

Building a Home for Grief: Lessons Learned from an Interfaith Grief Group Created with and for the Unhoused

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In memory of Mikey P.,

And all the beloved Chaplains on the Way community members whom we've lost.

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Abstract

This project aims to encapsulate the wisdom and insights gained over the course of an 8-month Grief Group hosted by Chaplains on the Way (COTW), a small nonprofit organization that provides spiritual care to people who are unhoused. The Grief Group was formed in response to the numerous deaths of COTW community members in recent years, though the group also created space for participants to process grief over various types of losses in their lives (e.g., material losses, functional losses, relational losses, etc.). The three main goals of the group were (1) to help attendees discover and/or connect with a sense of meaning related to their loss; (2) to promote coping practices grounded in compassion; (3) to cultivate a sense of community and collective support. Grounded in a strengths-based approach to chaplaincy, the Grief Group was co-created with community members who offered topics, resources, and insights that shaped the direction of the group. This project serves as a record of the agendas that were used in the Grief Group, and it also includes commentaries about each agenda, noting what worked well and what didn't. The introduction provides background information on grief among the unhoused population, and it also delves into the chaplaincy theory and grief theory that underpinned the formation of the Grief Group. The conclusion summarizes the main themes and practices that were covered in the group, and it reflects on the lessons learned related to facilitation and participation. Finally, I consider the impacts of the Grief Group and its effectiveness in meeting its goals, as well as the implications of this project beyond the COTW community.

Gratitude and Acknowledgments

The resources in the project were community-created by the wise, inspiring, and resilient Chaplains on the Way (COTW) community. I'm grateful to the beloved community of housed, unhoused, recently housed, and precariously housed who came together across lines of racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic difference to support one another through the grieving process. Their deep insights into the nature of grief and their resilience in coping with unimaginable suffering is woven throughout these pages. Thank you to everyone who invested their time and energy into brainstorming topics for the Grief Group, sharing resources with me and with others, and creating a warm, communal atmosphere through preparing food and ensuring everyone felt taken care of. I continue to be in awe of the Chaplains on the Way community, and I'm excited that their wisdom can be shared with a broader audience.

I also want to thank the other chaplains and staff at Chaplains on the Way for their invaluable support: Jill, Bill, Judy, Robert, Devin, and Heather. Jill's creativity and brilliance as a chaplain helped the idea for this project come to life, and Jill's skillful co-facilitation of the Grief Group taught me the tools and methods of wise leadership. I'm grateful for her advice and ongoing input and support throughout the creation of all of the resources in this document, and her spiritual and emotional support to me along my chaplaincy journey has been invaluable. I'm also grateful to Judy, the other chaplain intern at COTW, who participated in the Grief Group and offered poignant, wise thoughts that helped deepen our conversations. The advice and guidance for facilitation below contains many nuggets of wisdom that I gleaned from Judy's presence in the groups. I'm also grateful to Bill, who has always been generous in offering time to debrief chaplaincy encounters and offer guidance. My conversations with Devin and Robert have also provided insights and support that have shaped me as a chaplain and shaped the resources in these pages. I am also grateful to Heather for her constancy and support in moments of stress and the all-too-common printing difficulties and technology challenges. The teamwork amongst the staff and interns at COTW has truly been remarkable, and I believe their communal support and care echoes throughout these pages.

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Introduction: Context, Purpose, and Framing of the Project

Background: Grief among the Unhoused Population

This project lays out interfaith chaplaincy resources and agendas for a Grief Group aimed at supporting a diverse community of unhoused, housed, recently housed, and precariously housed people.¹ These Grief Group agendas and resources were specifically tailored to meet the needs of the community served by Chaplains on the Way (COTW), a small non-profit in Waltham, Massachusetts that is primarily focused on providing spiritual care to people experiencing homelessness. As a chaplain intern for COTW, I began to sense the need for a resource like this within my first month of working with the community. On my very first day as an intern, I attended a training on Connection and Co-regulation (an alternative framework to “de-escalation”), and I sat next to Mikey P., a kind, gregarious man who told me about his road trips around the country. He didn’t share much about his experience of being unhoused, but rather focused on welcoming me into the community. The second time that I met him, he remembered me and gave me a hug, which I sensed was his way of saying that I was now fully part of the community. I later learned about his active role in supporting the COTW community, including through greeting people at the breakfast program and coming up with innovative ideas to make the program run more smoothly. His friendly, warm presence always seemed to lift the spirits of those around him, and he made sure that everyone knew that they belonged. I sensed that his leadership in the community meant a lot to him personally, and the joy that he took in helping others was palpable and inspiring.

Tragically, within a month of our first meeting, Mikey P. had died. The rest of the community was devastated. People had lost a friend and companion, and the community had lost a core piece of the fabric that knitted it together. COTW held a memorial for Mikey P. soon after his death. The church was filled with his friends and loved ones, and the stories that people shared were moving and filled with love. The echoes of the loss of Mikey P. still reverberate to this day. The breakfast program isn’t the same without him, and community members regularly talk about how much they miss him. Mikey P. made an indelible impact on the community, and he will not be forgotten.²

In my conversations with community members before and after Mikey P.’s memorial, many people mentioned that they weren’t just grieving this loss. They listed off the names of at least a dozen others who had died in recent years, and they shared feelings of being

¹ I use the term “interfaith chaplaincy” over other comparable terms (e.g., “spiritual care”) for several reasons. First and foremost, I identify myself as an “interfaith chaplain” when I am meeting new community members through Chaplains on the Way. I believe using the term “chaplain” is important because it’s easily recognized and connotes a professional role with certain boundaries and ethical responsibilities. I pair it with “interfaith” to dispel any fears that I might be evangelizing a particular faith tradition. The term is not perfect because it doesn’t necessarily convey a broad understanding of “spirituality” that exists even beyond the bounds of religious traditions. However, I think the term is better than “spiritual care provider” (which may be triggering to those who are skeptical of medical institutions) or “spiritual caregiver” (which doesn’t necessarily connote a professional role).

² Mikey P.’s story is shared with permission from his sister. The rest of the project does not include names or personal stories of COTW community members. In order to further protect anonymity, I also don’t specify the gender of any COTW community member besides Mikey P., and I use “they/them” as singular pronouns to refer to individual community members.

overwhelmed by grief. Several community members confessed that they were having difficulty sustaining hope in the midst of all the loss, and some even feared that death might come for them next.

Unfortunately, this reality is not unique to the unhoused community in Waltham. In 2019, the average life expectancy for someone who's unhoused was the same as the life expectancy for someone living in 1900: fifty years old ("Homeless Persons' Memorial Day"). The risk of suicide is up to five times as high for someone who is unhoused, and the disproportionate rates of health conditions among the unhoused community result in "a biological age approximately 10 years older than nonhomeless people of the same chronological age" (Maglione, Kalisuch, Iglewicz 53, 57). Here in Massachusetts, the unhoused population living in shelters die at a rate four times higher than the rest of the state's population, and those who are "sleeping rough" (sleeping outside) suffer a death rate that's ten times higher than the average (Leung). The reality of unjust social systems that deny people basic rights to housing, medical care, and other basic necessities of life is literally killing people, and the burden of grief borne by those left behind can feel like too much to bear.

It's also likely that an unhoused person's grief began even before they became homeless. Grief and bereavement are often cited as one of the top causes of homelessness (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 6; Robinson, "Grieving Home," 47). The griefs that result after someone becomes unhoused are also not just limited to deaths of friends and loved ones. There are many different types of losses: material, relational, role, intrapsychic, functional, and systemic (Doehring 126-127; Kelley 7-8). Material losses may include the loss of a house and perhaps special items like dishes or pieces of furniture that one can no longer afford to store. Relational losses can include losing touch with family members and no longer belonging to the communities that one belonged to prior to being unhoused (e.g., work, church). The "stigma and embarrassment of being homeless" can also undermine these former relational connections (Robinson, "Grieving Home," 4, 55). Losing these relationships may lead to role losses, including the loss of a role as a mother or as a volunteer in a community group. A loss of employment is another reason a person may have become unhoused, and thus part of the person's grief may be related to losing the role of employee/worker (Brown 3-4). Those who become unhoused may also face intrapsychic losses such as losing a sense of stability, a feeling of dignity, or faith in a benevolent God (Brown 5-7; Maglione, Kalisuch, Iglewicz 58). In addition, people may become unhoused due to a health crisis, which represents a functional loss (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 176). While being unhoused, people may face numerous additional losses related to their body's functioning due to the mental and physical toll of homelessness (Brown 47, 148).

Finally, someone who is unhoused may experience systemic losses, which are losses "that an entire group or system experience" (Kelley 7). For example, if a beloved shelter worker moves away, the residents of that shelter may feel the grief of this systemic loss. Systemic grief may also include "grief born of injustice," in which unjust systems and oppressive structures harm and even kill marginalized populations (Kelley 15; Treleaven 178). The grief that results from injustice may be exacerbated by the knowledge that the pain could have been prevented if our society had more just policies or embraced a collective commitment to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression. Anger may understandably be a large part of grief born of injustice, including anger at God or the universe for allowing such injustice to occur (Kelley 15). This grief

may also be complicated by the fact that the trauma from injustice is ongoing as long as systems of oppression remain in place (Treleaven 171). Individuals who are unhoused may continually face systemic barriers to housing, adequate health care, and other basic necessities. Those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) may experience additional harm including pervasive racial microaggressions, which compound over time and can “result in traumatic symptoms” (Treleaven 15). The trauma caused by injustice is bound up with the grief, making it a particularly insidious and long-lasting pain.

The enduring nature of unjust systems can lead to a form of “chronic sorrow” or “living loss,” which are terms used for ongoing or continuously evolving losses (Kelley 13). One initial loss (e.g., homelessness) may lead to numerous additional related losses (e.g., loss of social connections, loss of faith, etc.), which can make a person feel like their loss is “living” - growing and changing and yet continuously present over time. A key component that makes “living losses” difficult to endure is the imagination of what life could have been without the loss (Kelley 13-14). Every time an unhoused person faces a new setback or endures another humiliation, the grief and frustration related to their chronic loss of homelessness may be exacerbated, and it may become more exhausting and painful the longer one has to endure it.

Given this reality of numerous losses of all different types, the term “cumulative grief” may be particularly applicable to those experiencing homelessness. According to Georgetown Psychology, “Cumulative grief is what happens when you do not have time to process one loss before incurring another... The experience of cumulative grief is especially hard because no two losses feel the same, resulting in a confusing mix of painful and sometimes contradictory emotions” (Georgetown Psychology, “The Distress of Cumulative Grief”). The various losses experienced by those who are unhoused are not equal and will not produce the same emotional reactions. This mixture of various emotions from numerous different losses can be confusing and overwhelming, and it can make a person’s grief difficult to face and process. One’s grief may then be compounded by numerous deaths of others in the unhoused community, as noted at the beginning of the introduction. As the number of deaths increases year after year, it takes a “spiritual and psychological and emotional toll on everyone” (McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian 342). The deaths of friends and companions also undermine an unhoused person’s “social support network” and leaves them isolated in facing their cumulative grief (Meris 106). This can make it even more difficult to face and grapple with one’s grief.

Cumulative losses can also trigger “survival grief,” which is a grief experienced by those in ongoing threatening or dangerous situations. In order to survive, one feels they must repress the grief and the overwhelming emotions that may come along with it (Serban 317-318). Those who are living in shelters or on the streets may live with an ongoing fear of harm or violence, which may hinder their ability to process grief (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 177). Additionally, the stress, frustrations, and exhaustion that can come with the daily hassles of trying to get food, find housing, and deal with all the complications of homelessness may force someone into survival mode or a feeling of helplessness (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 177-178). All of this may exacerbate and complicate the grief experienced by those who are unhoused, making it all the more tricky (and all the more necessary) to address.

A final complicating factor in the grief experienced by the unhoused is the fact that it is often “disenfranchised.” According to Kenneth Doka, disenfranchised grief is “a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged publicly, mourned, or socially supported” (qtd in Burns,

Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 178). Several scholars have written about how homelessness is a form of disenfranchised grief, especially considering the stigma and marginalization faced by this population (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 175; Meris 106; McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian 345). Disenfranchising one's grief may result in additional pain, anger, shame, and feelings of helplessness (Meris 106). A particularly insidious effect of disenfranchised grief and anger is that it may then become "internalized as self-hatred" (Doehring 121). Living in a society that doesn't recognize the griefs associated with homelessness can make it even harder to seek out support, and one can become even more isolated and entrenched in grief as a result. Activist Douglas Crimp has claimed that it's an "act of violence" to disenfranchise someone's grief and prevent them from mourning (qtd in McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian 345).

