

ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

SACRED OR SCARED:POST DEATH ENCOUNTERS AND THE SURVIVING  
SPOUSE

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN PASTORAL  
PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELLING

Edmonton, Alberta  
Convocation: October 2011

## DEDICATION

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience”

Teilhard de Chardin

In loving memory of Hugh Arnold Campbell (1953-1982)

“To know the rose is to know God, to know the faded rose will bloom again is to know eternity”

Lovingly dedicated to my husband Laurence, and our children Nicole and Thomas who have blessed my life for these past twenty years. A special thank you to Nicole for all the technological support.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In gratitude to my supervisor Fran Hare for her hospitality, wisdom, guidance and encouragement during this entire thesis process.

Fran, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

A heartfelt thank you to Orchid, Lilac, Bird of Paradise and Sunflower. Your willingness to share your stories made this thesis possible. I cherish our friendship.

In gratitude to my family and friends who supported me throughout the MAPPC journey with prayers, kind deeds and encouraging words. “I thank God upon every remembrance of you.” Philippians, 1v3

Finally to God, Jesus, Blessed Mother Mary and all the Saints and Angels for the Divine inspiration in the writing of this thesis.

## Abstract

In the past ten years, an exciting field of research investigating and documenting post-death communication has emerged. Post-Death or After-Death Communication (ADC) is described as a spiritual experience that occurs when a person is contacted directly and spontaneously by a loved one who has died. Contact varies with each individual and can range from feeling the presence of the deceased to full-blown sensory experiences where the bereaved reports seeing or hearing the deceased. The literature supports that there are at least twelve types of encounters recorded. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the impact of post-death encounters on the surviving spouse. The effect of post-death encounters on the grieving process, spirituality, and belief in the afterlife were also explored. Using the heuristic method of inquiry, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with four widows who believed their husbands had contacted them after their death. These encounters were considered sacred by each coresearcher and had a healing effect on the grieving process for each participant. The knowledge that their beloved was assisting, guiding and supporting them even in death, and the realization that they were not alone, was very comforting. Each is ready to move forward, and although open to the possibility of forming new relationships, they will continue to have a bond with their beloved. In conclusion, counselors should be educated about post-death encounters so that the bereaved can share their experiences in a nonjudgmental, understanding and supportive environment.

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We would have you be clear about those who sleep in death, brothers; otherwise you might yield to grief, like those who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those also who have fallen asleep believing in him.

1 Thessalonians 4, 13-14



Death is simply a shedding of the physical body like the butterfly shedding its cocoon. It is a transition to a higher state of consciousness where you continue to perceive, to understand, to laugh, and to be able to grow.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. (On Life After-death, 2008, p.26)

## Introduction

Historically speaking, research indicating that bereaved individuals often report seeing, hearing, or feeling the presence of the deceased is not a new phenomenon (Kalish & Reynolds, 1973; Haraldsson, 1988; Datson & Marwit, 1997). As early as 1914 Rudolf Steiner (1990) was lecturing on the spiritual relationships the living can have with those who have crossed over the threshold between life and death. In the last ten years an inspiring new body of literature revealing life after-death communication, also recorded as ADC, and post-death encounters, referred as PDEs, has emerged. (Moody and Arcangel, 2001; Piper, 2004; Bence, 2008; Lund, 2009; Varghese, 2010). This phenomenon has ranged from sensing the presence of the deceased as a feeling of being watched, to full blown sensory experiences that encapsulate visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory systems. According to Drewry, (2003) published research has established that purported post-death communications experienced by bereaved individuals are common, natural and non-pathological. (p.2)

So what is it like to experience communication from a spouse/life partner after his/her death? Does the surviving spouse view the post-death communication from his or her deceased partner as sacred, a holy moment and possibly an affirmation of their eternal love for each other? Is the living partner scared, afraid to accept that the deceased partner is trying to communicate with him or her after his death? Maybe the surviving spouse thinks he or she is imagining things and possibly going crazy. Did the relationship as a couple contribute in some way to how these encounters were received and accepted? What effect does this post-death encounter (PDE) have on the grieving process of the

surviving spouse? How has this experience impacted the bereaved person's belief system? What role did spirituality play in making sense of the PDE?

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the nature and the effects of post-death encounters (PDEs), also referred to as after death communication (ADC) on the surviving spouse. For the purpose of this inquiry, the definition of a PDE is 'a spontaneous experience of communication with a deceased spouse,' where 'spontaneous' means developing without apparent external cause, inducement or plan. It excludes deceased entities encountered using mediums, psychics, hypnosis or through channeling. 'Experience' means something personally encountered, undergone or lived through' (internet source adapted from the After-death Communication Research Foundation website, March, 2010)



## The Researcher's Personal Experience of Post-Death Encounters

It is with a renewed and personal interest that I wish to explore these and other questions surrounding the experience of PDE(s) and the surviving spouse. Nearly thirty years ago, and shortly after our Sacrament of Marriage, my beloved Arnold died tragically in an industrial accident. Two weeks earlier an ectopic pregnancy nearly claimed my own life. My faith, and the support of a loving community of friends and family, carried me through what John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul” (1987). Two months after his death, Arnold communicated to me in a dream. This was no ordinary dream. It was an “ineffable”(Varghese, 2010, p.12) moment with no words to describe the encounter other than to say it was the most peaceful and loving experience in my life. Almost thirty years later, it still evokes a sense of awe and wonderment as I recall that event with clarity and accuracy.

On Saturday evening, two days before his death, Arnold and I attended Mass and received Communion. He spent his final Sunday with a group of men planning and preparing for an up and coming Cursillo, a Christian retreat that was to take place in the spring. That evening, during what was to become our final embrace, Arnold and I experienced what can only be described as a glimpse of the divine, a mystical ecstatic moment that neither one could entirely fathom. The sacredness of that mystical experience remains with me to this day.

On Monday morning my beloved rose early, kissed me goodbye while saying “I love you”, and left to meet the van that transported several employees on the forty-five minute drive to the pulp mill where Arnold worked as a millwright. Having been just

released from the hospital a few days earlier, I had been staying with family during the day. This was my first morning alone at home since the surgery and thinking I was strong enough, I walked to the village store to drop off dry cleaning. The walk proved to be a bit taxing, so I was resting when Father Cameron and my close friend Jessie knocked on my door. Never in a million years could I have anticipated the news they had come to deliver. An accident at the mill had claimed Arnold's life that morning along with eight other men. Within a two-week period I had nearly died on the operating table having lost our first child, and Arnold, my beloved husband of a year and a half, was killed in an industrial accident.

Our relationship with God was strong, so strong in fact that Arnold and I chose to do our own readings on the altar during our wedding ceremony, for me, "Love is Patient," 1 Corinthians 13: v 1-13, and for Arnold, Tobit 8: v 5-7, "bring us to old age together." When Father Campbell, a friend of the family, came to visit while we were awaiting the remains to return home, I recalled those readings, remarking to him that growing old as a couple isn't always about your number of years together. Some people may be married a lifetime and never experience what Arnold and I shared in our brief time together and that thought brought me much comfort.

Arnold and I believed in the sacredness of our marriage and chose to wait until after our marriage to live as husband and wife. We were both involved in the church and chose to practice the Serena method of natural family planning and taught other young couples at pre-marriage retreats. At the time of Arnold's death my faith in a loving God sustained me, believing with all my heart that neither Arnold nor God would forsake me in my hour of need. Additionally the love from our large families and the supportive and

caring community helped me cope with this overwhelming and life altering tragedy.

After Arnold's death I had several conversations with God about my need to know that my beloved was with Him and that everything would be okay. There was pleading, bargaining, and even angry outbursts when God didn't seem to be listening. Weeks went by and no answer, so I finally turned my thoughts elsewhere. It was time to get some normalcy back into my life by returning to my teaching duties and to the rented mobile home that Arnold and I had shared. Previously I had been staying with family but decided it was time to return "home" and begin the journey of healing on my own. Spending that first night alone since Arnold's death, I prayed for a restful sleep, realizing that I would be facing my students for the first time in two months. If all went well this night, then perhaps I could get back into my "normal" routine.

In the middle of the night I had this amazing dream. Arnold was standing, arms outstretched and as big as life, with a group of people I didn't recognize. He always wore a beard and with his dark hair and long flowing white robe, he looked a lot like what I imagined Jesus looks like, but I knew it was my beloved. We "communicated" but initially no words were spoken. There was a "knowing", a sense of connectedness, and then in our conversation, that seemed almost telepathic, Arnold assured me that he was very happy and was with the Lord. He made me understand that he would continue to look out for me, to guide me and I was not to worry and that he loved me. I felt his huge arms envelope me. This embrace was as real as when he lived. When I woke from the dream, it was 2 o'clock in the morning. Alone in the dark, I was grinning from ear to ear with this amazing sense of peace and calm residing in my heart. It is still indescribable but my heart was overflowing with love. Peace entered my body and my soul for the very

first time since the accident. It was as if the Holy Spirit touched me, and I felt whole and healed. Neither Arnold nor God had deserted me.

Because of that dream I was able to return to my Special Education class and finish the teaching year. God, who knows all, timed everything accordingly, and I was so very grateful that my prayers were answered when I needed them the most. As a favourite saint of mine, Therese of Lisieux, also known as “The Little Flower” wrote, “What does it matter...If I suffer very much and always more, I will not fear, for God will give me strength; He’ll never abandon me” (Clarke, 1977, pg.124).

Guggenheim and Guggenheim (1995) refer to these very common post-death encounters as sleep-state ADCs. Sleep state ADCs feel like actual face-to face- visits with deceased love ones. They are much more orderly, colorful, vivid and memorable than most dreams. Some, like the dream I experienced, may constitute an actual vision that occurs during sleep (p.142). This encounter remained a secret for fear of ridicule from “naysayers” who would quickly dismiss this experience as a hallucination induced by complicated grief. As Kalish and Reynolds (1973) discovered in their research at the time, “individual realities of persons claiming to have had encounters with others known to be dead often mark the experiencing individual as pathological” (p. 209). Fortunately, thirty years later, the literature findings indicate otherwise.

There were many other encounters and situations that reinforced my belief that God and Arnold were working together to keep me safe and help me on my life’s journey. At the end of that summer I planned to return to University to finish a Masters degree in Special Education, something Arnold had convinced me to begin the summer before his death. Packed and ready to head to Acadia University in the Annapolis Valley,

I searched for our cat. He had been on the missing list for days and I had enlisted the support of this sparsely populated farming community. Arnold had given me this pet and I loved “Dubh” with all my heart. After struggling for days to find him, I sat in my car, in the middle of the dirt road pleading with Arnold to help find him. If I left now I would never see Dubh again and that was unthinkable. At that very moment, when I picked my head up from the steering wheel, out of nowhere and sitting in the middle of the road in front of my car, was Dubh!! Arnold had again come through and the cat joined me in Wolfville where we resided with a wonderful and supportive family for the first year following his death.

## Research Design

Qualitative research design focuses on coresearchers perceptions and experiences as a way of exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals ascribe to a human or social issue (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research also focuses on the understanding and exploration of sometimes emotionally laden human phenomena. The research literature for this inquiry includes reports of vivid imagery in all sensory modalities as part of the bereavement process. However studying post-death encounters relies heavily on information directly gleaned from the participants. Generally speaking, there is no physical evidence to corroborate the accounts recorded (Drewey, 2003). The individuals who volunteered for this study experienced the PDE as a real event and the researcher worked within their belief system of the experience. Therefore the qualitative research method was particularly well suited to this study as Silverman and Klass, (1996) emphasized in their introduction to *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. They believed that researchers who apply a qualitative methodological approach to their research do not set out to verify a hypothesis or to prove a preconceived theory. Instead they are reporting on what people experience and the way people make meaning out of their experiences and I quote: “Using this method it is possible to hear and legitimate the web of relationships in which the bereaved are involved, including that with the deceased” (p.22).

For this phenomenological study, I, the researcher, chose the heuristic method of inquiry. The word “heuristic” comes from the Greek word “heuriskein” meaning “to discover”, or “serving to find out”, and is specifically applied to a system of education under which the student is trained to find out things for herself (Conlan, 2004,

Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas, (1990) “the heuristic scientist seeks to discover the nature and meaning of the phenomenon itself and to illuminate it from direct first-person accounts of individuals who have directly encountered the phenomenon in experience”(p.38).

According to Paton, (1990) heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings the personal experience and insights of the researcher to the forefront .The two elements of heuristic inquiry, within the larger framework of phenomenology, include the researcher’s personal experience with that which is being studied and her intense interest in the phenomenon. Coresearchers must also share an intensity of experience with the phenomenon. The foundational question is “what is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely”(p.107)?

The heuristic approach has its roots in existential and phenomenological philosophy, and is concerned with meanings, essence, quality and experience. Heuristics leads to depictions of essential meanings and the focus is on the re-creation of the lived experience, “full and complete depictions of the experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person” (Conlan, 2004 p. 39). Conlan states “Heuristic phenomenological writing gives me the opportunity of deepening the reflective contemplation of my experience of this phenomenon: In doing so I can discover consequential meaning that I might not have envisioned previously”(2004, p.13).

Personal transformation seems to be at the heart of heuristic inquiry as it brings to consciousness greater personal knowledge of the topic under investigation. The researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. As well,

heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries. The heuristic approach was well suited for this study because the focus was on the phenomenon of post-death encounters as experienced by the surviving spouse. The experience was viewed heuristically through my own encounters and that of the four widows who volunteered as coresearchers.

The research question emanates from my intense interest in the area of PDEs and the unique effect on the surviving life partner. Excitement and curiosity inspired the search and therefore according to Moustakas, (2004), it lends itself well to the heuristic method of inquiry. He writes “All heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one’s own identity and self-hood” (p. 265). He adds, “the awakening of such a question comes through an inward clearing, and an intentional readiness and determination to discover a fundamental truth regarding the meaning and essence of one’s own experience and that of others” (Moustakas, 1990, p.40).

Paton (1990) states the uniqueness of heuristic inquiry is the extent to which it legitimizes and places at the fore these personal experiences, reflections, and insights of the researcher. A sense of connectedness develops between researcher and research participants “in their mutual efforts to elucidate the nature, meaning, and essence of a significant human experience” (p.108). Heuristics emphasizes connectedness and relationship and it is this connectedness and relationship that provided the researcher with the impetus to conduct this inquiry. As Dayringer, (1998) writes, “One of a person’s basic needs is for a responsive encounter. From the beginning to the end of life, the finite



person, being incomplete in himself or herself, reaches out to relate to others (p.16).

My goal was to be accurate and true to the stories told by the coresearchers while completing respectful, valid reflection. Moustakas, in quoting Soren Kierkegaard, advised the researcher to strive to be humble, and not hold a single presupposition, “so as to be in a position to learn the more,” advice taken seriously by this researcher (p.43).

One of the limitations of qualitative research is the lack of generalisability of findings (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010, p. 43). The findings of this inquiry may not be generalized to a larger population of bereaved individuals. However emerging data suggests continued future research on post-death communication and grief is warranted. The data collected from this study may shed more light on the nature of grieving and healing after the death of a spouse. Furthermore this type of research will serve to educate health care professionals and counselors as they journey with those who are grieving. Knowledge about PDEs will ensure that the bereaved can share their experiences in a supportive, non-judgmental and understanding atmosphere.

## Literature Review

### A) Post-Death Encounters

Post-death contact is experienced when a living individual feels that a person who is deceased is reaching out to connect with them. Such experiences may be a part of a model of grieving called *Continuing Bonds* (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996, Schut, Stroebe, Boelen & Zijerveld, 2006, Field, 2006, Neimeyer, Baldwin & Gillies, 2006, Corr, Nabe & Corr, 2006, Valentine, 2008, Wordon, 2009). The prevalence of experiencing PDEs would suggest that the phenomenon is more widespread and common than previously thought. (Kalish & Reynolds, 1973, Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1997, Bennett & Bennett, 2000, Duminiak, 2003, Daggett, 2005, Klugman, 2006, Bence, 2008, Heathcote-James, 2008, Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009)

According to Martin and Romanowski (1997) the purpose and meaning of each direct communication is as unique as the relationships between those involved. The contact may be fleeting or prolonged and it may happen only once, or several times, or never. From beyond the veil of life, our deceased loved ones may assume many different roles including messengers, guardians, protectors and comforters. Most contacts occur spontaneously, but through prayer, meditation, or simply by being open to the possibility, we can certainly facilitate or initiate an after-death communication. Whatever happens they assert that these communications offer us a chance “to heal from grief, from pain, from loss”(p.2).

Guggenheim and Guggenheim (1997) deem that life and love are eternal. During seven years of research they collected more than 3,300 first hand accounts from people who believed a deceased had contacted them. These researchers described this

phenomenon as a spiritual experience that occurs when a person is contacted directly and spontaneously by a family member or friend who has died. They have documented twelve major types of after death communication, with sensing or feeling the deceased (sentient ADC) the most common and the least tangible. Other common ones include hearing a voice (auditory ADC), feeling a touch, (tactile ADC), smelling a fragrance, (olfactory ADC) and partial and full appearance (visual ADC). A fairly common ADC, known as “twilight ADCs” occur when the person is just falling asleep or just waking up. Sleep state ADCs are also reportedly quite common and are likened to a dream, ”but where a dream is fragmented, jumbled, filled with symbolism, and incomplete in various ways...a sleep ADC feels like actual face-to face visits with the deceased loved ones. They are much more orderly colorful, vivid, and memorable than most dreams”(p.142). Remarkable encounters termed “out of body ADCs” have also been recorded although less common. The least common are termed telephone ADCs. Receiving a telephone call from your deceased love one can occur while awake or asleep so instead of seeing the person, one is having a phone conversation. Unusual physical occurrences, following the death of a loved one, are also regarded as authentic messages from the deceased as well. Lights turning on and off, mechanical objects being activated, and pictures being moved are a few examples. Research completed by the Guggenheims indicated that no special preparations were necessary for experiencing ADCs saying, “When people are having such experiences, they are usually engaged in ordinary and mundane activities and not even thinking about the one who has died” (p.24).

Symbolic ADCs are fairly common and “are those signs which affirmed their deceased family member or friend survived physical death and continues to live in

another dimension of existence” (p.211). According to the Guggenheims, most people intuitively recognize their sign right away, and feel it was intended just for them. As these authors attest, ADC signs provide hope to those who are grieving deeply “especially bereaved parents and the widowed” (p.211). Duminiak (2003) also believed that signs from nature may be ADC’s from loved ones. These include butterflies, dragonflies, rainbows, flowers, many different species of birds or animals, and all carrying messages from a beloved. Numbers that keep appearing over and over, flickering candles as if someone was trying to wave “hi” and any number of inanimate objects have all been documented as having meaning for the bereaved.

