UNPACKING MY MOTHER: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
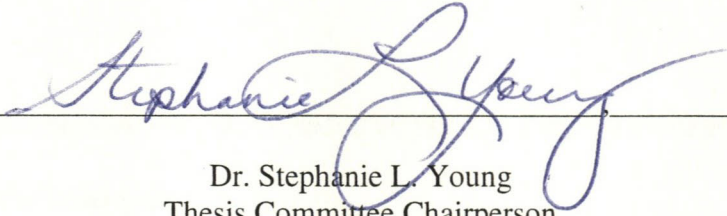
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MASTER OF ARTS

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty of the University of Southern Indiana,
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Dedicated to my beautiful children – Bryce, Madison and Grayson and my wonderful daughter-in-love Haley. You are my sunshine.

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Acknowledgments

It's hard to know where to begin when thanking the people who were integral in the completion

of a dream. I suppose the first place to start is with the person who inspired this work in the first

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Abstract

Clayton-Schnitker, Cindi S. Master of Arts in Communications, University of Southern Indiana, December, 2015. Unpacking My Mother: An Autoethnography. Major advisor: Dr. Stephanie L. Young.

This thesis is an autoethnography that focuses on the communicative consequences of the early loss of one woman's mother and the ways in which the loss of one's mother is disclosed to others. Early mother loss becomes part of a woman's identity, shaping the woman and mother she becomes. I provide a review of the current grief studies literature, primarily within the context of gender dynamics and throughout the lifespan. Additionally, I provide the theoretical framework of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) and look at various studies that engage in CPM, particularly in the ways we manage issues of grief. Then, I clarify my methodological approach of autoethnography and look at how autoethnographic research can be beneficial to exploring mother loss. I share my narrative accounts and memories about my mother and the loss of her. Particularly, I recount storied episodes with family and friends, providing moments of insight into how I disclose information about my mother, our relationship, and my loss. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how my autoethnographic reflections can contribute to larger discussions about mother-daughter relationships and bereavement.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Communication Privacy Management theory, Mother loss, grief, family communication

Introduction

I'm not sure what time it actually was when I drifted off to sleep. Her room is at the end of the hallway, and there is a bench outside the door. It is small and uncomfortable, but a place to rest, nonetheless. I hear steps—running and voices. Hushed, yet panicked. "It's time," I hear them say. Yet it takes me what seems like minutes to process what that means through the fog of the deep sleep I had finally welcomed. I somehow manage to pop my eyes open. Florescent lights, like all the hospital hallways I'd frequented. I turn toward the noise and see my father and my uncles running toward me. I leap off the bench into her room. The women in the family are all there. They are crying. I notice that they're physically apart from one another in an odd, random pattern. I weave through them to see what the matter is. Breath comes slowly. Jagged, short breaths with long pauses in between. I stand for a moment and wonder if I have the right to approach her. Would it be improper? No one else is near her body. I wonder why. My father, her husband of 20 years, pushes through the bystanders to her left side. He grabs her hand and squeezes it. I make a quick decision to take her other hand. I will be a grown up now. I will step forward and make a statement. Through the tears that are coming fast now, I lunge forward toward her and reach for her right hand. It is not warm enough, I think. Machines are making noises. Various relatives are saying things I can't recall. Muffled sounds. A nurse comes in and shuts off the heart monitor, which now displays an occasional, weak uptick. She walks away without eye contact, head hung with respect. I lean into my mother and say quietly, so only she can hear, "It's OK mom. You can go now." I mean it, too. I want her suffering to end. I want a normal life again. I want to be a kid who doesn't have a sick mother. I want relief for both of us. Her last breath comes. It is 2 a.m. and quiet. Just like that, she is gone. Dad says to my sister and me that it is over, and that the three of us will be starting a new life. She dies that September

night, that much I know. I won't realize for weeks to come that my notion of family and my

security of being loved died that night, too.

The loss of a loved one can be a devastating experience. From psychology to nursing to medicine, much research has been dedicated to understanding the process of bereavement (Klass, 1997; Klass & Walter, 2001; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Milkulincer & Shaver, 2008; Murphy, 2008; Nadeau, 2001; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Additionally, communication scholars have explored how we communicate grief, particularly within the context of interpersonal communication (Booth-Butterfield, Wanzer, Weil, & Krezmien, 2014; German, 1981), family communication (Carmon et al., 2010); the death of a spouse (Bergstrom & Holmes, 2000), pregnancy loss (Silverman & Baglia, 2015), and parental bereavement (Giannini, 2011; Titus & de Souza, 2011; Toller, 2008). However, little scholarly research has focused on adults who have lost a parent at a young age.

Specifically, this thesis is an autoethnography that focuses on the communicative consequences of the early loss of one woman's mother and the ways in which the loss of one's mother is disclosed to others. In the introduction to *Motherless Daughters,* Hope Edelman (1994) writes "most of the writings on parent loss still treat both parents and children as homogenous groups and overlook the specific gender issues that arise when a same-sex parent dies" (p. xxiv). Lacking is the critical exploration of the unique nuances of the same-gender mother-daughter relationship in the context of communication about grief. Women who experience early mother loss may feel a great deal of emotional loneliness, guilt, and sadness. Even with familial networks of support, to lose a mother as a girl or young woman is often a painful and isolating experience. While there is growing attention to stories of women losing a child, the voices and stories of motherless women often are not shared.

The early loss of a mother has a dramatic effect on the life of the child of that mother, not just for the childhood or adolescence, but the life of the adult that child becomes (Hawk, et. al. 2009). The grief of the loss of the mother may only be one aspect of the effects of mother loss. There are many practical changes the woman may face, like self-esteem (Stiffler, et. al. 2008), overall mental health and drive to succeed (Hawk, et. al. 2009), and the ability to relate to women who still have their mothers (Edelman, 2004). Early mother loss can become part of the woman's identity. Often, a woman may describe herself as "motherless woman" or "orphan," communicating to others an identity of loss. The identity of loss is almost like a set of glasses through which a woman observes the world. These glasses, like the grief the woman experiences, remain for a lifetime.

In the next chapter, I provide a review of the current grief studies literature, primarily within the context of gender dynamics and throughout the lifespan. Additionally, I provide the theoretical framework of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) and look at various studies that engage in CPM, particularly in the ways we manage issues of grief. In chapter three, I clarify my methodological approach of autoethnography and look at how autoethnographic research can be beneficial to exploring mother loss. In chapter 4, I share my narrative accounts and memories about my mother and the loss of her. Particularly, I recount storied episodes with family and friends, providing moments of insight into how I disclose information about my mother, our relationship, and my loss. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how my autoethnographic reflections can contribute to larger discussions about mother-daughter relationships and bereavement.

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My best friend, who lost her mother when she was 14, told me about a reoccurring dream she had for some lengthy period of time. She dreamt she was driving down the road and had a piece of gum in her mouth. She tried to remove the gum and throw it out the window of the car. But the more she pulled at the gum to remove it, the larger the wad became. It grew to uncomfortable proportions, and she would wake up feeling as if she was choking on it. She couldn't shake this dream and became concerned about it. She consulted a therapist, who advised her that the gum was a metaphor for all the information about her mother and feelings about how her father handled the death and the aftermath, and that she might continue to have the dream unless she spoke her peace. As she didn't feel she could actually confront her father at the time, due to her stepmother and other factors, she opted to write him a letter she would never send. She said all the things in it that she wanted to say aloud; things that she never had and likely never would. She would write and write until it was all out. She carefully folded the letter, put it in an envelope, and threw it away. She never dreamt of choking on her gum again.

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For me, the pain occasionally bubbles over and at odd times. I am shopping with Jamie, a cousin of mine by marriage. She is expecting her second child, and wants some new maternity clothes. Her mother–the archetype of a mother who loves you more than her own life – is with us. Jamie's mother buzzes around the store, picking out things for her to try on. "You look beautiful," she says, as she carefully examines her pregnant daughter. She clasps her hands in front of her chest and makes facial expressions of pride, as if her daughter was dipped in solid gold. This fashion show goes on for some time, and I sit and observe. After a pile of clothes is selected, the two women go to the counter to pay. A playful argument ensues between the two women over as to who will purchase the clothes. Her mother wants to pay, simply because she is

so delighted in her daughter and wants to express her love in some tangible way. Jamie wants to be independent and care for her own growing family. Suddenly, the stinging sensation of fresh tears wells up in my eyes. As I have been taught to not cry, at least not where I could be observed in tears, I turn on my heels and rush out of the store. I found a private place to allow the tears to come. Sobs follow, to my surprise. After a few minutes, I begin to wonder why I am so upset. No one will ever care for me like that again, I say quietly through my sobs. And there it is. My biggest breakdown to date. Not my wedding day or the day my daughter was born. This. The intense yet ordinary love between this mother and daughter is more than I could bear. This mother-daughter love is right there in front of me that day, unfiltered by actors on television or through a second-hand story, and I cannot watch.

Review of Literature

In this chapter, I present literature to support the use of Communication Privacy Management theory as a framework for understanding mother loss through autoethnography. My autoethnography attempts to understand why we, women who have lost our mothers, reveal and conceal information about our mothers. It is precisely the intersection between storytelling and the desire to reveal and conceal information about my lived experience that guides my research. To theoretically ground my autoethnography, I draw upon Communication Privacy Management theory as well as review literature regarding grief studies and bereavement scholarship.

Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM)

Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM) offers a critical lens for examining the ways people manage private information and the decisions they make to reveal or conceal private information (Petronio, 2002). CPM provides a framework for understanding why women, who may now be mothers, may or may not communicate information regarding their own mothers' death to others. That is, what are the ways in which motherless women talk about their mothers' lives and deaths and their own subsequent grief? What choices do we make in sharing or not sharing our loss? How does sharing stories about our mothers provide us ways to simultaneously memorialize our mothers and connect with our own children and others? While my autoethnography cannot serve as a voice for *the* story of mother loss, it can provide a starting point for examining how we communicate this phenomenon, an avenue for self-reflection with others, and as a form of narrative healing.

Specifically, CPM "is a practical theory constructed to permit applications that give us an opportunity to understand everyday problems and events that people encounter in families

(Petronio & Caughlin, 2006, p. 36). According to Petronio (2002), CPM focuses on how individuals assess the potential risks and rewards for disclosing private, personal information to another. Private information is defined as that which an individual feels ownership and feels they have the right to disclose at the time of their choosing (Hawk, et al., 2009; Petronio, 2002). Private information may include an individual's life experience and the stories one has collected over the lifespan.

The first principle of CPM is the tension between the inherent desire for people to reveal or conceal information. Another principle involves the ownership of information, especially as it relates to the individual's feelings that the information is private or public, and the desire to control that information (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2009). Rules that govern the level of privacy of information are set by criteria such as culture, gender, motivation, context and risk-benefit (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2009; Petronio, 2002). Individuals may weigh the cost and benefits involved with sharing or withholding private information (Dainton & Zelley, 2011). In regards to the decision to disclose information about a woman's mother loss to others, one may have competing desires to both reveal and conceal private information (Petronio, 2002, 2010). However, several factors may impact these choices including one's parental role (Thompson, Petronio, & Braithwaite, 2012), familial privacy rules that shape how family members react to a situation (Petronio, 2002), and the risk of shame, confusion, and negatively impacting the way the others view the woman in light of this new information.

This information is now shared or co-owned by the two individuals, and is no longer private to the mother, who may have held it as precious, almost sacred (Edelman, 1994). Baxter and Braithwaite (2009) noted that after disclosing private information, new boundaries may need to be coordinated between the discloser and the recipient of the information. In this context,

boundaries are "a visual representation of two sides; on one side people keep information to themselves and on the other side people share private information" (Dainton & Zelley, 2011, p. 70).

Additionally, friction or *boundary turbulence* (Petronio, 2002) may occur between the woman who reveals information about her mother and the recipient who receives the information. This may be due to the interaction not meeting the expectations of the woman, if the information about the deceased mother is not received positively, or if the child (or recipient) reveals the information subsequently in undesired ways (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2009, p. 316). Indeed, when privacy rules are violated (e.g., child reveals information shared by mother to others about grandmother's death), *privacy turbulence* can occur (Petronio, 2002). To correct privacy turbulence, mothers and children may have to develop new rules to coordinate boundaries (Petronio & Caughlin, 2010). The intense bond between a mother and her daughter may also make these boundaries particularly difficult to navigate (Edleman, 2006). Bekteshi & Kayser (2013) studied young mothers with daughters who are experiencing cancer. They noted that the mothers reported a desire to set an example of how to "be brave" in the face of adversity, because the mother feels she is the role model for her daughter (p. 2382; see also Gavish, Shoham & Ruvio, 2010). Nauta and Kokaly (2001) also observed that the mother is the most powerful role model in the life of a child. Since a mother often represents the safety and security for the entire life of the child, the loss of one's mother can be devastating (Edelman, 1994).

CPM provides a clear framework for exploring mother-child interactions and the motivations for why women may or may not communicate information regarding their mother's death. In fact, how privacy is managed within families can impact communication satisfaction in familial relationships (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Serewicz, Dickson, Huynh Thi Anh,

Morrison, & Poole, 2007). Much CPM research has focused on familial communication

including divorce (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Miller, 2009), infidelity (Thorson, 2009,

2015), family dynamics and money (Plander, 2013; Romo, 2011, 2014), "protective buffering"

or purposefully withholding information to protect someone (Joseph & Afifi, 2010), in-law

relationships (Mikucki-Enyart, 2011), stepfamilies (Afifi, 2003), and adoption (Docan-Morgan,

2011; Scharp & Steuber, 2014).