Given the extensive, pervasive, and enduring nature of the grief experienced by the unhoused community, providing grief support and counseling for this population should be a high priority within the mental health field. However, mental health support is inaccessible to many unhoused individuals. A study of homeless HIV-infected gay men demonstrated a lack of social services and mental health services to help address the bereavement of this population (Meris 104). Even when participants in this study were able to visit a mental health professional and talk about their grief concerns, the mental health counselor may focus on other issues (e.g., substance use) rather than self-identified grief concerns (Meris 106). Others within this population may not even try to seek help for their bereavement given the overall "stigma, social shunning, and ostracism" that they face in society (Meris 106). Other research on grief among the unhoused population demonstrates additional barriers to receiving adequate mental health support. An article on grief and depression in older adults experiencing homelessness talks about how "therapies are often of little practical use for homeless individuals, as access to psychotherapy services is likely to be limited and other competing priorities, such as obtaining adequate food and shelter, can be barriers to attending regular therapy sessions" (Maglione, Kalisuch, Iglewicz 64). Another report on bereavement among the unhoused population also argues that individuals' grieving and healing processes and timelines are unique, and mental health support may not be offered or accessible when people need it (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 34). This same report also discussed how unhoused individuals may be nervous and skeptical about speaking to multiple health care professionals, which is understandable due to many people's experience of "repetitive disowning by those professionals" (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 3, 36). In these instances, retelling one's grief story may just be retraumatizing, rather than helpful (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 36). Given these numerous and systemic barriers that unhoused individuals may face when seeking grief support, all too often the grief concerns of the unhoused are left unaddressed, leaving individuals to suffer alone and in silence.

Chaplains' Contributions in Addressing Grief among the Unhoused Population

This project argues that chaplains may be particularly well-suited to address the grief concerns among the unhoused population. One of the unique aspects of the chaplaincy profession is that chaplains are "often present in the settings of careseekers and their communities" (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 68). For chaplains serving the unhoused

community, this means providing spiritual care in the places where the community spends time and/or creating spaces where the community can come for shelter, warmth, care, and community. During the summer, Chaplains on the Way provides spiritual care at the Waltham Commons, at the community day center, at the McDonald's near the women's shelter, and at the public library where many in the unhoused community spend their time. During the winter, COTW offers a breakfast program Monday-Friday where people can find a full breakfast and warm shelter after they are forced to leave the shelters in the morning and before the day center and library open. At all COTW programs, a chaplain is available to discuss emotional concerns and the spiritual journeys of anyone who joins the space. However, nobody is required to talk to a chaplain, and thus the space is meant to feel safe and accessible to people no matter where they're at in their journeys. I believe that offering this consistent, easily accessible form of emotional and spiritual care is crucial in ensuring that those who are unhoused have access to the grief support that they deserve.

It's important to note that chaplains are not the only ones focused on validating and addressing the particular grief concerns of the unhoused population. For example, the Christian Action & Response in Society (CARIS) organization in Islington (a district of London) offers bereavement counseling to unhoused individuals. However, this counseling doesn't appear to focus on the spiritual suffering and existential questions that can accompany grief (*Bereavement & Homelessness*). Interfaith chaplains are well-suited to fill this gap. While chaplains may draw upon other fields, especially psychology (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 69, 85), the care that chaplains offer is unique in that it focuses on the religious, spiritual, and/or existential journeys of each care seeker. Within the field of interfaith chaplaincy, spirituality is broadly defined, and professional chaplains "explore with patients their source of strength, their hopes and fears, and their journey" (Serban 320). Unlike religious leaders in specific religious communities, interfaith chaplains serve people belonging to all and no religious traditions. Whether or not someone ascribes to a certain religious tradition or spiritual beliefs, they may be confronted at times with the big questions about their role in the universe and their purpose in life. Interfaith chaplains are there to help guide and support people through these big questions, and they do so by learning about and drawing upon the careseeker's own worldview and systems of meaning.

The ways that chaplains can be particularly helpful in supporting people through the grieving process can be categorized into three main areas: meaning making, coping, and community building.³ Thus, these were the main goals for COTW's Grief Group, and each is explored in more detail below.

³ These three categories are drawn from three of the main focuses of Melissa Kelley's book *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry* (2010). Kelley primarily focuses on the role that Christian ministers play in supporting people through grief. I believe that interfaith chaplains offer similar types of support as Christian ministers (i.e., meaning making, coping, and community building), yet with a slightly different lens. Chaplains may or may not share a care seeker's religious background or theological beliefs, so the way that a chaplain will help a person create meaning, find positive coping strategies, or connect with communal support will look different from how a Christian ministry would provide grief support to someone in their congregation.

Three Goals and Focuses of COTW's Grief Group

This project outlines the agendas and resources used for a weekly Grief Group hosted by Chaplains on the Way. The attendees of this Grief Group included individuals who are unhoused, those who were previously unhoused, and housed volunteers and community members. The aim of the Grief Group was centered around providing spiritual care to those experiencing grief due to a wide range of losses, from the death of a loved one, to the loss of a house, to pangs of familial alienation. The goals of this group were (1) to help attendees discover and/or connect with a sense of meaning related to their loss; (2) to promote coping practices grounded in compassion; (3) to cultivate a sense of community and collective support. Each of these three areas is explored below.

1. Meaning Making

One of the unique contributions of chaplains is the ability to facilitate the process of meaning making among grieving people from diverse social and religious backgrounds (Grefe and McCarroll 61). "Meaning" can be a nebulous concept, so for the purposes of this project, I chose to use Melissa Kelley's definition of meaning: "Meaning is the deep sense we make of things, the way we understand the world, how we articulate the overarching purpose or goal of our lives, the significance we seek in living, the core values by which we order our lives" (Kelley 75). Grief can significantly impact these various aspects of meaning, making us question our worldviews, feel disconnected from our sense of purpose, or lose our faith in values or principles that once ordered our lives. This can lead to a feeling of meaninglessness - where suffering is random and there are no higher values (e.g., compassion, justice, grace, love) to help us make sense of our suffering (Grefe and McCarroll 63). Meaninglessness can be particularly painful when it makes a person feel worthless.

This is where the "dignifying work of chaplaincy" may be particularly well suited to address the care seeker's pain. Chaplains honor "the inherent dignity of persons" and the "sacredness of life," insisting that each person matters and that each life has meaning (Grefe and McCarroll 64, 69; Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 88). Many chaplains draw upon Carl Rogers's concepts of "unconditional positive regard" and empathy to convey to careseekers that they are accepted just as they are and that their pain is seen and cared for with compassion (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 69). Chaplains may draw upon spiritual traditions and practices to convey this acceptance, empathy, and compassion (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 88). Because of their role as spiritual leaders, chaplains may represent "the sacred, (and) the spiritual dimensions of life" to the careseeker. Thus, when the chaplain offers compassion and care for the grief that a person is enduring, the careseeker may sense that their "pain is held within a larger wholeness" or that God cares for their suffering (Grefe and McCarroll 65).

This "dignifying work of chaplaincy" is the foundation upon which the Grief Group was built. The values underlying the group are that each person's story matters, that each participant's suffering is held in compassion, and that people are welcomed and accepted just as they are. These values shaped the content and facilitation of the group, with the aspiration that the atmosphere of "unconditional positive regard" and compassion would counteract feelings of meaninglessness and worthlessness that participants may feel.

The group also aimed to be a space where participants could reconnect with and/or reconstruct meaning in the face of their loss(es). The focus of chaplains and faith leaders on meaning-making in the face of crises may be particularly helpful and needed given that meaning-making hasn't traditionally been a part of psychoanalytic grief care. What Kelley refers to as the "standard psychoanalytic model of grief" (the model that was largely started with and based upon Sigmund Freud's ideas of mourning) doesn't focus on the meaning associated with a person's loss, such as how the person's loss fits into their larger belief system and whether the person can still find a sense of coherence and purpose in the wake of the loss (Kelley 40-41). This standard psychoanalytic model still has a lot of influence in our society today, despite the fact that contemporary grief theory affirms the centrality of meaning-making within the grief process (Kelley 71). Robert Neimeyer, a constructivist psychologist, claims that the central aspects of grief are related to the challenges that a loss poses to one's "personal world of meaning" and to the efforts one must undergo to reaffirm or reconstruct their system of meaning in a way that integrates the loss (qtd in Kelley 83). I agree with Neimeyer's assessment, and thus I sought to ensure that the Grief Group gave participants the space to explore how grief had impacted their worldview and the opportunity to see their grief in a new, more healing light.

The primary way that the Grief Group worked toward this goal was by prioritizing the sharing of stories. Stories are imbued with meaning, showing how we see the world, ourselves, and others (Kelley 76, 78). These stories may reflect personal meanings as well as meanings that we inherited from our family, culture, or faith tradition (Kelley 78). The sharing of stories seems to be especially helpful to the bereaved. R. Scott Sullender writes that "mourning is a time of stories — the telling of stories of the deceased, of how the death occurred, of the past and of a now altered future" (Sullender 114). Because of how disorienting and disruptive grief is to our worldviews and sense of meaning, telling and retelling stories may help a person make sense of what has changed and who they are now in the wake of the loss. Timothy Serban says, "Through the years in my ministry I have heard it said that every grieving person needs to tell his or her story at least 150 times before he or she can begin to heal" (Serban 320). He goes on to write that our family and friends may feel burned out after the fiftieth time hearing the story, which is one reason why it's so important for the bereaved to have a community of care surrounding them.

Thus, the Grief Group is a space where people's stories can be told and heard in community. Telling stories in a community of care can help construct new meanings in several different ways. First, telling a story may allow a person to release emotions related to that story, which can help them see their loss in a more spacious way (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 78). Second, sharing one's story can help a person along the path to "reclaiming a sense of agency and identity," which can empower them to construct new meanings related to their loss (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 78). Third, meaning making often happens in community, and telling our stories allows us to co-create meanings with others. This may lead to us seeing alternative interpretations to familiar stories (Kelley 84-85). Finally, sharing stories may give a person a new "plot" for their stories. Kelley says, "Some people suffer from shrunken or frozen narratives, particularly after a loss... New plot material allows for an expanded - and expansive - story, with new possibilities for oneself and one's future" (Kelley 84). For example, the disorienting loss of losing one's house may lead to a shrunken narrative centered around the stereotypes of

personal failure that surround homelessness. By joining a Grief Group and supporting others through their losses and hardships, new plotlines related to empathy and helping others may be added to the person's storyline, which can create a more positive sense of identity and perhaps hope for the future.

One may also make new meanings of their stories by seeing how their suffering is due to systemic injustices and structural violence. Seeing suffering in the light of structural oppression may dismantle harmful cultural myths about self-sufficiency and prejudiced stereotypes about marginalized communities. People may come to realize that their suffering is not due to personal moral failings, but rather their suffering primarily results from structural oppression and inequities that never gave them a chance to flourish. This can lead people to join communities advocating for a more just society, both so that they themselves have the opportunities they deserve and so that nobody else has to endure the same pain that they went through. Chaplains on the Way recognizes this larger systemic framework and works at the intersection of spiritual support and social justice. COTW supports the Waltham Community Leadership Group (WCLG), a grassroots collective led by people with lived experiences of homelessness, and the chaplains help care seekers engage in advocacy as an act of spiritual care. This overall ethos of social justice and a commitment to liberation infused the Grief Group agendas and shaped the reflections surrounding them. Many of the Grief Group attendees were also members of the WCLG, and I believe that these two groups balanced each other well, with the Grief Group validating people's pain and the WCLG offering people an opportunity to engage in advocacy as an act of hope.

2. Coping

Grief groups led by therapists or psychologists and grief groups led by chaplains may have different focuses and goals. In her chapter on "Theory, Practice, and Research of Grief Groups," Rebecca MacNair-Semands discusses how psychologically grounded counseling or therapy groups for the bereaved aim to support participants through the "tasks" of grieving. J. W. Worden formulates these tasks as "accepting the reality of the loss, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life" (qtd in MacNair-Semands 519). If a group leader is invested in helping participants move through these tasks, they will encourage participants to divest energy from the deceased, to return to meaningful activities (e.g., participation in an organization), and/or to engage in new activities (e.g., dating) (MacNair-Semands 519-521). It's important to note that MacNair-Semands' article seems to be grounded in what Melissa Kelley refers to as the "standard psychoanalytic model of grief" (mentioned above). Other psychologically grounded grief groups may draw upon different grief theories and thus would have different focuses. However, given that grief theories centered on the "tasks" of mourning are widespread throughout our society, it's important to say that the Grief Group outlined in this project does not adhere to this approach and has different goals and emphases.

Carrie Doehring sums up the goals of spiritual care for the bereaved well when she writes, "Grieving losses becomes spiritually integrative when caregivers and care seekers, first, identify and make room for the intense emotions of grief and, second, explore and find life-giving values, beliefs, and coping practices that compassionately accept grief-related

emotions” (Doehring 120). This two-pronged strategy encapsulates the goals of the Grief Group outlined in this resource.

