike the participants in Matthews's study (2006), who had lost both parents. This study may be useful to the human service field because it examined the unfamiliar feelings and mind-sets that one encounters when one loses a parent for the first time. Also, this study examined whether or not men create meaning as the result of the death of a parent and, if so, how. Thus, the problem statement of this study is, "The research study seeks to understand how someone who has lost a parent creates meaning and makes sense of that experience so that they can go on living their life." The study was a result of the suggestion made in Matthews's (2006) study, which was to conduct the study using men and people from other cultures as the participants.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how men and women who are middle-class and of various race, ethnicity, and cultural and religious backgrounds, who reside in New York create meaning from the death of their first parent. This was done by understanding the experience of grieving the loss of the parent by examining how one grieves. Participants were 18 and older, 2–5 years into the grieving process, with one living parent.

1.5 Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

This study adds to the understanding of how men and women who are middle-class and of various race, ethnicity, and cultural and religious backgrounds, who reside in New York create meaning from the first death of one of their parents. The participants were 18 and older. It is important for human service workers to be well versed on the dynamics of the cultures of the populations with whom they work (Jackson & López, 1999). This research also may provide insight into the various cultures of these participants by contributing information on how they create meaning from the loss of a parent. Grief counselors may also benefit from the results of this study. This study provides evidence that stories and other creative forms of expressions increase or provide a resolution for the process of creating meaning as a result of the grief process.

This research is important because experiencing the death of a parent can have negative effects on a surviving child at any stage of life. It is possible that those who have experienced the death of a parent will benefit from this research because it documents positive ways of dealing with death. The bereaved may find the meaning-making tools helpful in their own recovery. This research will bridge a gap in literature by supplying information on (a) how Positive Psychology is useful to people who are grieving the loss of a parent, (b) how people experience the death of a parent, and (c) how they create meaning in response to the death of a parent.

1.6 Nature of the Study

This study is a phenomenological, qualitative study.

The phenomenological approach to the study was used to develop understanding of the experiences and feelings of the participants who have experienced the loss of a parent. This is an appropriate methodology for the study because, according to Creswell (1998), a research question that seeks to understand how individuals experience a common phenomenon can best be addressed using a phenomenological research design. Such studies capture the essence of that experience by understanding the meaning the participants ascribe to the experience.

Section 2. Literature Review

> Every loss is a challenge to grow. Growth requires change, and change is often painful. When a loved one dies, everything changes, including you. Nothing is ever the same again. Loss creates an emotional wound, but it is an injury that can be healed. With help and understanding, the pain of loss can be transformed into a challenging new beginning, and your grief experience can become a healthy, positive and healing process.

—Tousley

2.1 Positive Psychology

"Positive Psychology is about the meaning of those happy and unhappy moments, the tapestry they weave and the strengths and virtues they display that make up the quality of life" (Seligman, 2002, p. 99). Positive Psychology seeks to understand the resilience of people and how they thrive and flourish, even in the face of the challenges and tragedies that are part of life (Resnick & Rosenheck, 2008; Seligman & Pawelski, 2006). Positive Psychology asks questions such as how people find something positive in a tragedy, as seen in the death of martyrs and heroes. How do people rebuild and become even stronger when a disaster strikes, as seen in the 9/11 tragedy, or when communities and countries unite to assist those who have suffered natural disasters, such as the victims of the Haiti disaster? This study sought to explore possible answers to such questions as these. It did so by understanding how Positive Psychology is used to assist people in creating meaning after the loss of a parent.

Since at least the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the "good life" has been the subject of philosophical and religious inquiry. The Positive Psychology Center (2008) stated that the roots of Positive Psychology reach back for decades in the psychology field. Positive Psychology is aware of and acknowledges a debt to humanistic psychology, which was popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and has many followers to this day. Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, among others, stated that people strive to make the most of their potential in a process called self-actualization, which can be enabled by a variety of conditions (Seligman & Pawelski, 2006). Humanistic psychology, founded by Rogers (1951) and Maslow (1970), prevention programs based on the wellness philosophies of Albee (1982) and Cowen (1994), work by Bandura (1989) and others on self-efficacy, research on gifted individuals (Winner, 2000), and broader conceptions of intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985) all lay a foundation for Positive Psychology. Jahoda (1958) made the case for understanding well-being in its own right, not simply as the absence of disorder or distress.