In addition, CPM research has focused on issues related to health communication (Bute,

Petronio & Torke, 2015; Canzona, Peterson, Villagran, & Seehusen, 2014; Hovick, Yamasaki,

Burton-Chase & Peterson, 2015; Petronio, 2006; Petronio, Helft, & Child, 2013; Petronio &

Sargent, 2011; Petronio, et al., 2004; Venetis, et al., 2012). CPM has been utilized to explore a

number of topics focused on sexual health disclosures (Nichols, 2012) including sexually

transmitted disease (Tenzek et al., 2013), fertility issues (Bute & Vik, 2010; Durham, 2008;

Durham & Braithwaite, 2009; Lewis, Matheson & Brimacombe, 2011; Rauscher & Durham,

2015; Steuber & Solomon, 2011), and miscarriage or infant loss (Bute & Brann, 2015).

Additionally, scholars have focused on the disclosure of disability (Blockmans, 2014), cancer

(Venetis, Magsamen-Conrad, Checton, & Greene, 2014; Weber & Solomon, 2008), and drug and

alcohol abuse (Riestenberg, 2007; Romo, 2012). CPM has also been useful for exploring gender

and sexual orientation disclosures related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered identities

(Lannutti, 2013; McKenna-Buchanan & Rudnick, 2015; Schrimshaw, Downing, Cohn, & Siegel,

2014) as well as in the context of friendship (Bello, Brandau-Brown, & Ragsdale, 2014;

Kennedy-Lightsey, Martin, Thompson, Himes & Clingerman, 2012).

CPM, then, is useful for examining a variety of communications topics including grief

and loss. Toller and McBride (2013) studied the motivation for parents to communicate (or not

communicate) with their children about a loved one's death. They found that parents are primarily responsible for disseminating information about death to their children and set the emotional expression rules that will determine the success of coping with grief over time. They argue that more research should be devoted to understanding disclosures about death between parents and children, due to the impact of these disclosures. Additionally, authors Hunter and Smith (2008) suggest that children of all ages experience grief, even infants. Thus, the topic of sharing information about death as a method of managing the grieving process is vital. In fact, *critical incidents* such as death of a loved one may not only provide a context for examining the "how" and "why" of personal disclosures, but also may necessitate the renegotiation of privacy boundaries and the shifting of privacy rules (Petronio, 2010, p. 186).

In sum, CPM can help to explain how and why mothers decide how to talk, if at all, with their children about the death of their mothers. The importance of the role of the mother in the life of the child in terms of modeling many behaviors (including "how" to grieve) combined with the impact of the communication about grief from a parent to a child is indeed impactful to the lifelong process of coping with loss.

Grief and Loss

Grief and loss are common experiences in life and have been studied at length within the medical field (Golden & Abel, 2014). Additionally, large bodies of work exist about the grief within psychology (Boelen, de Keijser, van den Hout & van den Bout, 2011; Falconer, Sachsenweger, Gibson, & Norman, 2011; Harper, O'Connor & O'Carroll, 2014; Kelley, 2014), sociology (Bonnette & Broom, 2012; Cain, 2012; Weaver & Jackson, 2012), nursing (Dion, 2014; Houck, 2014; Lindauer & Harvath, 2014), social work (Knight & Gitterman, 2014; McClatchey & Wimmer, 2014; Pomeroy, 2011), anthropology (Brown, 2009; Lewis, 2014;

Walter, 2000), religious studies (Cowchock et al., 2011), and communication studies (Powell &

Matthys, 2013; Titus, & de Souza, 2011; Toller, 2011). Specifically, interpersonal and family

communication research has examined a number of death and bereavement issues including how

parents guide children who have experienced the sudden loss of a sibling (Horsley & Patteron,

2006; Rossetto, 2015), couple communication in bereavement (Hooghe, Neimery, & Rober,

2011), parental bereavement (Bonnette & Broom, 2012; Dion, 2014; Titus & de Souza, 2011;

Toller, 2011; Weaver & Jackson, 2012;), end-of life conversations (Cain, 2012; Lindauer &

Harvath, 2014; Pomeroy, 2011) and final conversations with dying family members (Keeley,

Generous, & Baldwin, 2014).

Much communication scholarship has examined grief including the characterization of

grief in mass media (Drori-Avraham, 2006; Duncan, 2012), expressions of loss in the digital

world (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010; Falconer, Sachsenweger, Gibson

& Norman, 2011) and interpersonal expressions of grief (Balas, 2005; Doveling, 2015; German,

1981). Additionally, there is a growing field of study regarding the electronic expressions of

grieving and loss through social media such as Facebook, Twitter or MySpace. Interactions

through social media may provide support that people who are grieving are missing in their

physical worlds (Doveling, 2015; Duncan 2012). The digital arena is becoming a more natural

space for disclosures and support, especially for younger generations. Doveling (2015) notes

that expressing intimacy online, such as through providing emotional support, is becoming a

regular activity.

In addition, grief can be experienced in many circumstances, beyond the loss of a loved

one. In fact, in a lot of circumstances, change itself is a reason to grieve. Times such as going

through a divorce (Crosby, Gage & Raymond, 1983), losing a job (Shepherd, 2003), losing

mobility or independence because of a permanent disability (Werner-Beland & Agee, 1980),

ending a friendship (Jalma, 2008) and losing possessions due to natural disaster (Shelby &

Tredinnick, 1995) might all prompt a grieving process.

But what is grief? Bosticco and Thompson (2005a) state that grief is a "fundamental

Along with various contexts, the grieving process can vary from person to person and

situation to situation. According to Kubler-Ross (1975), there are five stages of grieving: denial,

anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She notes that these are not linear, and that they

may be experienced more than one time during the process. Many scholars agree this

characterization of the process is not only accurate, but transferrable to grief beyond the loss of

human life (Boniello, 1980; Crosby, Gage & Raymond, 1983; Krigger, McNeely & Lippmann,

1997; Werner-Beland & Agee, 1980).

But what is grief? Bosticco and Thompson (2005a) state that grief is a "fundamental

human process" (p. 1) that is "both psychological and a social and communicative process"

which is among the most difficult people must face (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005b, p. 257).

Bereavement is a lifelong process with no end, and it is one that cycles in and out of seasons of

intensity or manifestation of symptoms (Rowe & Harman, 2014). Grief is a process that has

distinct symptoms such as anger and changes in daily patters such as eating or sleeping (Bosticco

& Thompson, 2005b). Grief varies by person and by the type of loss, but usually carries strong

emotion such as guilt, loneliness and feelings of abandonment (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005b).

Grief usually involves crying, which helps to release emotional stress. Some in the grieving

process may turn to or away from religion at this time.

Specifically, some scholarship has been dedicated to mother loss and the ensuing grief of

the death of one's mother (McClatchey & Wimmer, 2014; Redin, 2011, Pivnic, 2014).

According to Edelman (1994) mother loss occurs when a mother dies or abandons her living

child(ren). The mother-daughter relationship is essential to the healthy development of a

daughter. "Mothers and daughters are connected to each other and this connection is lifelong"

(Kranz & Daniluk, 2002, p. 2). It can be surmised, then, that the loss of this relationship through

death can change the person this motherless woman becomes. Foote, Valentich and Gavel

(1996) note that the love from a mother is irreplaceable and without end. Edelman (1994)

suggests that a mother is synonymous with security and comfort for women of all ages. She also

argues that mothers are the primary female role models for their daughters, and without the

ability to learn from mothers, daughters can develop a variety of concerns, including issues of

low self-esteem and concerns with future attachments. In other words, a girl will have to become

a woman in a vacuum.

Additionally, grief is different depending upon when, in the development of the daughter,

the mother dies. Edelman's (1994) study on the early loss of a mother (in childhood, adolescence

or early adulthood) notes that what makes this death unique, and perhaps complicated is that, in

many cases, the child's father or other blood relatives are still living and able (perhaps also

willing) to continue to guide and nurture the child through the years to come. As Redin (2011)

argues, "Research has demonstrated that effective coping by adolescents comes from a secure

mother-child bond and open communication" (p. 15; see also Clemmons, 2009; Kristjanson et

al., 2004). Stiffler et al. (2008) also conducted research on the coping strategies of adolescent

girls whose mothers were battling breast cancer. This research did not address how the girls

coped with the deaths of their mothers (the mothers of the participants were in remission). Even

less research exists to explain how some children are more successful in coping with the death of

their mothers than others. As Nager and de Vries (2004) suggest, "what little is known suggests

that adult children's reactions to a parent's death fall on a continuum from that of relative

dispassion to extreme distress. Persons who had an extremely dependent relationship with their parent seem to respond with greater distress at the death" (p. 45). This study also suggests that the woman's attachment style may affect how she communicates about her mother loss. However, Edelman (1994) suggests that children cannot handle long periods of emotional distress, and they will seek to relieve the distress, either with the help of a trusted adult, or perhaps through less helpful outlets. In other words, children and adolescents need stability and a healthy outlet for their feelings of grief.

Klapper, Moss, Moss and Rubinstein (1994) studied mother loss and middle aged daughters. One compounding factor in their study is that many of the fathers of these women had passed away prior to the deaths of their mothers, thus leaving them without a living parent. Foote, Valentich and Gavel (1996) describe living through adulthood without a mother as "anxious muddling; devastated muddling; vaguely satisfied muddling" (p. 148). Additionally, the authors criticize North American culture for "not encouraging the open communication of feelings of loss and mourning," the lack of patience for the grieving process, and the lack of safe spaces for women to talk about their mothers who have died (p. 150).

In fact, this silencing of grief is discussed by several scholars (Burke, Neimeyer, Young, Bonin & Davis, 2014; Nazaré, Fonseca & Canavarro, 2013). For example, Rowe and Harman (2014) argue that women experience periods of more intense grief over the losses of their mothers on special occasions (like becoming a mother herself) and anniversaries. However, social support for the bereft may wane after time passes (Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012). Bostecco and Thompson (2005b) argue that internal or cultural pressures may cause a person to remain silent. Additionally, bereft individuals may have relational partners in their social networks who are "unable or unwilling to listen to their grief stories" (p. 258).

Nonetheless, across literature, the dominant paradigm of bereavement communication is that the telling of one's story, to make narrative sense of the loss, in an important healing process (e.g., Bosticco & Thompson, 2005a, 2005b; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000). As Hooghe, Neimeyer, and Rober (2011) maintain, "confronted with death, we need to create stories to make order of disorder and to find meaning to the meaningless" (p. 907). In fact, sharing stories of loss with family members can potentially bring people closer together and enhance intimacy (Rober, van Eesbeek, & Elliott, 2006; Sedney et al., 1994). Bosticco and Thompson (2005a) found that people find comfort in storytelling after a loss because people need to talk about their grief, and that the process of storytelling helps keep the loved one alive in some way. Additionally, storytelling can provide catharsis for those who are grieving.

Autoethnography, then, provides a space for sharing one's grief experiences as well as a way of critically examining how one makes choices for disclosing one's loss. For example, in exploring grief regarding the loss of one's mother, Doshi (2014) writes about caring for her mother with terminal cancer and how the lack of comfort care for her mother affected her grief. Additionally, Jago (2015) writes of her need to remember and also to forget aspects of her mother's life and death in order to manage her grief. Ultimately, she wonders, "how do you hold on to a ghost?" (p. 3).

In summary, much scholarship has examined grief as process, one that is unique to the individual and that may change with the passing of time. From a family communication perspective, grief is an "individual and a shared experience" and family is the most "significant social group where grief is experienced" (Kissane & Bloch, 1994, p. 728). Sharing stories, specifically from an autoethnographic perspective, can provide grief and bereavement studies

with a more nuanced understand in the ways grief is communicated. Utilizing CPM, too, can

provide a clear theoretical framework for examining these grief narratives.

Methodology

In this chapter, I reflect upon the methodological process of my autoethnography. Through personal narrative, I show how I collect my autobiographical "data" or narrative fragments to make sense of my experiences. Additionally, I contextualize my methodological reflections by providing literature on how autoethnography is a qualitative method that fosters self-awareness and transformation (see Custer, 2014). As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) note, "as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (para. 1). Therefore, it is important to share the steps and roadblocks of my autoethnographic journey.

It is important to note that my first forays into this research project began with a different methodology. Initially, I had intended to engage in a qualitative narrative study, grounded in Communication Privacy Management theory, on mother loss. I was to collect and analyze stories from other women about losing their mothers. I conducted a small study with this goal in mind, and I interviewed a few women I knew. I had carefully crafted questions to guide the interviews, and I hoped that common themes about loss would emerge from these stories. However, after conducting a few interviews, I made some critical observations. First, the women were very hesitant to give details about their deceased mothers. When the recorder went on, I was surprised to discover the women's reluctance to talk at length about their mothers – to give details and feelings, especially considering I knew them, and I knew some of their stories through previous conversations we'd shared. After the recorder was turned off, I would get comments like, "that was really hard" or "did I do OK?" While these conversations were rich in their own right, I felt that I was not getting the level of self-disclosure necessary to truly understand this cultural phenomenon (living as a motherless woman). It seemed that it was just too difficult a topic for these women to talk about. This phenomenon caused me to reflect upon what might be stifling

these women's stories. Second, while these women's stories resonated with me, I felt that a

better way of examining mother loss was to critically reflect upon my own experiences of losing

my mother. In order to understand this phenomenon of mother loss, I would first have to dig

deeper and tell my own story. And when one member of my thesis committee suggested

autoethnography as a way to remedy these concerns, I knew what I had to do. I would start anew.