First, the group aimed to provide a spacious container in which the fullness of people’s emotions and experiences could be witnessed and held in compassion. As the facilitator, I treated all of the prompts in the agendas as loose conversation starters, rather than rigid guidelines. I wanted people to share their grief journeys in the way that was most supportive to them, and I tried to give people as much space as they needed to express themselves, while ensuring that no one participant dominated the conversation. Sometimes the “progress” we’d make in the group was slow. For example, there were many groups where there were only two circle practices: the check in circle and one discussion question. For participants who were also attendees of the WCLG meetings, I sometimes sensed their frustration that we weren’t making much progress in getting through the agenda and that one agenda/topic could span several weeks. I responded by emphasizing that the goal was not to make “progress” or to accomplish “tasks” related to grieving. Rather, we came together to bear witness and support one another through our various grief journeys. Too often grief is relegated to the margins of our conversations and social interactions, and this group sought to reverse that trend by creating ample space for people to share whatever was on their hearts and minds. Over time, participants seemed to accept and even appreciate the slowness and spaciousness of the group, recognizing that the purpose of the group was mainly to see and support one another. I believe that the communal witness and validation of the pain of one’s grief is a powerful source of healing (see more below in the third point on community).

Second, the Grief Group aimed to help people through their grief by encouraging participants to explore and identify the values, beliefs, and coping practices that allowed them to relate to their grief with compassion. The section above on meaning-making addresses how the Grief Group helped connect people to life-giving interpretations, meanings, and beliefs around their grief. The third prong (helping people identify and connect with coping practices) was also built into the Grief Group agendas, often at the end of a session.

The reason that the agendas had a consistent focus on coping is because of the enormous stress that grief can cause a person. Melissa Kelley writes about how grief causes “emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal stress” (Kelley 99). This can lead to a range of emotions, from rage, to depression, to feelings of emptiness. One’s thinking may become disorganized, and one may feel confused and cognitively jumbled while they are grieving. Interpersonal relationships may suffer as a result of this stress (Kelley 99-100). Stress can also have negative physical impacts, causing health problems, insomnia, and changes in appetite (Kelley 101). For those who are unhoused, the stress of grief is then intermingled with the stress of homelessness, creating an overwhelming burden that may feel impossible to bear.

Given that the grief and stressors of being unhoused are ongoing for many in the COTW community, I didn’t believe it made sense to approach grief as a set of “tasks” that one must move through in order to get back to “normal.” The idea of returning to normal could even be offensive to participants. The “normal” reality of many participants was unpleasant at best, and toxic, violent, and/or terrifying at worst. In this context where participants’ previous “normal” may be harmful and where their futures may feel totally uncertain, I believed that the best approach was to focus on coping practices that people could draw upon in the present moment to help

them feel a greater sense of compassion for their experiences. From this greater sense of compassion, I believe that new possibilities could emerge, even if just in small ways.

Kelley says that coping is “our effort to manage stress,” and coping may be successful or unsuccessful. Some coping practices, such as substance use, may mitigate stress in the short term but are unhelpful in managing stress in the long term (Kelley 102-103). The Grief Group sought to help people connect to spiritual coping mechanisms that could support them in the long-term. This included meditations, interfaith prayers, ritual practices, reflecting on poems and songs, and simple contemplative practices that one could incorporate throughout one’s day. The aims of these practices were to help participants feel more ease in their bodies, more settled in their emotions, and more compassionate toward their overall experience. The coping practices sought to validate the various experiences that participants were having. During the Grief Groups, I emphasized that the purpose of the practices was not to “fix” how the participants were feeling or to minimize what they were experiencing. Rather, the practices sought to introduce an alternative way to relate to the suffering of grief - one that is more grounded in compassion and equanimity. Some of the practices, including prayer and rituals, also evoked a sense of the sacred, and my hope was that these practices would help participants with theistic beliefs to experience divine compassion for their struggles. Other practices, such as meditation and other contemplative practices, helped participants sense their own innate capacity for self-compassion and ease. Still other practices, such as listening to songs or reading poetry, were aimed at showing the universality of grief and thus helped participants to feel that their suffering was held within the larger interconnectedness of life.

While I believe that all of these practices can be effective when done alone, I believe that they were particularly powerful when done in community. The simple act of praying, meditating, or engaging in grief rituals together conveyed to participants that they weren’t alone in their grief. The solace and comfort that community can bring is thus the third major aim of the Grief Group outlined in this project.

3. Community

Gayle Huntress described the isolating nature of grief powerfully when she said, “(Grief) is a force that makes you alone when really all you want is for someone to take care of you” (qtd in Kiyosaki 114). Much of the literature on grief describes the loneliness and isolation that one often feels when in mourning (Halifax 191; MacNair-Semands 518; *Bereavement & Homelessness* 30-31; Haley, “Grief Support Groups”). Some of this isolation results from societal pressure to not talk about sadness or other emotions associated with grief (MacNair-Semands 518; Castle and Phillips 44). If people do talk about their grief with others, they may receive unhelpful suggestions or pressure to “move on” or “get over it” (Castle and Phillips 44). The bereaved may also self-censor their grief in conversations with friends and loved ones because they don’t want to burden others and/or are worried about what others might think of them (Halifax 193).

The isolation of grief is exacerbated for those who are experiencing homelessness. Those who are unhoused may have lost touch with loved ones and/or communities that they’d belonged to prior to being unhoused, and the prejudice and stigma that unhoused persons face may make maintaining those relationships especially challenging. The loss of previous relationships can further complicate the grief that one may already be experiencing (Brown 4,

55). Those who are unhoused may also feel that others don't understand and/or aren't able to offer appropriate support for their particular grief experiences (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 30-31). The CARIS report says that many who are unhoused "experienced social isolation either because people avoided them or they withdraw because they found the lack of understanding unbearable" (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 31). The systemic injustices and structural oppression that unhoused people face only exacerbate feelings of isolation. The shame that people face when they are unable to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" (a harmful, misguided expectation) can make people isolate themselves and not want to share their grief and struggles with others for fear of negative assessments of their self-worth. These experiences may be compounded by racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression, and people may be gaslit or belittled if they speak out about microaggressions or discrimination. This can then lead to silent suffering, which only increases feelings of loneliness. Rochelle Robins and Danielle Tumminio Hansen say that the isolation caused by systemic oppression leads to "spiritual suffering" (Robins and Hansen 113). People may question their inherent worth and dignity, and they feel undeserving of grace, compassion, or loving-kindness.

The Grief Groups outlined in this project were optional, open-invitation groups within settings that were accessible and familiar to unhoused persons. By hosting a Grief Group at the library and at the winter breakfast program, COTW offered a space where people could discuss normally taboo topics (e.g., death, fear, sadness) and where they could tap into the social support that's so important to the healing process (MacNair-Semands 518; Haley, "Grief Support Groups"). The Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin article specifically recommended support groups as one of the most effective ways to help unhoused persons process their grief. They argue that groups can help people receive validation and understanding related to the grief that comes with homelessness, which can help them face this grief and work through it (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 180). Groups also offer people an opportunity to offer support and empathy to others, which is another vital aspect of the healing journey (MacNair-Semands 523; Haley, "Grief Support Groups").

One of the core foundations of this project is a belief that isolation exponentially increases one's suffering during the grieving process and that communities of care are essential for the well-being of those who grieve. This belief is in line with the strands of contemporary grief theory that argue that "grief is a profoundly relational experience" (Kelley 121). This contemporary theory goes against the standard psychoanalytic model, which maintains that grief is a private affair and largely an individual experience. According to the traditional model, people are expected to mourn in private and to maintain composure while in the presence of others (Kelley 41). However, new scholarship has shown that relationships are essential in helping people through the mourning process and that the way a person understands their grief is influenced by others around them (Kelley 41-42, 126-127). Even having someone just listen to our stories about grief can bring about a feeling of release (Kiyosaki 114). Because it's often so hard to talk about death and grief in social settings, it can be a relief when we are able to actually talk about the loss, especially when others validate the significance of that loss (Castle and Phillips 44).

Validation and normalization are some of the key tools that chaplains use in supporting care seekers through times of struggle. Through validation, the chaplain shows their respect for

the dignity of each person by caring about that person's emotions and experiences in a non-judgmental way (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 77). The chaplain also normalizes the feelings of the care seeker, which can ease the care seeker's sense of isolation and their worries that their reactions are extreme. When a careseeker's emotions are normalized, they may feel a greater sense of belonging and feeling of connectedness with others who are experiencing similar emotions and reactions (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 77). When facilitating a group, chaplains can promote an atmosphere of validation and normalization, which can help group members to offer each other care in non-judgmental, healing ways.

While validation and normalization are powerful tools, they must also be balanced with an understanding that each person's story is unique and that systemic injustices disproportionately impact certain groups. Emmanuel Lartey writes that "every human person is in some respects (a) like all others, (b) like some others, and (c) like no other" (qtd in Ellison 65-66). Gregory C. Ellison II writes that it's essential to affirm that people are "like all others" to honor their humanity and fundamental human dignity. However, this must be balanced with an understanding of "power and social location," so that people from dominant social groups don't minimize the particular harm and discrimination experienced by marginalized groups. Finally, even though we're all human beings and have experiences that are similar to others, all of our stories are fundamentally unique, and a chaplain must respect the mystery and alterity of each person they encounter (Ellison 66). Through this approach of recognizing that care seekers are "like all others, like some others, and like no other," the chaplain can both decrease the harmful feelings of isolation and loneliness while not minimizing or discounting people's particular struggles.

This framework of "like all others, like some others, and like no other" can be especially useful in approaching the grief amongst the unhoused population. Given the stereotypes and stigma surrounding homelessness, it's essential to affirm each person's fundamental human dignity and also the uniqueness of their story. At the same time, those who are unhoused share particular types of struggles that others may not understand. This is why groups and communities that specifically welcome the participation of the unhoused may be particularly supportive. Considering that homelessness can increase feelings of isolation, creating communal spaces where the unhoused can share their grief and their stories is all the more important. In a study on later-life homelessness, Victoria Burns, Tamara Sussman, and Valérie Bourgeois-Guérin found that connection and support from shelter workers and other shelter residents significantly helped older adults to process their grief and have more hope for the future. Some participants even described their friends at the shelter as "family," which shows how meaningful this social support was to them (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 171, 178, 180). Another study by Catherine Robinson shows that this type of social support is equally important for young people who are unhoused. Robinson argues that places where these young people felt "emotionally and physically safe, supported, or simply free to think and talk" were vital for their wellbeing (Robinson, "Grieving Home," 55). These places "acted as conduits of grief and healing" for the young people in the study (Robinson, "Grieving Home," 57).

Robinson also makes an important observation when she notes that the spaces that felt safe to study participants were those that gave them both the freedom to be alone and the opportunity to connect with friends and/or youth workers, if they wanted (Robinson, "Grieving Home," 57). This shows that communal support cannot be forced, only offered. When people

know that they are invited into community but that they are not obliged to participate, their agency is honored and they're empowered to trust themselves, which can be a vital component of the healing process.

The communal nature of the grief support outlined in this resource was an essential aspect that supported the first two goals of meaning-making and positive coping. In their chapter on meaning making in chaplaincy, Dagmar Grefe, Pamela McCarroll, and Bilal Ansari write that “meaning in life is constituted through one’s sense of ‘mattering’ to others and of belonging to something greater than one’s self... Belonging to a group builds resilience and promotes a sense of meaning in life while providing protective factors that serve positive coping and well-being” (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 87). Thus, while the content of the agendas below is focused on meaning making and coping, a participant may in fact derive more meaning from belonging to the group than from the specific content of the sessions. I sought to ensure that participants felt ownership over the direction and organization of the group, and I strived to create ample space for participants to share their wisdom and reflections with each other. In addition, the coping strategies outlined in the agendas may have resonated in a deeper way because they were introduced and reinforced in a group setting. This project maintains that meaning making and coping are profoundly relational activities, and thus creating and cultivating a sense of community is an essential aspect in promoting resilience and healing through one’s grief journey.

Co-Creation of the Grief Groups

In interfaith chaplaincy, the care seeker’s voice is centered, and the care seeker’s own system of beliefs and particular struggles shape the direction of the encounter (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 77). The chaplain doesn’t force a particular worldview or belief system, and chaplains must relinquish their own agendas and focus on what the care seeker is expressing that they want/need. One way that chaplaincy honors the dignity of each person is by recognizing each care seeker’s agency and empowering them to tap into internal wisdom and inner resources that can support them through their struggles. This is referred to as a “strengths-based approach,” which rests on the foundational belief that care seekers “possess resources to address the problems and crises that erupt through the arc of their lives” (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 78). Through a strengths-based approach, a chaplain “seeks to support careseekers’ own healing capacities by engaging their sense of agency, meaning-making systems, spiritual values, and resources” (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 84). I believe that this empowerment model is particularly impactful when working with the unhoused community. Focusing on a person’s strengths can undercut harmful stereotypes of unhoused people as those who “need” help, rather than seeing them as people who can and *are* helping themselves and others. The empowerment model also counteracts systems that undermine the agency of unhoused people and force them to live according to others’ rules and structures (e.g., being forced to leave a shelter at a specific time each morning, having to walk across town to get food, etc.).