2.1.1 Positive Psychology is Different from Positive Thinking

Positive Psychology is often confused with positive thinking. According to the Positive Psychology Center (2008), Positive Psychology is different from positive thinking in two significant ways. First, Positive Psychology is grounded in empirical and replicable scientific study, whereas positive thinking is not. Second, positive thinking is a mind-set that dominates one's approach to life. Positive Psychology is not. Positive Psychology recognizes that in spite of the advantages of positive thinking, there are times when negative or realistic thinking is appropriate and unavoidable. This is the case when grieving the loss of a parent as such an experience is likely to trigger profoundly negative emotions. Given that, understanding how a person still experiences positive emotions and the place that these emotions have in one's coping with one's loss was explored in this study.

Positive Psychology is the study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals, groups, and communities to thrive. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed the *Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook*, which classifies strengths and virtues as having the following characteristics: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. According to the Positive Psychological Center (2008), the possession of these human qualities assists a person's resiliency.

Positive Psychology focuses on strengths as well as weaknesses (Schultz & Schultz, 2004; Seligman & Pawelski, 2006). Positive Psychology's premise is that human goodness and excellence are just as real as distress and disorder, that life entails more than the undoing of problems. Positive Psychology seeks to build on the best things in life as well as fixing what is wrong. The focus of traditional psychology on remedying human problems should certainly not be abandoned. Human suffering demands scientifically informed solutions. However, suffering and well-being are equally both part of the human condition, and psychologists should be equally concerned with both.

Positive Psychology is more than about making people happy. Happiness is only a small part of Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Seligman and Pawelski (2006) defined Positive Psychology using three overlapping areas of research: "the pleasant life or positive emotions" (p. 3), "the good life or positive traits" (p. 7) and "the meaningful life or positive institutions" (p. 272).

2.1.1.1The Pleasant Life

Research on the "pleasant life" (Seligman, 2002, p. 15; also known as positive emotions or life of enjoyment) is focused on an individual's experiences with positive feelings. The pleasant life also demonstrates how positive emotions are expressed when people participate in hobbies and other forms of entertainment. This element of Positive Psychology relates to this study because positive emotions will be experienced, on some level, by people who transcend the loss of a parent by creating meaning.

"It is natural, however, that people who are grieving will continue to experience feelings of sadness" (Seligman, 2002, p. 10). By examining how people use positive emotions to live a pleasant life, even when grieving, one can observe if the same attribute of Positive Psychology is used to transcend loss by creating meaning (Seligman, 2002). For example, the participants of this study may experience positive emotions by looking at pictures of their deceased loved one. They may create meaning in this act by understanding that the memory and love of their lost parent will continue to be with them even though their parent is not physically present.

2.1.1.1 .1 The Good Life

Seligman and Pawelski (2006) stated that the study of the "good life" (p. 8; also known as positive traits or the life of engagement) investigates the relationship between the individual's enthusiasms for the tasks one does in one's everyday life. However, in this study, the participants may create meaning in tasks other than the ones they do daily. For example, one may find that one creates meaning as one conducts certain tasks that foster positive memories of one's deceased parent. Such tasks may include compiling a scrapbook of the deceased parent's life, writing a journal of memories, or composing a piece of music in honor of the deceased parent. Such tasks have aided people to create meaning as a result of the loss of their parents (Matthews, 2006).

2.1.1.1.1.1 The Meaningful Life

Research on the meaningful life evaluates how a person experiences meaning by interacting in a larger group, such as a family, coworkers, religious organization, and the community (Seligman & Pawelski, 2006). When studying the "meaningful life" (Seligman & Pawelski, 2006, p. 8), one observes the level of people's participation, contribution, and sense of purpose while partaking in the larger group. An individual's sense of belonging, well-being, and sense of purpose was investigated in this research to determine whether participating in groups such as church congregations and bereavement support assists in creating meaning from the death of one's parent (Kennedy, 2007). Maslow (1943), in his hierarchy of needs, noted that when a person uses one's skills and abilities to help society, without expecting anything in return, a person is operating at one's highest level as a human being. This is called *self-actualization*. This element of Positive Psychology (the meaningful life) relates to this study as a person may transcend loss by creating meaning by finding fulfillment and purpose in life. It helps in perpetuating the essence of the life of one's deceased parent.