In her study on the effect of post death encounters on the bereaved, Daggett (2005) concluded that although not everyone encounters or recognizes the phenomena of PDEs, it is a common aspect of the bereaved experience. She defines a post-death encounter as “an unexplainable phenomenon or occurrence that is understood by the bereaved to be a communication from the deceased” (p. 191). These are signs or events that symbolize the relationship or hold special meaning for the surviving partner. Bennett and Bennett (2005), found that some individuals experienced multiple communications of different types from the same loved one. For others, a ‘sense of presence’ that lasted indefinitely, was the only post-death experience. They concluded that the stories collected “are accounts of ineffable experiences with a spiritual dimension, set in ‘the daily round, the common task’, occurring in the context of crisis, with spiritual strength, practical help or emotional comfort being gained from the experience”(p.151). Bereavement is often treated as a psychological condition of the individual with both healthy and pathological forms. After their study however, Bennett and Bennett concluded that human affections

and personality can survive beyond the grave and 'sense of presence' need not be seen as a symptom of grief (p.194).

Duminiak (2003) believed that after-death communication is God's gift of love for those who grieve. These sacred experiences may take many forms and all are extremely valid, meaningful and cherished by the receiver. The departed loved one may announce his or her visit through psycho kinesis (moving objects) or any number of different phenomena that carry a special or specific meaning for the bereaved. A familiar adage is "coincidences are when God acts anonymously" and Duminiak prefers to call these 'Godincidences', signs from loved ones that appear, "as joyful, amazing and timely experiences sometimes described as synchronistic or a coincidence but which are in fact really orchestrated from above" (p.34). I strongly agree with her that these ADC's are blessings from God, through our loved ones to us, who are watching over us.

Terhart (2007) writes that the initial goal of spiritism, the belief in the existence and manifestation of spirits, was inspired by researchers such as Emanuel Swedenborg, (1688- 1772), who set out to prove the existence of an immortal soul independent of the material body. Spiritism assumes that an individual's personality continues to exist after-death therefore the possibility of making contact with the dead in the hereafter exists (p.88).

Today a number of mediums, individuals renowned for their ability to have conversations with and convey messages from deceased loved ones, are changing the way we think about life after-death. James Van Praagh (1999), John Edwards (2001) Sylvia Brown (2001) and Robert Brown (2003) have written extensively about the spiritual journey and that death is not the end. They concur that we are all interconnected in this

tapestry called life, through the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and we learn who we are and why we are here. According to these authors, the mind, the spirit, and the physical body are all composed of the same God force energy, however each is vibrating at a different frequency. Spiritual energy is around us all the time and many of us feel it most intensely immediately after our loved one has died. We become more receptive to their messages at this time since our emotions can make us more sensitive to tuning in to these messages. These authors believe that our loved ones want to communicate to us that they're okay, that they didn't disappear into some black hole of nonexistence when they died, but have only passed into another form. They believe that souls in the hereafter communicate with their loved ones to comfort us, to let us know they are near and that they are still a part of our lives.

Anderson and Barone (2000) and Dennis (2003), documented the incredible stories of bereaved who have seen their loved ones, both in dreams and in waking moments. There are also reports of communication received in symbols, such as a smell of flowers, or in a "coincidence" of nature that has their loved one's name written all over it. It could be as simple as a song that comes on the radio at the precise time one is thinking about their loved one or as profound as an apparition where the person can be seen in full figure. It's as if one is allowed to "peek behind the veil" that separates one's dimension from theirs, if only for a fleeting moment (p.18). Authors such as Shockey, (1999), Moody & Arcangel (2001), Bence, (2008), Heathcote –James, (2008) and Varghese (2010) all have findings that support the belief that only a thin veil separates our natural world from our spiritual world.

Botkin & Hogan, (2005) wrote that life after-death is not yet a scientific issue, but

experiences suggestive of an afterlife have been an important clinical issue for some time. Seeing apparitions of loved ones or feeling their presence is, according to these authors, a common experience. Therefore it is important for clinicians to be able to discuss these experiences with their clients who sometimes require counseling, “to help them integrate such profound spiritual experiences into their everyday lives” (p.xi). These authors support a new approach to grief therapy, which acknowledges that people do not separate psychologically from their deceased loved ones. Instead we continue to think about, feel for, speak to and even ask for advice. This new approach to grief therapy now emerging “acknowledges this reality and helps patients develop this natural aspect of grieving into a healthy continuing bond with the deceased.” (p.27) Dr. Botkin, a clinical psychologist, has been utilizing a new therapy for grief and trauma called Induced After-Death Communication (IADC) utilizing Francine Shapiro’s technique from the 1980’s called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). His book includes dozens of documented case examples of successfully utilizing IADC in therapy. He believes healing occurs as a result of helping his client’s reconnect with their deceased loved ones.

The topic of post death encounters (PDEs), also known as after death communication (ADC), would be incomplete for this researcher without reviewing the literature on grief, the role of spirituality, and belief in the after life.

## B) The Face of Grief

Rock (2004) writes that we are relational people. Relationships are the basis for life and living, and when people die, relationships are lost (p.6). Relationships help us to establish human bonds but death severely wounds these bonds. These bonds are never destroyed. Broken, yes, wounded, yes, changed, yes, but never destroyed. When death

occurs, the first felt effect is grief, which is described as the emotional and social process of coping with this separation or loss. According to Rock, the context for this grief is mourning and the whole process is called bereavement. Bereavement is a specific form of grieving in response to the death of a loved one and there is no one right way to grieve. Wolfelt (2009) writes that to be bereaved literally means to be “torn apart” and when someone is torn apart, there is a natural need to embrace the heartfelt pain of the loss (p.14). The more intimate the relationship, the more intense the grief. An intimate relationship that is troubled, angry, violent or toxic can also lead to complicated grief as the surviving spouse not only grieves the deceased partner but also the relationship that did not get to be. Grief is a highly individual matter influenced by many factors unique to each grieving individual. These may include ages of the deceased and the surviving spouse, the survivor’s support system, the survivor’s relationship with the deceased and the cause or circumstances of the death. According to the literature, grief usually never resolves.

According to Attig (2011), grieving and mourning are two terms that are often defined ambiguously. He prefers to use the terms *grieving* and *mourning* to refer to processes of accommodating to loss and states, “grieving and mourning are coping responses to the deprivation and disruption that enter our lives when we are bereaved”(p.8). According to Attig, mourning is what we do within ourselves to transform our relationship to the one who has died. As well, mourning can refer to the way society and cultures tell us to behave in response to loss through death. On grieving Attig has this to say:

“I use *grieving* to refer to the full range of our coping responses to loss through death, including but not confined to, socially defined mourning



practices, or what we do within ourselves to redefine the relationship with the deceased. I also use *grieving* to refer to our coping response to any significant loss experiences, such as when we divorce, lose a friendship, lose a home, lose a job... I use *mourning* however, to refer only to responses to loss through death (p.9).

In summarizing, Attig states that as we grieve and mourn “we address our new life situation, come to terms with the absence of the one who has died, deal with our anguish, pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and move into the next chapters of our biographies which are indelibly colored by our bereavement” (p.8).

Jeffers & Smith (2007) expanded the definition of grief to make it consistent with the belief that healing is holistic in nature. Grief stricken people not only suffer emotionally but in other aspects of their lives as well so for them “grief is the normal emotional, spiritual, physical, relational, financial, professional, mental response to an external and consciously recognized loss” (p.3). They state that a person’s thumbprint and a person’s grief print are both unique; no two people grieve in the same way.

Wolfelt (2009) believes that the mourner must descend before she can transcend as the only way *beyond* the experience of grief, is *through* the experience of grief. He writes, “Honoring the spirit and soul is being honest about the sting of grief and acknowledging the reality of the depth of the loss” (p.41). When the mourner shares her grief story with us, our empathic responsiveness will help create a non-judgmental companioning relationship with this person. In our search for ministry, and from a place of open heartedness, Wolfelt reflects on the importance of four critical ingredients: humility, unknowing, unconditional love and readiness to receive (p.46). Humility is grounded in realizing we are not the experts about grief. We are students who are being taught by the true expert- the person in grief and he quotes Lord Chestertfield, “wear your

learning like your watch, in a private pocket; and do not pull it out, and strike it, merely to show that you have one”(p.46). Additionally, it is written in the Scriptures, “Be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1Peter 5:5)

Unknowing means being completely present to the mourner with an open mind and an open heart, requiring a very clear attentiveness to the moment. Unconditional love creates the sacred, safe space for the griever to authentically mourn. Our open hearts are able to become pathways through which Divine love is expressed to the mourner, “the companion relationship becomes sacred as it basks in the wisdom and healing powers of unconditional love.” Wolfelt quotes Matthew Fox, theologian and educator, who wisely observed, “When we are joyous and full of heart, we are emanating wisdom. Wisdom is not in the head but in the heart and gut where compassion is felt” (p.48). ‘Readiness to receive’ is a spiritual practice of preparing oneself to be present, as we become companions on the grief journey. Wolfelt proposes three phrases as a mantra or prayer to assist one in becoming *present*: “no rewards for speed; Divine momentum; not attached to outcome,” (p.51) and I would add a fourth, taught at an angel workshop, “bless, not impress.”

There is a saying that the unexamined life is not worth living. When one loses one’s spouse because of death, one is thrown into an examination of one’s life. As one searches for the meaning of life after the death of one’s spouse, a period of life transition for the living spouse begins. One develops true wisdom, which comes from self - knowledge and self –awareness. As we proceed on this journey in search for the meaning of life, one discovers identity is found in relationships. It is the experience of the Jewish mystic, Martin Buber’s I- Thou, “that we are not ourselves alone, but we are also in

relationship with others” (Rock, 2004, p.263). According to Lines, (2006) Buber suggested that the divine being could be viewed through every person with whom I enter into relation, be it my spouse, friend, partner, boss, child or neighbor and these “worldly encounters are the means by which I address God” (p.115). Lines believed that Carl Rogers, a man I greatly respect and admire, might be aligned with Buber. According to Lines, Rogers stands mid-point within a broad spectrum of spirituality, where Freud stands at one extreme and Jung at the other. Lines comments resonate with me particularly when he says, “Rogers combines the sociological view of religion with the mystical one and fundamentally puts great trust in his personal experience” (p.48) and this direct experience of relating person to person becomes the source of healing, much as Dayringer, (1998) and Yalom, (2002) have claimed.

According to Rock (2004), most widows mourn for the rest of their lives. In the first two or three years, this mourning tends to be compartmentalized according to their individual personalities. The loss is still with them, renewed feelings of grief do surface, and “this extent of grief is proportional to the degree to which the object of love has been woven into the texture of living” (p.32). Grief also tends to be more intense when the love relationship is most completely integrated into life, and when the loss comes without warning. After the initial stages of mourning, there is a lessening in intensity. The sadness is still there; it is just not as overwhelming. There may even be moments of genuine happiness, new insights, opportunities and affections. The most powerful help during this period of mourning can be the immediate family. As well, the social relationships which the widow has developed, can also serve to companion her on the grief journey.

Despelder & Strickland (2009) view bereavement as an opportunity for growth. As the bereaved person begins to reformulate the loss, it frees up energy that had been bound to the past and “there is a change in perceptual set from focusing on limits to focusing on potential; from coping to growth; and from problems to challenges” (p.346). When the tragic event of a loved one’s death is reframed in a way that includes possibilities, rewarding life changes can take place. Beliefs and assumptions that were once limiting are assessed with greater confidence and self-awareness and “grief becomes a unifying rather than an alienating human experience”(p.346).

Saint Benedict said, “Listen and attend with the ear of the heart” for companioning is about listening with the heart, it is not about analyzing with the head (Wolfelt, 2009, p.43). Jeffers and Smith (2007) advise us to listen to what is said, and to what is *not* said (p.15). Glantz (2007) writes that grieving people need good listeners because they need to talk about their loved one who has died. By not talking about the loved one, we are discounting the loved one’s existence and are causing the grieving person even more pain. She writes, “it is extremely important to keep their memory alive by acknowledging the impact they had on many lives... if we talk about his death, perhaps we can talk about his life” (p.19-20). She also acknowledges the need for tears. Tears are healing and one of the greatest gifts we can give to anyone is to share their tears: she writes:“ Tears are the holy water from our deep place of loving. If we have not loved, we would have no tears so we must learn to be comfortable with this precious expression of caring” (p.20). Glantz includes this beautiful quote from Washington Irving (1783-1859): “There is sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of

overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love” (p.36). Rabey, (2004) writes, “The tears we shed when we lose a loved one disappear into tissues and handkerchiefs, absorbed away from view. They seem fragile, almost irrelevant in and of themselves, except as evidence of deep pain”(p.30-31). However Psalm 56:8 tells us that our tears are stored in bottles and kept in heaven. And she writes, “They are precious in the sight of the Lord...we do not shed them in vain. Our tears serve a purpose. They water the garden of our grief and help to transform sorrow into joy” (p.31).

Elisabeth Lesser (2005) also speaks to the relevance of tears while sharing this quote by Rolf Jacobson “Let the young rain of tears come. Let the calm hands of grief come. It’s not all as evil as you think.” She elaborates,

Grief is a tonic. It is a healing elixir, made of tears that lubricate the heart. This is *the young rain of tears* that the poet Jacobson speaks of. When a friend or family member dies, -or when the world loses one of its beloved citizens, we should not hold back our tears. Our tears, *and the calm hands of grief* that follow, are not signs of some tragic and evil reality. *It’s not all as evil as you think*, the poet says. Grief is the proof of our love, a demonstration of how deeply we have allowed another to touch us (p.211).

Wright (2004) answers the question on how did Jesus grieve? : “He wept. He let pain of the death of his friend Lazarus overcome him. And he knew the separation was temporary... Go on cry a river let it rain down like tears from heaven and let it cleanse and carry you to the arms of those who will be strong for you” (p.32). Wright offers this quote from Max Lucado describing our tears:

Tears. Those tiny drops of humanity. Those round, wet balls of fluid that tumble from our eyes, creep down our cheeks, and splash on the floor of our hearts. They were there that day. They are always present at such times. They should be; that’s their job. They are miniature messengers; on call twenty-four hours a day to substitute for crippled words. They drip, drop, and pour from the corner of our souls, carrying with them the deepest emotions we possess. They tumble down our faces with

announcements that range from the most blissful joy to darkest despair” (p.34).

Grief is the price we pay for love and without attachment there would be no sense of loss (Mallon, 2008, p.4). Grief “is the healing process of the heart, soul and mind and it is the path that returns us to wholeness” (Kubler- Ross & Kessler 2005, p.229). Grief is an emotional, spiritual, and psychological journey to healing. Grief takes as many forms as there are grieving people, and losses, through death, hold a unique place in each survivor’s life story and no story of loss replicates any other. These authors write that the reality is that we will grieve forever. We will not “get over” the loss of our loved one. We will learn to live with it, we will heal and we will rebuild ourselves around the loss we have suffered. We will be whole again, but we will never be the same, nor would we want to (p.230).

### C) The Mystery

The question of whether human existence ends with our death or whether earthly life is only one aspect of a larger whole is one of the fundamental puzzles of human existence. Jung (1963) wrote that not only his own dreams but also the dreams of others “helped to shape, revise, or confirm my views on a life after-death” (p.306). In fact Jung himself shared this experience about his belief in the evolution of the soul after-death saying “about a year after my wife’s death – I suddenly awoke one night and knew that I had been with her in the south of France, in Provence, and had spent an entire day with her” (p.309) The thought that his wife was continuing after-death to work on her future spiritual development struck Jung as meaningful and held some reassurance for him.

According to Mallon, (2008) dreams offer spiritual solace to those who have been bereaved and as such “dreams can bring people closer to the sacred and the transcendent

that inspire and guide waking life” (p.123). She says it is not unusual for people to acknowledge that the dead appear in dreams just as they were in life, which further their belief that life does not end here on earth. Dreams, where God, angels or other revered beings care for the deceased, provide a sense of relief for the bereaved. She advises that when working with dreams and the bereaved it is important to take spirituality, faith and belief into account.

In her memoir ‘The Wheel of Life’ (1998) Kubler–Ross wrote, “ every person has a guardian spirit or angel. They assist us in the transition between life and death, and they also help us pick our parents before we are born” (p.23). In recent years people have become fascinated with angels, “God’s messengers” and hundreds of books have been written about every aspect of angels. These “powerful servants of God Most High” carry out many functions according to the Bible, including ministering spirits (Hebrews 1:14) guiding, (Matthew 1:20-21) providing, (Genesis 21:17-20) delivering, (Acts 5:17-20) protecting, (2Kings 6:16 Daniel 6:20-23) answering prayer, (Daniel 9: 20-24) and angels ministering at the time of death. (Hitchcock, 2005, p.160) Grieving people sometimes say angels have carried them. They may feel it was their loved one still comforting them from a world beyond their sight, while others think angels were sent by God to reassure them that they were not alone. Hitchcock quotes Billy Graham, who has touched many lives with the good news of Christ:

Once I stood in London to watch Queen Elizabeth return from an overseas trip. I saw the parade of dignitaries, the marching bands, the crack troops, the waving flags. I saw all the splendor that accompanies the homecoming of a queen. However, that was nothing compared to the homecoming of a true believer who has said goodbye here to all the suffering of this life and been immediately surrounded by angels who carry him upward to the glorious welcome awaiting the redeemed in heaven (p.164).

Conant (1996) investigated women's on going attachment to their deceased husbands. She found that sense of presence of the deceased represented positive coping with the existential issues. Some sense of presence experiences were interpreted as spiritual and were described as transformative, allowing the widows to recognize their aloneness in life with the realization that they could only visit their husbands in spirit.

According to Valentine (2008), "an increasing use of qualitative, interactive methods in relation to small, exploratory studies has allowed researchers to enter the social world of participants to reveal the experience of death and bereavement as integral to life rather than a condition to be treated" (p.3). The psychological model of "healthy" grieving, which proposes the severing of ties with the deceased loved one, has its limitations according to Valentine. She supports a more socially sensitive perspective, one which draws attention to the numerous ways in which the bereaved maintain a relationship with a loved one. The dead continue to influence the lives of the living and as she discovered, continuing bonds were not only dependent on the intentions of the living but were experienced as having been initiated by the deceased. These occurrences, sometimes via the senses such as through physical contact or hearing the person's voice, could occur quite unexpectedly and revealed "how continuing bonds could be shaped by the deceased as much as the bereaved person"(p. 130).

In their study (2009), Nowatzki & Kalischuk, conducted semi-structured, in depth interviews with twenty-three individuals who reported a post-death encounter. They discovered that these encounters profoundly affected the participants' belief in an afterlife. Additionally the participants described the PDE as having a healing effect on the grief process because of the sense of connectedness with the deceased ones, who they



believe to be constantly watching over us and guiding us.

Rothschild, (2001) in his book *Signals*, a beautiful story of courage and strength, writes about the messages he received after his partner's death and how they impacted his life. He writes:

Previously, AIDS had diminished my natural denial of my own death, but it hadn't diminished my skepticism of an afterlife. Yet that skepticism has now dissolved, almost completely, because of a series of miraculous signals from beyond. I have come to see that there is far more in heaven and earth than I had dreamt of in my old agnostic philosophy. In my life, broken dreams and shattered plans have, with the help of time, become fertile ground for new flowers, new experiences and creations that I couldn't have imagined a few years ago-like this book, for example. (xxiv)

Marianne Williamson wrote that this book stands as a strong testament to love's infinite power while Deepak Chopra believes this book is proof that the field of all possibilities exists and that within it we are never apart from those we love. In his forward, Neale Donald Walsh writes that this book closes the gap of all, the gulf in our understanding of life and death.