<div align="center">***</div>

My advisor tells me to begin journaling "like crazy," to begin this new-to-me method of

writing. I will take a "crash course" in autoethnography as methodology. I sit down in my living

room and the stories pour out of me – the scene of her death, the difficulties with my father after

her death, and how I've talked to my children about my mother's life and death. These big

stories lead to smaller stories, and I find myself searching for memories day and night. I type

wherever I can use my laptop – fingers moving at warp-speed across the keys. Frankly, my

writing is sporadic, but intense. I write a little. I read a little. I fold a load of laundry, hanging

my husband's work shirts with care. I write a page, then go pick up children here and there and

deliver them where they belong – sometimes just my own kids, and sometimes it's a car load of

Madison's friends. I grade some essays in between writing deadlines. Sometimes, I stare at the

pictures in my home office, allowing my eyes to disengage so my mind can remember and feel

those memories. I use my senses to recollect my mom. I look at her pictures. I sneak down to the

basement when no one else is home to open her box of high school memories. I try to smell her

scent, but it has long been replaced by the musty smell of storage. I handle these precious,

delicate items that she treasured, like an empty cigarette package that has "Allen, 1969" written

on it for some reason, and I fanaticize that she's still here. I talk about her more often and to

more people. And in that act, in the speaking about her, more memories arise. Writing this

thesis has given me an opportunity to say things I've never said about her, or think things I've never thought about her. On one occasion, reading back a story I had just written brings me to tears. I read on through blurred vision and wipe the falling tear drops from my chin. Life goes on, and so did I, but the enormity of the grief remains, even if it is buried quite deeply. This process has brought a lot of that up. Perhaps my inability to talk about the grief at the time was due to a lack of interest of those around me or a lack of resources. I don't know. But the grief has slowly festered inside me. A wound that will not go away. And now 25 years later, I am ready. Secure in place and time to speak.

Yet, I'm overwhelmed at just how many stories I should tell, if I allowed myself to do so. There are so many stories, so many memories, so much to write. But slowly, I begin to focus on not just my memories and how I remember my mother, but how I communicate with others (friends, family, co-workers) about her. I begin to write about these moments of disclosure, of sharing (or not sharing) with others my grief, my relationship, my mother. Serendipitously, my children provide me with real-time opportunities to examine my disclosures about my mother. Or perhaps those opportunities always existed, and I was not as attuned to them as I am now.

Additionally, I begin to immerse myself in autoethnographic literature and grief studies. There are so many stories that others have shared. So many autoethnographies that have looked at interpersonal relationships including family dynamics (Bochner, 2012; Sotirin, 2010), grief (Hollander, 2004; Isaac, 2007; Lee, 2006; McKenzie, 2015; Owens, 2014; Paxton, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2011; Wyatt, 2008) and mother-daughter relationships (Doshi, 2014, Eicher-Catt, 2004; Jago, 2015; Terry, 2012; Young, 2009). I am simultaneously overwhelmed and inspired by all of the literature. At times, I have a lingering, low-level sense of panic. Will I be able to complete this thesis? Am I emotionally strong enough to do this? How can my stories, my experiences, my

life, extend the literature, contribute to all of that research already out there? I move back and

forth, from subject to object. I position myself both as the speaking subject and as the object of

my study. Rather than standing on the sidelines, I write about me, delve deeper into my

experiences, to better understand mother loss. From the inside out.

Autoethnography as Methodology

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "autobiographies that self-

consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural

descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation" (p. 742). To

engage in autoethnography means examining the autobiographical data with a critical,

interpretive eye. Through self-examination, one can hope to try to gain a cultural understanding

of self and others (Ellis, 2004; Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2014). As Denzin (2004) argues,

autoethnography is a method about "real people with real lives" that allows readers to witness

our experiences (p. 140). Autoethnography, then, can provide a window into the thoughts and

feelings of motherless women, creating a narrative space to better understand this type of loss

and how it is communicated with others. As a form of narrative, qualitative research method,

autoethnography focuses on how the individual lived experience of the researcher can provide

larger, cultural experiences (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Autoethnography allows for

the researcher to not only critically examine the self, but also reveal stories that often are

silenced, overlooked, and marginalized. In fact, personal narratives are a form of conscious-

raising and "function as powerful tools in an effort to enact both social understanding and

political recognition" (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005, p. 24). While there are many approaches to

engaging in autoethnography, like ethnography the first step is data collection. Rodrigues and

Ryave (2002) argue for "systematic self-observation," a data collection technique that involves

the autoethnographer to observe and reflect upon their own behaviors. These include "cognitive

processes, emotions, motives, concealed actions, omitted actions, and socially restricted

activities" (p. 3). This means critically examining the private world of the individual. Journaling,

for example, can provide a way for collecting one's narrative fragments. While it is not always

possible to write down thoughts and feelings at the time of an event, one can still attempt to

remember the past and document one's memories. Poulos (2009) describes the process of

remembering and forgetting in his book *Accidental Ethnography*. He describes remembering

and forgetting as "two vital energies – the memory that holds us in a coherent life narrative and

the forgetting that allows us to go on in the face of pain and loss and trauma" (p. 39). Indeed,

forgetting traumatic experiences can be a way to go on with life in peace. As Poulos notes,

"forgetting is essential to sanity" (p. 39). In my case, my adult self must recollect how I, as a

child, lived through my mother's illness and death as well as recall moments of disclosure about

my mother with others. It is through the writing process, of reconstructing multiple sensory

experiences, that I can re-create memories of my mother. I must sort through the traumatic

memories I might otherwise wish to forget, with the good memories I certainly wish to

remember. McGlashan (1986) suggests that "human agents consciously and unconsciously craft

strategic means to managing the dialectics of memory and forgetting" (from Poulos, 2009, p. 39)

Simultaneously with data collection is analysis and interpretation. Chang (2008) notes

that recalling past experiences means selecting and evaluating certain stories to fulfill one's

research criteria. One searches for recurring patterns and emerging themes within the stories as

well as utilizes theoretical frameworks to "make sense" of these experiences. The

autoethnographer continues to refine and reflect upon these stories, shaping the interpretative

process. Young (2003) described her process of storytelling was created by first examining

related literature to her work, and then writing stories in relation to the literature. Pozeg (2014)

employs the opposite strategy – connecting literature with the stories as they are written.

An important aspect of autoethnography includes (re)claiming stories in order to make

life better and pushing through pain (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). In fact, autoethnographic

research may assist with self-transformation and healing from the past (Foster, McAllister, &

O'Brien, 2005). According to Ellis (2007), writing about the death of her partner was essential to

continuing on with her life. Others also see writing autoethnography as a therapeutic necessity

(Hollander, 2004; Isaac, 2007; Lee, 2006; McKenzie, 2015; Owens, 2014; Paxton, 2014; Tilley-

Lubbs, 2011; Wyatt, 2008)

Additionally, autoethnography can provide a space for examining familial relationships

(Adams, 2006; 2012; Ellis, 1993, 1996; Hermann, 2005; Jago, 2006; Poulos, 2009). For

example, Poulos (2009) examines secrecy within families and the anxiety involved with writing

stories and sharing memories of family. Additionally, Stern (2015) explores how her mother's

battle with addiction affected her childhood and is now affecting her adulthood, as well as the

health of her brother.

In fact, much autoethnographic research has focused on matters of grief (Clifton, 2014;

Doshi, 2014; Isaac, 2007; Jago, 2015; Lee, 2006; McKenzie, 2015; Owens, 2014; Paxton, 2014;

Russell, 2003; Sealy, 2012; Terry, 2012; Wyatt, 2008). For example, Doshi (2014) writes of the

final 48 hours of her mother's life, focusing on her inner feelings with the events she

experienced. Additionally, Terry (2012) describes the grief after the tragic loss of her daughter

and challenges the notion of a 'normal' grieving process. Personal narratives of grief, then,

provide us with a humanistic perspective of the biological and cultural phenomena of death.

From an ethical perspective, studying grief offers scholars insight into the nuanced process of

grieving. It is as personal as any process in life, and requires a variety of personal narratives in order to be understood.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

My husband asks me why I'm not acting like myself. I've been in the rocking chair in our bedroom playing solitaire on my phone for some time. I've lost track of how much time. I can tell it's been a while, because I tend to grind my teeth when I space out like that, and my jaws feel sore. Because he asks, and his big blue eyes (my favorite feature of his) are wide with concern, I snap out of this zombie-like state. I don't know what to say at first, because I didn't realize I had retreated from our family time in this way. I wound up here without much thought. I tell him, without thinking, that I'm really stressed and just feel shut down. He asks me if it's the pressure of the writing deadlines and I say yes. But it's more than that. He has his parents, and even his grandparents. I don't think he's ever even attended a funeral. What he doesn't know, and what I can't explain in a way that will make sense to him, is that bringing up all these memories of mom is emotional work that takes a toll on me mentally and physically. My stomach hurts and my chest feels tight. I feel a level of melancholy that is highly unusual for me. I'm normally a happy, even exuberant person. In a way, I feel like I'm wading through wet cement. My whole body feels heavy. It's work that is hard, but not in vain. The hope is that, through finishing this project, I will permanently remove the heaviness that sits just below that easy smile on my face each day.

Autoethnography as Ethical Research

As Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2014) state, autoethnography is "vulnerability with a purpose" (p. 25). Autoethnography requires the researcher to take emotional risks and make one's private experiences public (see Carpenter, 2015). As Gannon (2006) writes,

autoethnographic "truth" comes from "a self who was 'there,'" (p. 475). Ellis (2004) notes that autoethnographers "look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations" (p. 37). And as Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) argue, "when we embrace this kind of vulnerability in our research and representations, we commit ourselves to improving the lives of others as well as our own" (p. 39). Dashper (2015) writes about the troubling aftermath of the vulnerability she demonstrated in her autoethnography regarding an accident that left her with broken bones and shattered confidence. This exposure, then, could have consequences beyond the publication deadline.

In addition to negotiating with what will or will not be shared about one's self, there are also ethical concerns regarding those individuals in our stories. As Petronio (2002) argues, people believe that they have a fundamental right to own their personal information. However, what happens when an individual's story includes other individuals? A compounding factor is that most life events are "co-constructed" or experienced with others (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Mikucki-Enyart, 2011). Sharing one's story, then, is complicated by others' memories and perspectives of the experience. Since autoethnography privileges the writer's voice, it is important for the autoethnographer to be aware of these "relational ethics" (Ellis, 2007). Ellis notes that we have a responsibility to the people we cast as characters in our autoethnographic writing. By its very nature, autoethnographic writing cannot be impersonal and must hold confidential the reactions of the participants/characters. We must balance the act of telling our stories truthfully, to the best of our abilities, and from our own perspectives with honoring the wishes of those in our stories, alive and dead.

In my case, I cannot begin to predict what my mother would think about this project. Who she would have been after 25 more years of living is a mystery to me. But I do know this –

she loved me and my sister more than her own life, and this project is beneficial to me.

Therefore, I must surmise that she would be supportive of it. My dad and his wife, on the other

hand, would likely not appreciate the revelation of unflattering stories about them. I do not have

a relationship with them of any sort, so there is no way to gain approval. I do note, however, that

these memories are from my perspective, and may not parallel with their memories of the same

events. I certainly considered this paradox when writing and came to the conclusion that our

relationship could not get worse, so the benefit of telling my story outweighed the cost. Our

relationship has meandered from adversarial to polite yet distanced and everywhere in between. I

weighed those thoughts with the fact that most of the motherless friends I have also had difficult

relationships with their fathers and stepmothers after the death of their mother. These stories,

then, are for their benefit as much as mine.

Additionally, I reflect upon how others in the larger community saw my family, as a

cohesive family unit after my mother died and my father remarried. As my dad was a public

figure, he worked to maintain that image as part of his unofficial public relations campaign to

keep his business alive in our small community. Yet this public image was not the reality of our

private lives. I hated living that lie, and this thesis allows me to set my own record straight. As

Ellis (2007) notes, "seldom are we are we completely open with people in our lives about how

we see them or how we see ourselves relative to them" (p. 17). Indeed, I was not open with my

dad about how hard my time under his roof had been after Mom died until a volcano-of-a-

conversation erupted in 2009. I wrote my dad a letter after a strange and heated phone call,

saying all the things I always wanted to say about his (lack of) love and support. I mailed it

before I had any time to reconsider. Shortly after, I received a letter from his wife telling me

'goodbye and good luck' or something of that sentiment. They were not prepared or willing to

hear me out, and by speaking out anyway, it was the death knell to the polite and cordial

relationship we had created throughout my adult years.

Additionally, autoethnography means seeking out one's own truths through storytelling. I

told the stories in this autoethnography to the best of my memory. I did not embellish or create

them, except perhaps accidentally as a result of the hazy process of remembering. I must stress

that this is my story, and my memory, and I take full responsibility for every word. Adams

(2008) suggests ethics in narrative writing is essentially "doing more good than harm" (p. 177).