2.2 The Gift of Gratitude

Gratitude may be a "magic ingredient" in physical and psychological well being.

—Emmons

Gratitude is not a virtue that many people possess, especially during loss. We are quick to lament, become sad, and complain instead of being grateful for the positive things and people in our lives. We focus on the areas in our lives that are not as perfect as we would like them to be, instead of concentrating on the parts of our lives that are positive and gifts that assist us in living a lovely life. Perspective is everything, and gratitude is a useful tool to achieve and maintain balance, in addition to being of assistance at a time of loss (Seligman & Pawelski, 2006).

Emmons (2007), a leading scholar in positive psychology, is a trailblazer in the study of gratitude and how gratitude positively impacts the capacity to handle loss and various challenges of life. Gratitude serves an important purpose because it shifts our focus off of ourselves when overwhelmed by our own emotions (Emmons, 2007). When bereaved people can experience being grateful for the lives of their deceased parents and the impact the lives of the deceased made on others, they are better able to accept the death and move on. This research sought to discover whether gratitude has played a role in the participants creating meaning after the loss of a parent and, if so, how.

Research has demonstrated the strong role that gratitude plays with heart attack victims. Those who placed the blame of the heart attack on other people or circumstances were more likely to suffer another heart attack within the next 8 years (Affleck, 2002). However, heart attack victims who created meaning in their loss of health by becoming more appreciative of life and feeling gratitude for having survived had a reduced risk for a subsequent attack (Affleck, 2002).

A study conducted at the University of Pittsburgh found that heart transplant patients, who found thankfulness and appreciation in the initial loss of their health, experienced improved physical and mental health at 1 year posttransplant over those who did not (Affleck, 2002). This information demonstrates how eliciting positive emotions even in very difficult circumstances can help people transcend those circumstances. Thus, the capacity for the bereaved to move their gaze from the pain of their loss to the gift of the life of their deceased parent is potentially profound (Affleck, 2002).

Gratitude of their lived experiences (which include loss) may assist the participants of this study in achieving harmony and balance between the external environment and their inner experience and help them to create meaning from the loss of their parents. When people are passionately engaged in life, they experience complete contentment, intense focus, loss of awareness of time, serenity, sense of oneness with the cosmos, transcendence of self, excitement, high energy, joy, and, at times, anger, all of which are important elements of Positive Psychology and positive emotions (Abrams, 2006). This study observed whether feelings of gratitude were experienced after the death of a parent and how these feeling assisted the participants in creating meaning.

When a person uses the gift of gratitude as one experiences a loss of a spouse, there are usually seven themes that emerge: (a) it is a very lonesome time, (b) it is a different life, (c) one has to make up one's mind that one is going to go on, (e) spiritual issues permeate life without the spouse, (f) feelings of gratitude for the past and present, and (g) health or abilities changed after the death of the spouse (Martin, 2007). Often, people are grateful for the marriage they shared with their spouses, which allowed them to be better individuals (Martin, 2007). This element of gratitude also encourages them to enjoy the relationships with other family member in order to make the most of their lives without their spouses. This study sought to know if the participants experienced any of the aforementioned themes as it relates to their deceased parent and how.

The aforementioned studies focused on the experience of gratitude as a result of a death of a close loved one and the loss of health. The research reflects how participants of the studies understood the importance of gratitude and its benefits in dealing with death and loss in general. The results of the research studies by Abrams (2006) and Martin (2007) can be applied to this study. Both studies dealt with loss and creating meaning of that loss by the use of gratitude. The principles of gratitude are useful, and were useful in conducting this study. The researcher observed if the participants use gratitude to create meaning. Gratitude is an important concept because it causes individuals to look at the relationship they had with their deceased loved ones and discover a reason to be grateful for their time with the deceased.

Section 3. Methodology

Don't go abroad. Truth dwells inside man.
—Augustine

Augustine's quotation describes the spirit of phenomenological, qualitative research, the methodology of this study. The phenomenological approach potentially enriches the experience by bringing out aspects of an experience that may otherwise be neglected (Spiegelberg, 1994). In other words, important aspects of human experience can only be revealed in the telling of them.