It is very easy to dismiss these experiences as waking dreams or wishful thinking. All of these authors are aware that some scientists label these occurrences as "grief psychosis" which suggests that because you are grieving the loss of our loved one, we are somehow mentally unstable and subject to delusions. Heathcote -James (2008) completed her research in the United Kingdom and asserts, like the Guggenheims, that after-death communication is one of the most common spiritual experiences that we have. She states however, that more often than not, these experiences are dismissed by family and friends "as a symptom of grief or a product of disorganization and anxiety of the bereavement process" (p.18). She further acknowledges that what is being missed is the potential for

healing.

While these authors believe there are some people who cannot distinguish fantasy from reality, the overwhelming majority of bereaved people are thinking, rational people who can understand this very profound gift from their loved ones in the hereafter. Saint John Crysostom wrote, “They whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever we are” (etched on a plaque at the Parable Christian store).

According to Bonanno, (2009) most bereaved people do not find themselves searching for meaning in the traditional sense of questioning how or why the death came about. This is not where the mystery lies. The ‘how’ or ‘why’ is usually very clear such as “his heart stopped” or “his cancer spread”(p.114). Bonanno suggests that even though some of us cope remarkably well and may not be troubled by these nagging questions about the nature of the death, we often ponder questions about life and death, and about the possibility of an enduring soul that might live on in the afterlife. How we think about the afterlife plays a role in determining whether we experience a continued sense of connection to our deceased love one and how we cope with this loss.

Elisabeth Kubler–Ross, recognized as one of the leading authorities in the field of death, dying and transition, has written extensively about the mysteries of life and the grieving process. (1969,1975, 1978, 1991, 1997, 2000, 2005). Kubler-Ross frequently used the beautiful imagery of death of the human body as being identical to what happens when the butterfly emerges from its cocoon. The cocoon can be compared to the human body, but it is not identical with your real self for it is only a house to live in for awhile. She used the symbolic comparison of dying as simply moving from one house into a

more beautiful one as soon as the cocoon is in an irreparable condition. She believed that no matter how one dies, be it from suicide, murder, heart attack, or chronic disease, it will still release the butterfly, your soul so to speak “and you will experience some important things which you simply ought to know in order not to be afraid of death anymore”(1991, p.4). Death is simply a transition to a higher consciousness and she writes, “We need to know that when the physical form of our loved one leaves, something beyond them lingers and comforts us, something beyond our ability to describe or substantiate” (2005, p.49). She also believed that visitations from the deceased are a commonly reported afterlife phenomenon having recorded over 20,000 case histories pertaining to her research into life after-death. As Kubler- Ross emphasized, we have to accept in humbleness that there are millions of things which we cannot understand. This is not to say that those things we cannot understand do not exist, or are not real, simply on the grounds that we are not able to understand them. As written in Hebrews 11: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

#### D) Turning Mourning Into Dancing

Staudacher (1987) writes that there are innumerable ways in which a spouse reacts to loss. Feelings and concerns in this regard are influenced by personality and the unique characteristics of the surviving spouse. Desplender & Strickland, (2009) state that the nature of the marital relationship and the duration of the marriage as well as the cause of spousal death will also impact how each person grieves. Age and gender as well as other previous losses the spouse may have endured are also significant. Losing a loved one can bring about a host of debilitating physical and psychological symptoms (Holland, Currier & Neimeyer, 2006). These researchers conclude that meaning making after a loss

“can have an ameliorative impact on the devastating pain that follows the death of a loved one” (p.176). As Carl Jung wrote “The only unbearable suffering is suffering that we do not understand” (Hannah, 1981, p.9).

Anderson and Barone (1999) write:

When any of us experience a loss, there comes a time in the grief process when we shake our fists skyward and yell *Why?* It is the wrong question. The question we need to ask is “*What is the journey and what is the growth that I must accomplish by suffering the loss of someone or something so meaningful to me?*” It is the first step in the long and winding road that is to be our life’s spiritual journey. If you are at least trying to cope and maintain even the smallest shred of faith and hope, then you have survived the lesson. If you are at least trying to make sense of the senseless, then you are moving toward the Light. What we live through and continue in spite of our grief is our spiritual lesson (p.8).

Sittser, in *A Grace Disguised* (1995), reflects on what his own catastrophic and incomprehensible loss taught him after an accident claimed the lives of his mother, his wife and his daughter. He has learned that although all losses are entirely unique “it is a manifestation of a universal experience” and it is not the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives but how we respond to loss that matters (p.4). That response, Sittser emphasizes, will largely determine the quality, the direction, and the impact of our lives:

The supreme challenge to anyone facing catastrophic loss involves facing the darkness of the loss on the one hand, and learning to live with renewed vitality and gratitude on the other. This challenge is met when we learn to take the loss into ourselves and to be enlarged by it, so that our capacity to live life well and to know God intimately increases. To escape the loss is far less healthy- and far less realistic, considering how devastating loss can be- than to grow from it. Loss can diminish us, but it can also expand us. It depends, once again, on the choices we make and the grace we receive. Loss can function as a catalyst to transform us. It can lead us to God, the only One who has the desire and power to give us life (p.180).

Prend, (1997) in writing about the lifelong impact of grief and how to make it meaningful, inspires us to transcend this loss. Death doesn't end the relationship; it simply forges a new type of relationship, not based on a physical presence but on memory, spirit and love. Transcendence literally means to rise above, "to be metaphorically lifted up, to have an aerial view" and with it a new perspective (p. 85). Love is eternal, transcending even death and Prend describes transcendence as follows:

If autumn, with its fiery glowing goodbye and blazing breathlessness, represents Death and Shock; and winter, with its frigid, barren landscape represents Disorganization; and spring with its buds blooming, and life recycling, represents Reconstruction and Synthesis; then summer is Transcendence -with full blossoms, heady fragrances, and ripe fruit (p.84).

In another text Anderson & Barone (2002) write:

In time, the seasons of our lives will begin again. We will survive the seasons of loss because we have no choice but to believe there must be a summer. A hazy, distant memory of summer is all we have to hold on to, but our loved ones promise it is waiting for us. The seasons will repeat themselves many times over the course of our lifetime, but every season we endure is one season less until we find an endless summer of joy in the hereafter. The souls know that one fine day it will happen. Until then, we walk through our seasons, but we learn to follow the sun (p.123).

A contributor to the book, *Life After Loss* (Moody & Arcangel, 2001) has a similar metaphor:

Some days of grief became an all-consuming fire that threatened to burn my soul into ashes; on others it was ice that anesthetized all feeling until my extremities became unresponsive to life. Slowly spring gave way to summer and with the passing of time, an awareness began to enter my conscious thoughts (p. 144).



*To Everything There Is A Season*

*There is an appointed time for everything,  
and a time for every affair under the heavens.*

*A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.*

*A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to tear down, and a time to build;*

*A time to weep and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn and a time to dance;*

*A time to scatter stones; and a time to gather them;  
a time to embrace and a time to be far from embraces.*

*A time to seek and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away.*

*A time to rend and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silent, and a time to speak;*

*A time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time of war, and a time of peace.*

*Ecclesiastes Chapter 3*



In my daily reading from *Prayers for Healing*, (1997), the March 15<sup>th</sup> prayer by

W.E.B. DuBois seemed to fit quite nicely here:

It is the wind and the rain, O God, the cold and the storm that make this earth of Thine to blossom and bear its fruit. So in our lives it is storm and stress and hurt and suffering that make real men and women bring the world's work to its highest perfection. Let us learn then in these growing years to respect the harder sterner aspects of life together with its joy and laughter, and to weave them all into the great web which hangs holy to the Lord (p.61).

C.S. Lewis, writing of his own grief after the death of his beloved wife observed:

And then one or other dies. And we think of this as love cut short; like a dance stopped in mid career or a flower with it's head unluckily snapped off-something truncated and therefore, lacking it's due shape. I wonder. If, as I can't help suspecting, the dead also feel the pains of separation...then for both lovers, and for all pairs of lovers without exception, bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love. It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as autumn follows summer. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure" (p.62-63).

This eloquent metaphor is a moving expression of how we relearn our relationships with those who die. Lewis' metaphor suggests that our loving relationships are dynamic and flowing. Attig (2011) writes that when we care about or love another person our attachment resembles the gentle embrace of dancers moving freely together. Death does not end our caring or our loving. It is instead compatible with our continuing and transforming our care and our love and he shares this, "As we grieve we struggle to learn the next figures of the dance and to find a meaningful way to continue caring about, and loving, the absent person even as our lives are transformed by our losses"(p.170).

Madeline L'Engle comments on Lewis' own growth and his insights after his loss:

Bereavement is not the truncation of married love but one of its regular phases like the honeymoon. What we want is to live our marriage well and faithfully through this phase too. Yes, that is the calling of either husband or wife after the other has died (A Grief Observed, p.11).

Bregman (1992) tells us that Lewis' *A Grief Observed* teaches about death and separation as Christians can experience and reflect upon them. It avoids the idea that religion automatically consoles or that Christian hope leaves no room for bitterness or loneliness or grief (p.144). As we grieve, we learn to love in separation, let go we must, but not entirely. We can continue to embrace those who die in their absence and turn our "mourning into dancing" (Zonnebelt-Smeenge & De Vries, 1998). De Vries wrote the following as a poetic summary of moving to the other side of grief: (p.215)

### Mourning Into Dancing

I should dance in God's presence, they say,  
 Though my heart is burdened with grief.  
 I should revel in God's mercy, they say,  
 Though my life is shattered with pain.

My partner has died.  
 This is the dark night of my soul.  
 Days and months press on.  
 Evenings and mornings lumber past.

My grief is great; my soul cries out,  
 "Why me, O God? Why me?"  
 "Not you, my child. Not you.  
 Your spouse has died. Not you.

I can give you life. I gave you joy.  
 I can give again."

Sabbath.  
 Rest now, and begin again.



The sun burns brighter- so slightly brighter.  
 The pain of the grave becomes the power of grace.

Step by step, God works his miracle.

“You shall dance again, my child.  
 “You shall dance again.”  
 You, O God alone, can turn  
 My mourning into dancing.

Zonnebelt-Smeenge & Devries write “both of us, having gone through this experience, believed our futures had been ripped from us when our spouses died. We needed to grieve the death of our hopes and dreams before we could begin to build again” (1998, p.16).

#### E) Divinity In All That Is...

There does not seem to be a universally agreed upon definition for the words spirituality and religion, and there are numerous overlapping meanings in the literature (Swinton,2001; Plante, 2009). Plante defines religion as “the organizational and community of wisdom traditions that generally include sacred scriptures or religious writings, values and beliefs, and an identified leader or spiritual model to emulate” (p.4). Spirituality is defined as being attentive to what is sacred and is connected to a concept, belief, or power greater than oneself. Plante (2009) writes, “Sacred often refers to what is holy, divine, eternal, or perhaps highly meaningful” (p 5). Spirituality, from the Latin word spiritus, means “breath of life” and is also broadly defined as a personal connection with a

force beyond the self, with God or the divine, and the harmonious interconnectedness across time and relationship. (Post et al, 2009).

Pargament (2007) defined spirituality as the search for the sacred and writes that some define spirituality in relational terms, as involving a transcendent relationship with what they perceive to be sacred or divine. Spirituality can be found in a piece of music, the smile of a passing stranger, a sunset, or a daily prayer of gratitude upon awakening. It can reveal itself in the ways we think, act, feel, and the ways we relate to each other. As David Elkins wrote, “The sacred is everywhere; we need only open our eyes” (Lines, 2006).

Campbell (2006) writes, “Divinity is made manifest in the corner of our hearts, through the simple touch of a healing hand, a sincere word of comfort, or a willingness to stop long enough to listen to someone who needs to share her inner pain” (p17). Finding the extraordinary in the ordinary is what divinity is all about and it is from the sacred that we are able to enter into truly meaningful relationships with others. Campbell writes that the energy of the divine waits for us to reunite with it and teachers and ascended masters such as Jesus, Moses, Mother Teresa, Krishna, Buddha and the Dalai Lama help us to find it. She shares this quote from Krishna; “For one who finds his happiness and his joy within himself, and within himself finds light as well, is at one with God” (p.64).

Religion, on the other hand, is differentiated in the literature as an affiliation with an institution or organization with rules, traditions and leaders. The religious person may connect and experience spirituality through a specific system of beliefs and practices. Although religion and spirituality are

intertwined, an important construct in the literature is that while everyone may be spiritual, not everyone is religious. However Goldstein, (2007), writes that those who identify with the term religion, and those who identify with the term spiritual, are both in search of the sacred and according to Hood, the majority of persons identify themselves as both religious and spiritual (2005, p.349).

Goldsworthy and Coyle (1999) did a qualitative study that explored the multidimensional nature of religion and spiritual beliefs. Their data provided a wide range of information on the nature of bereavement and the processes associated with it. Issues of faith and spiritual support were highlighted as positively influencing the grief as a structure of meaning that gives a sense of order and purpose to our existence and death (p.22).

Hays & Hendrix (2008) believe that we do not face stressful life events without a system of general beliefs and practices that affect how we cope with the situation. They state, "Religion is frequently part of this general orienting system and is often used to derive meaning or some explanation for the loss of a loved one to give sense or purpose to his or her existence and death (p.339). In this study, individuals who held Christian beliefs were interviewed after the death of a partner and the importance of religious faith was a primary theme relating to understanding and coping with their loss. The nature of their relationship or connection with God was a key element of their religious faith, helping them to view the loss as having meaning or purpose.

Mallon (2008) states that extensive evidence shows that belonging to a faith community can assist with healing from grief. As well, positive gains in mental wellness have been observed in those who hold spiritual beliefs and associated practices. The

research suggests that spiritual beliefs are associated with a decrease in death anxiety and an increase in psychological well-being and that spirituality brings a deep sense of meaning and purpose to our existence. She shares these words, scratched on a wall in a Jewish ghetto in Poland, “ I believe in the sun even when it does not shine. I believe in love even when it is not shown. I believe in God even when he does not speak” (p.79). Helen Keller would agree, “I believe that God is in me as the sun is in the color and fragrance of a flower- the Light in my darkness, the Voice in my silence” (Harvey & Baring, 1995, p.46).

According to Bonanno (2009), three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in their most elemental form, include some basic idea about a final resting place in heaven. The idea of heaven becomes a comfort for the bereaved, at least during the initial period of mourning. For those of us who believe that heaven awaits the faithful, the death of a loved one is not a final good-bye and “is more like a prolonged absence, one that will end, eventually when the loved one and the survivor are reunited” (p.146).

Death, according to Sanders, (1993) should not be viewed “as a terminus but as a tunnel leading into an ampler and incredibly more wonderful and beautiful world” (p.31). For him, death is a transition, not a final condition and he says it is helpful to remember that it is only the earthly body that is adversely affected by death. The holy and spiritual relationships of life on earth will not be severed, but will continue in purified form. Family relationships among believers will not be broken and death will not destroy our connection with the past. He believes that the strongest argument for the recognition of loved ones in heaven is the appearance of our Lord Himself in His resurrection body when Jesus spoke these words to His disciples (Luke 24:39); “It is I myself! Touch me

and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (p.38).

The journey of Jesus Christ provided the pattern for the life we are to live in the face of grief and separation. As Oates (1997) discerns, “the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus represent his separation, transition and reunion with us. When we are separated—as in divorce or death or a new cycle of life as retirement-old things pass away” (p.85). Oates writes that there is a time of mourning and transition and if we do not regress into nostalgia for the past, we move forward to a reunion with a new life.

Shockey (1999) writes that death and resurrection, eternal life, paradise and the Kingdom of Heaven are some of the major themes in the Gospels. The New Testament contains three stories in which Jesus raised the dead back to life and he believes these stories point to an authority that Jesus seemed to possess in the area of life and death. Christ’s greatest legacy, and the climax of the Gospel story, was to rise from the grave Himself, after three days of entombment following his execution (p.177). Shockey has interviewed several people who have come close to dying, people who claim to have had an NDE or near death experience. He shares this:

When people undergo death, they often describe finding themselves in darkness. Only after they recognize a *light* off in the distance, which serves as a kind of beacon, do they know how to proceed into God’s presence. Isn’t that light—considering the qualities of compassion, forgiveness, and strength that are attributed to it (Him) in the NDE reports—the essence of Christ? Aside from all the religiosity that has been attached to Jesus over the centuries, it appears that Christ’s greatest effect on humanity has been to light their darkness in life and evidently also in death (p.178).

Dying is a faith experience and the death of a spouse wounds deeply. Tengbom (2002) believes that recovery from grief does not mean we get over the emotional pain of our loss entirely. She writes:

if it seems the wound finally has been covered with new tissue, we soon discover that the tissue is so thin and fragile that the slightest bump breaks it open, causing it to bleed again. But the pain is not as intense, the wound is not as deep (p.41).

If our relationship with our deceased one was a good one, thanksgiving and praise will accompany our grief, praise for the gift our loved one was to us, and praise to the giver who gave the loved one to us. Zonnebelt-Smeenge Devries (1998) view the grieving process as a way of healing your broken heart in order to become whole again. The wound may heal but the scar will remain. According to Rock this 'wound of widowhood' can be the catalyst for further growth (p.2). As Henri Nouwen (1979) wrote:

making one's own wounds a source of healing, therefore does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains, but for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering and rising from the depth of the human condition which all men (sic)share (p.88).

He believes that for some the concept of 'the wounded healer' may sound morbid or unhealthy. However making one's wounds a source of healing does not contradict the concept of self- realization or self-fulfillment "but deepens and broadens it."

Nouwen speaks to my heart when he talks about the importance of hospitality with its deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition:

Hospitality is the virtue which allows us to break through the narrowness of our own fears, and to open our houses to a stranger, with the intuition that salvation comes to us in the form of a tired traveler. Hospitality makes anxious disciples into powerful witnesses, makes suspicious owners into generous givers and makes closed minded sectarians into interested recipients of new ideas and insights (p.89).

On the death of his own mom and while visiting her gravesite, Nouwen himself came to this conclusion:

When I stand before that simple grave, look at the cross, and hear the wind play with the leaves of the tall poplars surrounding the cemetery, I know that I am not alone. There is no apparition, no mysterious voice, but there

is the simple, inner knowledge that she who died more than fourteen years ago is still with me. Embraced by the solitude of the beautiful cemetery, I hear her say that I must be faithful to my own journey and not be afraid to join her someday in death (1994,p.68).

O'Rourke (2009) writes that Nouwen often referred to Sacred Scripture and the life and death of Jesus Christ in order for us to befriend death. He wanted to help us understand how we can make the journey through the end of our earthly lives fruitful for those we leave behind and for those who come after us. She writes:

The beauty of life is that long after we die, we continue to bear fruit. The legacy we leave for the people we have known finds its fullness after we are gone. Many times we affect the lives of people we have never even met. The way they live, inspired by the way we lived, carries on into eternity. Henri knew that long after his mother died he continued to make decisions guided by her spirit, the Spirit of Jesus which she continued to send to him. Many of us know that to be true in our own lives as the presence and wisdom of the loved ones who formed us continues to live in our hearts and actions. We remember them, not because they left us, because they changed us (p.60).