He reveals that his family members, about which he writes, are not inclined to challenge his

written descriptions of them for a variety of reasons. This is also the case for me. Adams (2008)

also argues that one must understand "narrative privilege" – that is, having been educated and

accepted within the academy as a platform from which to write (p. 180). In other words, my

story is told because I have risen to a life place where I hold the proverbial pen. There are

considerations regarding power dynamics within that idea (see Young, 2008).

Engaging in ethical autoethnographic research also involves searching for external

validity of one's memories and experiences (Chang, 2008). While this may not always be

possible, one should consider searching for "outside sources" such as interviews and artifacts to

help enhance autoethnographic accuracy. For example, my mom's brother once told me that he

was alone in the room with my mother when she died. In his memory, no one else was there. For

a period of time, I began to doubt my recall and wondered if it was all an illusion and what he

was saying was true. I finally asked some of my other family members, including my dad, who

corroborated my version of the story. I was reassured that we were all there. Yet, for my uncle,

he seemed adamant about his version of events as truth. Indeed, many people recall memories

with fondness, even if the events were difficult or negative, perhaps in order to protect

themselves from harboring ill feelings (Holland & Kensinger, 2013; Li, 2013).

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I see how much life I have lived between my undergraduate graduation and the beginning

of my graduate program. Nearly a dozen years had lapsed, and I was a very different person.

While I entered graduate school for a master's certificate to pursue my dream of teaching at the

college level, I realize now my academic journey has become a personal one. At some point

during my graduate coursework, the information I was learning began to click. I was connecting

what I was learning to my interpersonal relationships, my career experiences, and my mothering

experiences. I began to let it change me. I let the material open my mind. I began to care that I

was actually learning about life, not just gaining a certification.

I had three choices to end my master's program. I wanted to create a thesis from the

beginning of my consideration of my choices. The program chair cautioned me that theses tend

to drag on, so perhaps I should consider the comprehensive exam in order to finish more timely.

However, I had a personal desire to tell these stories and to give a voice to this experience for

motherless women. She wasn't incorrect, though. With starting a new job, selling our home and

moving, and a few stops and starts, this process has taken a full year. I think it would not be a

true thesis project experience without a race to the finish, however.

I remember that I used to keep a paper journal when I was in high school. In it, I wrote

my thoughts and feelings, probably about boys, and certainly about how unhappy I was without

my mother. I have attempted to start journals on and off in my adult life. The hum-drum of the

day to day life of a working wife and mother gets in the way of such things, so the thoughts,

feelings and observations just wash away with the tide of life. This methodology has given me

incentive to record my story in an organized, grounded way. I wish I had such an article from

my own mother. To read her thoughts and feelings, even about the small things would give me a

coveted intimate moment with the adult she was. Now, should something happen to me, my

children will have this thesis as a record of some aspects of my life. That makes this more than a

met requirement for a degree. It makes it a gift to me, and to my beloveds.

I wonder what my mother would say if she could see me now.....

Autoethnographic Reflections

Telling the Kids

I have a picture frozen in my mind. The actual photograph is somewhere in a scrapbook. My little girl, when her thighs were still deliciously chunky, wearing a red and white checkered dress for the 4ᵗʰ of July. Pigtails were carefully crafted but her hair isn't quite long enough. Strands hang around her neck, blowing in the wind. She was about two and a half. I'm next to her, squatting down to her height and holding on to Mom's headstone. She's squinting in the sun, and I'm wearing sunglasses. I decide a small smile is in order. Nothing too happy-looking. We had taken Madison to the cemetery to start the talks about my mom. At some point, I had decided that she was just old enough. I didn't want too much time to pass before she knew about Mom. I didn't want her to live her life as if she didn't have a maternal grandma. You do, *I'd tell her,* but she lives in heaven.

At this time in her development, she was really into "stickas" (stickers) and stuck them all over herself first thing every morning. Naturally, she wanted to give Grandma Chari some of her stickas. They were the puffy kind – ladybugs. She put them all over the top left corner of her headstone. That was about a decade ago. Time and weather have worn off the ladybugs and the foam pieces that were underneath them, but the base of those stickers are still there, lovingly placed by small, chubby fingers.

One can imagine how confusing this abstract concept is to a toddler. Grandma Chari is *here* at this cemetery, but she's really in heaven. There were many follow up questions as a result, to clarify if she was at the cemetery, as I'd shown her, or in heaven, as I'd told her. We had to remediate how a person, any person who had lived, could be in two places at the same time. When she was about 8, she had finally achieved the ability to understand that for us, the

body and the spirit are two separate things. Now, we could move on to how and why my mother

died.

Revealing information about death to children requires special consideration such the

chronological age of the child and/or the developmental readiness of the child (Edelman, 1994;

Kubler-Ross, 1975). For me, finding the right moment between developmental readiness and my

desire to insert my mother into my children's lives has been the way I determine what and how

to reveal to my children about my mother, who they will never meet. These conversations allow

for children to understand that their parents have parents ("grandma was mommy's mommy")

and an understanding that events happened before their births. Studies have focused on four key

aspects of children's understanding of the biology of death: universality – the understanding that

all living beings must die one day; irreversibility – the fact that once dead, one cannot come back

to life; cessation of corporeal life – the realization that death involves the termination of all

corporeal functions and organs; and causality – an appreciation that it is precisely the cessation

of the functioning of the body in some way that causes death (Edelman, 2004; Harris, &

Giménez, 2005).

My maternal grandmother died of cancer, with breast as primary. I recall my mother's

very limited information about her life and death. My mother was only 7 years old when her

mother died, and the illness and death were hidden from her. She recalled that after her mother's

death, she was told that her mother "went away," not that she had died. She was not permitted to

go to the funeral and was not told that her mother had died until she was about thirteen. Because

her dad had already died when she was 2, she was orphaned. She didn't have anyone to give her

information about her mother's life or death.

I was in fifth grade when I got "the talk" from my mom. Not the kind of talk most fifth graders get, but the cancer talk. One afternoon, after arriving home from school on the bus, my mother told my sister and me to sit down. We noted the seriousness in her face, and we complied (probably one of the few times we immediately complied with her requests in those years), sitting nearer one another on the couch than we normally would. Mom sat on the coffee table, facing us. The table had glass in the center, and we were never allowed to sit on it. She was breaking her own rule. This was serious. Her knees were wedged in between the sets of our knees, although I don't remember if they touched or not. She got right to the point. "I found a lump in my breast and went to the doctor. They say it's cancer and I'm going to have it removed. After it's removed, I'm going to be just fine." Most importantly, my mom then uttered the words that tempted fate and made me distrust grand proclamations for the entirety of my life – "I'm not going to die and leave you like my mother left me."

That one statement still haunts me. It impacts me in so many ways, but most importantly it shapes how I communicate with my own children about illness and death. I can't make them any promises about how long I will live, or even how long they will live. That is not up to me, and it wasn't up to my mother. When Madison would ask me what happens if I get breast cancer, I tell her, "Well, medicine has improved a lot since the 1980's and doctors know a lot more now. They can detect it much earlier which improves chances of survival, so even if I do get it, with good care, I could still live a long life as most women do. I'm seeing the best doctors in the region who take excellent care of me. I'm doing everything in my power to stay well and to live a long life." This proclamation has to be repeated every so often as the reassurances have a definite shelf life.

The disclosures have changed over time as my daughter has grown into adolescence. We are driving past a cemetery when my nearly thirteen-year-old daughter Madison questions me about headstones. "Why are some of them so small?" she asks. I tell her that they had probably been there a long time and that people didn't used to do large headstones. "Are there really people buried under them?" she asks. "Sort of," I reply, thinking the response of how people were buried behind the stones is probably too much information for this exchange. She wants to know if cemeteries hire someone to mow all around the stones. "Yes, they do," I say, matter-of-factly. She thinks that would be the creepiest profession ever. She wants to know about how the burials works "Do they actually dig a hole and put people in them?" she asks. I note her squished up nose signaling confusion and maybe a bit of disgust. I tell her there was a casket that then went into a vault and then into the ground. Some part of me is really proud that I know this, as if I was the veteran of some obscure and twisted war. "I picked mom's casket out," I tell her. She looks at me, wide-eyed and mouth agape, as I continue. "She loved baby blue, so I made sure she got one that color. I walked through rows of caskets on display in the back of the funeral home and found the one I really liked." I hadn't known prior to that experience there was a showroom in the back of funeral homes, but then again, I was only thirteen. What could I have known? I picked one without too many frills. She didn't like a big fuss. I wonder to myself, why did Dad let me pick it out? Did I say I wanted to do so? But I remember feeling the crisp white satin interior of the casket, running my hand over it several times until it suited me. I thought in very concrete terms then. She will be here forever, I remember thinking. I want it to be soft. "I talked my Dad into buying her the most expensive vault they had, so it would delay…you know…the decomposition." Madison agreed that it was a good thing, but I note how casual that seems for her. After all, it's not her mother that is going to decompose, at least not

right now. I remember that it cost $5,000, which was really a lot of money in 1990, especially

for us at that time. I decide not to tell her that, though, in the moment.

> *"Do you want to be buried, mom?" she asks. I think for a second. Yes. Yes, I do. She*

asks if there is room next to my mom to bury me. I tell her that I think there is, but I want her to

bury me in Evansville, so she can visit my grave. "I used to visit Mom's grave regularly after

school when I was in high school," I tell her. "Now, I rarely go because I don't have a reason to

drive all that way, other than to go to the cemetery." I should go more, I tell myself. We arrive

at Target to begin our school supply shopping, so the conversation ends without fanfare. It's

sometimes like that when the most intimate disclosure happens.

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Petronio (2002) outlines the ways that people manage rules for disclosure. Petronio

suggests that personal liking and attraction play a role in our process of deciding to reveal or

conceal information. If we like another person, we are more likely to disclose private

information to that person. Additionally, a benefit of disclosure of private information includes

relationship development. We can seek to "enhance the nature of our significant relationships

with others by revealing private information" (Petronio, 2002, p. 66). In the case of these

disclosure decisions in the story above, I decided to reveal information to Madison because I

value my relationship with her as much as or more than any other relationship in my life.

Additionally, I want to be seen to be cooperative and forthcoming when answering her questions,

especially on the small questions, so she feels comfortable asking the big questions of life.

Finally, I decided to tell her about my experience picking out my mom's casket in an effort to

pass my story on to her. Now, even though she was not there, we co-own this information, and I

trust her to manage it properly.

Another factor to consider when communicating with a pre-teen is that adolescence is a time when a child is heavily managing his or her privacy, and violations of privacy such as giving or receiving too much personal information can be a serious infraction to the teen (Hawk et al., 2009). A teen begins to develop his or her own privacy boundaries, separate from those his or her parents may have enforced before, or may employ themselves. Often, these privacy negotiations take the form of disagreements or confrontations (Hawk et al., 2009). During this period of time, a mother may elect to err on the side of closedness because of her concern for her teen's own privacy management and out of concern that the information would not be received well by the teen. According to Stiffler et al. (2007), communication between adolescent daughters and their mothers deteriorates for multiple reasons. Mothers report difficulty allowing their daughters the space they may crave in an effort to keep them safe from making poor decisions, specifically in relation to the daughter's budding sexuality. The struggle with the need to protect and the need for independence may create an overall poor communication situation between mother and daughter. Furthermore, Stiffler et al. describe this communication struggle as:

> During the adolescent years, there is a finely crafted dance between the mother and the daughter. There are times when one leads and the other follows and they switch. The mother loosens her grip, yet continues to protect until she sees that her daughter can handle more independence (p. 645).

If the mother was a teen when her mother died, she may ascribe some of her worries and fears about her daughter becoming motherless; thus, adding more stress to the communication between the mother and her daughter. Edelman (1994) coins the term "neon number" to describe the age at which the woman's mother died (p. 21). This specifically describes the concerns the

mother has that she, too, will die at that age (regardless of how her mother died – even in an

accident that is extremely unlikely to be replicated). This also can be used to describe the

feelings the mother has when her daughter reaches the age she was when her mother died.

Additionally, Edelman recounts stories of increased friction between the mother and daughter at

this age, and even depression and suicidal ideation presenting in the daughter. Perhaps these

symptoms are due to the power of suggestion by the mother, or a testament to the

overwhelmingly strong identification between mother and daughter.

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She studies me like a textbook, but I try not to react as if I know this. She asks me if

certain body changes are normal and how I get that contoured look on my cheeks. She asks me

to apply her makeup for her, talking her through all the steps I follow. We walk through the mall

chatting about moisturizer and fashion trends. She's as tall as me now, but as we wait in line at

a checkout, she places her hands on my shoulder tenderly, petting the furry jacket I'm wearing.

She rests her chin on her hands, her face close to mine. We connect in this moment as

girlfriends – the state in which I look forward to living with her in about a decade. I know this

won't last, and it really shouldn't. I'll have to tell her no, she can't go to that unsupervised

party, and nag her to clean her room and brush her teeth. That's what she needs right now.

She'll have hormone-infused meltdowns of epic proportions for seemingly no good reason. But I

realize now how very much I lost when I lost my mom. She was actively dying when I was

Madison's age. Mom was consumed with chemo and surgery and trying to live. I didn't want to

bother her with hair advice (considering she had none, and that fact alone made her weep) or

makeup tips. It just seemed so insignificant in light of what was happening in our world. Most

of all, I regret that I never got to be her friend. I'm stuck in the restricted knowledge of being

her little girl, and it will just have to stay that way. I want to tell my daughter about this, about

how much I cherish our time together, but such a disclosure could startle and spook the delicate

animal that is a young teenage girl. It might also elicit an eye roll or a response devoid of

compassion. So I just savor the moments and try to take as many pictures in my head as

possible, knowing that my time may come at any time, and this may be all I have with her. It

might just have to be enough for her whole lifetime, as my time with my mom was for me.