3.1 Research Design Strategy

The researcher conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. In a phenomenological, qualitative study, gathering information centers on conducting in-depth, semistructured interviews with open-ended questions with 8–12 participants (Tesch, 1990). According to Polkinghorne (1989), information can also be gathered from descriptions of the experience by using sources such as novels, poems, paintings, and other forms of creative art in order to assist the participants in describing their experiences (Creswell, 1998). For example, participants in this study may have certain creative artwork, writing, or music that reminds them of their deceased parent or is a source of comfort during their grieving. The participants may have done this kind of work during their time of bereavement. These artifacts may help them describe their feelings about the experience.

The researcher asked participants how the artwork, writing, or song reminds them of their deceased parent and why. In the case of a song, the researcher asked the participant what specific lyrics remind them of their parent and whether or not the words add to their creating meaning from the loss of their parent. The researcher used a tape recorder during the in-depth, semistructured interviews to collect the data.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Because the interview questions were open-ended, the participants volunteered much of the specific information required without being asked. If they had not, the instrument served as a guide to bring forth more information. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5–2 hours. Interviews were tape recorded. The tapes were then transcribed by the researcher after carefully listening to them.

Section 4. Data Analysis and Findings

> Every man's life ends the same way. It is only the details of how he lived and how he died that distinguish one man from another.

—Hemingway

4.1 Demographic Data

Eight participants were chosen for this research study. They all scored lower than 15 on the Beck's Depression Inventory (Beck, 2003). The participants reflected the population of the New York community from which participants were chosen. There were four women and four men. A pseudonym was given to each participant.

Table 1. Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Marital status	Ethnicity	Age
Kim	Single	Chinese	21
Sam	Married	Indian	35
Ernie	Single	African American	51
Anthony	Single	White	28
Willie	Single	Hispanic	44
Angie	Married	African American	41
Rose	Married	Jewish	56
Tina	Married	Caribbean American	30

4.2 Data Analysis

Giorgi et al.'s (1985) empirical phenomenological model was used to analyze the data. Giorgi et al.'s (1985) methodology for data analysis consists of five essential steps, which the researcher followed carefully. First, the data collected from the audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and read many times and analyzed in depth to discover possible themes, patterns, and categories.

Second, the language of each participant was reviewed and considered to understand the psychological essence of the experience for the participant. Third, the information given by the study participant was transformed into more psychologically scientific language. Fourth, the information presented by the study participant was synthesized and transformed into a meaningful statement that reflected the participant's experience of the loss of a parent. Finally, the synthesized statements of each of the participants were combined.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) stated, "Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what to tell others" (p. 157). Coding categories were developed after analyzing the emergent themes of the interviews. Strategies for developing coding categories included examining transcripts for patterns and topics. This step was conducted between Steps 3 and 5 in Giorgi et al.'s (1985) methodology. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) stated that coding categories include perspectives held by subjects, subjects' ways of thinking about people and objects, activity codes, and relationship and social structure codes. The aforementioned techniques were used to uncover the essences of the participants' experiences. For example, the answers given from each interview were coded by assigning a number to each response. Giorgi (1997) further stated that it is important that qualitative researchers adopt a holistic orientation to the application of a phenomenological research design. All data were reviewed and considered by the researcher prior to preparation of any conclusions about commonality of experience through a process of final analysis.

This qualitative research study, using a phenomenological design, aimed to describe in the words of eight participants their experience of the loss of their first parent and how meaning was derived. In section 4, the demographic data, research population, data collection procedure, research questions, and data analysis were explained. Members of seven ethnic groups were represented in this study: Chinese, Indian, African American, White, Hispanic, Jewish, and Caribbean. Four men and four women comprised the participants. Each interview's textual description was written in narrative form. The themes from the data were presented answering the main research question, "How does one create meaning from the loss of a parent?" The results of the interviews identified various ways people of different cultures in one New York community create meaning from the loss of a parent. The themes that emerged from the interviews give a better understanding of how culture, religion, relationships, and education can assist in creating meaning. The main themes were health, religion, gratitude, education, changing roles, and storytelling. The themes reflect these aspects in the lives of this population and their importance in society and the human service field. None of the participants used the stages of grief to create meaning, nor did any participant grieve in any unusual way. No participant had strong reactions to the questions. They all seemed to enjoy answering the questions because it gave them a chance to process their feelings. However, as mentioned earlier, these themes do not reflect the ways all people in the aforementioned populations create meaning from the loss of a parent, but they do provide insight on how meaning is created by members of seven populations.