Prend (1997) reminds us that everything we are today was molded and influenced by the fact that we loved and were loved in return. That love, and that influence, will forever be a part of who we are. Just as we are different people today for having loved, so too are we different people today for having lost. She shares this beautiful quote from Emerson, "In this universe nothing is ever wholly lost. That which is excellent remains forever a part of this universe. Human hearts are dust, but the love abides to bless the last generation" (1997, p.80).

## Methodology

For this proposal, the researcher chose the heuristic method of inquiry. Creswell (2009) suggests a guideline of six to eight interviewees as an acceptable sample size when doing a qualitative interview (p.181). However the researcher interviewed a total of four coresearchers, deemed to be an acceptable sample size since, as stated previously, phenomenological heuristic research is concerned with meaning and not necessarily with making generalized hypothetical statements.

Access to the coresearchers involved the help of a “gatekeeper,” described by Creswell as an individual who provides access to the research participant (p.229). These gatekeepers became aware of the researcher’s need for participants through informal conversations and were able to refer specific friends and family members. The gatekeeper contacted each coresearcher to determine their willingness to participate in the inquiry. All four were women who had experienced post death encounters after the death of their spouse and were eager to share these experiences .The gatekeepers then provided the researcher with phone numbers in order to make contact and explain in more depth the purpose of the interview. Relevance and suitability of the coresearchers’ experience to the inquiry was determined by the first informal phone conversation.

Participation was voluntary and involved the completion of one to two hour interviews which were digitally recorded. The researcher gathered data by way of the semi-structured, face to face in depth interview method, and through the use of open-ended questioning. Requests for clarification and probes such as “can you tell me more about that?” provided further elaboration and understanding of the coresearchers’ experience.



The semi – structured interview questions were as follows.

1. Can you share the events that led up to the death of your spouse/life partner?  
How did he die?
2. How would you describe your relationship with your spouse while alive?
3. What was the nature of the post-death encounter(s)? Describe your experience.
4. How did you come to make sense of your experience?
5. What do you believe happens when we die?
6. Could you share what spirituality means to you?
7. Is there anything else that you would like me to know that we have not discussed?

The digitally voice recorded interviews were then transcribed by my daughter, a first year Nursing student, who agreed to maintain confidentiality. The digital voice recording and transcripts of the interviews are being stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. The digital voice recording will be erased and the transcripts will be shredded upon acceptance of the completed thesis. The coresearchers in this study may receive a copy of the findings of the research if they so wish.

The coresearchers were provided an e-mail copy of their transcript and were asked to check for accuracy and to make any changes or additional comments. The coresearchers were also contacted by telephone at a later date for clarification and corroboration of the results data. Phone conversations as well as e-mail provided some updated information since months had passed from the time of the initial interviews.

The researcher listened to the taped interviews making notes and highlighting and

color-coding specific areas of the conversation pertaining to the questions. As well, the transcripts were re-read several times in order to search for specific themes, shared experiences and commonalities throughout. The researcher also made notes of areas perceived to be unique to each individual and recorded these on recipe cards. Finally, the researcher reviewed all the highlighted passages and recipe cards to formulate the results.

The researcher has sought to avoid the use of any information that may identify the coresearcher. Anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained by using pseudonyms. Two coresearchers had stories that included the significance of a certain flower pertaining to their relationship with their beloved. The idea to name and identify each coresearcher by their corresponding flower came about during the first interview and was well received. When presented with the idea, the remaining coresearchers chose their special flower name. They were also apprised of the pseudonyms considered appropriate for their beloved husbands after the researcher had time to process their stories. The names chosen also had significance to their story and the relationship to their husband. The coresearchers and their husbands are as follows: Orchid and Cowboy Angel, Lilac and Blue Butterfly, Bird of Paradise and Rock and finally, Sunflower and Robin.

The first interview took place at the coresearcher's home in early July. The second interview was conducted while vacationing on the East Coast in late July. My third interview was set up by a friend who is a therapist and she also acted as gatekeeper in order for me to connect with a former client. I traveled to her home in October and conducted the interview there in a very peaceful and serene setting. Finally, as circumstance would have it, my attendance at a family-focused grief workshop garnered

my final coresearcher. Synchronistically speaking, sharing a laugh brought a group of us together and somehow my research topic was introduced. With that my fourth coresearcher volunteered and she came to my home in November to complete the final interview over a cup of tea. None of these individuals were in any way connected to me personally. We had never met prior to the interview with the exception of briefly meeting my fourth coresearcher at the conference. In conducting the interview the researcher was hearing each story for the first time. Intensive interviewing is a guided conversation the goal of which is to elicit from the coresearcher rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This intensive interviewing technique enabled the researcher to gather data as a means of discovering the coresearchers' experience of post-death encounters.

Gilbert (2001) writes that qualitative research draws the researcher into the world of the coresearcher thereby requiring the researcher to be empathic as she attempts to connect with the participants. In conducting the interviews, building relationship and rapport was crucial. Relationship building was the focus from the initial phone call to the actual encounter, as the researcher attempted to listen with empathic understanding, reverence and genuineness. My ability to connect with these four participants as an empathic listener resulted in very personal sharings, providing the rich data that is the hallmark of this type of inquiry.

As a novice researcher, I believe there is no fixed way of thinking about the world, and different people can experience similar events but interpret them differently. Harris and Huntington (2001) state that data collection analysis and subsequent theorizing is highly dependent on the researcher's personal positioning. In utilizing in-depth

interviewing, “the researcher becomes the research instrument with all the results being filtered through her perceptions and understanding of the social situation in which she is working” (p.132). During this process it was necessary for the researcher to bracket, or set aside her own experiences while interviewing, in order to be *present* with each participant in the study (Creswell, 2009 p.13). Prior to taping the interview, the researcher admitted her willingness to share her story and experiences following the taped interview. This approach enabled the researcher to dedicate quality time to each coresearcher. It also served to demonstrate to the coresearchers the importance and relevance of what they were about to share. The researcher did acknowledge when there was a common thread or similarity but attempted to refrain from giving the details of her experience until the interview concluded. At that time the researcher was able to share her story of the lived experience, as this was a very important part of validating the experiences shared by the coresearchers.

A relationship built on trust was a necessary condition in order for coresearchers to willingly disclose very personal experiences and emotions. Finding the balance of emotional engagement while maintaining appropriate emotional boundaries was vital. Furthermore, the researcher sought to “respect the rights, needs and desires of the informants” (Creswell, p.198) and any sensitive information revealed was held in strictest confidence. Shared information of a personal nature that was not directly related to the questions, remained confidential and was not included in the results. Participants were informed that if they experienced discomfort at any time and did not wish to continue, the interview would be terminated. At no time did the researcher take on the role of therapist and although ready to make available the names and numbers of appropriate agencies,

this was not necessary. The researcher, as an empathic listener, did strive to be totally present to each participant as they narrated their experiences. The written consent (see appendix) was reviewed with each coresearcher. The research objectives on the consent form were verbalized as well at the time of the interview. By signing the consent form, the coresearcher relinquished any notion of seeking financial claim for the interview. However the researcher provided a copy of *Hello From Heaven* (Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1997) as a token of appreciation. This book would serve to further validate that we were not alone in experiencing the phenomena of ADCs. Follow up contact indicated that the book was both appreciated and insightful.

### **Validations**

According to Creswell (2009) validity, or for this project, credibility is one of the strengths of qualitative research. Credibility is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the researcher's standpoint, the participants' standpoint or the readers' standpoint (p.191). Creswell states that qualitative validity or credibility means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures. Trustworthy, credible and authentic are some of the terms used. Participants' feedback and verification is often used as a method of presenting the plausibility of the research, by bringing back the findings for a "member check" which can involve a follow up interview (Creswell, 2009, p.191). The researcher has utilized e-mail and phone conversations for clarification of data on several occasions. Returning to the interviewees insured that the researcher "got" what they were telling me.

Rich and thick descriptions found within the data have been used to convey findings. These served as the main method used to ensure external plausibility with

regard to the researcher's data. As Creswell acknowledges, this strategy may transport readers to the setting and may lead the discussion to deeper understanding of a shared experience (p.191). As well, Sprenkle (1994) writes that it is important to contextualize the study since the results cannot typically be generalized to broader populations.

Researchers are advised to be modest in making conclusions and drawing inferences (p.228). Self-reflection has added to the openness and honesty of the research and reflectivity is core to good qualitative research. According to Paton (2002) the rigor of heuristic inquiry comes from "systematic observation of and dialogues with self and others, as well as depth interviewing of coresearchers. Using a quote from Craig (1978) he states, "This mode of inquiry affirms the possibility that one can live deeply and passionately in the moment, be fully immersed in mysteries and miracles, and still be engaged in meaningful research experience"(p.108).

Validity is the extent to which the researcher's findings are accurate, reflect the purpose of the study and represent reality (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010). They state that research can be valid through "intersubjective knowledge," similar to what Moustakas calls intersubjective truth (p.301). They quote Moustakas, who adopted the belief from Edmund Husserl, deemed the founder of phenomenology, that experience is the source of all knowledge. Each can experience and know the other, not exactly as one experiences and knows oneself, but in the sense of empathy and co-presence . Internal validity requires that the researcher be as faithful to the ideas of the participants as possible.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research means "methodological soundness and adequacy" (p.302). The researcher's intellectual honesty and openness as well as a sensitivity to the phenomenon under study is what makes these results valid and

trustworthy. Holloway and Wheeler (2010) recommend several ways qualitative researchers can check and demonstrate to the reader whether the research is trustworthy. They include member checking, peer review/debriefing and thick description. The second member check took place when the researcher forwarded the coresearchers a copy of the final draft of their interview as condensed from the transcripts. They were encouraged to provide feedback and follow up phone conversations ensured that the researcher was accurate in her findings and true to the coreserachers stories. Quotes from the coresearchers, described as thick, rich, dense and detailed descriptions of the experience being studied, make up the bulk of the data analysis.

## **Orchid and her Beloved Cowboy Angel**

Orchid and Cowboy Angel (CA), the name given him by his grandkids after his death, had been married thirty- five years before the accident, which took his life almost five years ago. The interview took place in her home, previously owned by her son and his family, where she moved after her husband's death. The acreage had become too much work for her to handle alone.

Theirs is a true love story, of soul mates destined to be together, of a relationship which blossomed on the school bus and one which would be shared at the memorial celebration of CA's life by their daughter. When CA was thirteen, he and Orchid attended different schools but traveled on the same bus. Apparently he told his friend 'you know that little blond girl over there, one day I'm going to marry her.' Then when he was fourteen, CA went to the exhibition in Regina. They weren't even dating at the time.

And he went to the exhibition and you know how you get those bracelets with names engraved on them? He got my name engraved on one of these and I did not know until after we were married that he did this. He told me the first night we were married he says: "I got something to show you", and he went into the closet and on top shelf there was this bracelet. And I asked "when did you do this?" And he said, "when I was fourteen."

At the time of CA's sudden and untimely death, Orchid was in another province caring for her mom who had become ill recently. Her grief became even more complicated after the death of her mom eleven months later. Orchid described her relationship with both as "losing my two best friends in the whole world". This was the most emotional of the interviews, but one Orchid later described as "cathartic". There were moments when Orchid found the retelling of her experience to be heart wrenching while alluding to the guilt and anguish she experienced in the early stage of her grief for not being home when it happened. In her own words:



That wouldn't have happened if I was home. He wouldn't have gone after supper to load their vehicle or what if I had gone with him? If, if, if, I if'd myself to death for a long time but it all ended up being the same, you know; he's still gone no matter. Sometimes when I feel that way, go back there and think, you know (if I had been there this wouldn't have happened) but I am getting better. Like I just don't, I realize that chances are it wouldn't have made any difference. He was a cowboy and that was his soul and he always said he wanted to go with his hats and boots on."

Orchid expressed her selfless love for CA: "So I'm really thankful it was so quick. He didn't suffer a lot, and I mean, he's ok where he is. I can be ok, you know? I have to believe that because I just...what's the point of anything?"

The strong sense of community exhibited by the abundance of support she received really opened her eyes. She chose to have a celebration of his life in the community hall with an 'open mike' for people to share stories. Orchid said:

He didn't do funerals at all, he didn't want that... We had five guys working for us at the time and I asked them to wash all the trucks up, make them shiny. They lined up all the trucks, made them all shiny and lined them up beside the hall and they put a big banner 'in loving memory of ...

Asking how this makes her feel now Orchid responded:

That makes me feel good because that was him. You know, at the time we hadn't spoken about this, you know we just hadn't. But it's as if he was there with us. This is what, everything we had chosen to do seemed to fit him to a tee. You know, and with no preparation or nothing,(sic) just bang, bang, bang. Then when I look back, it couldn't have been anything more for him. It was just what he was and what he would have wanted.

The testimonials at the hall helped her cope and provided the validation that CA had affected many people in a positive way, and made her and her grown children proud. She recounted, with tears in her eyes, what her son said:

He said he's always been proud of his dad, but never as proud as this moment. He said he had no idea that dad had touched all these lives, you know, no idea. And created such an impact on so many people. There were people there that I didn't even know because he met them throughout his travels.

Orchid said she didn't believe in coincidences but she had a conversation with CA before his death that affected her:

You know on some level, on some level, it's almost as though he did know this was going to happen. I know on some level there were so many things in place that happened after I realized. Like for instance, I had been gone a week. I had left the previous Saturday, and as you know he brought my suitcase to the car, put it in the trunk and he hugged me and he looked at me and he said, (he always called me Babe) he said 'Babe, take it easy. Be good to yourself, take care of yourself because you can't change what's going to happen' And that stuck, you know, and I looked at him and I thought he's talking about my mom because my mom was ill and that's why I was going out. He said 'take care of yourself, you can't change what's going to happen.' And so, when I look back after, it just gave me, like you said the shivers, like he said that to me.

Orchid found some consolation in that CA seemed to have everything up to date, "bills paid that day, laundry done, the house cleaned and the jerry can filled with gas." In retrospect she says, "He didn't know...but I still think that somehow this plan for us, the plan of life, it just worked out, you know. And he finished up these loose ends. He left as good (sic) as he could out of his love for me".

She too felt guided and felt CA was orchestrating things from beyond the grave as well; "I know for a fact, I would give my life, I know that he was there with me." A friend came and offered to buy all the equipment on the farm for a fair price which alleviated a huge burden for her, "and I know CA just had a hand in it, there is no doubt in my mind that he didn't (sic) because everything just went as if he was there doing this all, you know." Orchid said she couldn't make any of these decisions but CA was still

guiding and taking care of her; “Yeah, he was and still is, but especially at that time, he was there. *I could feel him, I could smell him, I could sense him, I just couldn’t touch him.*”

Orchid described their relationship; “we were soul mates. CA was the only man I ever loved, he was my other half.” She says, “we were good to each other and for each other,” and she had only one real regret and I quote:

That’s the one regret, that we worked so hard. We were of the belief of the era that you worked like crazy till you were 50 or 55 and then you could sort of slack off a bit. We worked all the time, Bev. We had a few holidays together, but if there’s one thing I would change, it’s we would spend more time together.

She now counsels her grown children to value their time together as family saying:

It doesn’t matter, those are just things. I walked around the acreage crying, all these things that were so important, they were our life, they’re nothing. They’re meaningless now, totally meaningless, you know, it’s just ‘oh my God. I didn’t know life, *I didn’t know final until that happened.* Not one more word, nothing. You know I didn’t know that hurtful finality, you know, until that happened.

Orchid talked about the roles they shared as husband and wife and how hard it was to have to do the things that her husband used to take care of and trying to adjust to life without him, which prompted her to move. It’s described very poignantly in these emotionally laden words,

I didn’t even realize you know that I lost so many things. I lost my husband, I lost my self-confidence, I was scared of everything. Nothing, but everything. I just lost me. I lost me because I didn’t think I could go on without him, he was me. He was part of me. I didn’t feel safe, he protected me. He’s the only person in the world, I think, that loved me unconditionally.

The post-death encounter that impacted her for a long time happened two weeks after CA's death. The grass needed to be cut, a task she completed 'thousands of times' but on this day her heart was palpitating and she was really scared. Through her tears she shared her experience:

I didn't know if I could do that. And I thought 'why am I feeling this, I always cut this grass?' So I filled up the lawnmower and I was cutting the grass and I was just having a hell of a time. I was sweating profusely and it was hot out. But anyways, it was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and I was just a mess and all of a sudden, like I was way cutting the grass by the burning pit, and I looked up and the garage light was on, the solar light was on. Like this is a solar light that just comes on when it's dark! And I looked and I knew. I said 'this was CA's domain. If he would've come anywhere, it would be in his garage. *So I just walked to the light and I said, " Ohh Cowboy Angel" ...and the light went out.*

The light continued to come on "and every time it just felt like he was hugging me, every single time...I could almost will it to come on." On Father's Day in June, in the middle of the day, her children and grandchildren came to plant a tree in CA's honor. Her daughter-in law looked up and said, "Orchid, the light just came on", and it stayed on for about ten minutes. Everyone in her family, including the grandkids, as well as a close neighbor and friend witnessed the light on several occasions and felt that CA was communicating with them each time. Orchid added:

But that didn't surprise me that he would come in that way, in a light. It made sense to me and it felt so good. If it wouldn't have been for that light, Bev, I don't know what I would've done. Because I needed that so bad(sic) and the kids did too, like the grandchildren would come and 'oh Papa's here. The light's on'. And it was just, wow, crazy.

Orchid often felt his presence in their bed in the nighttime, her hardest times, being alone in an empty house. She speaks about this "I would lay(sic) there and every once in awhile I would feel, just like a feather, going over my head, you know, right over the top of my head. I could certainly, I smelled him for a long time, his cologne... a long

time". She then reminisced about the night of his celebration of life when she actually had her first ADC:

I went to bed that night and I said 'CA, you know, if I could just have one more hug, one more hug.' You know, and that kept going through my mind, just one more hug, just to have that from you. And I dreamt that night, when I did finally fall asleep I dreamt I was in my bed that we slept in, and we had an adjoining bathroom, and I dreamt that he came out of the bathroom and he was all dressed. It's not like he came out of the shower or something, he was all dressed and he laid down beside me and held me. Then he left, and you know, after I cursed myself and I said 'Why didn't I say a hundred hugs? All I need is a hug.'

Orchid described her experience by saying it was as if she were awake and was able to tell him how much she missed him. She says "I woke up shortly after that and I could still feel him holding me. I knew I got what I asked for but I was so sad."

In speaking about the legacy, with her children and grandchildren who wouldn't be here if it weren't for her relationship with CA, Orchid had this to say "What a legacy, like what a legacy it is, you know but it's just too damn short. Too damn short. That's the thing."

In terms of her spirituality Orchid remained open and honest:

I don't belong to any religion. I was born and raised a Catholic but I consider myself a Christian. And I do have a life of spirituality, like I read a lot of books and my belief is be a good person to myself and to others and that's the way to try and live. My spirituality helped me when CA passed, the Catholic church had nothing to do with it. And never will because I don't have, it's not part of my life, I don't need it in my life. I have my faith, yes, I do believe in God or whatever it is....or energy , whatever you perceive it to be, I do believe in that and I do believe there is an afterlife.