Disclosure in the adolescent years may advance the mother's agenda for her daughter due

to her history of loss. Edelman (2006) describes two extremes of mothering daughters in the

adolescent years. Either the mother becomes very permissive in an effort to give her daughter

the teenage years she couldn't have, due to taking care of a sick mother, or due to having to care

for other family members such as siblings and a father after the mother's death. Or the mother

may be very strict and force early independence on the teen in an effort to ensure the teen could

be successful in her mother's absence, should she also die young. A central tenant of CPM

theory is that "boundaries are coordinated and privacy rules often emerge out of an interaction

with others" (Petronio, 2002 p. 76). In this case, a mother may not have the awareness that she is

managing her relationship with her daughter from a place of fear that she will die young, too.

Therefore, she may set privacy boundaries regarding her mother unintentionally. Her position of

power as the parent, however, may shut down negotiations for rule setting (Petronio, 2002).

Disclosures about the lost mother in either case may take the form of an admonishment for the

daughter not appreciating that she still has a mother, when her own mother did not. *You should*

appreciate your non-sick, available, healthy mother I sometimes want to shout at my daughter

when she's taking advantage of me or being ungrateful. At the same time, I'm relieved that she

doesn't have the knowledge of what living with a sick mother and having to take care of me and the family is like.

My daughter has frequently asked what my mom was like. What that question means is that she wants to compare my mom's mothering of me as a child to my mothering to her as a child. Because my daughter is very similar to me in appearance, I often make unsolicited comparisons. For example, Madison had thick blonde hair that stretched down to her waist as I once did. I tell her that my mom and I used to wrestle (sometimes literally) over hair brushing time. She did not soften the pain of removing all those knots under the layers of hair by using a spray conditioner. Mom was a very practical woman and a penny-pincher. She would allow me the opportunity to brush it out myself with my soft-bristle brush before she would take the "vent brush" to it and clear out the massive tangles underneath the many layers of hair. I would whine and cry, and, occasionally, she would whack me on the head lightly or a little more sternly on the bottom with the brush in order to encourage compliance. The battle of the hair ended when I was ten, about the time that bobbed styles and perms came into fashion. I won't pretend to have been on the cutting edge! I don't remember telling my daughter that this had happened, but one day, she mentions that my mom had been "mean." Surprised and concerned for Mom's legacy, I ask Madison where she got that notion. "She used to beat you with the brush," she replies. I correct her that I meant that disclosure to be a funny story rather than an overall impression of what she was like. After all, I can now relate. As my mother had with me, I hated to cut Madison's gorgeous Rapunzel-like hair, but the maintenance is hardly worth the effort at times. I note to myself that I must do a better job with positive disclosures regarding my mom.

Boundary turbulence, or "clashes over expectations about privacy management" may result from giving the teen too much unwanted information (Petronio, 2002, p. 33). The mother

may assume "boundary linkage" due to the familial relationship with the teen. In fact,

"Boundary linkages represent the connections that form boundary alliances" (p. 29).

Additionally, boundary ownership includes "rights and privileges" recipients have once they

receive private information (p. 30). Teens may be an unwilling recipient of private information

that they didn't want to know. It is logical that teens may not be willing or able to process

information about death and grief. Due to these considerations, a woman may decide to reduce

the number of disclosures to her teenage child(ren) until the boundary turbulence levels out when

they are older.

Religious Beliefs As a Framework For Disclosure

My young son turned 4 years old a few days before the 25th anniversary of my mother's

death. The night before that anniversary, I went looking for snapshots of her to post on

Facebook as a memorial to her. My son doesn't let me out of his sight for too long. He calls for

me as I sit on the floor of my home office. "What are you doing?" he inquires, in the same way

he always does. "I'm looking for pictures of my mommy," I reply. "Oh, can I see them?" he

says as he crawls into my lap. "Of course," I say, trying to contain my excitement that he's

interested. I first show him pictures of her in her young and healthy days. One photo is from

1973 where her hair is in low pigtails. She's smiling broadly, standing next to my dad's red

sports car. It was taken before I was born. I never talked with her about the photo, so I don't

know the circumstances. Did she get a new camera? Was the car new? I figure there was some

event involved; it was an entire generation and a half before "selfies," and she wasn't much for

allowing pictures of herself randomly. Next, I show him a picture of her on her wedding day.

Skinny teenagers flanked by my dad's parents – two of four people who attended their wedding

service on an early June Saturday in 1970, in the tiny chapel that still sits along US 41 in

Farmersburg, Indiana. One of her sitting in the brown recliner where my dad spent his leisure time napping. She's got one leg folded under her, the same way I still do, a glass of sweet tea in one hand, and her head resting on her fist. She's not smiling, but she still looks pleasant. It's one of my favorites of her – a natural shot that reminds me of the million times I looked at her, looking just like that – mundanely beautiful. Grayson comments on how these must have been taken before she got sick. Yes, I tell him. She was once young and healthy and beautiful, and she was my mommy. Then, I show him her last professional picture. It's the picture she had taken because she had requested a closed casket. She would pose for this one in order to have the picture sit on the top of her casket. She wanted one more family picture as well – the four of us smiling, as if nothing big was getting ready to happen. Four sets of sad eyes are there, unable to be hidden for this photo. I wonder if she knew that her family would dissolve, and she wanted to freeze it in time? In the picture, she's bloated and is clearly wearing a wig. Someone, I don't remember who, advised her to get one that was salt-and-pepper colored, because she would start graying naturally if she had hair. Unlikely. She would have "frosted" her grays away, as she might have said. Her vanity was certainly noted by me as I reached adolescence. She bought an expensive wig from the "Dolly Parton Collection." I told her that it looked like she had a cat sitting on her head. I didn't like when she wore it. I told her that it was obvious she had cancer; why try to hide it? Occasionally, she wore scarves on her head that my granny (Billie, her mother-in-law) had handcrafted for her. They depicted barn scenes with ceramic animal buttons or had quilted ducks or cats on them, and they were trimmed with lace. In fact, I did not want her buried with her wig because it seemed inauthentic, and I didn't like the idea of carrying a lie into the afterlife. Grayson knew that something was really different with her appearance. He

asks me if this was after she got sick. I tell him it was. "Oh," he says without fanfare. I give

him a squeeze and a kiss on his baby neck, and we get up and play cars.

This disclosure, however, has set off a chain reaction of questions in my inquisitive little

son. Car rides are peppered with interrogations, often with the same questions being asked, for

weeks after the pictures.

"How'd she die?"

"She got cancer. Sometimes people get cancer and live a long time, but my mom got

very, very, very sick and died because of cancer."

"How'd she get cancer?"

"I don't know. Some people get cancer." I elect to lie to him here, as I do know that it

was a genetic cancer, but I don't want to scare him nor do I want to explain genetics to a

4-year-old.

"Where did she go?"

"She went to heaven."

"When is she coming back?"

"No one comes back from heaven. Once you're there, you stay there forever."

"Where's her house?"

"Heaven."

"What kind of car does she have there?"

"You don't need cars in heaven."

"Where does she work there?"

"You don't have to work in heaven. You get to just relax."

"Where did your mommy work before she died?"

This question really intrigues me because I've never been asked this before. Either people knew

my mom (were childhood friends) or have never asked what she did for a living. I've never

talked about it simply because no one asked. But this big question from this little mind warms

my heart.

"She was a stay at home mommy. She took care of me and my sister."

"Oh," he says, unremarkably, as he always does when his line of questioning has been satisfied

momentarily.

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The religious beliefs of the family may affect the willingness to engage in conversations

about parental death. Most religions offer some explanations of an afterlife, especially if a

person lives an honorable life while on earth (Puolimatka & Solasaari, 2006). Kubler-Ross

(1979) explored the religious rituals of death, noting that some religious traditions include

superstitions around death and rules for speaking about the dead. These traditions or rituals of

making peace with the dying, accepting death as a normal part of life, or fearing death as

something unknown and taboo can be passed on through generations, perpetuating the feelings

about one's own imminent death and the past death of loved ones, especially one's own mother.

Additionally, Harris and Giménez (2005) found that adolescents and adults are likely to adopt

and use a spiritual rather than a biological explanation for death, while accepting and

understanding the biological explanation (e.g., "Grandma is in Heaven" versus "Grandma's body

stopped working"), but younger children adopt the biological explanation without the spiritual

explanation. The concept of religious beliefs may inform the "how" information is disclosed

about death. The spiritual explanation of death allows the living to feel that the loved one who

died is still living, just in another state of being, such as through reincarnation or considering her

and angel who watches over them (Harris & Giménez, 2005).

Furthermore, Malcom (2010) reviewed children's books that were written to assist with

conversations about death and grief. He noted themes in the books related to heaven as "up,"

bright lights and clouds in illustrations, angels watching over loved ones, and, most interestingly,

the confirmation of the existence of a heaven. These books were published for North American

children, and one might assume directed at a Christian market, but certainly contribute to the

notion that children may have regarding the existence of a heaven or afterlife, and that it is a

good, happy place. These descriptions help children understand the afterlife more concretely.

They can point to the sky to characterize where a loved one is and can feel as if the loved one is

living on in some alternate state of being.

Personality of the Child

My son went for his 4 year old checkup shortly after we began conversations about my

mother's death. I have stressed the fact that she got very, very sick and could not get well, so she

died. I didn't want him to think that a small illness could end a person's life – not his own life or

any of his family members. During his checkup, he got his flu shot. I had not told him about it

before the appointment because he's a worrier, and I knew he'd get upset. Between the time the

doctor asked if I wanted a flu shot for him, and I said yes, and the nurse coming in to give him

the vaccination, I began to explain to my upset little boy that the shot would help keep him

healthy. He cried when he got the shot, and I picked him up to console him. He's big now –

almost too big for me to carry when I walk, but I strain my back to carry him out of the office. I

reassure him that he's OK and that this was going to keep him from getting sick. Through his

sobs, he says, "Did your mommy not get her shots and that's why she wasn't healthy and died?"

A mother may consider the temperament of the child in her decision to reveal information about the loss of her mother, or the timing of sharing that information. Some children are more susceptible to worry and may begin to fear that their own mother may also die. This is especially true if this is her first introduction to the concept that living things die. If a family pet or a family member that the child knew has already died, this concept may not be as taxing on the child (Edelman, 2009). Phyllis Silverman, a noted bereavement expert, explains that if the child first learns the concept of death in hearing about a person (like a grandmother) who died that the child didn't know, it can be a positive way to introduce the subject of death with little effect on the child's daily life (Edelman, 2009). On the other hand, realizing that a mother can die when a child is young can be stressful for a child. According to Edelman, this is an often cited reason that mothers choose not to tell their young children about their mothers. Joseph and Afifi (2010) describe "protective buffering" as the desire to protect a loved one from "worrisome information" that could add to the stress of the loved one or cause unnecessary stress (p. 412).

Now my son wants to know what can die and what cannot. We have walked through lists together. Houses cannot die. Rocks cannot die. Trees can die. Deer can die. Fortunately, he hasn't connected that I will die, and so will he. His penchant for worrying scares me as he gets closer to the heart of the matter – everything that lives will die. While I can't lie to him, I'm not sure I can cope with the deluge of concern this will bring.

Interest of the child in the departed grandmother may also affect the mother's openness or closedness about this topic (Petrionio, 2002). Since "privacy and disclosure are dialectical tensions," they must be constantly managed and negotiated throughout the communication process (p. 33).

Also noteworthy is that "privacy rules are learned through socialization" (Baxter &

Braithwaite, 2008, p. 312). Not only are the children learning information about me, and about

information related to my mother, they are learning how open or closed they are expected to be

regarding privacy information. In other words, they are not just learning private information

from me, they are learning how to manage private information through my communicative

actions.

If the child has a lot of questions and is curious about her grandmother, the mother may

be more willing to discuss her. If the mother's information about her mother is met with

resistance from the daughter (or child), the mother is less likely to give further information about

her. The mother may also interpret her daughter's disinterest as lack of care or concern, or even

rejection from her daughter (Edelman, 1994, 2006). Privacy decisions are a dyad, in other

words, there are two participants in the disclosure event. The recipient of the disclosure must be

willing and able to receive the private information in order to successfully navigate privacy (see

Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008).

Woman's Coping Ability

She used to call me her "little nurse." I got a lot of fulfillment out of taking care of her.

I think it helped me cope with her death later on. When I was 12, I used to get up a little earlier

than normal and put her pills for the day in a sorter. The sorter was meant for a week, but she

had too many to take in a day that I made new labels for it with the times she should take each

group of pills. I knew them all by name and what they did for her. One, in particular, was to

ensure her brain didn't swell after her surgery, so I triple-checked to be sure that one got in her

rotation. It was an oval shaped black pill. I'd take her orange juice, because the doctor said

that one of the pills should be taken with vitamin C, and maybe some toast to her room, along

with her container of pills. I'd go over the instructions with her again on when to take them

while I was at school. I would worry about her all day while I was gone.