The results, conclusions, and recommendations are discussed in the following section. Section 5 provides more information regarding the implications of the themes as it relates to Positive Psychology and the human service field at large.

Section 5. Results, Conclusions, Recommendations

"Every story has an ending, but in life, every ending is just a new beginning" (Author Unknown). This quote expresses the importance of creating meaning from loss. It shows how one can make the best of a situation, even one as difficult as death. The final section of this study allows the researcher to evaluate her own work and provide personal insight into and interpretation of the study's results. This section accomplishes two objectives: First, it interprets the study's results in light of existing findings in the field, and second, it recommends directions for future study.

5.1 Summary and Discussion of Results

This study adds to the understanding of how men and women who are middle-class and of various race, ethnicity, and cultural and religious backgrounds who reside in New York create meaning from the first death of one of their parents. The participants were 18 and older. Grief counselors may also benefit from the result of this study by understanding how creating meaning can assist in processing the loss of a loved one in a healthy manner.

This study demonstrates evidence that stories and other creative forms of expressions increase or provide a resolution for the process of creating meaning because of the grief process. This research is important because experiencing the death of a parent can have negative effects on a surviving child at any stage of life. It is possible that those who have experienced the death of a parent will benefit from this research because it documents positive ways of dealing with death. The bereaved may find the ways to create meaning, such as the ones used in this study, helpful in their own recovery. This research bridges a gap in literature by supplying information on (a) how Positive Psychology is useful to people who are grieving the loss of a parent, (b) how people experience the death of a parent, and (c) how they create meaning in response to the death of a parent. The researcher reviewed literature that concentrated on five areas: (a) grief and bereavement, (b) coping strategies to assist in dealing with loss, (c) Positive Psychology, (d) the gift of gratitude, and (e) the creative process of making meaning in response to adversity.

The primary research question of this study was, "How does one create meaning from the loss of a parent?" Six themes emerged from participants sharing their experiences: health, religion, gratitude, education, changing roles, and storytelling. Changing roles and storytelling were themes that were also observed in Matthews's (2006) study.

Five themes emerged from Matthews's (2006) study: relationships, stories of loss, changes, importance of family, and, creative expression after loss. All of the participants used creative expression to construct meaning after the loss of their parents (Matthews, 2006). This current study included men and women who had lost one parent, as participants of this research. They did not have the experience of losing both parents; thus, this is the first time they are experiencing this phenomenon, unlike the participants in Matthews's study (2006), who had lost both parents. This study is useful to the human service field because it examined the unfamiliar feelings and mind-sets that one encounters when one loses a parent for the first time. Also, this study has the benefit of examining whether or not men create meaning as the result of the death of a parent and, if so, how. Thus, the problem statement of this study was, "The research study seeks to understand how someone who has lost a parent creates meaning and makes sense of that experience so that they can go on living their life." The study came about because of the suggestion Matthews (2006) made in her study, which was to conduct the study using men and people from other cultures as the participants. This study shows that there was no significant different in the ways men and women create meaning. The major differences among the participants were reflected in the cultural aspects of their lives.

5.1.1 Discussion of the Results

The results of the study are that men who are middle-class and of various race, ethnicity, and cultural and religious backgrounds residing in New York create meaning from the death of their first parent using six themes, as mentioned previously. Matthews's (2006) study demonstrated five themes. In both studies, the participants used changing roles and storytelling to create meaning. Only one participant of this study created meaning from creative expression, by writing poetry. This participant said she found great comfort in this tool. She stated that this was a hobby long before the death of her parent. It is interesting that this was not a tool used to create meaning by any of the other participants of this study, particularly by the ones who are in school.