The Grief Group outlined in this resource was created using the empowerment model and a strengths-based approach. Participants in the group chose the topics, resources, and types of practices that the group focused on. Sometimes participants would approach me with a

specific poem/song they wanted to discuss or a particular topic they wanted to cover. Other times I created agendas based on common themes that I heard throughout the Grief Group and through my one-on-one conversations with people in the COTW community. Many of the topics and types of practices were determined based on the results of a survey that I gave out to Grief Group participants (see Appendix B and Appendix C). At the end of each Grief Group, I also solicited feedback and suggestions, which helped me to determine future routes that the Grief Group would take. All of the various ways that I solicited input into the creation of this resource are outlined in further detail in Appendix A.

Another powerful aspect of the Grief Group was that it allowed participants to share their wisdom and insights with others in the group, and it created a community of care where everyone was recognized as a potential healing resource for others. I believe that most of the benefits that participants derived from the group were not from what I shared or from what was on the agendas. Rather, the true healing came from participants supporting and caring for each other, and the profound spiritual insights that participants shared made the conversations deeper and more impactful than I could ever have conceived of on my own.

Setting and Context of the Grief Group

The Grief Group was officially hosted by Chaplains on the Way and was part of a range of groups and services that COTW offers. One of the main services that COTW provides is a breakfast program every weekday from 7:30am-10:30am during the winter and early spring. The breakfast program occurs in a local Waltham church, and people come to the program for a free breakfast, a chance to connect with others in the community, a warm place to be in the mornings, and/or a place to nap after they've been forced to leave the shelters early in the morning. Some also come to attend the weekly groups that COTW hosts. COTW's most consistent weekly group is its interfaith service on Wednesday mornings, which takes place on the Waltham Commons during COTW's summer schedule (mid-April until late November) and in the church during the winter program (late Nov. until mid-April). COTW also provides the physical space used by the Waltham Community Leadership Group (WCLG), which meets every Tuesday morning. COTW provides chaplaincy support to this local organizing and advocacy group which is led by people with lived experiences of homelessness. COTW has also hosted a meditation group off and on for a number of years. Midway through this Grief Group cycle, COTW started hosting the weekly meditation group again because of a request from a Grief Group participant. Finally, COTW hosts memorial services for any community member who dies, and it hosts an annual Memorial for All to commemorate all those we've lost in recent years.

Almost all of the Grief Group attendees also participated in the WCLG and/or the other groups hosted by COTW. This influenced the focuses, topics, and practices that we covered in the Grief Group. For example, I likely would have included more meditation practices in the Grief Group if COTW wasn't also hosting a group specifically around meditation. COTW's weekly interfaith service also includes a meditation practice, which reinforced the desire for the Grief Group to delve into different types of practices. The weekly interfaith service also provided an avenue for ritual and prayer around the griefs of the community, and I believe this reinforced the desire of participants for the Grief Group to be primarily discussion-based. In addition, the

WCLG provided an important counterpoint to the Grief Group. The values and beliefs of the WCLG is that the community *can* do something to alleviate and prevent unjust suffering and grief caused by inequitable, oppressive systems. For example, midway through the Grief Group cycle, the WCLG hosted a Housing Summit where people with lived experiences of homelessness called together local politicians, government organizations, non-profits, and Waltham residents to have discussions around how to solve the affordable housing crisis. The event was a huge success and demonstrated how advocacy can be a form of communal spiritual care. Thus, while the conversations in the Grief Group were important because they named and validated the suffering that community members were experiencing, these conversations were never the last word on grief. Many Grief Group participants went on to actively seek to alleviate the grief caused by homelessness through their involvement in the WCLG.

The interrelation of the Grief Group and the WCLG goes even further. The Grief Group started because WCLG members recognized the need for it and requested that the group be formed. The title “Grief Group” came from the WCLG members who initially requested the group. Thus, the Grief Group shouldn’t be understood as a chaplain initiative to “help” the community, but rather as an initiative that the community undertook to support and heal itself.

The first iteration of the Grief Group was three sessions and occurred in the summer of 2021 (before I started working as a chaplain intern at COTW). There were discussions around whether to have an open, drop-in group or a closed group with a set number of participants. Ultimately it was decided that the group should be open in order to make it more accessible. Ideally, there should be both an open and closed group so that people can join whichever format works best for them. However, given time and staffing constraints, COTW has only hosted an open group. The chaplains also provide one-on-one grief support for anyone who is uncomfortable with the open group format.

I began working at COTW in May 2022, and the most recent cycle of the Grief Group started in August 2022 and ran until early April 2023. The reason the Grief Group started up again is because community members requested it due to the overwhelming number of deaths in the community and the enormous grief that community members were facing. Jill and I co-organized and co-led the Grief Group sessions in August and September, and I fully took over the facilitation of the group in October. The agendas included in this resource only span October-April because (a) these were the agendas that I was fully responsible for creating and implementing, and (b) these were the agendas that were co-created based on the input of community members. In the initial months when the group was still solidifying, Jill and I planned the agendas on our own and focused on introducing people to the concept of a Grief Group. Thus, it’s important to note that the first agenda in this resource is not intended to be a “first” agenda that would start a Grief Group, and other initial groundwork needs to be laid to introduce the various facets of “grief” and discover why participants are interested in joining the group.

It took a while for the location of the Grief Group to become solidified. At first we met in a library study room, but the room was too small and hot. Then we met in an open reading room of the library where talking and conversation are allowed. The benefits of this space were that other library patrons noticed the group, asked about it, and sometimes even joined. The drawbacks were the frequent interruptions, and the reason we ultimately moved is because a children’s group started to meet in that room at the same time as our group. We then requested

to use the library's Trustees Room, and the library generously allowed us to reserve and utilize that space each week. The Trustees Room was a nice conference room with a large table in the center, a small kitchenette on the side, lots of windows, and a serving/drink area with a coffee maker. We stayed in this room until COTW started its winter breakfast program. At that point, we chose to move the location to the church where the breakfast program was held in order to make it more accessible to the COTW community. (See further reflections on location and set up in the conclusion.)

The timing of the group often depended on the location. We started hosting the group in the early afternoon on Wednesdays because COTW staff were already in Waltham for the Wednesday morning interfaith service. The timing of the Grief Group shifted to late afternoon (3:30pm) when we moved to the Trustees Room because that's when the room was available on Wednesdays. Late afternoons were a hard time to meet, especially because people had to get back to the shelters. Often people were also tired in the late afternoons. Attendance became more and more sparse as the days became shorter and we found ourselves meeting during/after sunset. When we moved the group to the location of the breakfast program, we moved the time to 9:15am. This allowed people time to get some coffee and breakfast before the group, and it allowed time for cleaning up before/right after the breakfast program ended.

Each Grief Group lasted an hour, which seemed like the right length. It allowed enough time for some good conversations, but also it wasn't so long that it was overwhelming. Many people joined late, and many participants left early. I welcomed the fluidity of participation, believing that it created a more accessible and trauma-informed space (where people could take a break or bow out if they were overwhelmed). Also, despite my best efforts to gather people so that we could start on time, there were a multitude of factors that resulted in us often starting late (e.g., participants getting food, potential participants asking questions to determine if they wanted to join; regular participants coming late, etc.). I was not very rigid with the start time, though I strived to start the group as close to the start time as possible. Many times we started with just two or three people, and over the course of the group, participation would swell to 7-8 people. I was much stricter on the end time. When we met at the library, the group ended late in the afternoon and participants needed time to get back to the shelters. When we were at the church, the group needed to end on time so that we could clean up from the breakfast program. Starting late and ending on-time meant that often groups were only ~45 minutes.

I often emphasized to participants that I am not a psychologist and this was not a therapy group. However, the group also wasn't an unstructured free-for-all. The covenant helped to create the container for the group and set the norms. (For more about the covenant, see the Nov. 30th agenda and commentary and the section in the conclusion called "Covenant and Group Agreements"). The format for all of our discussions was a circle practice. Participants sat in a circle, often around a large table, and for each discussion question (in green on the agendas), we'd go around the circle and each person would have a chance to share. Participants could always say "pass" if they didn't want to share. During the first session of the Grief Group in August, Jill and I experimented with each person being allowed to speak for one minute (measured with a small hourglass timer). After the timer finished, we'd move on to the next person. The idea was to ensure everyone had an equal time to share. However, participants didn't like this method, and we changed it so that people could share as long as they wanted during their turn. This had both benefits and drawbacks (see the section on "Circle

Practice” in the conclusion). After each circle practice, we’d open up the floor so that anyone could share their reactions to others’ sharings and anything else that was on their minds.

Jill and I decided at the beginning of the group that it would be best to print the agendas so each participant had a copy. The idea was that printed agendas could help the group feel more like a co-created space where all have the power and responsibility to ensure the group stays on track. It also was a good reference point if people forgot the question as we went around the circle or if we were doing an unfamiliar ritual or practice. In addition, it allowed participants to be more fully engaged. Before each session (starting on Dec. 7th), we went around the circle and read the group agreements. Also, whenever there was a quote or long piece of text (including the closing words), I would ask if anyone was willing to read it for the group. Some participants also kept the agendas and printed resources so that they could refer to them later. This was especially true when I printed out copies of poems and song lyrics.

It was also important that we had food before and/or during each meeting. As one WCLG member brought up in a weekly meeting, it’s hard to focus and engage if one is hungry. This community member requested that all COTW and WCLG gatherings have food, and COTW was happy to follow through and make that happen. While the Grief Group met at the library, one participant generously cooked delicious, vegetarian meals for everyone each week. On the weeks this participant couldn’t make it, other participants brought food for the meeting, and COTW supplemented with food and sparkling waters from our own supplies. Participants’ active involvement in bringing food to the meetings reinforced the idea that the group was a co-created space, and the food created a warm, friendly atmosphere. When the Grief Group moved to the church, all participants could get breakfast before/during the group because the group met in the breakfast program space.

Between 2-13 people participated in each Grief Group, with an average of 5-8 participants. The Grief Group participants, like the COTW community as a whole, were diverse. Participants came from various faith traditions and religious backgrounds, and many didn’t identify with any religious tradition at all. Participants were racially and ethnically diverse, and there was a mix of genders in the group. There was even class diversity. All of COTW’s programs are open to anyone - both unhoused and housed people. Many of the participants were unhoused and sleeping at the shelters in Waltham, and some were sleeping outside (especially in the summer months). Many other participants were housed community members who volunteered to support COTW’s programs and/or who participated in COTW’s activities. Many others were currently housed but had previously lived experience of homelessness. A couple participants were precariously housed and their status as housed/unhoused changed over the course of the group. A few others were housed Waltham residents who otherwise had no connection to COTW. They heard about the Grief Group through the library’s online calendar or through the church where the breakfast program was held. (See further reflections in the section entitled “Both unhoused and housed participants” in the conclusion.)

The Grief Group, like all of COTW’s programs, was free.

Who I am and why I wrote this

In the summer before my third (and final) year of the Master of Divinity program at Harvard, I brainstormed various topics for my senior project with Jill, my supervisor and the

Executive Director of Chaplains on the Way. I'd been working part-time as a chaplain at COTW for a few months, and I knew that I wanted to consult Jill about my final project because she, like me, is a Buddhist practitioner with a vocation in interfaith chaplaincy. I came to Harvard Divinity School to study socially engaged Buddhism and interfaith chaplaincy, and I knew I wanted my project to be connected to those themes. I've learned about Buddhism since childhood because my dad is a Zen practitioner, and I've been practicing within the Insight tradition since high school, when I started going with my dad and stepmom to a local Insight community in Nashville, Tennessee (where I grew up). After moving away from Nashville for college (Washington, D.C.) and a year of living abroad (Malaysia), I ended up coming back to my hometown in 2015 and getting highly involved in One Dharma Nashville, the Insight community my parents introduced me to in high school. In 2018, I participated in One Dharma's six-month training on how to offer basic mindfulness meditation instructions, and I've offered Introduction to Meditation workshops and sessions off and on since then. I began to be increasingly interested in socially engaged Buddhism during that time as well. I worked as a community organizer advocating for health justice in Tennessee for four years, and I increasingly relied on my Buddhist practice and community to sustain me during challenging campaigns and to provide a theological grounding that helped me understand my deeper intentions for engaging in social justice work.

One of the main reasons that I ended up applying to divinity school was to be able to further explore the intersections between social justice advocacy and the Buddhist path. Since coming to HDS, this has been a main focus of my studies and extracurricular activities. In 2021, I worked with a team of three other people to organize the 8-month [Buddhism and Race Speaker Series](#), and in the 2021-2022 academic year, my friends and I co-created a yearlong class exploring Decoloniality and Buddhism. As a white woman committed to the Buddhist path, I believe it's essential for me to explore and help dismantle the ways that white supremacy culture infests predominately white, convert Buddhist communities and shapes larger discourses on Buddhism in the U.S., such as the all-too-common erasure of Asian and Asian American Buddhist voices. I also believe the Buddhist path offers valuable thought and resources to social justice movements. While these lines of inquiry may not be explicitly discussed in this project per se, they no doubt shape what I've chosen to include and how I've talked about the various parts of the project.