As a couple they had a "general talk" a year before CA passed away about 'if you pass before me' since they were both healthy at the time. Her mom was a big believer in the afterlife, they were very close and they had "hundreds of talks" and she did a lot of

reading on the subject. She mentioned that since her mom's death, even her dad thinks differently since he also experiences after-death connections with her mom and has been comforted by them.

She really questioned how one person can deal with losing their mom and their husband within a year and describes a strange event that occurred after her mom died. Orchid spent three weeks with her dad following her mom's death, and upon her return home the light stopped, never to come on again. Orchid believes her mom was with CA and "it's as if Mom told him, 'okay CA', and I could see her telling him this, "you have to do what you have to do but Orchid's going to be okay." Orchid felt her mom was telling him that she was strong and one day, shortly after CA passed away, her seven-year old granddaughter said, "Grandma, you are a strong, independent woman and you can do it". So Orchid typed up those words and posted them on her fridge as a daily reminder and it's really helped her move forward.

She also volunteered at the library and eventually went back to work part -time. As well, encouraged by her doctor, Orchid found walking to be very therapeutic, "walking miles and miles every day, walking was a huge part of my coping". Fresh air and getting out of the house released endorphins that helped her deal with grief. She attended individual counseling for two years, which she found to be " a big help" and also a bereavement group. Although she didn't want to be there she shares this:

I wanted to get better so this pain I was living with, I just wanted it to ease, I wanted it not to be there. I wanted to feel normal again. I wanted to wake up and feel and look forward to something without 'Oh God, it did happen. It did happen.' Not another day you know. And I'd go to bed sometimes and just say, 'you did it Orchid. You made it through another day.'

She discussed two positive things out of the bereavement group experience. One was creating a poster/collage of what she wanted her life to be. This included travel, and her dad and her two sisters recently took a trip to Hawaii. She also pictured herself in a house surrounded by flowers, which is like the home she has now. The only visualization yet to be fulfilled is the one involving a new relationship. She says, "I put question marks beside it, another man in my life. But I mean, if it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, it doesn't. I'm okay." The second best thing about group had to do with relationship as well. Orchid met and made friends with an elderly widow and they now have what she considers "a mother/daughter relationship."

Before ending our interview, Orchid remembered another ADC. She had thoroughly cleaned and put everything away this night, which was routine for her. When she woke in the morning there was a red jujube on the counter that wasn't there the night before. CA loved these jelly candies and Orchid laughed as she shared how he had to eat this, his favourite candy, with peanuts. She added, "There were other things. I can't remember them all right now"

Orchid also turned to Reiki to "ease the pain and to put myself in someone's hands to help with the healing", and the Reiki Master told Orchid that she saw CA coming in with her and described his white cowboy hat and all. Her words were, "he came in here with you and he is never not by your side". This validation was very important in terms of Orchid's healing and she relished every opportunity to receive treatment from this Reiki Master.

Towards the end of the interview Orchid laughed and smiled more as if a burden had been lifted while sharing her story with a fellow traveler and willing listener. She spoke

of being thankful for all that her husband accomplished and took comfort in the life that they had shared for thirty- five years. Orchid took me to see a beautiful photo of CA taken about a month before his death when the family was all home together. She really believed a lot had been mapped out, that lots of things were just taken care of prior to “the pain of that day my son named Black Friday”. She invited me downstairs to see what she called “my shrine to CA” where she keeps his saddle and white cowboy hat, two very special possessions that are where they are supposed to be.

You know, there’s been so much happen in the last four years, and each one of us, I don’t think we’d be where we are right now, I know we wouldn’t, had this not happened. And I’m not saying where we are is bad, it’s where we need to be. Like my son and his wife, maybe they wouldn’t be here, but I presume they would. The kids wouldn’t have built the cabin at the lake.

She talked about all the things that had to be dealt with before she could move from the acreage and how she wanted to escape, described as “running away” from there prematurely. One of these things was dealing with the house, which had been flooded with a backflow of sewage, shortly after she had made the decision to sell the acreage:

And so I had time to deal with all that and so when I did put the acreage up for sale a year and a half later, it was meant to be. And that’s when I found this house. So things like that, it’s not a coincidence. It took something as major as this friggin sewer backup to keep from running away and dealing with things. You know, and to me Bev, that was no coincidence. This happened, and it had to be something almost devastating. I was running, I was on the run looking for an out here and I didn’t do it because I couldn’t. Nobody was ever gonna buy this place you know, filled with sewage. We had to fix this.

And fix it she did with her son’s help and she spoke again of it as being “ a blessing in disguise.” In retrospect she says, “I think that needed to happen because my son was over at my house three nights a week and he needed that for him and for me.” Finally she added, “In order to share, and move on, and cope with what was happening.



He needed that. And I needed that too. So we spent a whole year down in that friggin' (sic) basement and *he ripped everything down to the barest walls and rebuilt everything*. And he did a wonderful job.”

During our final conversation, Orchid described a recent synchronistic experience of meeting a tattoo artist at her job. She had taken a beautiful picture of a wild orchid in Hawaii. This was the first flower given to her by CA at the prom many years before and she wanted to have a tattoo of it. The artist sketched something for her from the photo, which she loved, and had him tattoo it near her ankle, teal (for her mom) and lavender (for her husband), Orchid's two best friends favourite colors. She is moving ahead and is enjoying her new home saying, “I feel safe here, for the first time.”

### **Lilac and her Beloved Blue Butterfly**

Lilac and I met for the first time while vacationing 'back east' in July. The meeting took place at a restaurant, and although not crowded, this was by far the most difficult interview to conduct and record. The background noise in this public venue coupled with the many interruptions from our very attentive hostess made for a more challenging interview. During our conversation the naming of a flower never came up. Later we spoke on the phone and when asked what flower would be her choice for a pseudonym, she chose Lilac. She wanted her husband to be Blue Butterfly because of an experience this past summer with a blue butterfly that kept circling the lilacs, her favourite flower. It stayed close to her, described as "sticking to me" and she felt it was a message from her husband since she considered him as "gentle as this butterfly". Her husband's death occurred a year and half prior when he suffered a heart attack in December while alone at home.

I asked Lilac to tell me about her husband and their relationship. Lilac and Blue Butterfly (BB) met in high school and were married at seventeen:

We were soul mates, buddies, friends, everything. We grew up together and when I speak of him, I feel happy. We understood each other very well. We had a good communication line. He was a real gentleman, I can't say enough good about him because he was my life. He was just a very special person.

An illness five years ago nearly claimed her life, "I was very sick and he took care of me so well that, you know, kept me going because I was at the point of giving up. Yes, he'd make me tea, shave my legs, you know, I couldn't do anything." She described these selfless acts of unconditional love as follows: "it's a real testament when you're that

down and out and (he) never complained. It was me doing the complaining because I felt like ‘Why are you doing this? This is not fair.’ He said ‘You would do it for me’. Lilac also talked about the great respect they had for each other and how BB always complimented her in public. Often, as a presenter at workshops, BB would remark, “Thanks to my beautiful supportive lovely wife and he meant every word”

They were getting ready for retirement so BB had gotten rid of a lot of stuff that he either gave away or put in a garage sale, especially since he was a collector.

We were just starting to get ready, we actually had some things packed and it was better for me because then I didn’t feel like I was giving away all this stuff because he got rid of a lot anyway. He kept telling me he doesn’t need this and I didn’t really need this and I didn’t feel quite so, I’m giving to some charity. It’s like you’re giving everything away; it’s hard.

Lilac spoke candidly right at the onset about BB being there with her:

I feel him with me constantly, at all times. He never leaves me. And I do believe his spirit is here. It’s because it just gives me this strength, some kind of strength to make me go on. He’s always told me, if I die, don’t die, please live on. He’s told me that; we’ve talked a lot about that; and that helps.

When asked about feeling his presence she stated:

Yes, I do, and sometimes it’s almost like, I don’t hear him, but it’s almost like I’m thinking like ‘should I do that, or shouldn’t I? And I can almost feel him directing me. I don’t know how, it’s just something that...it’s a good feeling. And like I get excited all the time, I just feel so good that I could do that.

BB had heartburn for a day or two and Lilac urged him to go and get it checked .He wanted to wait a couple of days and go together when Lilac had her appointment at the clinic. That evening, he drove Lilac to join some women friends for a social. Lilac spoke:

So I got there and it was about, I was there about an hour and maybe ten minutes and the women were all talking about how awful their husbands were. And then when it got to my turn, I couldn't think of anything and thank God.

She said she had nothing to complain about, there's nothing more she wanted and she was just happy to have someone in her life that she could share everything with. Lilac explained, "And they said, 'you've got to be kidding, you must be lying' like they wouldn't believe me. And I said, 'No, no, no I can't say anything bad about him, I really can't, I really can't.'"

When she called BB to come pick her up, he didn't answer. Lilac had a funny feeling and asked her girlfriend to drive her home and the Christmas lights were not on which was also suspicious. Lilac entered the house and found BB on the floor. She spoke matter of factly about her reaction explaining how she remained very calm, didn't panic and called her sister after the 911 call. While the paramedics worked on him she and her sister went to the bedroom. Lilac said:

The weirdest thing ever, like I was on a cloud or something. And my sister was crying, and I wasn't crying. And I looked at her and I said, 'He's already gone.' She said, 'don't say that.' I said, "No, I know he's gone" and she said, How?" "Because I could hear him" she said, "You heard him?" I said, "No, I didn't hear him, I felt him"...I'm not kidding you, people think I'm crazy but I felt him. It was just like a real peaceful, almost like everything is going to be okay.

Later on in the conversation she added, "I feel strong and I feel good about myself. I didn't know what I would do... you don't know until it happens... but finding him lying there and it's like he was so at peace."

Lilac said it makes her feel better, knowing he is around "Every night when I lay down in bed I say, "Goodnight dear. It just makes me feel better. And at first, when it

first happened, I swear to God that I turned around and somebody touched my shoulder...not ...just touched...just barely.” This experience initially took her by surprise as she relates:

I felt it on my shoulder. I actually looked. I was just getting into bed, I said ‘Goodnight’ (BB) and I turned around and it was like somebody put their hand right on me. ‘Jesus, I think something touched me!’ It freaked me right out and then I thought, “Okay dear, goodnight’ like I wouldn’t be afraid, like when I went over to the house to start packing some more stuff, my sister said, “Aren’t you scared?” I said, “No, what would I be scared of. If BB shows up, bonus, great” (laughing hard). Lilac also dreams about BB a lot but can never touch him in these dreams. ‘I don’t really feel like he’s gone; I feel he’s there.

She shared an incident that came to her about things getting done before BB died.

He wanted to send the Christmas gifts early that year, something they had never done before. He also wanted the grandkids to open their gifts as soon as they were received. The grandkids called and talked to BB when their presents arrived telling him how much they loved their gifts and him. This was their final conversation.

BB also had her looking for their wills before the planned retirement move. He was always saying, ‘We’ve got to get those wills. We’ve got to get copies of them. We got to call my lawyer because if something ever happens’. Lilac went looking for those lost wills and had searched the filing cabinet several times while BB was alive. As she says:

Well something did happen and she had to find those wills. She says “So I went into the house, I went straight to the basement, not even thinking about it or knowing why I was going to the basement. Real strange. I opened the file cabinet which we looked through a thousand times, but there was the will sitting right on top. What happened there? We had looked for them for a year and a half!”

Another time she felt guided by BB while trying to decide where to move now. A sympathy card arrived from the retirement villa that she and BB had shown some interest

in. Lilac saw this as answered prayers and said, “Thank you BB, I didn’t know where I was going to live. I didn’t know if I was going to an apartment or what the heck.” BB had set the wheels in motion in November, a few weeks before his death.

Synchronistically speaking, the condo was coming available that February, exactly when Lilac was considering making the move home.

She was grateful for all the support she received, particularly from her sister:

So I came home on the train; my sister and her friend came with me so I didn’t have to be alone. They stayed and helped me set up some things. They were very helpful, all the support I had. And they all loved BB like a brother; they cried more than I did, they still cry. And then I didn’t know where to have the funeral, the service... so I called my sister and she said, ‘you have to bring him home.’ I couldn’t think right eh.

BB had been cremated and the memorial in her hometown six months later was harder on her although Lilac found she “the inner strength” that pulled her through. She also found consolation in the fact that BB didn’t suffer. She spoke these words:

He always said to me, ‘if I die I hope I go really quick.’ You got your wish but I really didn’t want it this soon. You got your wish. He’d say ‘don’t let them put them things in me, take them out, if it’s time for me to go, let me go.’

He was very spiritual and turned Catholic with Lilac because their third son wanted him to receive the Eucharist. They always went to church as a family but BB couldn’t partake in receiving communion. Although Anglican, he didn’t have any religious upbringing and so he joined RCIA to become a Catholic. Lilac said there was never any pressure from her to do so as it was entirely his choice. BB had a real strong connection with her mom and took her and Lilac to Ste. Anne De Beaupre, a very spiritual healing church in Quebec.

Lilac said she didn't experience any guilt. She also took comfort in the fact that the coroner told her that it was a good thing they couldn't revive BB as Lilac shares this thought:

The coroner said I'm very lucky he died, he probably would have been brain dead and he wouldn't want that at all. I feel like I am one of the fortunate ones, I really do. I've told people, I've had more in my life than some people even know about. You know what I mean? And I'm so thankful for that because people go through their life and they don't have anything that close.

Lilac is hoping and counting on heaven and believes in an afterlife. "Well it's obvious to me that he'd go straight to heaven. There's no question, if anybody's going to go it'd be him. He'd go straight there, no question." Lilac added, "I never had that 'Why did you leave me?' thing. I didn't, I never had that. He wouldn't have left me but there's a reason we don't know."

Lilac feels she is coping and talks about being happy:

People sometimes look at me now and say, 'How can you be happy?' I say, 'I don't know, but I am. 'Well you're alone; they say. I say 'No I'm not...I mean I don't feel alone, let's face it. He's been part of my life for forty years, part of my whole life- body, soul and mind. How can you just stop it? And I know darn well if I ever met somebody, that nobody would ever compare. I know I will probably meet someone I have an attraction to.

Lilac and BB even had this conversation. He told Lilac, "I don't want you to stop living, you know, go on and do what you want to do. But one thing I ask you, don't let anybody take advantage of you. That's all."

Her faith has carried her along as well as she explains:

I think without that would be very difficult to go home by myself, to open the door and know that nobody's there. Well I know that nobody's there but I never feel alone or frightened or anything like that. I think your faith helps a lot. Like you know you've got to have something. I don't understand people who don't have anything.

She loved BB unconditionally and although she thinks BB had a stronger belief system, Lilac shares this, “He taught me a lot. He told me that it was me who taught him, I guess through the years watching me had taught him because I never lectured him on religion and like, you do what you want if you want to go to church, whatever.”

There was a lot of chuckling and laughing as Lilac recounted how she met her soul mate saying, “We were so young, but we knew.” She also mentioned that being a military wife prepared her in some ways because she had to adjust to BB being away for months at a time. Although this was difficult, her selfless love made her strong. “And I know all I had to do was say, ‘I can’t do it’... and he would be home. I couldn’t do that because it would ruin his whole career.” She shared a story similar to Orchid in having to take on jobs normally done by her husband. She used to be the “screw picker-upper” while BB hung the blinds and because they moved around so much in the military, this was an ongoing task. There came a day after BB’s death when Lilac had to hang the blinds. She drops the screw and laughingly said to BB, “Where are you now? You could pick up that screw anytime” (chuckling). I was just sweating. I was so hot. To put up these blinds, eh. But you know, you get through it that way.”

She shared that she has many good memories although there were hard times in the beginning with small kids and not a lot of money, and as she said “that’s life.” Lilac and BB “got through them together and he was doing all he could; he worked a job part time and everything else, and I always praised him.” This conversation reminded her of an incident that happened a month before his death. They always held hands in the car or when they went walking and she shares this:



We were holding hands. I was thinking to myself, ‘my God, he’s got nice hands. They’re nice and soft.’ And he had a healing hand, like honest to God. When he would come into the hospital and put his hand on me, I felt so good. *Just lay your hand on me*. So she shared what she was thinking with BB, “Your hands are really nice.” He said, “What? Are you crazy?” I said, “No, I really like your hands. They’re so soft. And by holding your hand, I feel so much from you.”

Lilac cherishes this moment and began to talk more wistfully about what she will never have again. However she believes, “He’s very happy; he’ll be happy if I’m happy.”

Lilac experienced a life-threatening situation five years before BB’s death. She had to have valve surgery and had an opening in her stomach and spent a year and a half in and out of the hospital. She really wanted to give up because she felt that she was such a burden on BB and her sons. At one point everything was shutting down and she had emergency surgery that lasted twelve hours with a 50/50 chance of her pulling through. She and BB faced the possibility of her death. The doctor said she was “a miracle” and she believes that as well and credits all the prayer support she received. Luckily for Lilac, she enjoyed five more years with her beloved before BB’s death.

Lilac really maintained her sense of humor throughout the interview, and it was easy relating to her East coast humor. Her final story about her youngest son was on a more serious note as she shares this; “I always think we had him for a special reason because I was told we couldn’t have any more kids and my baby was already fifteen.” She said this unexpected “bundle of joy was created out of love.” This son influenced his dad to participate fully in the Catholic Church and Lilac considers him to be pretty special:

I think everybody’s got a purpose, you know and they’re all very special (her three sons). It’s just, he’s different, there’s just something there. When he hugs me, it’s exactly as his father’s; the same energy goes right

through. He has the same walk, movements and that magic touch, those healing hands of BB.

Lilac's final words "I had a lot of good, that's what keeps me going."

### **Bird of Paradise and her Beloved Rock**

Bird of Paradise was interviewed in her home and the interview felt very relaxed and calm, partially due to the serene setting and her gentle personality. It had been seven years since Rock suffered heart failure while water skiing.

His death was particularly difficult for her son and daughter who were thirteen and twelve respectively, especially her daughter who was in the boat at the time. Rock was known to fool around in the water so when he went down, Bird of Paradise asked her daughter to jump in to help her dad with the skis, not realizing what had happened. As Bird of Paradise said, "When I saw his face, I knew he wasn't with us anymore." She pulled him onto the boat and tried CPR to revive him while sending her daughter for help and shared this, "I have a difficult time going back to that place and that spot," which she meant both figuratively and literally.

Bird of Paradise recounted feeling out of sorts that day, like a foreboding. Rock even said to her before heading down to the dock, "What's wrong? There's something wrong. You're not yourself," and she replied, "There is something wrong and I can't put my finger on it. I have a perfect life and I don't know what's making me feel uncertain." She said something in her stomach, in her gut wasn't feeling right, and he gave her a hug and said they would talk later. "That hug lasted a very long time. I needed it, and you know, and I just blew it off and it wasn't half an hour later and he was gone...so it's been seven years and when I go back to that place, it's like it was yesterday." She found that both individual counseling at various stages and eventually group counseling helped with the healing process.