The woman's ability to cope with the death of her mother and acceptance of the loss may influence her decision when and how to reveal information about the death of her mother, and even if she will reveal information at all (Edelman, 1994; Petronio, 2002). If the mother had been ill and died from an illness, such as cancer, the child of that woman may have experienced much during that period of illness. She may have had to assume the role of "mother" in her family of origin, picking up the tasks normally performed by her now-ill mother (Stiffler et. al., 2008). Those mothers may harbor a variety of feelings about this burden, and may feel they had to grow up too fast. The level of freshness this pain presents may affect how and when the mothers talk to their daughters about their experience of mother loss.

I was the only cheerleader in 9ᵗʰ grade to have to hurry home from practice to cook

dinner. I wanted my dad to have a warm meal, since Mom was gone. I tried to replicate all the

meals my mom had made, and I suppose I burned every one, at least once, in my pursuit of being

the "perfect daughter."

Furthermore, Fisher (2010) suggests that women can experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) through the loss of their mothers. This manifests in chronic worry about dying young and excessive concern for health and safety. This is sometimes related to how the mother died. In other words, if she died of heart failure, the woman may exercise excessively in order to try to maintain cardiovascular fitness. Or, she may exhibit excessive anxiety when driving if the mother died in a car accident (see Edelman, 2004). This can be a lifelong manifestation, one that can negatively affect the woman as the mother in her communication with her daughter. Additionally, the ability of a woman to cope with the illness

and subsequent death of her mother can shape her lifelong view of herself and her habits. This

may also affect how willing the now-grown child is to talk about her own mother's life and

death. The question remains - why do some women cope with their grief, and some fall in to

despair? Bonanno (2008) explores the concept of resilience in the face of trauma or grief. He

notes that many psychology professionals underestimate the commonness of resilience because

those who are thriving are not seeking services in order to deal with difficulties in life. One

aspect of resilience is hardiness. As he explains,

> Hardiness consists of three dimensions: being committed to finding meaningful purpose
>
> in life, the belief that one can influence one's surroundings and the outcome of events,
>
> and the belief that one can learn and grow from both positive and negative life
>
> experiences. (p. 108)

Confidence or self-esteem, positive emotions, and the ability to laugh and find humor even in

difficult situations all contribute to positive coping outcomes (Bonanno, 2008). While I contend

that being helpful to my mother to provide comfort to her in her last months gave me a positive

grieving foundation, it is perhaps as much or more so the innate hardiness I inherited as a set of

personality traits. As a result of my positive level of self-esteem, an errant disclosure should not

set back my grieving process too greatly.

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For a period of time after my mother died, I experienced a great deal of distress because

I had prayed for weeks for God to go ahead and take her. I could hear her struggling for breath

in the bedroom across the hall in the night. She would cough, sputter, and gasp. I cried silently

in my small bed, helpless to make her better. I told no one that I wanted Mom to pass away. I

was afraid they would think I didn't love her. My dad was constantly pushing for more doctors

and more treatments, and I just wanted her to stop suffering. Then the last thing she heard me

say was that she could go ahead and die. A thirteen-year-old tends to think that her words and

thoughts are more powerful than they really are. Did I make her die? Did she go faster than she

should have because of me? My distress and grief were likely let out in unacceptable ways, but

it was all I knew how to do. It would be years before I realized that her suffering did need to end

and that I had not part in deciding the hour of her death.

The mother may experience feelings of guilt related to the death of her mother. Edelman

(1994) notes that we are socialized to not be angry with the dead, yet a woman may feel a deep,

lingering sense of abandonment from losing her mother that could manifest as guilt. If her

mother died after a protracted illness, a woman may have sometimes wished for her mother's

suffering to end and/or for her family to get back to "normal."

The kick in the gut, though, is that normal is gone. It died with her. There will be a new

normal. Maybe a series of "new normals." You just don't know this at the time, though. You

think something akin to normal can be achieved, but she was the center of your normal, and

she's never coming back.

If the woman has made a success of her life after her mother died, she may experience

some guilt about her achievements. As Edelman (1994) reflects on her own mother loss, "It

dawned on me at a certain point that although the thing I wanted most was to have my mother

back, I wasn't willing to give up what I'd gotten since she died" (p. 276). And perhaps this guilt

may cause a woman to feel that the force behind this success should be kept private. Self-

defense in privacy management is when "individuals feel the potential risk is too great" and

decide to keep information private (Petronio, 2002, p. 49). After all, it must seem odd to people

who have not lost their parents that there is a real, tangible silver lining to the loss.

May, 1995. I stood at the podium at my high school graduation gripping the sides lightly. Around my neck was a heavy-feeling valedictorian medal. The school counselor told me during my first semester of my senior year that I would be first in my class. Mathematically, no one else could catch me no matter the scenario. I had worked for weeks on my speech, consulting my sister's books of quotes. I practiced time and time again. I took a deep breath and prayed and asked Mom to be with me. I looked up at the full gymnasium and began my speech. Only one other classmate would be going to a four-year college along with me; the rest would stay in town. I spoke through tears as I described how my mother had given me the strength to succeed. I saved this dedication until the end because I knew that I would feel emotional. The hard truth was that, without her death, I would most likely have performed my academics in a mediocre fashion. After all, I would have had a safety net. For what would I be hungry? Why would I want to leave her comfortable nest? Would she have even let me determine my own academic future in this way?

Additionally, I alone own my success. Without having had a support system, I can claim every victory as my own. Who would I even thank if I was required to do so? My mom, for pushing me out into the deep end shouting "swim!"

Cause of Death as a Factor

My mother died of a "sexy" disease – one that has charity walks and ubiquitous pink ribbons and regular news coverage. By even the most conservative account, she fought the disease for weeks, if not months, longer than others might. She dragged around an oxygen tank and coughed and gasped for breath. She still took my sister and me places and put on the best happy face she could. She was a fighter, I can tell myself happily. I can fantasize about how her love for her girls kept her going forward. She hung on for us; she didn't want to leave us. As a

result, when I reveal that my mother died when I was thirteen, I can easily field the inevitable next question – how did she die. I can spin tales of her heroic efforts to live and paint a figurative cape on her in my stories.

The way the mother died may affect the decision to reveal or conceal information about the loss of the mother. If a mother died in an unexpected or violent way, the information about her may be considered "highly intimate" and, in the absence of a potential reciprocal disclosure, a woman may choose to keep the information private (Petronio, 2002, p. 51). While a death that is natural – that is, caused by physiological illness may be a death that is easier to talk about, there is another consideration. A genetic disease that may be passed on to the next generation may frighten a child, causing a decision to conceal information regarding the death of the mother in an effort to mitigate the worry of a young child (Schaefer & Lyons, 2001). As noted above, the risks of disclosure may outweigh the benefits in this case (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008).

When my daughter was at elementary school age, she started to understand the basics of genetics (characteristics can be passed from one generation to the next, such as eye color or height) and the permanence of death. She also understood that my mother died of cancer, and that the cancer could be genetic. She began to worry about my health and to be concerned that I may die of the same disease. One night, a commercial about breast cancer screening came on TV. I didn't realize she was behind the couch, playing quietly. She popped up suddenly, a concerned look on her face. She began to ask me questions about my mom. The inevitable follow-up question was whether or not I would get breast cancer too.

The type of parental death may impact how one grieves and discloses to others about the loss (Klapper, Moss, Moss, & Rubinstein, 1994). For example, Fry (1995) notes that if one's mother died in an accident, one may fear sharing this information with her children as it could

cause anxiety in the child as the mother goes about her daily activities. A woman also be

concerned about boundary turbulence because the accidental death of her own mother may leave

her with the feeling that control equals comfort. And if a woman's mother was murdered by a

family member, she may have a difficult time coping with this for a lifetime. It may be

challenging to talk about the death to anyone, let alone her own children (Fry, 1995). If the

mother (grandmother) was murdered in a random act of violence, the mother may have a difficult

time making sense of the murder and may not have closure on the death of her mother, causing

her to be unable to discuss it (Kubler-Ross, 1975).

Indeed, the cause of death greatly impacts disclosure decisions. Disclosures create co-

ownership, as noted earlier. When the information is co-owned, the "co-managers must

coordinate their actions" and work together when information is mismanaged (Baxter &

Braithwaite, 2008 p. 316). In other words, when private, and perhaps controversial information

is shared, like the details of the death of a mother, the person who revealed the information may

feel violated in the case of the information subsequently being shared inappropriately (Petronio,

2002).

Fathers and Stepmothers

My father silenced any talk about my mother in a physical way. My mother's funeral was

very well attended. She was young and had a lot of friends. She smiled a lot and had a loud,

infectious laugh. She'd snort when she laughed really hard. The graveside service that followed

the somber funeral home service was also well attended. It was a sunny, warm September day.

My sister and I had many friends whose parents had driven them all the way to our new town for

the funeral. We also had new friends from our new town who came. After the service ended, we

made our way around to greet these friends. There was a comfort in being physically surrounded

by kids our age. We felt their support, compassion and love. Dad parted the congregated

teenagers until he got right behind us. My sister and I were standing side by side. He put a hand

on each of our shoulders, and then simultaneously slapped us each on the back. "It's over. Let's

go," he said, as he walked to the family car. My sister and I followed him obediently out of fear

after this display of force, and drove away from the cemetery, leaving our friends, family and

support system behind. There was little discussion about our mother after that time.

Because of my dad's job in coal mining, my parents moved about an hour away from the

town where they went to high school This was where my sister and I spent our first years. My

paternal grandparents still lived in this little town, so we would drive the hour to occasionally

visit. An hour's drive, before technology, was pretty torturous. We would protest, but would

always be piled into the car when it was time to go. There was a Y in the road as you

approached town. To the right, the state highway continued. A gas station welcomed us into the

small town on that route. But if we took the left road, we entered a rural area. Mom and Dad

would begin to talk about the people they had known and the memories they had shared. We

would roll our eyes as dramatically as we could and make fun of their conversation. We called

this route "Memory Lane." It took us directly past the 1930's façade of the high school. Simple,

but proud, it stood unchanged from that time, to their graduation in 1969, to the current day.

Though I carried on this charade of not wanting to hear the stories (or, more likely, that I

thought they were incredibly lame), I secretly loved listening to them. I began to think of my

mom as a teenager. Dad was a young man vying for her attention. They were not just task

masters and disciplinarians (who would not let me do nearly as much stuff as my friends' parents

let them). They were just kids who grew older. These stories were the evidence.

While Mom's cancer had reached a point of no return, the coal mine where my dad had worked for 20 years began to cease operations where we lived. Dad was high on seniority, so he'd be among the last workers at the mine (which could have been as many as five years out). However, he decided to use this as an excuse to begin a new career. Besides, he would need help with these two teenage girls who he would soon be left alone to parent. He decided to move us to this town where his parents were, and where he and my mom had fallen in love. To this day, I joke that there are still three sets of heel marks all the way from Clinton to Dugger. Perhaps there are also wheel marks from Mom's oxygen tank. It was the only home the three of us girls had ever known. Mom had been orphaned at age 7 and passed around to relatives until she married my dad. They bought this home about 1972. Mom had lovingly cared for it and made it her own. By some miracle of fate, my final class trip at the only school I'd ever attended was scheduled for moving day. I left with my class and was spared the sight of the moving truck pulling away one final time, and my mother dying by inches, both at the hands of the cancer, and at the hands of her grief in having to say goodbye to this life she had created, embodied in a home.

And yet, living in that home without her – the heart of that little double wide on Hazel Bluff Road – would have been impossible. At the new house, a bigger house made of brick on a busy state highway, Mom concerned herself with setting up the home. The road was so busy with trucks and local teenagers cruising in circles that my dad used to joke that a person could be run over by the same car twice before anyone noticed. Mom had the pictures hung in the same way she did at our house in Clinton. Three rows of 8 by 10. The top row was of my older sister – baby to current; the middle row was of the two of us, and sometimes all four of us, together; and, the bottom row was pictures of me – baby to current. Mom had collected ducks, and her kitchen

in Clinton had been adorned with duck curtains – cutesy and surrounded by country blue, but they did not make the move to the new house. Then, there was the table. Our old house had a large eat-in area at the end of the galley kitchen. There sat a round table with four chairs. Every dinner, and many other meals, had been eaten there by our little family of four for many years. I'm not sure what happened to that particular table. After the move, I went shopping with Mom for a new one. She wanted one that would fit in the new space, but she would reuse the chairs. I expected a round one, like the one we had before, only smaller. But I hear my mother tell the sales clerk who is helping us this statement, which shocked me: "I need a table with fold down leaves." Later, I hear her tell a friend, "You see, I'm going to die soon, and I don't want my family to stare at an empty chair. I want them to be able to fold down the place where I'll sit, and move the chair away." I am shocked to hear her say this, and I go to my bedroom to process it. It's the first time I've ever heard my mom admit that she was going to die. She would not do that around my dad because he was still in denial about it. There could only be discussion of how she would get better. We could not speak of the obviously impending death. Perhaps he felt that acknowledgement meant defeat.

That cheap Wal-Mart table and the original chairs have moved with me to every place I've lived as an adult. It serves as a symbol of how her love for me, of the care and concern she had for my feelings and wellbeing extended past the end of her life. The table and chairs become a place for remembering my mom, a lieux de mémoire *or "site of memory" (Nora, 1984/1996). They also become a starting point, a point of disclosure, for any guests who ask about my furniture. And when I tell the story, the reactions range from shock of the intimate nature of the disclosure to admiration for a woman they would never meet.*

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The story of Cinderella is a famous one. Cinderella's mother died when she was ten years old. Her father, who was a good father, remarried and subsequently died as well. The stepmother pampered her biological daughters and forced Cinderella to become a servant. The ending to the story, of course, is that Cinderella escapes the servitude of her stepmother's care and begins a new life.