The other main focus on my studies at HDS has been interfaith chaplaincy. I became interested in exploring a career in healthcare chaplaincy when I was working in the health justice movement and realized that my favorite part of the job was accompanying people facing serious health crises and supporting them as they found new meaning and hope through advocacy. During my second year at HDS, I completed my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at a hospital, and I loved it so much that I knew that chaplaincy was the career path that I wanted to pursue. I was excited to find Chaplains on the Way because the organization works at the intersection of spiritual support and social justice, and I've been so grateful to serve as a part-time chaplain intern and to learn from/with this community over the past year. Next year, I will be pursuing a full-time chaplaincy residency at a hospital, with the goal of becoming a board-certified chaplain.

Throughout my chaplaincy training, one of my main areas of focus has been on dying and grief, which is why I chose to focus my senior project on these topics. The reason that I've

been drawn to this work is not necessarily because of loss and grief in my own life. While I've lost friends and family members whom I still think about and grieve for, the people whom I've been closest to in my life are still alive, and I haven't really experienced other major losses either. Rather, my interest in this work stems from my spiritual practice, namely the Buddhist death contemplations that I've been practicing for the past four years. When I began to contemplate my own mortality and the reality that everyone I know and love will one day die, I dived deeply into "anticipatory grief. This grief work has helped me to see how precious life is and to strive to appreciate each moment. My daily meditation practice still includes a ten-minute death contemplation, and I believe each day is richer because of it. The importance of this practice to me is the main reason that I focus on grief and death within my vocation, and I believe the spiritual support that I've provided to the dying and the bereaved has been the most meaningful, precious, and sacred work that I've ever done.

Intended Audience

When compiling this resource, the primary audience that I had in mind was COTW's chaplains and chaplain interns (present and future). I hope that they can draw from these materials for future COTW programming, and I would be delighted if this became a "living" document that other COTW chaplains and interns continue adding to and revising.

My other primary audience is the COTW community, which is comprised of people who are currently unhoused, people who are formerly unhoused, and housed Waltham residents. I hope that this project remains available to everyone in the community and that anyone can look through and find the resources that are most supportive to them.

My final audience is other interfaith chaplains working in different communities, especially those who are working with the unhoused community. I hope that other chaplains adapt these resources to meet the needs of their own communities, and/or that they can find inspiration in creating their own resources.

Grief Group Agendas and Reflections

Oct. 12th Grief Group: "For Grief" by John O'Donohue

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Print copies of the poem "For Grief" by John O'Donohue for each participant⁴
- Bring pens or highlighters for each participant

⁴ O'Donohue, John. *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. Convergent Books, 2008.

Agenda

1. Welcome
 - a. Outline: Check in, reading poem “For Grief” by John O’Donohue and discussion of poem, closing words
 - i. Format for discussion questions: circle practice w/o timer, then “reaction time”
 - b. Questions?
 - c. Group agreements (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or “fixing” others)
2. Check In (name and how you’re feeling today, especially related to your grief journey)
3. [“For Grief” by John O’Donohue](#)
 - a. Introducing poem: this poem is similar to the poem “For One Who Is Exhausted, a Blessing” by John O’Donohue, which was the scripture reading for the interfaith service a couple weeks ago
 - b. First reading of the poem aloud: following along on your own copy
 - i. First impressions: what is one idea that resonated with you or stood out to you?
 - c. Second and third reading of the poem aloud: closing your eyes (if that’s comfortable for you!), and seeing if you find (a) a word or phrase that validates how you’re feeling or perhaps makes you feel less lonely/”crazy” in how you’re feeling, and/or (b) a word or phrase that gives you comfort or hope
 - i. *After the poem has been read aloud twice, you’re invited to underline the words/phrases that validate how you’re feeling and to circle the words/phrases that bring you comfort or hope. You can take your copy of the poem with you, so you can turn to it again when you need spiritual support or comfort.*
 - ii. What did you underline? What did you circle? If you want to share, you could also say why those words or phrases resonated with you.
4. Grief Group Closing⁵

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
Amen

10/12 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

An important note: This was not our first Grief Group. The group had been meeting for several months at this point, and we already had a group of regular participants. Therefore, this isn’t written as a “first” agenda to start a Grief Group. The reason it’s first in this resource is because this is when I’d started creating agendas using the input of community members, so this is the

⁵ These closing words were adapted and co-written by Jill Gauling, Executive Director and Chaplain at COTW, and Justi Godoy, COTW’s former Development Director and Chaplain.

first “co-created” agenda. (See the section “Setting and Context of the Grief Group” in the Introduction for more information.)

A large group of ten people attended this week. We took our time settling in, especially because a participant had brought a warm, home cooked meal and we wanted to label all of the ingredients in the dish and give people enough time to serve themselves. There was a warm, communal atmosphere as we were settling in. Several new participants had joined this week: one had learned about it from the library’s online calendar, two had been meaning to come for a while and had finally made it, and two had come because I’d talked with them on the Waltham Commons earlier in the afternoon and informed them about the group. Regular participants greeted the new participants, and there were numerous conversations between old and new participants during the pre-group meal.

When we did get started, the check in circle seemed to help invite new people into the conversation and give them an opportunity to explain why they had come. The agenda also stimulated a lot of good conversation. Here’s what I thought worked well about this agenda:

- One new person said that during the second and third times reading the poem, a new line had stuck out to them which they weren’t expecting. This suggests that the practice of re-reading one thing over and over can be beneficial for some participants.
- Most participants seemed engaged in circling and underlining phrases in the poem.
- The agenda overall seemed to be the right length, and we ended right on time. Simple agendas with just a couple questions seem to work best.
- The poem spoke to a lot of participants’ experiences of grief. These are some of the lines that participants said especially resonated with them:
 - “Your thoughts make your eyes unsure; And some dead echo drags your voice down; Where words have no confidence” → One participant resonated with this line and how strange life feels after loss.
 - “Flickers of guilt kindle regret; For all that was left unsaid or undone.” → This line prompted conversations about specific regrets that participants had. I believe it’s powerful to have a poem that validates the commonness of regret after a major loss, and I believe it was helpful that multiple people stated that they resonated with this line, normalizing guilt as a frequent part of grief.
 - “All you can depend on now is that; Sorrow will remain faithful to itself.” → One participant appreciated how this validated the enormity of loss.
 - “And when the work of grief is done, The wound of loss will heal” → One participant said this line resonated with them. The participant went on to express that people just had to be tough through their grief and that everything would be fine over time. At the end of the circle, I invited the question of what it means to “heal” over time, and I gently suggested that we might always carry the scar of loss but that perhaps the pain of that scar would ebb over time. I did this to validate participants’ various experiences of grief and try to address any fears that they might be grieving “wrong” if they don’t feel better in a certain timeframe. As I mentioned in the “Coping” section of the introduction, this Grief Group was not aimed at having participants accomplish the “tasks” of grieving, and thus I worried that this line of the poem gave off the wrong impression of the goals of

the group. The grief theory that I was drawing from rests on the belief that grieving may never be finished, but rather that people “learn to live with their grief” (Kelley 37).⁶ In order to further explore this theme of time and healing with the Grief Group participants, I planned a three week series on this topic in January.

- “From that gap in the air; And be able to enter the hearth; In your soul where your loved one; Has awaited your return; All the time.” → This line brought people comfort.

Finally, I mentioned at the end of the group that the poem we used today was suggested by one of the group members, and I invited others to share their ideas for future sessions. Two regular participants came up to me after the group with specific ideas for future sessions.

Oct. 19th Grief Group: Ritual for Reflecting on Recent Deaths

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Bring a soft blanket and small stones
 - Spread out the soft blanket in the center of the table, and arrange the stones around the perimeter so that participants can easily reach them

Agenda:

1. Welcome
 - a. Overview of today’s group
 - b. Format for discussion questions: circle practice w/o timer, then “reaction time”
 - c. Questions?
 - d. Group agreements (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or “fixing” others; anyone can pass)
2. Check In (name and one word about how you’re feeling in this moment)
3. Grounding Practice - Humming⁷
4. Reflecting on recent deaths
 - a. There have been many deaths in the Chaplains on the Way community recently. Some people in this grief group may have attended the memorial that COTW hosted earlier this afternoon. This group is a place where we can continue to support each other as we grieve the losses of our loved ones and friends.
 - b. If you attended today’s memorial: What’s still on your heart? Any lingering feelings, or stories you didn’t get a chance to share earlier but that you want to share now?

⁶ Melissa Kelley writes that the standard psychoanalytic model claims that “normal” mourning is “time limited” and has a definitive end point. However, newer psychoanalytic perspectives suggest that one may never reach an “end point” to their grief, though the acuity of the pain may lessen over time (Kelley 37). I reference these theories related to time and healing in the January agendas on this topic.

⁷ This practice was based on the humming practice described in the book *My Grandmother’s Hands* (Menakem 141-142).

- c. **If you didn't attend today's memorial: You're invited to talk about any specific loss that's on your heart today and share a story/memory related to that loss.**
 - d. While you share, you're invited to take one of the stones and hold it in your hand. These stones represent our grief. When you finish sharing, you can place your stone on top of the soft blanket in the center, which represents the tender space of compassion in which all of our griefs can be held.
 - e. After each person shares, the group will respond together: **"We honor your memories and feelings. We are grateful for what you've shared and hold it in the tenderness of our collective heart. We offer our care and compassion as a soft blanket where your grief can rest."**
5. Grief Group Closing
- We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
Amen

10/19 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

This Grief Group session was held immediately after a memorial service that COTW led for a community member. Of the six people who attended the Grief Group, three had attended the memorial.

This was the only agenda where the prompt for the opening circle was to share "one word" about how you're feeling in the moment. This didn't work out and people opted to share lengthier check-in's about how they were doing. I chose not to enforce the "one word" check in rule and let people share what was on their hearts. From this experience, I realized that the opening check-in circle is actually one of the most important times of the Grief Group. People often come with something specific on their hearts and minds, and this check in circle gives them a free space to share that with the group.

For each of the discussion questions, participants didn't stick to the prompt and rather just shared whatever was on their hearts and minds. I didn't make any particular effort to bring people back to the prompt because I wanted people to use the group however they found useful.

The reason that I led the humming practice was because a participant had expressed interest in simple practices that they could do throughout the day to ground themselves. However, this practice flopped. I only heard one person humming along with me. This may have been because I told people that they didn't have to participate, and most everyone took me up on that. I wonder if practices like humming feel too vulnerable because most people are not used to doing these sorts of practices with other people.

The ritual aspect of this agenda (taking the stone and placing it on the blanket; saying the response together) also flopped. Only one person took a stone and laid it on the blanket. A couple others took a stone and kept holding it throughout the meeting. Also, nobody read the response along with me, even though I repeatedly encouraged them to do so. Eventually, I just

read it alone. This did allow me to improvise a bit and tailor the words to people's individual sharings, but I was disappointed that it ended up being the chaplain who offered words of comfort to each participant rather than the community offering care and support to each other.

When debriefing this Grief Group with Monica, my senior seminar advisor, she mentioned that this ritual may have flopped because it was the first ritual that I invited the group to engage in. The group was still relatively new at this time, and participants may have still been building up their trust in my facilitation and in the other group members. Rituals can feel particularly vulnerable because they invite us to access deeper emotional states through symbolic objects.⁸ Therefore, it's important to cultivate a sense of trust and safety within a group before inviting them to engage in a ritual together. This hypothesis on why the ritual flopped is also corroborated by the fact that the ritual that I invited participants to engage in a month later was quite successful (see commentary on Nov. 16th agenda). This may have been because participants felt a greater sense of trust in my leadership and in the group by that time. Overall, I believe that it may have been more skillful to wait to do any rituals until after the conversation about the covenant and community norms (see Nov. 30th agenda).

Oct. 26th and Nov. 2nd Grief Groups: RAIN Meditation

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Bring a meditation bell to signal the beginning and end of the meditation
- Print out one copy of Tara Brach's RAIN Meditation⁹ (for facilitator)
- Print Handout 1: "What's Normal?" (pg.10 in Megan Devine's *How to Carry What Can't Be Fixed: A Journal for Grief*)¹⁰

Agenda:

1. Welcome
 - a. Overview of today's group
 - b. Format for discussion questions: circle practice w/o timer, then "reaction time"
 - c. Questions?
 - d. Group agreements (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or "fixing" others; anyone can pass)
2. Check In (name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey)
3. RAIN Guided Meditation, by Tara Brach
 - a. **R: Recognize** what's going on
 - b. **A: Allow** the experience to be there, just as it is

⁸ According to P. E. Irion, "ritual provides the useful function of allowing the participant to channel feelings. Rather than being overcome by passivity and a feeling of helplessness, the context of ritual allows the mourner to 'act out' or externalize deep feelings that might otherwise not be expressed" (qtd in Castle and Phillips, 48). In addition, Jason Castle and William L. Phillips write, "Because of their out-of-the-ordinary feeling, rituals may help the bereaved to be less analytical and be more in touch with their feelings or even become aware of feelings that they were not conscious of before the ritual" (Castle and Phillips 49).