Rock was forty-eight years old, healthy, active and there was no warning. In the beginning Bird of Paradise was confused and blamed herself: "I was a medical professional, I should have been able to do something". Then about two weeks after his death, she called her pediatrician to have the children tested: "If Rock had something that could have been passed on, I need to know". The autopsy report stated that he died from 'sudden arrhythmia disorder,' and three months later their daughter was diagnosed with the same condition. This meant having to give up all organized sports, which at the time were helping her cope with her dad's death. As well she spent a great deal of time in and out of the hospital undergoing surgeries and meeting with specialists and which took its toll on the entire family as they were reeling from Rock's death. Bird of Paradise shares this: "And I guess, to this day, the only thing that truly makes sense of Rock's death was that he saved his daughter." She had to focus on her children; " And parts of my grieving were put off till a later date but I think you're given the ability to deal with things at a different point anyway."

Rock was a hard worker but quality time with family was very important and their cottage provided that getaway to create those memories cherished by the family today. Bird of Paradise spoke of their twenty- one years together this way; "We were a normal couple, and that was what came back to me. We had our ups and downs, you know. You think at first, oh my goodness I shouldn't have said that. And then you go, No, we had a normal relationship. Probably better than most." She expressed gratitude for those twenty-one years together saying, "I had hoped we'd have another twenty-one or more, but for some reason, that was the life we planned, not the life that was meant for us."

Bird of Paradise talked about her belief system and had this to share:

I was brought up in the Baptist faith and I grew up in the church. I had a very religious upbringing. But was I really spiritual, no. So I knew that I had to trust in something, you know to get through this. However, I know for a little while I was a little bit angry at God, at the universe, and saying like, if there's a God, he wouldn't have done this to me. You wouldn't have done this to my children, not necessarily to me because I could take on the brunt of it, but why would you have taken their dad? This isn't right, this isn't the way life's supposed to happen.

Her first ADC experience occurred around two weeks after Rock's death, lying in bed while drifting off, but not yet asleep. At the time she recalls "feeling like he was just in the ground in a box, and there's nothing else." She continued:

I went to the grave with him. And that was the first time I had this cold, cold feeling, and it was dark and I was scared and he said, 'I'm not here'. So, that to me, gave me the hope to just pick up and say, 'No, he isn't there. That's just a place to go to, where his physical body was resting but his spirit wasn't'. That was the first time and it was good for me because I was ready at that point *to just go to the grave with him*. And what it did was remind me that he's not there and my job was to look after our children.

Shortly after Rock's death, Bird of Paradise and a friend returned to the cottage to tidy things up and she had another meaningful ADC experience.

We walked over to the site where he had collapsed in the water and I picked up a couple of stones and I spent some time in meditation there and cried buckets. I think the lake went up a couple of centimeters that day (chuckling). Just when I was walking back with the girl that had taken me up and my neighbor from up there, it was a fall day, and all of a sudden I felt warmth across my shoulders. I knew he was there with me and that it would be okay. I felt his arms were around me. It wasn't scary to me, it was very comforting and calm. *It was like my big rock of a man that he was in our relationship, unfaltering, he was there*. Different times, when his presence is there, at a situation, it's almost like I hear his, it would be something he would do or something he would say.

She shared the close bond between her son and his dad. He is now studying the same field as his father. They were so in sync that one would start a conversation and the other would finish it. She disclosed that for about two years following Rock's death, her son told Bird of Paradise, "Dad still visits me every night. We still have our talks", something they always did every night when Rock was alive. Even now, Rock still visits him, just not as frequently, and he told his mom, "But I don't tell people anymore because they would think I was crazy" and Bird of Paradise added, "He's starting to put his own little filters up on that, until he meets people that will understand."

Her daughter also had some experiences, "But she'd got scared". Bird of Paradise felt that she was more intuitively connected to her daughter and shared this:

She was that much younger and she also saw her Dad in the water and she had to have a lot of work around that. Although we were very close, I knew that I couldn't help her through it and I needed a professional. She did some counseling and she journaled a lot through the last seven years.

She showed me a picture of a bird of paradise and her story gave me what I refer to as "angel bumps." This is really an exotic, winter flower but every arrangement that came during the funeral in August seemed to have a bird of paradise in it, "So the children and I were sort of drawn to this bird of paradise." That first Christmas, still reeling from Rock's death and her daughter's diagnosis, Bird of Paradise decided to escape "to someplace different and maybe a bit happier." So they visited friends in Phoenix and then flew to Disneyland for a few days and, "when we got there the streets were lined with bird of paradise and we knew that Rock was there and that was right." Then the next Christmas her daughter needed an ICD implant and underwent surgery in the city. Because Christmas was tough on the family, they went the following year to Hawaii where they found the bird of paradise again. Picking up a Hawaiian/tropical

calendar, they discovered that the flower for February was the bird of paradise, the month of Rock's birthday. It is usually depicted in a group of three, also symbolic for the three of them.

When Bird of Paradise was considering a move away from the acreage, the home she shared with Rock for seventeen years, she was questioning her decision. However, because of her daughter's medical needs they needed to be within five minutes of the EMS. She recalls this incident while moving furniture to the new house:

and I came around the corner, out of the garage because I had parked in there, switched on the light and Rock was sitting in there on the couch. In a different house, same furniture, but a different house, different space and he was there. It was my answer, to know regardless of where the physical place of our home, he would always be part of our home. He would always be there.

She also shared that Rock was around more in the first couple of years. "I was just reeling and he would show himself more. And the last four or five years, you know, there's situations when I know he's close. But I've expanded my spiritual being and opened to more and I've continued to do work on being more open so that the messages will come to me. And sometimes it's an intuitive type message. Sometimes I can, you know, meditate and ask, and the answer is instant. And other times it comes to me throughout the day in another way and I'll go, 'thank you for answering this.'

She wanted to share more about her spirituality and said:

The basis of my Christian upbringing, I think, gave me the ability to trust that there is far beyond our physical being and that we are interconnected in a universal energy and universal spirit. We are connected and our time here is short, regardless, because there is no time in the spiritual side or in the spiritual realm. And that I feel gifted that Rock and I had the time now, rather than sorrow that we didn't continue to have time. And I feel extremely gifted that I have two children, his children, and that his legacy, or his life, will continue to show through.

Bird of Paradise is now putting some of her time and energy into helping other grieving widows, talking with them, starting up coffee groups as well, and she says, "It's supporting each other and it's helping me and I don't think I will ever forget where I was." She reminded me of 'the wounded healer' (Nouwen) and my own wounds and how helping others who grieve and mourn, in turn heals the one facilitating the healing. We both shared our need for catharsis, acknowledging the feelings surrounding our loss and healthy ways to grieve whether it's five, seven or even thirty years later. Recently she spoke these words to another widow:

And I said, 'I know where you are. Seven years from then, I still have my days where I don't dwell in it but I allow myself to go there and be sad or cry or whatever it is I need. Sometimes I just need to go out and do something really physical like running or just get outside in the fresh air. And sometimes it's go up and talk to him. I do use his gravesite as a place to go to communicate with him. I mean, I talk to him other times, but sometimes I just want that concentrated energy.'

Bird of Paradise shared a picture of Rock that held a prominent place in her home as well as photo of her and the two children. The beautiful poem written by her daughter and given to her on Mother's Day speaks of their loving relationship:

Closer than most, we've come a long way in the last six years we've grown together. Indestructible unit. Now as the time comes for our paths to diverge, we will forever have each other. Although our houses may be thousands of miles apart, our home will always be together.

Graduations have been tough because as she said, "I really think they were robbed of their Dad's presence in the physical form". As an 'only parent,' a term she prefers to 'single parent', she says her children have had to make many concessions, particularly at school events, when she could not be in two places at once. These times reminded her how much she wished Rock was there. Other times, when she needed to be taken care of, were difficult moments as well. When she had to deal with her daughter's



surgery alone she remembers getting angry at Rock asking, “Why have you done this? Here I am, this is our daughter going through a major surgery. You need to be here with us.” And then Bird of Paradise says she did realize he was with them, just not in the way she needed. She recalled how exhausted she became dealing with her daughter’s surgery alone at the hospital. Adding to her struggle was coping with Celiac disease and the hospital food was not recommended on her diet so she was not eating properly either.

Around the third anniversary of Rock’s death, Bird of Paradise experienced her “dark night of the soul.” Her daughter had another medical emergency requiring surgery after experiencing several “shocks” all weekend. It was imperative that she remain by her daughter’s side. At the same time her son needed her support as well as he was in another city showing his miniature horses at a horse show. Bird of Paradise was feeling like she should be present to offer her son encouragement and provide the parental support. Again she was reminded of being an only parent because if Rock were alive, they could share the load and be there for both their children. This was a very difficult time for her and Bird of Paradise had to look beyond herself and asked for help. She shares this:

I was to the point where I just couldn’t take any more and that was when I just sort of went with it and I said ‘I can’t do it anymore alone’ Because I was at the point where, if I kept going, I probably wouldn’t have come out of it. I was coping, I was managing, but I was just at such a threshold that one more thing was just too much. And so at that point, it turned around for me because I asked for help. I acknowledged that I couldn’t do it alone.

This was a big year for her because Rock would have turned fifty-five and they had been planning for that year. Like Lilac and Orchid, Bird of Paradise described her independent nature; “I was perfectly capable of doing things, yet you don’t realize just how much you do rely on that person when they’re not there. Oh yeah, he used to do that. I wonder how he did that.”

This year has become a transition year for Bird of Paradise. One of her recent challenges came after her children headed to university and she had to ask the big question “where am I going with my life?” She has done lots of soul searching, meditating and learning about strengths she didn’t know she had. Bird of Paradise has a new philosophy to assist with this transition as she tries to make herself open to what happens today, not control it. She read this line to me that she wrote as a reminder, “You have to let go of the life you planned, to have the life that is waiting for you.”

### Sunflower and her Beloved Robin

Sunflower came to my home to conduct the interview. Unlike myself and the other three coresearchers whose husbands died suddenly, Sunflower had to deal with her husband's terminal illness. Almost five years ago her beloved Robin died of colon cancer at the age of forty- nine, a month short of his fiftieth birthday. They had been married fourteen years. When first diagnosed Robin tried a new chemo drug for nine months. He was able to continue to work as there were very few side effects and as Sunflower said;

He did awesome. Then, within the month after he completed his chemotherapy, he was flat on his back. So from there, from the nine months on, until the time of his death, he was absolutely just bed ridden and it was very severe. So it was about four months of him being gravely ill...he actually ended up in the hospital right away and although he did have, you know, a few incidents of rallying, throughout that four months. But he never came out of it.

Robin was very courageous and Sunflower shares this:

I always remember one thing that he had said basically laying(sic) on his death bed, and I think that's part of my journey and where I am today, is because he said to me, 'Just think, Hon, if we had never had this happen, if I'd never gotten sick and I had never gotten cancer, we would have never met all these wonderful people'. And so you again are one of them because I couldn't have told my story (chuckling).

As well, like Orchid and Lilac, Sunflower spoke lovingly about the wonderful support she received, especially from her sister.

She and Robin have twins, two young boys who were only four and a half at the time. We talked about how different it is when you are left alone with little ones and Sunflower remarked, "Yeah, it kind of gives you some drive and keeps you going. You don't have time to do anything else (chuckling) when they're busy little boys." One of her more emotional moments was describing how her boys said their last goodbye to their dad at the hospital and remarked on "how cute and innocent children are." She was

reading a children's book explaining death and there was something in the book about angels and the boys had wondered if their dad was going 'to get his wings'. When the time came, after their dad had passed, Sunflower brought them in to the room. One son, who was very close to his dad, came in quiet as a mouse, and proceeded to look under the sheet. When Sunflower asked what he was doing, he replied, "Mom, I'm looking for his wings. Where are his wings?" We both shared a laugh over how children are so literal at that age.

Sunflower was my final interviewee and I shared with her that I and the other coresearchers had all lost our husbands quite suddenly. Then she shared this beautiful thought: "I think the year, like the last year of his life, I believe, like one of the things I wrote in a letter about him that the funeral celebrant read at the funeral, was that we had a chance that last year, to fall in love all over again. You know, because you get busy with life and things that don't really matter." She said they never gave up hope:

So two weeks prior to his passing the Doctor came in and said 'I think we need to get some things in order,' so it was almost like, we're just going through this whole process, the nine months that he went to work every day, so it was really only four months that he was sick. *So it was almost sudden, yet not sudden.* He was in and out with medication or with, you know, just medical issues that came up that caused the reaction to the chemo, or chemo treatments or whatever. It ended up being where he almost died, you know, several times. So it was kind of like, on the times that he was coming back from those incidents, we didn't talk about death itself. We never talked about him dying because he always kept coming back, right? So it was never something accepted, right? We never accepted that. He was, you know, a lot of times I think he was trying to protect me and the boys, right? Because he didn't want us to be left alone. So he wasn't going to say, 'You know what, I think I'm dying' or maybe we didn't ask all the right questions to the Doctor, you know, until the end. We didn't say, 'Is he going to die?' We never came out and asked that question. And I think it was just because we didn't want to give up the hope, the fight.

I included Sunflower's whole quote because it is best read in its entirety. As Sunflower expressed "there's miracles, there's everything. So it wasn't in the cards, it wasn't going to happen. We had a whole life left to live and lots of plans and lots of things to do."

In terms of our discussion on the afterlife, Sunflower shared this

We never discussed that. No, that was something we never discussed. I think we knew, we knew within ourselves, like we believed in God, we believed in life after-death, that when you die you go to Heaven. I think we were both raised in a Christian atmosphere. We went to Sunday school, either in a United Church or an Alliance Church, whatever the case may be. So I think, we knew there was life after-death. You knew that and we've seen where other people have passed away before us, you know, many people and so, you know there has to be something after that."

Sunflower's family works in the funeral industry and she did as well while going through high school. Today she has rejoined her dad working in funeral directing and feels it is a calling while adding, "I've met a lot of wonderful people and I wanted to give back what I had been given and help people through that process."

She has taken courses on the psychology of death and dying and says, "I've even studied things and I'm going, maybe I know too much here...I don't know if it's made it more difficult for me or more easy, but just very aware of what's going on and what's out there." She is not afraid of death and believes in honouring people where they are.

Her first experience came in the form of a fine -feathered friend. She had been visiting her sister in another province for a week or two after Robin's death.

So we were there and I just said to my sister, 'I just want to go home and be home for his birthday. 'So that was fine and she goes 'you know, you really shouldn't go. you should just stay.' And I said, 'no, I really want to go home and be there. And I thought in the back of my own mind, I just thought 'you know my heart is telling me to be there, just in case there's something, you know, that's there.

Sunflower and the boys drove home the day before Robin's birthday and she continued the story:

All of a sudden then the following morning, of course, the morning of his birthday, I was lying in bed and at 5 o'clock in the morning, not 4:59 or 5:01, or 5:02 or 5:03, it was exactly 5 o'clock in the morning, and that was the time we had the alarm set for, that we always got up for his work every morning at 5 o'clock. But of course, I didn't have the alarm set for that day because he wasn't there, no reason to get up at 5. So all of a sudden, I heard, something woke me up, and it was a kind of an unusual sound, you know. It wasn't the creaking of the floor that you may hear or something like that. But there was a tapping on my bedroom window and I just kind of, 'What is that?' It was almost like a POOF! sort of sound and sort of a fluttery thing, but it just kept doing it and it kept doing it. So I kind of looked around, and here there was a robin that banged into the window with his beak and it was this great big huge robin, and my husband was a big boy (chuckling). This big robin with this beautiful red breast, he was banging on the window with his beak and then he was fluttering up and down my window. All day, it was like all day long. It was unreal and I just looked at it and went, 'Holy cow, what is that?' And then just as I thought, it was the fifth day of the fifth month at 5 o'clock in the morning. So I'm just thinking like, 'This is weird, and I'm not a superstitious person at all.'

Interestingly that robin stayed around all summer long and did the same thing, providing Sunflower with her wake up call at 5 o'clock every morning. Now she says:

Ever since then, he's been there every spring and he actually goes all around my whole house, and it's a fairly large house. We gave him a name, my kids and I, of course my kids are like 'Robert's back! So we named him Robert, and then a couple of years ago, he has a girlfriend. So we have Robert and Roberta (laughing). And they had a family last year so we saw the nest and the babies in one of our spruce trees.

Sunflower's husband had his pilot's license so she found it symbolic that her message came on his birthday on the fluttering wings of the red-breasted robin.

She recounted another ADC experienced by one of her boys. The morning of the funeral, the twin who "was the clone of his dad" had spent the night in her room while the second twin was in the other room with her sister. Sunflower said he was a little upset

because he knew the funeral was that day and he was very close with his dad. Sunflower shared this:

So I ended up saying to him, 'You know, it's going to be okay. I just want you to know, today is the day that we are going to say goodbye to Dad. But it's going to be like going to church, you know, there's going to be lots of people there and there's going to be music, and we're going to play some songs, and then we're going to have the video. And so we'll get to see Dad on the video and you guys riding on the garden tractor with Dad. So there's going to be lots of things and there's going to be lots of people that we know, so it's going to be okay, we're all going to be okay.'

Sunflower said she was trying to be strong for him, and to lighten the load, started tickling his face, something he loved, when:

All of a sudden, he just looked up and sat up in the bed and goes, "There he is!" and I said, "What?" And he said, "There's Dad." And he had looked up to say, just off to the right, toward where I have one of those closets in the room, and he said, "There he is, *with his eyes and his mustache.*" And I said, "Oh wow, (son's name), that's awesome!"

Her sister came in the room to ask about breakfast "and she actually walked in front of where he was looking to come to the side of the bed, and so I knew at that point, because he then went like this, and moved his head to look around Auntie as she stood between him and his dad." Sunflower explained the reasoning behind *his eyes* because when Robin passed away the children were with her at the hospital. His eyes were closed and at their young age the boys asked how come he couldn't open his eyes. Sunflower believes Robin had to come and say goodbye because they were so close and this son needed that goodbye and he was Daddy's boy and Daddy would do anything for either of his boys". Robin had been cremated and Sunflower chose to do the "inurnment" the following day in a private ceremony. She relates another experience that occurred after the burial:

And just as we were coming into the yard from returning from the cemetery just down the road from our farm, we would have been facing the cemetery. I looked up and for whatever reason, as we were driving into the driveway, down the lane and there was airplane circling the cemetery. And the plane was very high in the air; you couldn't see what type of aircraft ...and so, I just thought, 'Whoa, what is that?' And not even, 'Oh well, whatever, I wonder what that guy is doing up there circling the cemetery.'" And so then we just proceeded in, we were just recessing back to the house and we were coming into the lane, and it just *kept circling*, round and round and I thought, 'Well this is really odd' And so then, when we were driving into the lane, getting closer into the house the plane starts coming over to where we were and we have two flagpoles in the yard( her husband made these out of tubing from oilfield pipe and chrome drill bits) with a Canadian and an American flag. So the plane came, after doing it's circles around the cemetery for awhile...the plane came in over and it flew, it just made a turn and flew directly between those two flagpoles and directly over the house and off to the west. I just looked at it and went, 'Oh my God! And it was kind of bizarre because it just flew into the sunset. Hovering, and just the timing and everything. And I said to my sister, 'You see that, don't you?' because at that point you think you are losing your mind.