My relationship with my father has been strained since my mother died, but for a variety of reasons. Most of those reasons involve his new wife. There has been another spectacular collision between my dad's new wife, Marsha, and my sister, Carri. The two are more alike than they care to admit. An all-out turf war for my mother's memory and Marsha's place in this house is waged. Not known for her patient and respectful communication skills, my sister has flown off the handle at my dad's new wife. The stated reason was petty, insignificant. The real reason is that my sister is 18 years old and has not been given a chance to properly grieve losing her mother. Moving to a new town, she has found fitting in more challenging than before. And now she is rooming with our new stepsister, Andrea, someone who has always been an only child of a single mother. Someone who our dad feels compelled to impress and have on his side as he tries to make his wife feel comfortable. This particular collision, however, is quite serious.

Dad blocks the hallway where I am standing, near the end, near the entry to my bedroom. He is not a physically imposing man, but his presence is so much bigger than he is, especially to a young girl who wants so much to please him. "Marsha left me and it's all your fault," he yells at me suddenly and without warning. I rush to my own defense but come up short, having no context for what is happening. The fact that I had not participated in this particular blowup was a non-sequitur. Finally, I ask for details. "Marsha went to her mother's. She's had enough of all of us," he says. Oh, I think. She's not really leaving him because she would have gone to the

home she still owns 30 miles away if she was really leaving. Still, my dad is upset, and I want to make it better. I feel very much conflicted as the loyalty boundaries are being drawn. I can tell that what was left of our family is being torn apart at this moment. There would be two factions – my dad, his new wife, and her daughter versus my sister and me – two teenagers with no mother.

There is a specific day that I had to declare this loyalty to my sister after the last particularly nasty argument that officially ended our family. I am grief-stricken that I have to begin to end my relationship with my dad. All I ever really wanted was to be his little girl. I used to watch my neighbor, an only child, play outside with her father. He would walk behind her while she peddled her bike. He gave her the occasional push with a walking stick; most importantly, he followed where she led. Part of me thought it was sad because she was an only child, and her parents were her only playmates if I wasn't over there. But it's not as if my sister was my playmate anyway. Having a sibling didn't make me any less lonely. I wanted so much for my dad to spend time with me like that. I somehow managed to talk him into letting me go fishing with him when I was little. It was probably a break for my mother to only have one girl in the house, so she could have made him take me. I really hated fishing. I hated staying quiet for so long, and I never caught a single fish despite sitting for hours in that boat. Dad was never one with a lot of patience, so I would often get told off for some sort of infraction or another. The timing was such that as Mom got sick, and Dad couldn't be away on a boat for any length of time. I was becoming a young lady who had no desire to even try to fish anymore, so that activity ended organically. My other major attempt at gaining my dad's love and time was playing basketball. Perhaps it was my most cringe-worthy endeavor. It was short-lived. While home movies of this exist somewhere, I'm incredibly grateful there was no instant-upload YouTube

UNPACKING MY MOTHER *videos at the time! But he would practice with me in the driveway, and show me how to shoot the ball, and I loved the positive attention. He wasn't in his woodshop or asleep in his chair. He was focusing on me, in that moment. So I played, badly, but I played.*

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Mom was gone in mid-September, and Dad had a serious girlfriend within weeks. My dad, only 40 years old, looked very much like George Clooney with dark, thick hair, dark eyes, and smooth skin. His smile was broad, much like mine, and he was brimming with confidence. And the women in town were lined up for him. Dad owned the local hardware store, and I worked in there to help out the family. At first, the store was frequented by old men in overalls. One in particular would wet himself and perhaps not realize it (or not care). He would come in and "loaf" (sit around for extended periods of time) as my grandpa used to say. His stench would stay around for hours after he left. Plumbers would come in for toilet gaskets. Guys from the machine shop next door would come in for screws and bolts, and the teenage sons of that machine shop owner would come in for a candy bar, and maybe to share a smile with me. All the normal small town hardware store stuff. A few weeks after Mom's funeral, I started to notice the occasional made-up, hair-done, perfumed woman in the mix. Maybe she would ask for grass seed. Maybe it was paint. Whatever the excuse, they started arriving more frequently now. A polite acknowledgment of me, then, a look past me for a glimpse of him. Shortly, he selected one to date, and we spent a lot of time with her and her kids. By Christmas, they were exclusive. It seemed serious. She regularly hinted that she wanted to get married. The pressure did not suit him. After about a year, he came to me and my sister and asked if we would be upset if he broke things off with her. I felt very important that he had asked for my opinion, and was feeling quite relieved that there would not be another woman in my mother's house. At least not yet. Soon,

thereafter, Dad hit the dating scene wholeheartedly. My sister and I would take him shopping for the latest clothing styles – cardigans and turtlenecks, all the rage in 1991. When he would go out for the night, to the club or on a date, he would ask me to style his hair. He had let it grow long in the front, and I would blow it dry and comb it so it looked boyish, like a California surfer. His cologne would linger long after he was gone for the night, and I felt very conflicted. I was happy to see him happy again, but I very much missed having any kind of parent. It was during one of these nights out that he met the woman he would marry.

Marsha said that Dad was following her around, almost like "Rain Man," but she decided to accept his invitation for a date after being pressured by her friends to do so. Over time, their relationship grew in another city where she lived. Dad would rush away as soon as he could on Saturday and return late Sunday night for work Monday. I didn't know much about her, except that she drove a white Firebird with T-tops and listened to hip music. She was whisper-thin and well dressed. Marsha seemed like a cool, much older sister. I was proud of her, and wanted so badly for her to love me. I remember that I had needed new underwear when they were first dating. She had picked some up for me at the store when she went for errands. I was overjoyed! When you're motherless, you realize all those invisible things your mom had done for you, like buy you underwear. They were the kind in a package from Wal-Mart, with the days of the week printed on the elastic. I was fifteen and much too old for those, but I didn't care. I just thought that my bad luck had turned around, and I would be mothered now. This woman was here to save me! She's going to love me and nurture me and make everything alright! They got married in June, 1992, 21 months and 5 days after my mother died. By that Christmas, it had become apparent that her intentions were not so noble, and there would be no love. Maybe she exposed some hard truths that I needed to know to go on with my life, like the

fact that my dad did not want children and resented my mother for leaving him with two children

he never wanted. "Things change," she hissed at me when I asked my dad why he agreed to

have children if he really didn't want them.

Looking back, I would say I was not a bad teenager. Naturally, we all are kinder to

ourselves than we deserve in our memories. I experimented with alcohol, I admit, but nothing

serious, and no drugs. I had an 11:00 pm curfew until I left for college. I never missed it once.

My infatuation with boys was probably my biggest downfall and most likely drove Dad and

Marsha crazy. That certainly led to the biggest fights and problems of my own creation. I

wanted to break free from their control very much, and I hedged all of my bets on my academic

ability. I went all in at school and was valedictorian. I got scholarships to pay my way through

college, because it would be my full responsibility. Dad and Marsha were paying for her

daughter to finish college. This was my chance, however, to grab the control of my own life I

was seeking. The loneliest time of my life was when I moved into my college apartment.

Roommates would frequently call their parents, chatting about the minutia of their experiences.

I would sit and read, and work, probably periodically pouting about my status as an orphan.

Orphan. The label echoed in my ears. I was calling myself that now because even though my dad

was alive in the biological sense, he was not in my life. He had rejected me once and for all.

Eventually, I got used to the loneliness. It just became part of who I was. My search for a new

mom was definitely over, and I accepted the fact that I would not ever feel parental love again.

Very little scholarship has been devoted to the role of stepmothers in families after a

biological mother has died. In fact, Schmeeckle (2007) noted the lack of scholarship and

attempted to study adult children of stepfamilies which were formed through the divorce of the

biological parents. Often, stepmothers function as gatekeepers to the fathers. Additionally,

Edelman's (1994, 2006) extensive work on stepmothers reported that fathers usually remarry within two years of a mother's death. The relationship with the stepmother can be one loaded with concerns after a mother dies. As she (1994) explains, "Idealization of the lost mother, unrealistic expectations of the stepmother, and the arrival of step- or half-siblings can all create disharmony between a motherless daughter and the new woman of the house" (p. 188). Many who Edelman surveyed reported that their stepmothers were abusive or indifferent, gave preferential treatment to her own children, and limited contact between the father and his own biological children. Schmeeckle also reported that women who are stepmothers tend to show favor to their own biological children over their stepchildren (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004).

CPM assumes that "boundary ownership" is innate in familial relationships (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008 p. 315). Those who share familial ties through marriage or biology may assume that the relational partners in the household can be categorized as "trusted others" (Petronio, 2002, p. 33). As noted before, boundary turbulence can occur when a recipient of the information does not want the information, or if there is a misunderstanding of the relational closeness of the recipient of information (Petronio, 2002).

Adding insult to injury, stepmothers may move into the home once curated by the deceased mother and may take over mother's possessions after her death (Edelman, 1994). Some of Edelman's participants reported neglect on the part of the stepmother or even abuse. As one participant said, "…the sickness that followed in the form of a twisted 'stepmonster.' I'm not sure I'll ever be able to separate the pain of losing (my mother) from the pain of acquiring (the stepmother)" (p. 189). Even with healthy stepmother relationships, daughters feel a lost connection after the death of their mothers, as something is missing.

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Christmas, 1997. I arrange a visit with my dad to his home. My boyfriend and I drive the two hours from my college town to his house. When we get there, my stepsister is there with her husband and baby. I'm told that there would be no room for us to stay overnight because Marsha had arranged for her daughter to stay there with her family, taking all the rooms. We're told we can sleep on the couches. It's not so much the sleeping arrangements that bother me, it's the fact that my dad didn't stand up to her and say, no, my daughter is coming, and she's going to have a proper place to stay! I feel rejected, that he has chosen her and her daughter over me yet again. Dejected, we drive the two hours back home. I sob most of the way. "Why does she have to have my dad, too?" I say through the tears. My boyfriend knows my pain. His father has rejected him, too. After his parents divorced when he was three years old, he has not had a positive relationship with his dad, nor has his dad chosen him over his girlfriends over the years.

Women/mothers are largely regarded as the "kinkeepers," maintaining familial relationships and histories (Rosenthal, 1985). Kinkeeping includes a number of communicative tasks including "arranging the details of visits, initiating contact, facilitating inclusion in larger family gatherings, remembering birthday and holiday greetings and gifts, discussing emotional and personal life, giving affection and nurture, and providing various types of support" (Schmeeckle, 2007, p. 179). As Edelman (1994, 2006) states, mothers are often the glue that holds families together. When the mother dies, these vital family tasks die as well. Therefore, if the stepmother does not want to include the motherless daughter in these activities, the father rarely, if ever, steps in to ensure the daughter is included. Fathers generally passively participate in these activities and events and let their wives take the lead.

A study by Gosselin (2010) found that fathers who are remarried who have a positive relationship with their biological children often have a distressed relationship with their wives (the stepmothers). Additionally, when there was conflict between the father and the biological children, the relationship between the husband and wife was reported to be more positive. The author supposes that outcome is based upon the fact that stepmothers may feel excluded in the home due to the harmony between father and children. Perhaps the role of woman (wife) as gatekeeper to the man (husband) is one that is important to the feeling of self-worth of the wife. Shapiro (2014) discusses the issue of stepmothers filling two marginalized roles – a gendered one (being a woman) and being a step-parent (not the "real" mother). This can lead to conflict and poor communication for stepmothers and children.

Furthermore, relationships between fathers and daughters following the death of the wife (mother) affects the life of the daughter. Prior to the death of the mother, the father may have been somewhat of a bit player in the life of the daughter. As Victoria Secunda, a noted author on parental relationships with their children throughout the lifespan, states "mothers represent the day, fathers the night – and the weekend, the holiday and special dinner out" (Edelman, 1994, p. 109). Participants in Edelman's (1994) book reported that they felt they had to "tiptoe around" the fathers for fear they will leave, too. They also reported the need to develop special coping skills since they felt their mom was the buffer between their dads and them, and now that buffer is gone. *"Wait until your father gets home" was a common threat my mother issued. She seemed to control his anger and wrath. She could unleash it at her whim, or she could deflect it when she felt it was necessary. She would send us to our rooms if he was particularly upset about something. She'd talk it out with him or let him yell, or whatever it was that diffused the anger. Dad once told me, years after Mom's death, that he had understood her in a way he did*

not understand his new wife. I believe Mom had understood him, too, certainly more than I ever will.

Research beyond Edelman's work is lacking regarding how daughters and fathers continue on after the death of the mother. However, family communication research highlights the importance of good communication and useful disclosures during this delicate time (Rowe & Harman, 2014; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005a/b, Toller & McBride, 2013; Serewicz, 2013). As previously highlighted, nurturing is a primarily gendered activity, performed almost exclusively by mothers (Chodorow, 1999; Glenn, 1994). Some fathers are may find that they are ill-equipped to provide any nurturing to their children, even though the need for nurturing is lifelong. Many daughters expressed feeling like they could never seem like they had any needs as to not upset the grieving father. In some cases, daughters were encouraged to go on with life has if nothing had happened, as if the mother had never lived at all. Many of Edelman's participants reported having difficulty depending on fathers after mom's death. One reported that, "I needed him to help me through those first months after my mother died, and he was off wining and dining all the divorced women in our town" (Edelman, 1994, p. 127). Daughters may have tried several attention seeking strategies to get love and attention from their fathers as a result of this lack of physical or emotional presence. Many of these attention-seeking behaviors are not ones that lead to positive outcomes. My experience with my dad certainly reflects what the research says on this matter.