⁹ Brach, Tara. "RAIN: A Practice of Radical Compassion." *Tara Brach*, 1 Jan. 2020, <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain-practice-radical-compassion/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

¹⁰ Devine, Megan. *How to Carry What Can't Be Fixed: A Journal for Grief*. Sounds True, 2021.

- c. **I: Investigate** with interest and care (in the body)
 - d. **N: Nurture** with self-compassion
 - e. **After the meditation: How was that practice for you? What arose for you? (Any response is welcome! Even if you felt distracted, sleepy, overwhelmed, etc. All of it belongs.)**
4. Thinking about RAIN in our daily lives
- a. Simply **recognizing** the impact that grief is having on us can be hard because grief manifests in a lot of different ways, as we've discussed before. **[See handout 1]**
 - b. Even if we do recognize it, **allowing** our grief can be equally challenging because we think we "should" feel a different way or "should" be handling the grief "better." Yet Tara Brach says that allowing our grief and saying to ourselves "it's okay" and "this belongs" can provide relief and comfort.
 - c. **When is it hard for you to recognize the impact grief is having on you? And/or when do you find it challenging to allow your experience of grief to be just as it is? What happens when you accept the grief and allow it to be there?**
 - d. Once we recognize and allow our grief, Tara Brach recommends that we **investigate** it with interest and care. This includes asking ourselves, "How am I experiencing this in my body? ... What does this vulnerable place want from me? What does it most need?"
 - e. This naturally leads into the final part of the RAIN practice: **nurture** with self-compassion. Tara Brach invites us to offer ourselves a soothing gesture (for example, putting a hand on our heart or belly) or to say to ourselves a message of reassurance or acceptance or love - whatever it is that we most need to hear ("I'm here with you."; "I love you, and I'm listening."; "It's not your fault."; "Trust in your goodness.")
 - f. **What gesture or phrase of self-compassion do you feel like you most need today? Do you feel like you can offer yourself compassion in this way?**
 - g. You're invited to continue experimenting with the RAIN technique over this next week. See if you can offer yourself self-compassion in a way that allows your grief to be just as it is and that lets your grief know that you're there and you care about it.
5. **Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group**
6. **Grief Group Closing**
- We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
 May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
 May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
 May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
 May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
 Amen

10/26 and 11/2 Grief Groups: Commentary and reflections

During the October 26th Grief Group, we only got through the first part of the agenda: the RAIN meditation and a discussion about how the meditation was for participants. Therefore, I split this agenda into two sessions. On Nov. 2nd, we discussed the section “Thinking about RAIN in our daily lives.” I told people that they could take the agendas with them and try to incorporate the RAIN practice into their daily lives over the next week, which would then be the basis for the discussion on Nov. 2nd. During the Nov. 2nd session, nobody mentioned trying to incorporate the practice over the course of the week, so I’m not sure if that suggestion was helpful.

I wrote this agenda because a participant was interested in incorporating meditations into the Grief Group. This participant had positive feedback about the Oct. 26th session when we did the RAIN meditation and discussed it. However, not everyone was as interested in having meditation form a central part of the group. At the end of the Oct. 26th session, another participant said that they wished to have more time for discussion. Therefore, COTW started a separate weekly meditation group. This created a space for those who wanted to dive into meditation more deeply, while preserving the Grief Group as a primarily discussion-based group.

However, I do think it was valuable to have some time for meditation in the Grief Group, and people generally had positive feedback about it during the closing circle on Oct. 26th. During the sharing circle after the meditation, it seemed like all of the participants had engaged in the meditation (even though some seemed to have engaged by doing meditation practices that they were already familiar with, rather than following along with this particular guided meditation). I was pleasantly surprised about the high level of participation, especially because group meditation can feel uncomfortable or vulnerable for some people. I was nervous that the practice would end up like the group humming practice a few weeks before, when most people had opted out of the practice. However, the group seemed more comfortable with quiet meditation. This may have been because meditation is incorporated into COTW’s weekly interfaith services and several Grief Group participants also attended those services.

One unexpected comment during the discussion was the idea that meditation can help us to distance ourselves from our emotions. The comment was said during circle practice, and I didn’t end up commenting on it after the circle practice was over. However, after debriefing the Grief Group with Jill and Monica (both of whom have Buddhist practices), I wished that I had explored this idea with the group and raised a couple reflections from my own Buddhist practice and from the Buddhist tradition. On the one hand, meditation practice can be used in an unskillful way to bypass or repress our emotions. I believe this comes from a false understanding of the Buddhist notion of equanimity and an unrealistic “ideal” of not having negative emotions at all. My Buddhist teachers have taught me that equanimity’s true meaning is that we have the capacity to open up to all of our emotions and experiences just as they are, while at the same time not being swept away by them. On the other hand, sometimes our emotions are so intense and/or we’re so consumed by them that it’s essential to step back from them a bit in order to gain a better perspective on them. Meditation can be a helpful tool in helping us to step back and see our experiences from a different perspective. Meditation may also offer us some relief or ease, which can give us hope and help us to better navigate the challenging times in our lives. Overall, I think there must be a balance between meaning-making

(diving into our pains and seeing the meaning in them) and coping (finding some relief so we can get a healthier perspective), and I believe meditation can serve both of these purposes if it is used in a skillful way.

The reason that I chose the RAIN meditation in particular was because I believed it offered a great example of a coping practice that would help participants relate to their grief with compassion. The RAIN meditation has been a cornerstone of my personal spiritual practice for years, and it's helped me to cope with challenging emotions and to feel greater self-compassion during difficult times.

During the Nov. 2nd session, the handout on the different manifestations of grief helped to spark a good discussion. This handout seems particularly helpful for validating people's varied experiences with grief.

Finally, the discussion questions on "Thinking about RAIN in our daily lives" were broad enough that participants took the conversation in several different directions (some responses directly addressed the prompt; others did not). I didn't force people to try to stick to the prompt. I believe that a good prompt is one that gives people the freedom to share what's really on their heart and mind regarding their grief journey.

Nov. 9th Grief Group: Survey about Grief Group

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Print copies of the survey for each participant (see Appendix B)
- Bring pens for participants to use to fill out the survey

Agenda:

1. Welcome
 - a. Overview of today's group
 - b. Format for discussion questions: circle practice w/o timer, then "reaction time"
 - c. Questions?
 - d. Group agreements (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or "fixing" others; anyone can pass)
2. Check In (name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey)
3. Survey about grief group
 - a. As we're planning ahead for future Grief Groups, we're interested in hearing what topics related to grief are most relevant to you. We also want to hear what practices you'd like to engage in during this Grief Group.
 - b. Please take 7 minutes to fill out the survey.**
 - c. On the first page, which statement feels like it best describes your experience recently?
 - d. On the second page, what practice, ritual, or activity are you most interested in exploring during this grief group? Why?
4. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
Amen

11/9 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

The participants took longer than seven minutes to fill out the survey. However, this may have been because there was conversation and questions interspersed throughout the time that participants were filling it out. Also, people filled it out at different paces, so I had to repeat the instructions a few times. Overall, I think participants spent around 15 minutes just filling out the survey, but that was because the discussion about the survey began while people were filling it out. For this group, I think it was better to have an informal process for filling out the survey, rather than rigidly enforcing silence and efficiency.

Participants generally understood the directions (though I did have to explain them several times). However, one person interpreted the 1-5 ranking as a ranking of the intensity with which one resonates with that statement (1 being the least and 5 being the most, like a 1-10 pain scale with 10 being extreme pain). This participant ranked all of the statements that they chose as “5”, which indicated that these statements really resonated with the participant’s experience. After this participant realized that they had misunderstood the instructions, the group and I were encouraging, saying that the way that the participant had done it was perfectly fine and that we appreciated their vulnerability in sharing their experience. I appreciated that other participants actively sought to reassure this participant because it felt like the group was taking ownership as co-leaders of the space.

Although I thought that this Grief Group would just be a planning session, the conversations prompted by the survey ended up being quite powerful. Several participants expressed that they were struck by how many different types of grief there are. Some commented that they were grateful to have language for their various types of grief. The reason that I think this session ended up being so impactful is because the survey validated and normalized the various grief experiences that participants were having. As mentioned in the introduction, validation and normalization are two of the key tools used by chaplains to show their respect for each care seeker’s unique situation and to ease the isolation that often accompanies suffering.

For the first circle practice (asking participants about their responses to the first page of the survey), generally everyone read aloud all of the top 5 answers that they’d selected, even though the question only asked them to share one. I viewed this as a positive sign that people were willing to be vulnerable and share what was really impacting them. I believe that having the pre-written statements helped normally quiet participants engage at a new level. One participant who almost always passes during the circle practice read out a number of statements. Even though they didn’t explain why they’d chosen those statements, just their reading of the statements gave us a powerful insight into that participant’s grief, which they likely would not have shared otherwise.

The survey also sparked new conversations about grief that we might not otherwise have had. This included a discussion about collective grief, as well as a discussion about participants' subtle fears that death might be "contagious" (i.e., worrying that death might come for them next).

By the time we got to the second discussion question, we were almost out of time because people had spent a relatively long time filling out the survey and sharing their answers to the first page. Therefore, the second circle practice around people's answers on the second page was quick, with people just sharing 1-2 practices that they do or would like to do.

Nov. 16th Grief Group: Cumulative Grief and Grief Ritual

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Bring a basket
- Bring the following materials to put in the basket
 - A stone roughly the size of your palm - something with weight, but not too heavy
 - A couple dry leaves
 - A stick - a foot or two long
 - An empty bowl

Agenda:

1. Welcome
 - a. Overview of today's group
 - b. Format for discussion questions: circle practice w/o timer, then "reaction time"
 - c. Group agreements (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or "fixing" others; anyone can pass)
2. Check In (name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey)
3. Cumulative Grief
 - a. Cumulative grief is also sometimes called "**grief overload.**"
 - b. Definition of Cumulative Grief from Georgetown Psychology: "**Cumulative grief is what happens when you do not have time to process one loss before incurring another...** The difficult emotions which come from the initial loss bleed into the experience of the second loss. If there is a third loss, then the emotions from both the first and second losses get tangled up with the emotions of the third. So on and so forth. As you accumulate losses, processing the grief from each one becomes harder to handle. **The experience of cumulative grief is especially hard because no two losses feel the same**, resulting in a confusing mix of painful and sometimes contradictory emotions. While one loss may make you feel angry, another may make you feel numb, another may knock you down with sadness, and yet another might make you feel relief (think: the passing of a parent who was, in life, suffering)."¹¹

¹¹ Georgetown Psychology Team. "The Distress of Cumulative Grief." Georgetown Psychology, 7

- c. According to Dr. Bill Webster, here are some common reactions to cumulative grief:¹²
 - i. Feeling “**shock and disbelief**, not even ready to begin the work of grieving”
 - ii. Keeping a “**defensive posture**, keeping yourself in a state of heightened alert to guard against the next onslaught of very bad news that surely must be waiting just around the corner”
 - iii. Becoming **overwhelmed**, which causes us to **avoid** the pain of the losses or pushes us into **denial**
 - iv. Beginning to **question our faith or questioning God** (feeling like God is punishing us, or struggling to reconcile our ideas of a benevolent God with all of the pain we feel)
 - d. Does this definition of “cumulative grief” or do any of the common reactions resonate with your experience?
4. Grief Ritual, adapted from the Work that Reconnects’ “Truth Mandala”¹³
- a. We may feel so many different things when experiencing cumulative grief. This Grief Ritual is a way for us to start to name out loud just a couple parts of our experience.
 - b. Each of the four objects in the basket has a different meaning, and each object can allow us to speak to a different part of our experience:
 - i. “**This stone is for fear**. It’s how our heart feels when we’re afraid: tight, contracted, hard. With this stone, we can let our fear speak.”
 - 1. Examples: “I’m afraid that I’ll die next...”; “I am afraid that I’ll lose control of myself because of how much pain I feel”, etc.
 - ii. “**These dry leaves represent our sorrow...** Here the sadness can speak.”
 - 1. Examples: “I cry each time I hear this song...”; “I feel a pang of loss every time I wake up and remember that he’s died...”, etc.
 - iii. “**This stick is for our anger**, for our outrage. Anger needs to be spoken for clarity of mind and purpose. As you let it speak, grasp this stick hard with both hands. It’s not for pounding or waving around.”
 - 1. Examples: “I’m angry at God...”; “I am angry at someone who’s died...”; “ I am angry at my sister who didn’t check in on me after our dad’s death”, etc.
 - iv. **The empty bowl is for our numbness**. Our numbness is welcome here too.
 - 1. Examples: “I feel like I should be sad, but I don’t feel that right now...”; “Things don’t feel real”, etc.