Sunflower immediately phoned all his pilot friends and no one flew that day.

Sunflower talked about how certain experiences happen but "You're not always accepting of those things because you not really paying attention." There were lots of little things that happened around the farm after Robin died and she questioned if these incidences were "just me grasping at straws". One incident stood out though:

Like all of a sudden the auger started going and dumped out a load of grain on the ground. And you're kind of going, 'What is this? And you're kind of going, 'Nah, this can't be.' Are you telling me to get off the farm or what? Because I really can't do all this stuff.

Sunflower had some emotional moments and we talked about the importance of tears. We also talked about the importance of maintaining our sense of humor and she was able to find humor in some of the shared stories. Coincidentally, it was that ability to laugh at ourselves that connected Sunflower and myself at the workshop on family focused grief therapy. She also laughingly shared her experiences



with a bereavement group she attended and how she should write a book about “what not to say to the grieving widow.”

In journeying with another lady at the hospital, whose husband died about a month before Robin, Sunflower shared this:

She didn't want to sit alone with her husband who had just passed away, until the family got there. I had been around death and dying a lot growing up and that sort of thing yet, this guy was staring me in the face, I mean he was deceased but I was sitting there going 'My husband is down the hall, why am I here with this woman and this dead person? You know what I mean? *But she needed the comfort and I was there because I was her friend.*

Two years later she was asking, “What do I do now? How do I *move forward*?” a phrase she, like Bird of Paradise, prefers to “moving on.” Sunflower attended some group counseling sessions and continues to stay in touch with other people who were on the same floor as her husband. She attends conferences, some sponsored by the funeral organization where she is employed, and shared this:

This is the third year that I've been there... the last three. I even remember the first one. I was kind of going, 'I'm not sure if I should be here or not' (laughing) but again I wanted to find out. I guess maybe that's part of my grief journey too, is finding out what makes us all tick. And maybe that's a weird, cockeyed approach.

Sunflower has since gone back to university to become a licensed funeral director, which includes a course on Psychology of Death & Dying. She would eventually like to put together something like a coffee group, similar to Bird of Paradise, like a social support network for people who have lost their spouses and are ready to socialize again. At the time of the interview Sunflower shared a personal story of starting a relationship, which she described as a horrible experience. However she is learning to trust again and is taking time “to kind of take care of me and get me back on track with the kids”

## Results

The most common and least tangible after death communication reported by Guggenheim & Guggenheim as well as Duminiak, are sentient ADCs where one feels the deceased's presence. Orchid, Lilac and Bird of Paradise discussed this type of ADC as part of their experience. Lilac, whose husband's death is the most recent, expressed that she feels her husband around all the time. In terms of sensing the presence of her deceased husband, Sunflower was the exception. Although she felt something "swoop by" on several occasions, she was not sure how to explain it and wondered if she was "grasping at straws" or not really paying attention to these occurrences. Orchid was the only coresearcher to mention olfactory ADCs whereby she can sometimes smell the cologne her husband wore. Tactile ADCs, a feeling that one is being touched was also a common experience for Lilac and Bird of Paradise. For Bird of Paradise it was 'a warmth' across her shoulder as she felt Rock's arms around her at the lake. She described this experience as very comforting and calm instead of scary. Lilac felt someone touching her shoulder as she readied for bed one evening and she initially freaked out. A sense of calm replaced that fear as she came to believe that it was only her beloved Blue Butterfly saying good - night.

At the time of the interview Sunflower and Bird of Paradise were the only two who hadn't had a dream about their husbands. Recently Sunflower sent me an e-mail sharing how her first dream in nearly five years came about. She has been considering a move and had given it a great deal of thought, wondering if this was a good decision for her and the boys who are now nine years old. Sunflower's dream could actually fit in with what is termed by the researchers as "telephone ADCs" which are reportedly the

least common type. In the dream, Robin phones her and they chat about her plan to move the kids to town. He tells her it is okay with him and Sunflower described how understanding and accepting Robin's tone of voice was. He agreed with Sunflower and encouraged her to move forward. She expressed feeling really good about their conversation saying, "I had a real feeling of contentment," and that she and the boys are looking forward to moving. She ended with these words, "I feel so blessed."

A recent phone conversation with Bird of Paradise revealed that she too had finally had a dream, considered a sleep ADC from her description. She shared how our meeting and her willingness to revisit the death of her husband transformed her. She was now at a crossroads since her children had grown up and moved away so Bird of Paradise decided to reconnect with her counselor and talk about moving forward. Her counselor took her through a visualization exercise that would "allow her heart to open". A few days later Rock came to her in a dream, which she said was very significant. Bird of Paradise described it as if she and Rock were watching a video replay of the last seven years. She experienced all the sights, smells and feelings as well as chronologically viewing "all the sadness, struggles, uncertainties, and joys." Rock told her he was there through it all, although not in the physical sense, even though it oftentimes seemed like she was all alone, and Bird of Paradise thanked him for that. In the end Bird of Paradise found closure and described feeling "really, really peaceful and joyful" as she begins what she described as "a new chapter" in her life.

Orchid's dream, similar to my own, could fit under what is termed sleep ADC as well. It occurred the night of Cowboy Angel's memorial celebration and she was desperately wanting "one more hug". After she had fallen asleep, Orchid had her dream

and when she awoke, she could still feel Cowboy Angel holding her. We both received this gift at very critical times as we mourned the sudden death of our spouses.

Experiences where the participants told of being held, hugged and touched by their spouses, brought much peace and comfort as these feelings were internalized as reassurance from their beloved that things would be okay. This confirms the research that some ADC communication can come in the form of an answered prayer. It may offer reassurance that death is not the end or confirm that our deceased spouse continues to guide and care for us. As Bird of Paradise experienced, changing houses did not change the relationship.

The research also indicated that unusual physical occurrences following the death of a loved one were also authentic messages from the deceased. Orchid's solar light and red jujube incident would fit into this category. As well, Sunflower's mysterious circling airplane at the inurnment and the auger mysteriously dumping the grain could easily fit into this category of ADCs.

Nature or symbolic ADCs as well as "Godincidences," those synchronistic situations, all had significant meaning for each participant, and were shared by the coresearchers. Sunflower's experience with the robin was a profound example. A nature enthusiast may try and negate this as saying this is simply what robins do during the mating of spring season. However, these incidences are about the meaning and significance they hold for the individual, and not whether they are natural or perceived as counter to nature. The timing and circumstance say otherwise. Sunflower's intuition to be home on her husband's birthday, to be awakened at precisely 5 o'clock on the fifth day of the fifth month (Robin's birthday) is all too coincidental. This situation had real

significance to her and I, too, believe her husband found a way to send a message of love. Martin and Romanowski (2009), emphasize that these dynamic and synchronistic events are compelling and indisputable because they are made up of two or more incidents related to a single person. According to these authors, events as described by Sunflower involving the cooperation of nature and other forces beyond human control, can be very persuasive (p.87). During a phone conversation with Lilac, she shared that last summer, while sitting out under her favourite lilac tree, a blue butterfly came to visit her. She described it as “sticking” to her and it stayed around her for a long time. Lilac described her husband’s personality saying he was “as gentle as a butterfly” and she needs no convincing that her husband was sending her a message of love. Lilac’s story reminded me of a something written by Kubler–Ross to a child with cancer and included in her *Memoirs*:

When we have done all the work we were sent here to do, we are allowed to shed our body, which imprisons our soul like a cocoon encloses the future butterfly.

And when the time is right, we can let go of it and we will be free of pain, free of fears and worries-free as a very beautiful butterfly returning home to God (1997,p.8).

Among the less common experiences, Bird of Paradise was the only participant who shared what researchers term an out of body ADC. This occurred prior to drifting off to sleep when she visited the grave a couple of weeks after Rock’s death and made the important realization that she needed to remain here to take care of their children

There were two experiences of visual ADCs reported. Sunflower’s son described a partial apparition when he described seeing his dad “with his eyes and moustache” near the closet in Sunflower’s bedroom the morning of the funeral. Although Sunflower was

unable to see what her son witnessed, she had no trouble believing that her husband came to say good-bye. Bird of Paradise actually saw a full apparition of Rock as she was moving to the new home and felt happy that, no matter where she was, Rock would be there too.

All four coresearchers felt that their spouses were providing guidance and comfort as they struggled to deal with their loss and each found comfort in that. This coincides with the research by Conant (1996) as most widows in her study described sense of presence experiences as “a type of caring by their deceased husband”(p.190). Orchid felt that Cowboy Angel had his hand in selling their farm equipment saying, “everything just went as if he was there doing this; I could feel him, smell him, I could sense him, I just couldn’t touch him.” Lilac felt Blue Butterfly had his hand in her finding the right place to move to after his death, also described as “a good feeling” knowing that when she has to make certain decisions, Blue Butterfly continued to support her. Bird of Paradise often sits in quiet meditation seeking guidance or support with decision- making, and feels she too is being guided to find the answers. Sunflower spoke of talks she’s had while visiting the gravesite, and although she doesn’t always get a sign, sometimes she does, and again she thinks these experiences are determined on our willingness to examine them in light of our loss adding, “if you’re looking for it or not looking for it, or you’re willing to take it in or not take it in.”

Most of these ADC occurrences were spontaneous. However, there were also times when the spouse really needed to have that connection with the deceased and it was almost as if her prayers were being answered. Orchid’s dream experience, similar to mine, and her solar light experience, were times when we both really needed that sign to

help us to move forward. Duminiak (2003) writes that meditation and prayer can also put us into a tranquil state that can open a doorway for spiritual communication. Bird of Paradise alluded to her intuitive nature and how she is learning to be more open to receiving these messages. Although most of my ADC experiences occurred nearly thirty years ago, I know that other loved ones, including some very close friends who died suddenly, send me messages of comfort all the time. Four years ago my best friend in the whole world died suddenly from a brain aneurysm before her fiftieth birthday. Her last name was Coyne and ever since her death, I have filled a dish with all the *coins*, particularly dimes that have come to me in the most unexplained ways. These coins seem to appear when I'm needing support with something and I've learned to trust their appearance as a sign that all is well. Recently her sister and I met at a coffee shop and there were two shiny dimes on the floor by my foot and I knew in my heart my friend was sending a "hello from heaven" to the both of us. From my readings I have come to believe we are all intuitive, a word I prefer instead of psychic, and some of us decide to develop this ability. As Sunflower said, you can choose to pay attention or not.

Edward (2001) says not everyone receives messages and his explanation is that intense emotions can have the opposite affect as well. Some people experience such pain, and hurt so much that they unconsciously block everything out. Grief can be so overwhelming, "that the psyche numbs itself" (p.222). In order to cope with the loss, some people have to shut everything out. Connecting with beloved deceased persons cannot take the place of the natural grieving process. Each of us must confront and accept the physical loss of that person. As beneficial as it might be to connect with a departed loved one on the other side, either through a medium or on your own, Holland &

Neimeyer (2006), state that it is imperative that you honor yourself and your loved one by grieving for them properly.

In her study Conant (1996) found that experience of presence, even if the spiritual interpretation was doubted or believed inconsistently, allowed reassurance that life after-death was possible for the deceased. The widows in her study “wanted an afterlife for their husbands as well as for themselves when they would eventually die.” (p.192). In terms of this inquiry, all four participants considered themselves Christians and shared similar beliefs in an after life. Orchid had distanced herself from organized religion but kept her faith and defined her personal spirituality by following those two great commandments, love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself. Bird of Paradise is expanding her spirituality, which has less to do with religion, although she maintains it was her Christian upbringing that gave her the ability to trust in a higher power. Her belief is that we are all interconnected in a universal energy and universal spirit. Lilac and Sunflower participate in organized religion and talked about belief in God and life after-death, that there has to be something more. As Lilac said, “if there’s a heaven, I know Blue Butterfly would go straight there”. My own belief system mirrors in some ways all four. Spirituality is something that every person possesses and it is not dependent on religion. It relates to the meaning and purpose of our existence. Like Orchid I believe in loving God and your neighbor and like Bird of Paradise I too am learning to redefine what spirituality means to me. We are all one, and in the end we will return to God, the Divine, Source, Creator, Light or whatever other word one chooses to call this Higher Power. At the same time I am also part of an organized religion like Sunflower and Lilac, believing in the resurrected Lord, Blessed Mother Mary, all the archangels, angels



and saints. As the research indicates, belonging to a faith community or holding spiritual beliefs can have a positive impact in times of sorrow and dealing with the death of a spouse. (Mallon, 2008) We also know from Goldstein (2007), that both those who identify with the term religion and those who identify with the term spiritual, are in search of the sacred. What I've come to understand from my coresearchers is that we share a common belief that there is more to the human being than just the body and mind. Our spirituality may be something intangible, like sentient ADCs, but it will outlive the physical body in which it resides.

What I also discovered is that the depth of their common experience has to do with relationship. All four participants shared wonderful stories about their relationship to their spouse, using language that included words like soul mates, unconditional love, self-sacrifice, caring, and gratitude. The literature talks of venerating your deceased spouse, that in death the spouse could do no wrong. However, each of these widows reflected on how their relationship was fairly normal, with the usual ups and downs that occur in marriage and as was stated more than once "that's life." They were very open and honest and did not attempt to 'sanctify' their spousal relationship. As Attig (2000) writes :

We find the good that lasting love offers when we blend cherished memories of those who have died with fresh experiences with those who survive with us. When we remember realistically and resist temptations to idealize or identify excessively. When we value both the legacies that those who have died have given us and all that so many others have given already and still have to offer. And when we use the practical and soulful wisdom of those who have died and draw upon their inspiration to enrich the life that we still have to live, including our life with others (p.285).

Bonanno, (2009) writes that our relationship with someone in life will shape how we deal with grief for that person when he's deceased. In his research he discovered that those who are most resilient in the face of their loved one's death, and are able to accept

the finality of the loss, are those who are able to find comfort in memories of that person. They know their loved one is gone, but when they talk about the deceased, they haven't lost everything because "the *relationship* is not completely gone" (p.73). The widows he interviewed were all able to still find joy in the positive shared experiences as if some part of their relationship is still alive. Bonanno writes about the power in these comforting memories and they serve to keep us on an even keel and this seemed to ring true with these widows. From remembering the engraved bracelet given so long ago, the drive while holding those "healing" hands, the enjoyable trips to the cottage at the lake or learning "to fall in love all over again", these memories offered some comfort and may have contributed in part to the "healthy grieving" of the coresearchers.

According to Rock (2004) "the effective resolution of undoing the bonds of the relationship to the deceased, "is necessary to recover effectively" (p.35). This seems to fit with traditional bereavement theories that looked with disapproval on any form of continued relationship with the deceased person. The ultimate goal of grieving was to completely sever the attachment, to break all unconscious connection. According to Conant (1995), Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1995), Botkin & Hogan (2005), Valentine (2008), and Bonanno (2009), bereavement theorists are now taking a second look. Many healthy, bereaved people do not relinquish the emotional bond. People continue to feel deeply connected and even hold conversations with deceased loved ones, prompting bereavement theorists to "reverse gears." (p.201) Now they tout the importance of maintaining, rather than breaking, the emotional bond.

These results would support the healing, comforting, and sacred nature of post-death encounters and the surviving spouse. Each participant expressed gratitude for this

continuing bond with her beloved. Sharing these personal experiences, often described as cathartic, provided the validation that they were not losing their mind or suffering from grief psychosis. ADCs should be accepted as real communications and everyone gains from discussing these events openly. As a therapist with a desire to work with those who grieve, I have learned the value of listening in a non-judgmental, accepting and responsive way. By creating a safe, supportive and sacred space for those who grieve and mourn, therapists will be in a position to further explore the healing power of continuing bonds. Death may be the end of life, but not the end of the relationship.

Attig (2011) writes that no one should ever underestimate the pain of the loss of a deceased person's presence, no matter the nature of the relationship prior to his or her death. Though our anguish may moderate as we learn to love the deceased in their absence, we will likely experience it still, and it may never vanish. These four participants are all open to the possibility of forming a new relationship if the right person comes along, but at the same time know in their heart that they will continue to have an emotionally healthy attachment to their deceased husbands. Although I have been happily married for twenty years, I still have a special place in my heart for Arnold, my first love, and always will.

Despelder and Strickland (2009) write about bereavement as an opportunity for growth. Although difficult at first, this perspective does promote a gradual movement toward accommodating the loss. In reviewing the stories of Orchid, Lilac, Bird of Paradise and Sunflower I discovered several major changes that have taken place.

The fifth anniversary of Orchid's beloved Cowboy Angel's death will be this May. She moved 'into town' and loves her new home with the beautiful flowers. She

feels 'safe', less isolated and thankful that she no longer has to deal with the demands of a huge acreage and farm business on her own. Her children are married with children and she appreciates that 'legacy' and enjoys spending time with them as they bring her much joy. Her mother's death, eleven months after Cowboy Angel, complicated her grief journey. Her beautiful orchid tattoo will be with her always, just like her "two best friends in the whole world." Befriending another elderly widow has helped both of them heal. Orchid has found a part time job, is traveling more and is taking one day at a time. Although she admits to being ready for a new beginning in terms of a relationship, she adds 'if it happens.' A recent e-mail revealed she has found additional comfort in a book I loaned her called *Heart Broken Open* written by Kathleen Carlson, widow of Richard Carlson and co-author of the *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* series. Orchid said Kathleen's story paralleled in many ways what she herself went through and she has found great comfort in this. Orchid's final message, "Surrender, Trust, Accept - words I am now trying to live my life by."

Lilac has just experienced the second anniversary of the death of her beloved Blue Butterfly. She has moved provinces to be 'home' where both she and her husband grew up and where her family is. Her grown children have also provided her with grandkids, his 'legacy' as well, and she enjoys spending time with them. Retired now, she is enjoying life, traveling and reconnecting with family and old friends. In fact, this May Lilac is planning a trip West and expects to drop in for a visit. During a recent phone conversation, Lilac chuckled when she shared that she moved again. Actually though, it was just next door to the condo with the garage that she always wanted, and as she says about her beloved Blue Butterfly, "he's happy if I'm happy."

Bird of Paradise has just experienced the seventh year anniversary of her beloved Rock. This was definitely a transition year and a year for soul searching. In the beginning she had to devote most of her time and energy to her two children who were pre-teens. Compounding Rock's death were the health issues and surgeries that her daughter had to undergo and it was because of these concerns that she moved her family seven years ago. Now her son and daughter are doing extremely well at college and developing relationships of their own. In a recent phone conversation Bird of Paradise described the 'crossroads' she is at in her life. Being a partner in her husband's business worked when he was alive, but she has now willingly given that up. She is just starting part time work that utilizes her professional medical training. Bird of Paradise has organized coffee groups to help others who are bereaved and is beginning to think that meeting someone new is a possibility. Her recent visit to her counselor 'for a tune up' helped prepare for what she described as 'the next chapter' in her life. In a recent phone conversation, Bird of Paradise shared that she is ready to remove the prominent photos of Rock that are around her home and place them in a more private place. She sees this as another step in her own growth and healing as she learns to move forward.