This study did not reflect the other themes of Matthews's (2006) study: relationships and importance of family. Matthews's (2006) study did not reflect the themes of health, religion, gratitude, and education as this study did. It is possible that a theme such as education was used in this study because the two participants who used this theme were younger than the participants of Matthews's (2006) study. They were 21 and 30, still at the age when one pursues a career. Matthews's (2006) participants consisted of women between the ages of 39 and 57. Matthews's (2006) themes of relationships and importance of family were used by the participants of this study in creating meaning. The older participants of Matthews's (2006) study may have placed great importance on the relationships in their lives, as many older people do, and used this element to create meaning.

Religion was a prominent theme in this study but not in Matthews's (2006) study. There are many churches, temples, and religious institutions in this study's New York community. This may explain the frequent use of religion as a theme in creating meaning in this study. According to Cimete and Kuguoglu (2006), spiritual and cultural beliefs play a significant role in how people deal with death. Each religion and culture has its own approach to dealing with loss that uniquely influences each individual, including how each person speaks, thinks, acts, and deals with death.

This study examined the various ways the participants' grief process included spiritual and cultural beliefs, and how they contributed to their experiences of creating meaning. This was seen in the accounts of four participants.

This study is unique in that it also focused on the experiences of grieving men. It was demonstrated that men do create meaning from the loss of a parent. This study involved four men who created meaning in much the same way the women of this study and Matthews's (2006) study did. The men of this study used the themes seen in Matthews's (2006) study: storytelling and changing roles.

Matthews's (2006) study used only two ethnicities: six White women and one African American woman. As per Matthews's (2006) suggestion, this current study demonstrated how the participants used aspects of their culture and ethnicity to create meaning from the loss of a parent. This study showed how members of six ethnic groups created meaning. As stated earlier, the participants consisted of one Chinese woman, one Indian man, an African American man and woman, a White man, a Jewish woman, and a Caribbean American woman.

5.1.1.1 Conclusions

Creating meaning from the loss of a parent is a process by which people remember their deceased parents in ways that add value to their lives and the lives of their deceased parents. By creating meaning, the survivor may perpetuate the loved one's value and importance of life and has a chance to live out that meaning. Through this process, one is able to transcend the loss and develop a permanent link between oneself and one's deceased parent. As stated earlier, living out meaning involves mustering the courage necessary to overcome the pain of loss while continuing to affirm inwardly that life with all its sorrows is good and can be used to help us to become better people (Seligman & Pawelski, 2006). Seligman is a pivotal figure in the field of Positive Psychology, having challenged others to embrace research related to Positive Psychology. This was a paradigm shift for psychologists who traditionally focused on mental health deficits and problems to mental health, strengths, and the ways that people can thrive.

The results of the study showed that people can use these virtues to assist in the grief process and create meaning. For example, the Positive Psychology principles of wisdom and knowledge were used by all of the participants of this study. They had the wisdom and knowledge to understand what they needed to cope with the loss of their parent in a healthy manner. Their wisdom and knowledge gave them various ways of coping constructively, as they created meaning. Courage was used as the participants of this study overcame fear and found the courage to create meaning from the loss of their parents.

Humanity was used by Anthony, who was not very close to his deceased father; he created meaning by being a support to his family. As the oldest male in the family, he became the patriarch. He stated that he made an effort not to speak ill of his father but instead take his father's position as the head of the family and show great love and compassion to the other members of the family who were grieving. The principle of humanity was also helpful in Anthony's ability to create meaning from the death of his father. He had the inner peace to forgive his father for not being the "model dad." Instead of holding on to resentment, his inner peace allowed him to organize gatherings on Father's Day and honor his father with his younger siblings. He stated, "It is not fair for me to be resentful when so many other people loved him."

All the participants used temperance. Instead of doing activities that are self-destructive in an effort to ameliorate the pain resulting from the loss, they used the principles of temperance and self-control by finding other, positive ways to work through their grief. The Positive Psychology principle of transcendence means climbing or going beyond some philosophical concept or limit. Transcending the negative effects of death by choosing to make the process of mourning a healing one requires all the virtues of Positive Psychology. This is the core of creating meaning. This study showed how Positive Psychology was demonstrated as it relates to this objective, the human capacity to create order and meaning in response to the loss of a parent.

> A man's dying is more the survivors' affair than his own.
> —Thomas Mann

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