July 2021, <https://georgetownpsychology.com/2021/07/the-distress-of-cumulative-grief/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

¹² Webster, Bill. “Cumulative Grief.” *The Centre for the Grief Journey*, <https://griefjourney.com/article-library/cumulative-grief/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

¹³ “Truth Mandala.” *The Work That Reconnects*, 26 Nov. 2017, <https://workthatreconnects.org/resource/truth-mandala/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

- c. We will pass the basket around, and you're invited to pick up any object that you want and then hold onto that object while you talk about how you experience that emotion. You can pick up as many objects as you want.
5. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 6. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

11/16 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

The first part of the agenda had a lot of text, so I asked participants to take turns reading the text aloud. I believe that this worked well and helped participants to stay engaged with the material. One participant remarked that they thought Dr. Bill Webster was smart and onto something with his quote, and I was glad that the material had resonated with that participant.

During the circle practice, I expected that people would build on Dr. Webster's quote and share experiences or emotions that were similar/different from what was described in the quote. However, participants didn't reference the quote much in their responses. Instead, they shared stories about specific losses and reflected on their experiences related to the overall topic of cumulative grief. The topic of cumulative grief did seem relevant to most participants.

I was pleasantly surprised at how well the grief ritual went, especially considering the soft blanket ritual a few weeks before flopped. I believe the success of this ritual may have been because there was a greater sense of trust and safety in the group. We'd been meeting for several months by that point, and the conversations had become more vulnerable over time.

Overall, it seemed quite helpful to have ritualized objects that represented emotions.¹⁴ Participants picked up and held the objects as they spoke, and it seemed to help keep the conversation on topic. It was helpful to have the printed agenda that stated what each object represented because participants referred to that list during the ritual (especially the first person who shared). I also modeled how to share by holding each object and giving examples of what someone might share, and I believe this also helped the ritual to be successful.

During the grief ritual, many participants picked the empty bowl that represented numbness. I think it was helpful to validate that numbness can be part of the grief journey, and this interest in talking about numbness led me to plan an entire Grief Group around this topic (see January-February Grief Groups: Numbness and Fear of Being Overwhelmed by Grief). A

¹⁴ Castle and Phillips write that, "by definition, ritual includes the use of symbolic elements, objects (both physical and nonphysical) as well as actions" (47). Rituals and their symbolic elements have therapeutic functions. T. A. Rando outlines nine therapeutic properties of rituals for the bereaved: "power of 'acting out' (externalization of thought/feeling), legitimization of emotional and physical ventilation, delimitation of grief (during ritual), legitimization of emotional exchanges (with the deceased), context for processing grief, validation of loss ("reality check"), structure for nebulous affect, social interaction (reintegration), and structuring of anniversaries and holidays" (qtd in Castle and Phillips, 46).

few participants also picked up the dry leaves and the stick. Nobody in this group picked up the stone, and I wondered if sharing about fears felt more vulnerable.

When modeling what one could share related to anger, I included anger at the violence of racism as one of the examples. A participant then built off that example during their turn. I believe that this demonstrates how important it is to include emotions related to collective grief (racism, systemic violence, etc.) in the examples in order to validate this type of sharing. Also, as this participant was sharing, I realized that I may not have been entirely clear about what I meant with my example, and I worried that I may have caused harm to the participants of color by not being clear. I wished that this group had a built-in way of naming that mistake and apologizing for not being clear. This is one reason why the “oops, ouch, wow” closing circle was added a few weeks later.

Nov. 23rd Grief Group: Holiday Grief and Gratitude... Maybe

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- ~30 dry leaves, ideally ones that are intact and big enough for people to write on
- A large glass bowl filled with water, placed in the center of the table (though it may need to be moved throughout the ritual to ensure everyone can reach it)
- Sharpies to write on the leaves

Agenda:

1. Welcome
 - a. Overview of today's group
 - b. Format for discussion questions: circle practice w/o timer, then “reaction time”
 - c. Group agreements (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or “fixing” others; anyone can pass)
2. Check In (name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey)
3. Holiday Grief
 - a. We all may have different reactions to the Thanksgiving holiday tomorrow, and these reactions may include feelings of mourning and grief. Some of us may be grieving the loss of a loved one whom we used to spend the holiday with. Others among us may be grieving the lack of a house where we can spend the holiday, and others may be experiencing collective grief around the genocide of millions of Native people.
 - b. Around the holidays, we may feel pressured to suppress our grief and try to only focus on the “good” things. In this group, we're invited to make our losses known to each other, and we have a space to talk about them openly.
 - c. Take as many leaves as you want, and write on the leaves anyone or anything that you're grieving for this holiday - e.g., the loss of a loved one, the lack of a house, the loss of youth/childhood happiness related to this holiday, etc. (As you may remember from the grief ritual last week, the leaves represent sorrow or mourning).

- d. What did you write on each leaf? Why? After explaining what you wrote down, you're invited to put the leaf in the bowl of water in the center of the table.
4. Gratitude... Maybe
 - a. We may feel pressured to come up with a list of what we're grateful for this holiday season. However, if developing this list feels forced or inauthentic, then it's not really serving us and can even make us feel worse.
 - b. On the other hand, loss and grief can sometimes make us grateful for things in unexpected ways. For example, we may feel a new appreciation for our friends, or for simple self-care rituals, or for small acts of kindness, or for the beauty of nature around us. We may also feel a new level of gratitude for the memories of our loved ones and friends whom we've lost.
 - c. Has gratitude shown up during your grieving journey? If so, how? What are your reactions when gratitude arises or when conversations turn to gratitude (e.g., ashamed, frustrated, numb)?
5. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
6. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

11/23 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

I was again pleasantly surprised at how well the ritual worked. This ritual was similar to the ritual with the stones and soft blanket (which had flopped a few weeks before), yet this time everyone participated and the ritual itself seemed to open up new conversations. Again, this may have been because participants had developed a greater sense of trust and safety in the group. Among the seven people who attended this group, most were regular participants who had attended many of the previous sessions.

I also believe that this greater sense of trust allowed the conversations to be deeper and more vulnerable. During this ritual, regular participants wrote down and discussed griefs that they hadn't shared with the group before. Perhaps the fact that people could take as many leaves as they wanted encouraged people to think about grief in a more expansive way, including griefs about aging and health problems. I also wondered whether the holiday season brought up memories of other griefs, especially family-related ones. In addition, the power of a ritual container can also elicit deeper sharing and the arising of emotions that a person may not have been conscious of before (see footnote 8).

Whenever someone shared that they were missing a particular family member, Judy (the other chaplain intern) asked for that family member's name, which was written on the leaf. I was

moved by Judy's witness and care, and I believe that it's an impactful practice for the chaplain/facilitator to learn and say the names of the people whom participants are grieving.

Similarly to last week, I think it's important for the facilitator to name collective griefs, especially at the beginning of the group because it sets the tone and helps participants know they can mention these types of grief. Since this Grief Group was the day before Thanksgiving, I believe it was essential to name the grief and anger around the genocide of millions of Native peoples. One participant also wrote this grief on a leaf, and I was glad that they felt safe enough to share this pain with the group.

During the grief ritual, I talked about how the leaves in the water showed how we're not alone. In this group, we came together in our grief, and together we could float in the water that symbolized compassion and care. I considered whether to add this to the agenda itself, but I decided not to because I think it's better to keep things simple. I think this ritual worked so well because it was quite simple, and I wasn't sure it was necessary for me to say that the water symbolized something. Regardless, I believe that the symbolic image of the leaves all floating together on the water conveyed an important message. It reinforced the sense of community and collective support for each others' grief.

During the conversation about gratitude, most people did end up having gratitudes that they wanted to share, even though I emphasized that the pressure to feel grateful could feel frustrating or upsetting to some. The group conversation about gratitude was brief, since the library closed early that day due to the next day being Thanksgiving.

Finally, I told participants I would release the leaves to the wind outside the library after the group. I told participants that they could take their leaves out and throw them away if they didn't want their words/names of loved ones scattered outside. Nobody took out their leaves. One participant saw me scattering the leaves after the group and said how meaningful it was to be releasing our sorrows to the wind. If it had been a different time of day or a different time of year, it might have been impactful to all go outside together to release the leaves. However, this wouldn't have worked well on a cold, dark November afternoon.

Nov. 30th Grief Group: Group Agreements and Covenant

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group
2. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey. You may also want to share how the Thanksgiving holiday was for you last week.
3. Group agreements and covenant
 - a. Below are some of the shared agreements that we've informally been practicing over the last few months. Because we have vulnerable conversations in this group, I believe it's important to have an explicit shared covenant so that this group can feel like a safe space for all. (Some of the agreements below are taken

from the Harvard Divinity School's touchstones for creating intentional space and adapted from Parker Palmer's 11 touchstones.)¹⁵

- i. **Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go**
 - ii. **Not advising or “fixing” others**
 - iii. **Anyone can pass**
 - iv. **Speaking from our own perspective**
 - v. **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder**
 - vi. **Speak your truth in ways that respect other people’s truth**
 - vii. **Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed**
- b. What do you think about these agreements? Is there anything that's missing?
 - c. How can we support each other as we strive to follow these agreements?
4. Circle practice: Feedback about today’s grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
 5. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
Amen

11/30 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

Because this Grief Group was grounded in a strengths-based approach and empowerment model, I believed that it was essential that the group develop their own set of community norms and accountability practices. As mentioned in the introduction, a “strengths-based approach” rests on the foundational belief that care seekers “possess resources to address the problems and crises that erupt through the arc of their lives” (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 78). In applying the strengths-based approach to the group as a whole, I believed that the community of Grief Group attendees had the strength and capacity to know how to deal with challenges that arose during our gatherings. This agenda sought to empower participants to view themselves and the group as having the capacity, resilience, and knowledge that was needed to face any difficulties that arose and to work through them in healing ways.

This Grief Group began with a warm, friendly atmosphere. The participant who had been generously cooking and bringing food to each session was unable to make it, so some participants went together to get food before the group. They then made popcorn for everyone right before the group started. The offerings of food made it feel like a communal, co-created space. There was also laughter and communal problem solving when one of the bags of popcorn got burned and wouldn't stop smoking, and several people stepped in to try to solve the problem so that we wouldn't set off the fire alarm

¹⁵ “DIB Touchstones.” *Harvard Divinity School*, <https://hds.harvard.edu/about/diversity-inclusion-and-belonging/dib-touchstones/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

The check in's about the Thanksgiving holiday took up at least half of the group time. The holidays had stirred up a lot of reactions and emotions among participants, and it felt important to hold space to discuss this. One participant discussed the genocide of Indigenous peoples and how we're not taught this reality in popular discourses about Thanksgiving (a conversation which we'd started the week before). Another participant talked about being from an immigrant family and not celebrating this holiday. Another participant talked about growing up in poverty, and how some of the other participants' remarks seemed to reflect relative wealth and abundance. This was the first time that I noticed a tension between housed and unhoused participants. As the facilitator, I sought to validate that we all have our own unique stories and lived experiences, and that the values underlying this group are that we can come together across lines of difference and support each other through the universal emotion of grief, however differently we may experience it.

The second half of the session focused on a discussion of the covenant. The group had solidified into a core group of around 6 people who came to almost every session. I believe that this helped us to have a fruitful discussion about the covenant because the participants were committed to the group and had attended enough sessions to know what felt good to them and what had been challenging. Participants actively engaged in the discussion about the group agreements and suggested these two additions to the covenant: (1) "We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space" and (2) "We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying "oops" when we make a mistake and "ouch" when we feel hurt by someone else's comments."

The second addition came from the discussion on question (3)(c) about how we support each other in living out this covenant. In addition to adding the agreement about saying "ouch" or "oops," the group also decided to incorporate an "ouch, oops, wow" circle at the end of each meeting. The "ouch, oops, wow" circle is a practice that we do at the Waltham Community Leadership Group (WCLG) meetings, and many Grief Group participants are also regular participants of that community organizing and advocacy group. Another method that the group chose to stay accountable to the covenant was to read the group agreements at the beginning of each Grief Group session. This is especially important when new people join the group. Reading the covenant at the beginning of each meeting is also a practice of the WCLG.

In the feedback circle at the end of the session, one participant said that their word was "respect," and they said that they admired how much the group respected one another. At the end of the group, participants expressed appreciation that we'd taken the time to talk about the covenant.

Dec. 7th Grief Group: Maintaining Connections with the Deceased

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Bring a bluetooth speaker, and be prepared to play the song "Keep Me in Your Heart" by Warren Zevon through the speaker¹⁶

¹⁶ Zevon, Warren. "Keep Me in Your Heart." *The Wind*, IndieBlu Music, 2003. Spotify app.