Sunflower will be experiencing the fifth anniversary of her beloved Robin's death in April. She had two little busy twin boys age four at the time of his death, who needed their mom so she got down to the job of being 'an only parent.' At the time of the interview, Sunflower was the only one who hadn't moved as part of the life altering experience following the death of her beloved. Recently we also had a phone conversation after I received an e-mail from her. Sunflower remarked that they have stayed on the farm after Robin's death mostly because this was 'their dream', a dream

they had worked so hard for, and she found it hard ‘to let go of this dream.’ Both she and Robin had intended to raise the boys on the farm together. Now he is not here to complete the journey and Sunflower has come to the conclusion that it’s time to move forward. The farm is a huge part of what she has become, and she will always have fond memories of her life there with Robin and the boys. Sunflower explained to her girlfriend that she plans on having a ‘moving forward garage sale’ not just a ‘moving sale’ because as she says, “we are not giving up, just moving forward.”

As Jeffers and Smith, (2007) wrote, healing from grief is holistic in nature. Each of the coresearchers have taken healthy steps to ensure that they are working through their grief. Grief, like our thumbprint is unique to the individual and their road to healing has taken many paths. Individual and group counseling provided a bit of a roadmap as they journeyed on unfamiliar terrain. Sharing their stories at bereavement groups, with those who traveled a similar road before them, provided insight. At times some found it helpful to peruse travel literature and brochures to guide them on the journey. Others, when they were ready, left the group to explore this healing road to grief on their own. They were invigorated by the fresh air and literally ‘walked for miles’. Others found that sometimes the experience of running fast on this road released endorphins, alleviating some of the pain and hurt. Most found that keeping the body fueled with nutritious food helped them to persevere when the uphill climb appeared before them. Supportive friends and some sisterly love were also ‘manna’ on the journey. When faced with a roadblock, when the rocks on the road appeared to be boulders, some took an alternate route and found delight in a Reiki Master who did wonderful energy healing. This roadside assistance provided the necessary respite during this long and arduous journey.

As they continue on this very personal journey, many times during quiet solitude and prayerful sacred moments, these road warriors remembered all that they have been given. Wrapping those beautiful memories around their shoulders, like a warm fuzzy blanket, feels like a hug from their beloved. Searching the moonlit night and the starlit sky, they give thanks to the Creator, resting in His abundant and unconditional love. Rest they will, for tomorrow is another day, a day filled with possibilities, as they prepare to continue their journey on this road called Grief.

“And the end of all exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time” (T.S. Elliot in “Mallon” 2008, p.31)

### Reflection

The Healing Power of Post-Death Encounters could be an alternate title for this thesis. In experiencing the *presence* of our beloved in many different forms, we each found comfort, reassurance, guidance, safety and protection, unconditional love, hope, and renewed faith in the after-life. Rabbi Harold Kushner is quoted in *Hello From Heaven* (1997) as saying, “I am quite confident that the most important part of a human being is not his/her physical body but his/her nonphysical essence, which some people call soul and others, personality... The nonphysical part cannot die and cannot decay because it’s not physical” (p.76).

Mea Culpa is a Latin phrase, which translates as “my mistake or my fault”. As a Catholic I learned to beat my breast while repeating this three times, indicating that I was sorry and in need of forgiveness. While listening to the taped interviews and following the transcripts, I discovered that occasionally I would interrupt my coresearchers and at

times found myself finishing their sentences. Although intuitively I may have been correct in knowing what they were going to say, I should have refrained from jumping in as it might give the impression that I was “leading the witness” so to speak. The Amish have a saying “listen more, talk less.” This reminder should be engraved on a plaque in every counseling office, a lesson I hope to take to heart. On day eleven of my Lenten journey, I came across a quote that speaks to me about making room for silence in order to hear the Lord:

The Light of My Presence is shining upon you, in benedictions of Peace. Let my Light shine in you; don't dim it with worries or fears. Holiness is letting Me live through you. Since I dwell in you, you are fully equipped to be holy. *Pause before responding to people or situations, giving My Spirit space to act through you. Hasty words and actions leave no room for Me; this is atheistic living.* I want to inhabit all your moments-gracing your thoughts, words, and behavior. (Sarah Young, *40 Days with Jesus: Celebrating His Presence*, 2010).

Fortunately, the coresearchers felt sufficiently comfortable with me so that they were free to interrupt any questions or comments I offered. They were also quick to tell me when I had correctly grasped what they wanted to say and rephrase my impressions in order to make their stories more accurate. Their additional reflections in our follow up conversations also clarified my understanding of their stories.

Orchid, Lilac, and Bird of Paradise, like myself, all lost their husbands quite suddenly, with no warning or preparation. These interviews were fairly consistent and seemed to have the same quality of interaction. In retrospect, both Lilac and Orchid shared how it seemed that there was precognition, that their husbands were guided to say



and do certain things leading one to believe that it was all part of the plan. Sunflower had time to say good-bye and “to fall in love all over again.”

As unique as our experiences were, there was also a common ground that created a bond and relationships were formed. Four of us had similar experiences in that we learned to cope with the sudden and unexpected death of our beloved. Sunflower, on the other hand, had to deal with her husband’s terminal illness and in her words, “it wasn’t sudden, but then again it was.” According to the literature, it may be more devastating to grievers when death comes as a complete shock as opposed to death that is “anticipatory” in nature, when death is imminent with time for preparation, and to say our good-byes. Regardless, the role of the counselor or caregiver in either situation is not to compare or judge that one death is easier to bear than the other. The goal is to respect and honor where the person is on the road to acceptance and healing .

My conversation with Sunflower did take on a different tone and direction compared to the other three. Any number of factors could account for this. First of all, she was the only coresearcher that I had met previously at which time she disclosed the nature of her husband’s death. I did not have any prior knowledge when meeting my other three participants. Sunflower was my final interview and my own anxiety had somewhat subsided. As well, this was the only interview conducted in my home as we relaxed over a cup of tea, like old friends. Sunflower also shared that she was around death a lot growing up as her father was in the funeral business and she has since studied to become a funeral director. Sunflower was very much in control of the conversation but I found myself sharing much more on tape about my own relationship and ‘philosophy on death and dying.’

Each conversation stirred up many emotions in my being. Like Sunflower, I remained by my mom's side after her diagnosis of cancer at the age of fifty-seven. My brother, who was diagnosed with colon cancer fourteen months ago, passed away in January. I was fortunate to visit with him and his family while in Nova Scotia last summer and I treasure that memory. My family recently attended a beautiful celebration of life for my mother –in law who passed away peacefully at the age of ninety-one. What I have come to realize on my own spiritual journey is that healing doesn't always mean experiencing a cure. My very wise and compassionate supervisor Fran Hare, explained to me that there are many ways of winning in the throngs of a fatal disease besides surviving it. We all have a fatal condition called life. We are all going to die someday. How we die, whether by illness, accident or old age, matters less than the meaning we find in how we lived. If someone with a terminal illness uses the last portion of their life to mend relationships and bless others, has s/he not won the battle? I wholeheartedly think so. As Elizabeth Kubler- Ross wrote:

Each one of us is born for a specific reason, and each one of us will die when he or she has accomplished whatever was to be accomplished. The in between depends on our own willingness to make the best of every day, of every moment, of every opportunity. The choice is always yours.  
*(Chicken Soup for The Grieving Soul, 2001,p.159).*

Listening to the taped interviews often reminded me of Arnold, particularly Orchid's story as our husbands deaths were deemed "accidental". Her recounting of her story brought back a vivid memory of our last weekend together. We visited his parents and my parents, went to Mass and saw all our friends almost as if he was getting to say his final goodbyes to the people who were dear to us. I felt guided to take out the Bible given to me in his memory from my best friend. Tucked away were Arnold's two cards

written and sent to me while I was on a Cursillo retreat a few months earlier. I have often looked at these handwritten messages, cried over and reread them many times especially during that first year of bereavement. His comforting words seemed to be messages from the grave and had more relevance for the time following his death. This very personal message now needs to be shared and as I type, the tears, the holy and healing water that is God's gift to us, are streaming down my face:

Dear Beverly, I suppose by now you are a bit confused with the whole shebang. Just put your trust in God and say to him 'Thy will be done' because I have faith in you. Don't worry about me I will be just fine. Hang in there Babe. I am saying the Rosary and offering up this weekend by means of Mass and prayers. If there is one thing I learned at my Cursillo was to put a lot more trust in God. Bailey, I love you from the bottom of my heart, Arnold.

Lilac's words brought me back to how I too had come to rationalize Arnold's death. For me there were also worse things than dying. Arnold could have lived and been incapacitated or survived in a vegetative state. At the time, even the thought of our marriage ending through divorce would have been much harder for me to accept.

Reminiscing with both Bird of Paradise and Sunflower, I shared that I believed having a child would have made it easier to go on. I had prayed for Arnold to come and get me, to plead my case before God, that I did not want to remain alone on earth. As I discovered from Bird of Paradise, whether there were children or not, we both experienced the dark night of the soul and came to realize that our work here was not yet done:

Oh, night that guided me,  
 Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,  
 Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover  
 Lover transformed in the Beloved!  
 All ceased and I abandoned myself,

Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.  
(John of the Cross, in Harvey & Baring, 1995 p.186)

Hospitality is defined as the relationship between guest and host or the act and practice of being hospitable. Henri Nouwen wrote that hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest. It occurs when the host feels at home in her own house, and creates “a free and fearless place for the unexpected visitor” (1979, p.89). Regardless of the setting, I believe hospitality can also occur when the host creates a free and fearless place in her heart. By opening their hearts, Orchid, Lilac, Bird of Paradise and Sunflower willingly shared very personal and sometimes painful stories. As the invited guest, it became both an honor and a privilege to share a laugh and shed a tear as we embarked on this sacred journey together. My search to understand post-death encounters and their effect on the surviving spouse brought us together. A relationship built on trust, mutual respect and shared lived experience serves to keep us connected. As we open our hearts in hospitality to meet the weary traveler I am reminded of this quote when our Lord said “where two or more are gathered in my name, their am I” (Matthew 18:20)

Reviewing the transcripts revealed a common theme that kept reoccurring. Each participant spoke candidly about how they were coping with the death of their beloved. As Bird of Paradise so poetically penned, “you have to let go of the life you planned, to have the life that is waiting for you.” Mallon (2008) writes that poetry is the expression of profound emotion and much of it originates in the experience of loss. She believes that that the bereaved can give vent to feelings in a highly personal way while writing poetry. She included this poem by Nell Dale and suggests that anyone whose partner has died may find Dale’s book *What Color is Grief: A Journey* of particular value ‘for all those

like me, who suddenly found the future they thought was there-is no more' (p.106).

The color of grief  
 What color is grief?  
 Grief is a dark still grey foggy day  
 It is November in June  
 It is the color of gloom.  
 It is the starless night of the black moon  
 Grief is lost on a boggy moor.  
 Grief is drowning in the cold sea.  
 Grief wades through the oceans of time and goes nowhere.  
 Grief is a stopped clock.  
 Grief you were not invited in-you have invaded my space.  
 Grief you were not invited in-you have invaded my spirit.  
 You have overtaken my brain and my body  
 Grief you have no direction.  
 Grief you are too heavy-you drag me down.  
 Grief I never wanted you as my partner.

When describing how it took the sewer backing up to help her come to terms with some issues, Orchid described having *to rip everything down to the bare walls and rebuild everything*. Metaphorically speaking, she reminded me of how the death of a loved one rips away the protective décor of our lives and forces us to rebuild who we are and how we wish to connect with the world.

During our conversations I found myself making reference to the fact that no matter how many years elapsed, Arnold's death left a huge hole in my heart. This wound may have healed but the scar remains. As an earlier quote depicts, after thirty years the tissue is not as fresh and the wound does not tear open as easily, but the scar is always

there as a reminder of the loss. Rock (2004) wrote that we may never stop mourning and even though we move forward, we will have constant reminders of a life that might have been. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" is one of the Beatitudes.

These four participants, like myself, want to help others who grieve and mourn, by reaching out to receive and give comfort to others who have experienced loss. Widowhood reminds us that we need people, people need us, and our lives still have purpose. This brings me back to Nouwen again. The wounded healer understands woundedness because she has gone through a similar painful experience and come through on the other side. She has experienced growth, acceptance and healing. The healer's experience is what makes her able to connect with another in pain, not as the *expert* on grief, but as *an equal* and a companion. The healer feels empathy, not just sympathy, and others can sense this intuitively. This opens a conduit between those who mourn on a spiritual level and connects them. Persons in need of support can be cared for by the healer and at the same time, end up being instrumental in the healer's own healing. Each encounter between healer and the other can be transforming for both.

This is not to say that someone who has not experienced loss cannot successfully companion the bereaved. However when we are in the company of others who know the stumbling blocks and pitfalls of this journey called grief, we can speak more freely about our pain without fear, because they too have made this journey. As Attig (2000) informs, "In this shared plight, others know us as fellow travelers who struggle to find our way again in worlds transformed by loss" (p.11).

During our encounters each participant discovered that after sharing her story, she felt a catharsis, a release, described as “a burden lifted.” I found myself sharing some similar emotions and experiences and it was very liberating and healing to talk about these post-death encounters in a non-threatening and non-judgmental atmosphere with women who had to cope with the death of their spouse.

Throughout my MAPPC journey I have come to align my thinking with those psychotherapists, like Yalom, Dayringer and especially Carl Rogers, who believe in the healing power of relationships. Rogers, (1995, 2007) named six preconditions for therapeutic change to occur in the client and the therapeutic relationship is at the heart of his client- centered approach to therapy. Two persons are in psychological contact, the client is in a state of incongruence, being anxious or vulnerable, while, the therapist is authentic and congruent, and described as integrated in the relationship. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client and also experiences empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference. She then endeavors to communicate this experience to the client. Rogers writes “The communication to the client of the therapist’s empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved” (p.241).

This inquiry discovered several common themes shared by the coresearchers. Like myself, each felt that her beloved partner still cared about her well being and reached beyond that thin veil between life and death, to send love. Each also felt a strong desire to talk to their beloved, and to interpret synchronistic events, signs in nature, chance encounters, and their own internal thoughts, as responses from their beloved.

We all treasured opportunities to talk about our beloved and were grateful for the

love and life we shared. Each felt the call to live life more fully, to do more than bury themselves in grief or anger or helplessness and sought whatever measures were appropriate to assist with healing and growth. They found ways to draw strength from their loss to grow emotionally and spiritually. When spousal relationships are troubled or have become estranged, after –death communication may be less comforting or possibly even scary. However for each research participant, post-death encounters were very sacred and were experienced as loving, comforting, and reassuring messages from her beloved.

Three years ago I attended a weeklong workshop with Doreen Virtue, a psychologist and one of the foremost authorities on communication with the angelic realm. Angels have always been deemed “messengers of God” and stories abound of angels who protect, comfort and guide. Some of us do choose to see our beloved in this role, something akin to a guardian angel, continuing to support and guide us until we are reunited. Recently one of Doreen’s newsletters had this timely piece of advice. She writes that we often experience situations that appear to be negative, yet which contain rich hidden blessings and opportunities for growth. By calling on God and the angels we can shift from fear into peace and I quote, “Just as easily as you change the word SCARED into SACRED by rearranging the “C”, when you “C” the divine order and blessings within every situation and relationship, there’s nothing to be SCARED about...because it is all SACRED.”

On a more personal note, nearly thirty years later, I am still able to recall and reflect on the experience of communicating with my beloved as if it happened yesterday. This curiosity led me to discover what others who have lost a spouse or life partner



experienced and what impact it had on them. Although each experience was unique to the individual, we all shared a common bond of losing our life partner and experiencing the deceased after his death. As an aspiring counselor seeking to specialize in the area of bereavement, this research has increased my knowledge and understanding of death and dying. More importantly however, it has taught me that in befriending another person's pain and suffering, we as caregivers must befriend our own pain and suffering. Then we may become what Henri Nouwen called 'a wounded healer.' As Linda Leonard (1995) writes, " Getting in touch with one's soul means going through one's own struggle and despair and also realizing that it is working through those wounds that helps unite you with other people" (p.78).

Namaste

*wu/w.fenarts.com*

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*"Life is beautiful"*

*Fera Gonzalez*

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After-death Communication Research Foundation (<http://www.adcrf.org/ADC%20Stories.htm>)

## Appendix

### Written Consent Form

I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Psychology and Pastoral Counseling Program (MAPPC) offered at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton. As part of the degree requirements, I am completing a thesis on the topic of post-death encounters and their effect on the surviving spouse/life partner. I invite you to take part in my study as someone who has experienced after-death communication. Participation is voluntary and I will be interviewing a total of four individuals.

Participation in this study will involve the completion of a maximum two-hour, in-depth interview. The interview will consist mainly of open-ended questions to help you reflect on your personal experience of post-death communication and bereavement. As part of the data analysis, I will wish to contact you periodically upon completion of the interview by telephone, email or in person. You may withdraw from the research process at any time. You may also choose to withdraw your consent for use of any of the information you provide for research purposes or for future sharing of data post thesis.

The interview will not present any physical risk to you. However if the sensitive and emotional nature of the topic causes you distress and you wish to discontinue the interview, you are free to do so. As a researcher, my main role will be to listen as you relate your experiences within the structure and focus of the interview process. In discussing any personal topic, there is a potential for other pertinent issues to arise during our conversation that may need to be addressed. At no time will I take on the role of the therapist or provide an opinion or advice with regard to the information you reveal.

However, I will provide a list of agencies in your area where such services may be sought if you so desire. I am required by law to notify appropriate authorities should you disclose ongoing abuse to a minor child, a person-in-care, and/or the intent to harm yourself or others.

Each interview will be digitally voice-recorded and then transcribed. Interview data transcription will be done by a hired transcriber. The voice recording will not contain any identifying information. The transcripts themselves will be labeled: file A, file B, file C, and file D. The transcripts and information from them will be shared with my thesis supervisor and my program co-ordinator. Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained by using pseudonyms and by avoiding the use of any information that may identify you. The digital-voice recording and transcript of our interview will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. The digital-voice recording and the transcripts will be kept for a period of one year following completion of the final thesis. At this time the digital voice recordings will be deleted and the transcripts shredded.

Benefits of participating in this study may include opportunities to reflect on your experience of grief and loss and personal spiritual beliefs. In addition, your participation in the study will assist health care providers and counselors with increased understanding of grief and healing. My goal will be to analyze the data collected from your interview in order to explore your experience of post-death encounters and its effect on you.

I have read and understood the information sheet, and I am aware that I can ask questions about the research and receive satisfactory answers. I know that the participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I agree to take part in the interview and give my permission for tape-recording it, and for the use of quotes,

with the use of a pseudonym. I understand that the data might be looked at by the researcher's supervisors or peers for reviewing without my identity being revealed. Additionally, I am aware that the researcher may use the data in presentations/workshops or post studies after the final thesis has been accepted. I agree to take part in the research.

By signing this consent form, I agree that I will not make any financial claim for this information. The researcher cannot be held legally liable, personally, or otherwise, in contact or in tort.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the above statement and agree to participate as an interviewee under the conditions stated above.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Signature of the Interviewer

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Date

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