Worry Management

She doesn't know I'm watching, and she would not want me to be. I'm only 12 but even I know this. The moment is too intimate. It was never meant to be seen, let alone seared into my memories for my whole life. Because I know I'm not supposed to be there, I hide behind the

couch so she can't see me. She's on the deck on the back of our house. The cold, fall wind is blowing hard. She's out there in her nightgown and robe, though. She has this yellow hair brush with soft bristles. It's designed to be used for a baby, but she uses it on her delicate head. Toward the end, she'd use it to scratch intensely at her head as the radiation therapy has wrecked the skin on her scalp. It flakes and causes her a lot of itchy discomfort. But today, she's using it to gently remove what's left of her once carefully coifed blonde locks. She sobs uncontrollably as the wind takes away those curls that were meant to mirror those worn by Princess Diana. I can hear her through the French doors that separate us. The last remnants of her beauty are flying away. She'd say that she now looks like the Bride of Frankenstein, with all of her surgical scars and bald head. I think to myself – at least you're still alive! But now I understand that her identity was unavoidably bound with her beauty. As middle age has crept in on me, I understand her vanity – wanting to hold on to that last bit of youth. Hers is taken too soon, and cruelly.

<p align="center">***</p>

When my daughter was in the 4th grade, she tells me that all of her friends have said I'm the prettiest mom around. This makes me happier than it should – a seal of approval from 9 year olds! But it's because my mom was also the prettiest mom in the 4th grade, and then she was disfigured, and then she was gone. I want so much for her to have a youthful, healthy mom, unlike I had. So I listen to her music and ask her friends about boys and drive them around to Starbucks and the mall. I want her to have that, because I did not. I arrange my work schedule to make room for these things, and don't go places I might like to go to be available for these things. She might underestimate the gift of normalcy, but I do not.

In the small exploratory study that I conducted on mother-loss, I discovered that women

who lost their mothers communicate with their daughters with the purpose of managing their

worry.   If the mother died of a genetic disease, the women is likely to communicate with the

purpose of mitigating worries her daughter may have that she may get the disease and die young

also (Sinicrope et al., 2008). Women may provide information about scientific advances in the

medical field related to the illness or may give information about how to avoid getting the illness

(Sinicrope et al., 2008). Kratzke, Vilchis and Amatya (2013) report that mother-daughter health

communication may help daughters make better decisions about their own health, like making

better lifestyle choices. This is probably most true regarding communication between mothers

and their children.

      As Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) maintain, CPM "views disclosure as the process of

revealing private information, yet always in relationship to concealing private information" (p.

310). Thus, the woman, who is in possession of the whole body of information about her mother

may reveal information that will put her child at ease and conceal information that would worry

the child.

      To keep my children feeling safe, secure, and loved, I dole out little bits of information

like candy at a parade. I don't tell them how she was young and vibrant one day, then broken

the next, and how she died right there in front of my eyes. I want to protect them, as my mom

had wanted to protect me. I now understand the enormity of her love for me, and how important

protection from the uglier parts of life, like death, are for children.

Conclusion

Through this autoethnographic thesis project, I have shared some of my personal stories related to the death of my mother and instances when I have shared my grief with others, examining these moments through the lens of Communication Privacy Management theory. Drawing from literature related to autoethnography, grief studies, and CPM, I have highlighted how the mother/daughter relationship is among the most impactful in our social structure and how the loss of a mother is life-changing for the daughter who remains. It is a unique type of grief.

Specifically, CPM provides a critical perspective for examining how and why an individual may disclose (or keep private) information about her mother. CPM assumes that all humans have a need for privacy and a need for disclosure (Petronio, 2002, Baxter & Braithwaite, 2009, Dainton & Zelley, 2011). For me, to keep information about my mother private would be tantamount to a final death, in some ways an erasure of her existence. Conversely, sharing everything I knew about her would leave me vulnerable to negative reactions or "boundary turbulence" and would cause the information about her that is sacred or private to me to now be considered shared information. The information would be co-owned. Thus, in some ways, I would be losing control of how, when and why information about my mother would be shared. Through this research, I have discovered that the "why" information is shared varies. Sometimes, I kept information private because I did not think anyone else would want to know. Sometimes, I did not disclose information because I feared the knowledge would be treated recklessly. Sometimes, I shared information because I needed the attention and sympathy from others. And sometimes, I shared information simply because someone asked a genuine question, and I cared enough about my relationship with them to oblige. Studies have cited these reasons for

disclosure and more (Hunter & Smith, 2008; Toller & McBride, 2013; Carmon, Western, Miller Pearson & Fowler, 2010). Carmon, et. al. (2010) explore the importance of disclosure after a death in the family. They found that a high amount of disclosure correlates positively to personal growth after the death of a loved one. In other words, people grow when they talk about their grief with trusted others.

CPM is a compatible framework for understanding grief and bereavement as a cultural phenomenon. Grief, as experienced by a child, is almost totally dependent upon the disclosures of the adults around them. Likewise, the memories of a departed loved one are filtered through the disclosures that a child receives. As Toller and McBride (2013) have explored, parents may establish privacy rules and model privacy disclosures after the death of the other parent. Additionally, they use a religious frame to protect children (p. 20). Bosticco and Thompson (2005b) also noted that "family communication serves a central function in grieving" (p. 274). Nonetheless, I extended their research by focusing on some of the gendered dynamics associated with the mother-daughter relationship.

Petronio's (2002) work on personal disclosures notes that disclosure has two realms – openness and closedness -- that can play an important role in autoethnographic research. Autoethnography provides a space for engaging in openness or sharing often painful experiences that may have been kept private or closed. Autoethnography allows the researcher to critically examine the self, through "thick descriptions" to understand "cultural phenomenon" (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 33). One purpose of autoethnography involves "writing to right" (p. 35). In other words, it is intended to create a platform for voices that have traditionally been marginalized or silenced (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). Connecting that purpose to the foundation of CPM, then, creates a method for exploring why stories of grief, specifically of

women who have lost their mothers, have often been silenced. Perhaps it is the lack of value for "subjectivity, uncertainty and emotions" – traditionally considered feminine (and thus lesser) traits (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 35) that has limited scholarship on how we talk about mother-loss. Autoethnography, then, gives researchers an outlet for disclosure and narrative meaning-making that might otherwise be ignored.

Limitations

As noted, some have criticized autoethnography as a methodology that it is not readily generalizable, and perhaps not even transferrable to others in the same cultural group. This may be seen as a limitation to this thesis. However, scholars must continue to recognize the value of personal stories and narrative as a way in examining larger cultural issues (e.g., Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Young, 2009). Autoethnography readily lends itself to the study of grief. After all, while grief is shaped by gender, socioeconomic status, race, religion and culture, it is also an intensely personal journey. Autoethnography provides a window into that personal experience, and further narrative research on mother-loss can be useful in helping scholars understand the grieving process for fully.

Additionally, the recalling of memories to craft personal stories may be viewed as a limitation. Memory sometimes fails us, and so recalling stories years, even decades later, means that certain details of events and experiences may have changed. And in real life, there are always gaps between reality and experience. However, this does not mean there is not a "truth-ness" to the stories, things that we can learn from personal narratives. There is a narrative truth that autoethnography offers (Bochner, 1994). As Bruner (1984) states, stories are not a life lived (what actually happened), but a life told or a representation of that life. Indeed, "what matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller--to see the

world from her or his point of view, even if the world does not 'match reality'" (Plummer, 2001, p. 401).

Future Research

A frustration when reviewing literature for this study was the lack of research on a father's role with the children after his wife dies. When the mother dies, the father is left to be the mother and father for the child(ren), and ultimately shape who the child(ren) will become (Edelman, 1994, 2006). Because of this large gap in academic research, future studies could focus on fathering without a mother, which would contribute greatly to the body of research.

Additionally, several studies have been conducted regarding grief and CPM; nonetheless, there is still a need for more scholarship combining these. Toller and McBride (2013) note that 90% of children will experience a death in the family by the time they reach high school. They also note that most of the information regarding death, grief, and the afterlife comes from families. Because of this impact, more research needs to be devoted to disclosures about death and grief. Future research can involve applying CPM to other types of grief--the loss of a father, a sibling, or a close friend and explore how each type of loss requires its own set of privacy rules (Petronio, 2002).

Ultimately, CPM research can use autoethnography as a methodology to explore how the individual make choices for revealing or concealing personal information with others. Autoethnography allows CPM scholars to explore personal disclosure choices over a lifetime as well as employ "thick descriptions" of how and why one might disclosure private information (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). This type of exploration of disclosure can increase understanding in new ways - from the author's perspective. This type of perspective about CPM was not explored prior to this study.

Additionally, autoethnographic scholarship can continue to draw upon qualitative

theories such as CPM as a way to engage in more systematic or thematic analysis of personal

narratives. As autoethnography is a relatively new research methodology, a connection with

existing qualitative research theories such as Relational Dialectics Theory (Toller & Braithwaite,

2009) and Attachment Theory (Forrest, Judd, & Davison, 2012) combines that which is

accepted in the academic community (existing theories) with "embodied experiences in research

projects" (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 29). Combining CPM and autoethnography can help us

understand how and why disclosures happen, with the author as the object of the study.

Therefore, we can understand, from the author's perspective, how disclosures have worked well,

and how they haven't, and why. This type of self-reflection about disclosures in various

relationships and situations in life help us understand the full-picture of interpersonal and family

communication.

Final Reflections

The ability to tell a good story is a personal strength of mine. I found autoethnography to

be a natural fit with my abilities. The stories, as it turns out, were at the tips of my fingers, and

have been waiting to be told, examined, and concatenated for years. When I got them all on one

page, and looked at the body of work I created, I realized that more themes emerged than I

originally expected. I had, in fact, been more strategic about revealing and concealing

information about my mother than I had realized.

Women who have lost their mothers may feel that they have lost their source of

unconditional love and their safety in the storm of life. Edelman (1994) states that the loss of

this source of unconditional love can be lifelong. One respondent in her study stated,

"Ultimately, the thing that makes you crazy isn't that your mother died, but that you can't talk

about it, and you can't let yourself think about it" (p.11). For me, as a result of being told by my

dad that I was not allowed to grieve my mother, nor have any thoughts, feelings or concerns

about my own life and health in the aftermath of her death, I developed a rich inner dialogue,

sharing revelations about my grief or recollections of my experience only with myself. This

suppression of emotions reflected a male-dominated discourse. For me, as a child and young

adult, I was to "soldier on" after her death. And I received so much praise for being strong and

capable. What the adults around me actually meant to express was that they were relieved I was

not expressing needs that they could not fulfill. While I have never been ashamed of my lived

experience in relation to my mother's death and the grief that followed, I attempted to protect

myself and my feelings of pain.

Additionally, I have begun to better understand, or at least conceptualize, the magnitude

of what my mother must have been feeling. One day, driving home from work, I was thinking of

her. I was nearing my 38th birthday, which was the last she would celebrate. I was feeling

thankful for being healthy and strong and happy, and experienced an immense feeling of sadness

for her. She was planning her own funeral at this age. She was preparing her daughters to live

without her. She was actively dying. She knew she was leaving us with an unprepared (and

perhaps unwilling) father, but there was nothing she could do about it. She had no choices left.

And that feeling, if I'm trying to empathize with her, takes my breath away. So my dad was a

widower at 39-years-old, with two spoiled and grieving teenage daughters, which he did not

possess even the slightest bit of emotional intelligence or worldly experience to handle. And I

begin to see his humanity and how he muddled through. I wish I could report that this epiphany

had spawned a new and positive relationship with him. Alas, the damage was too severe and too

sustained for us to be able to have a relationship in this life. Too much pride and too many

words spoken in anger have made irreparable wounds. Additionally, the stepfamily dynamic is just not one that is going to work for our cast of characters. All of this acknowledgment of understanding does not erase how difficult life has been for me at times, and how sometimes made more difficult by his lack of understanding, compassion or introspection. But sometimes, just seeing a person in the light of full humanity can at least soften some of the pain.

<p align="center">***</p>

Dad built a new house for us after Mom died, but mainly as a fresh start for his new wife. My mother did not live there in any way. Her pictures were packed up and marked for me or my sister to remove from the house when we settled somewhere. Her scent was replaced by the smell of new drywall and a new woman. Her recipe box, full of index cards scribbled with her handwriting and stained by her experiments, disappeared. Her table was put in storage. I complied with this literal and figurative silencing of all mention of her because I was rendered totally powerless by the situation.

At some point in my adult experience (although I don't remember when), I decided to resurrect my mom. I was no longer under the constraints of my dad and realized that I could move Mom in to my own space if I wanted to. I opened her boxes. Her pictures. Her high school memories. Her favorite robe. I hung her picture on my wall where I could study her features as I sat on the couch with my children or just watching TV. I began to unpack her and make her part of my everyday life again. And, as the years progressed, I fully moved her in to wherever I was. This autoethnography is the final box of memories of her for me to unpack.

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