- Print the [lyrics](#) to the song for each participant¹⁷

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group
2. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
3. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or "fixing" others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - i. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying "oops" when we make a mistake and "ouch" when we feel hurt by someone else's comments
4. Song - "Keep Me in Your Heart" by Warren Zevon
 - a. On the survey everyone filled out a couple weeks ago, some people noted that they maintain ongoing relationships with people who have died. We may feel pressured to "move on" after a loss, but it can also be healing and meaningful to remember those whom we've lost and to have small rituals/practices to keep their memories alive in our hearts. We may also continue to feel their presence or talk to them, even though their bodily presence is no longer here.
 - b. The song "Keep Me in Your Heart" was the final song written by Warren Zevon, and he recorded it right before dying of lung cancer in 2003. In the song he talks about how those whom he's leaving behind can remember him and maintain a relationship with him, even after he's gone.
 - c. We'll listen to this song twice. First, you can follow along with the [printed lyrics](#). The second time, you're invited to close your eyes and let the song wash over you, and notice what words/phrases/emotions resonate with you as you listen.
 - d. What words or phrases from the song resonated with you?
 - e. What do you think Warren Zevon means when he says "I'm tied to you like the buttons on your blouse" and "I will be right next to you"?
 - i. Do you ever feel the presence of a departed loved one?
 - f. Do you maintain an ongoing relationship with those who've passed on? If so, what does your relationship look like now, and what practices/rituals do you do to maintain the relationship (e.g., talking to your departed loved one, seeing signs of their presence around you, holding an object that belonged to them, etc.)?¹⁸

¹⁷ Zevon, Warren. "Keep Me in Your Heart." *Genius*, 26 Aug. 2003, <https://genius.com/Warren-zevon-keep-me-in-your-heart-lyrics>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

¹⁸ This question is grounded in the theory that "continued bonds" with the deceased is normal and can be healing. Kelley writes that the standard psychoanalytic model suggests that "the purpose of mourning is to withdraw all psychic energy (i.e., to deathect) from the lost loved one in order to be able to reinvest it in new relationships" (39). In the standard model, a continued connection to the deceased might be

5. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
 - b. You can also share an "oops, ouch, wow" ("oops" - I made a mistake; "ouch" - something was hurtful; "wow" - I am inspired by or grateful for something)

6. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

12/7 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

A small group of only three people attended this session. Two regular participants had said in advance that they couldn't make it, so it didn't feel like the smallness of the group was due to a disengagement from regular participants.

This song only seemed to resonate with one of the participants. Another participant explicitly said that the song hadn't resonated for them, and I expressed appreciation for their comment and willingness to share honestly. We ended up not having time for a full circle practice for questions (4)(e) and (4)(f). Since the song didn't seem to be resonating much, I decided to just give a couple of minutes for an open discussion on either of those questions. If the song had seemed like it was meaningful to people, I might have delayed the discussion of those two questions until the next session.

One of the lines of the song that resonated with a participant was "maybe you'll think of me and smile." This sparked a discussion about sharing happy memories of the deceased. Another line that resonated was "when you wake up in the morning and see that crazy sun," and we discussed how, during the initial stages of grief, the world seems strange and it's hard to believe that cycles of day continue on despite the fact that your world has been turned upside down.

The bulk of the discussion this session centered on dreams of the deceased and how our loved ones visit us through dreams. Perhaps it would be good to focus a whole session on this.

Also, I'm not sure if it was necessary to listen to the song twice. This may depend on the size of the group, and the group's comfort with times of quiet, reflective listening. If the song is played twice, I recommend guiding participants into a meditative posture and attitude when listening to it a second time: closing their eyes (if that's comfortable for them), noticing how the song lands in their body, and feeling how the words wash over them.

considered pathological (Kelley 23). However, more recently there has been research showing that "continued bonds" with the deceased can be "a source of great comfort and healing" (Kelley 25).

Dec. 28th Grief Group: Debriefing the Holidays

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Print copies of the Litany of Comfort adapted from the Unitarian Universalist Association for each participant¹⁹

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or "fixing" others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - i. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying "oops" when we make a mistake and "ouch" when we feel hurt by someone else's comments
 - j. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words
3. Circle Practice: How are you doing today? How was the holiday season for you?
4. Some of you attended the Blue Christmas service a couple weeks ago. Below is the responsive reading from that service. This responsive reading is a [Litany of Comfort adapted from the Unitarian Universalist Association](#). We will go around the circle and each person will read one paragraph, then we will all say the response. Afterwards, we will discuss what resonates with us from this responsive reading, especially now that we're reflecting back on the holiday.
5. Circle practice:
 - a. Did anything in this responsive reading resonate with your experience this holiday season?
 - b. If the holiday season was difficult, what helped you find some comfort and peace?
6. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.

¹⁹ Faulk, Debra. "Litany of Comfort for Blue Christmas." *Unitarian Universalist Association*, <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/151325.shtml>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

- b. You can also share an “oops, ouch, wow” (“oops” - I made a mistake; “ouch” - something was hurtful; “wow” - I am inspired by or grateful for something)

7. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

12/28 Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

There was a gap of two weeks between Grief Groups in December. This is because COTW was hosting a Blue Christmas service one Wednesday, and Grief Group participants were invited to attend it instead of the Grief Group (since it was happening on the same day and would cover a similar topic). The second week (the week of Christmas) I was traveling and unable to facilitate the group.

The group on Dec. 28th was small, with only two participants. I believe this was largely due to the gap between meetings, though perhaps it was also because it was the week between Christmas and New Year's Day. Even though it was such a small group, I still facilitated the group in the same way that I would have facilitated a larger group. We read through the covenant, took turns reading the Litany of Comfort, and did circle practice for the discussion. I believe it is important to maintain clear structures and stick to normal expectations for the group, which can help to establish a sense of stability and safety in the group.

I believe it's important to have a group during/after the holidays because of how tough the holidays can be. One participant said that they had been looking forward to the group because of a recent death that they had experienced over the holidays. I believe the group's consistency supported them through this loss because they knew that they'd have a place to reflect on it and process what had happened.

I also think that it was helpful to have a relatively loose agenda focused on open-ended questions about the holidays. The holidays can stir up so much, and it was important to create a spacious container where people can discuss whatever is on their hearts and minds.

However, I also think it was impactful to include the Litany of Comfort to guide the discussion, if participants wanted a prompt. The litany's paragraph on loneliness opened up a conversation about this topic, which hadn't come up much in the Grief Group up until that point.

There was also a beautiful moment in the middle of this group when one of the participants paused mid-conversation and told us that we should look out the window at the brilliant sunset. We spent a few minutes quietly admiring the sunset, getting up out of our chairs and going over to the window to admire it. This felt like a symbol of hope during the grief of the holidays.

Finally, this was our last meeting in the Trustees Room at the library, so we also spent a few minutes saying goodbye to the room and sharing fond memories of being in that space (e.g., the burnt popcorn a few weeks before and being worried we'd set off the fire alarm). I

believe this ritualized sense of closure was important because of the attachments that may have been formed to the room and the grief that might be felt in leaving it behind. (See further reflections in the “Location and Set Up” section of the Conclusion.)

January Grief Groups: Time and Healing (3 sessions)

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group
 - a. Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or “fixing” others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - i. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying “oops” when we make a mistake and “ouch” when we feel hurt by someone else's comments
 - j. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words

Tentative new agreement - we will vote on whether to add this:

 - i. Step up, step back: you're encouraged to “step up” if you normally don't share much and to “step back” if you normally share a lot so that there's time for everyone
3. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
4. Does time heal all wounds?
 - a. We all have likely heard messages from family, friends, and/or popular culture saying that grief is temporary and that “time heals all wounds.”
 - b. However, recent research shows that this may not be a helpful or accurate way of looking at grief. Melissa Kelley writes in her book *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*: “For many people, there may never be a definitive ‘end point’ to their grief. Rather, people learn to live with their grief. The acuity and pain of the grief tend to subside over time. However, people may

reexperience pain, sadness, longing, or other feelings when they recall their lost loved one. Grief becomes a new character in one's life narrative, perhaps largely receding into the wings over time but never fully vacating the stage and capable of making an entrance at particular moments throughout one's life." (37)²⁰

- c. Have you heard messages about how "time heals all wounds"? How do you react to these messages? In your experience, what's the relationship between time and healing?
 - d. Does Melissa Kelley's description of grief as a new "character" in one's life resonate with your experience?
5. Not wanting to "get over" one's grief
- a. Megan Devine writes in her book *How to Carry What Can't Be Fixed* that the idea of "getting over" our grief may feel wrong or even offensive. She says, "For many people, their grief is their most vital connection to that which is lost. Getting better might mean that the person you lost, or the life you no longer get to live, isn't as important anymore." (121)
 - b. Devine asks us to reflect on this question: Do you worry that time will make your loss recede into the background, like some faraway dream that never happened?
6. Compassion for our fears and difficult thoughts
- a. We may also have internalized messages about how grief should be temporary, and we may feel bad about ourselves if we feel like we're grieving "too long." After the death of a loved one, we may also be scared of feeling better because we feel like it's disrespectful to the person we lost, and we may judge ourselves harshly when we do have moments of feeling okay.
 - b. When we are caught up in fears, self-criticism, or other unhelpful thoughts, here's a simple practice we can do:
 - i. **Take three deep breaths**
 - ii. **Notice how we feel in our bodies**, especially how the fear or self-judgment is landing in our bodies (e.g., tension in the shoulders, hardness in the belly, etc.)
 - iii. **Offer ourselves words of compassion.** If we're feeling deep sorrow (even if it's a long time after the loss), we can say to ourselves, "Oh honey, it still hurts, doesn't it?" If we are feeling scared, we can say to our fear, "I'm here with you. I know how hard it is, but I'm right here with you." If we're judging ourselves for feeling sad and thinking that we should be feeling better by now, we can say to our inner critic, "Thank you for trying to help me. But it's okay for me to still feel sad. My grief comes from love."
1. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
- a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.

²⁰ See footnote 6 for more information about grief theories related to time and healing. These theories formed the foundation upon which this agenda was built.

- b. You can also share an “oops, ouch, wow” (“oops” - I made a mistake; “ouch” - something was hurtful; “wow” - I am inspired by or grateful for something)

2. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

January Grief Groups: Commentary and reflections

This agenda spanned three weeks. Each week, the check in's were extensive, especially from participants who were new to the group. After the check in's there was only time for one more circle practice: the first week the circle practice focused on question (4)(c), the second week on question (4)(d), and the third week on question (5)(b). In the final week, I also briefly introduced the compassion practice at the end. I guided participants through it in a way that was similar to how I'd guide a meditation. Unfortunately there wasn't time to discuss participants' reactions to the practice. Given the slow pace of the group (2 circle practices per session), I began to emphasize at the beginning of the group that we're not trying to accomplish anything, and that the goal of the group is simply to come together in community to bear witness and support one another through our various griefs. (See sections on “Coping” and “Community” in the Introduction for more information.)

These were the first three weeks in the new location (the church) and during the new time (during COTW's regular breakfast program time). The new location and time made the group accessible to more people, especially those who were unhoused and attending COTW's breakfast program. Therefore, we had several new people each session, and the groups were large, especially in the second and third weeks when we had ~10 participants each time. The size of the group was another reason that there was only time for two circle practices each session (check in's and one discussion question). In addition to the new people, most of the regular attendees from the library continued to attend the Grief Groups in the new location, which added a nice continuity to the group.

A few participants expressed appreciation for the quotes in this agenda. Most, however, didn't respond to the quotes directly, but rather used them as a jumping off point to share about their own grief journeys over time. As in previous groups, I didn't try to ensure participants kept strictly to the prompt. Rather, I hoped that people would share whatever was on their hearts and minds related to their grief. Holding this open space yielded powerful insights and meaning making. For example, at the beginning of the third session, one participant shared the insight that grief comes from love, and I believe this comment helped set a tone where people could find more acceptance for and meaning within their grief. I believe this was a powerful example of how meaning making often happens in community and how sharing our stories and experiences with others can lead to the co-creation of meaning. This comment about grief

arising due to love seemed to give other participants new “plot” material for their grief stories and to allow them to imagine “new possibilities for (themselves) and (their) future” (Kelley 84).

In terms of the theme of Time and Healing, there seemed to be a consensus among most participants that the phrase “time heals all wounds” isn’t accurate and that grief of particular losses still exists in some form throughout one’s life. Many people seemed to agree that the grief lessens in acuity over time, though it may never fully go away. I shared this quote from Megan Devine’s book *How to Carry What Can’t Be Fixed*: “The passage of time isn’t going to fix anything. What it will do, just by its very nature, is soften the edges of loss. Soften, not erase” (Devine 122). It seemed to resonate with many participants, and it was brought up several times throughout the sessions. For most participants, this discussion about the inaccuracy of the phrase “time heals all wounds” brought relief because it assured them that their grief is not “wrong” if it doesn’t fit into a certain timetable.

Some participants, however, did not derive comfort or validation from this idea. Rather, they expressed that their deep pain and grief will never go away, and often these remarks were made with a twinge of anger and/or despair. I sought to validate these perspectives and acknowledge the painful realities of oppressive systems and lack of societal recognition/care that exacerbate and perpetuate certain types of grief (see the introductory section “Background: Grief among the Unhoused Population” for a discussion in disenfranchised grief). I also thanked people for sharing openly and honestly, suggesting that the group could collectively hold the burden of the grief and that they don’t have to face the pain alone. I’m not sure, though, if these comments were helpful, or if they stemmed from my own discomfort and desire to “fix” the pain (or some of both). In these instances, it was important to check in with myself and recognize how hard it was for me to bear witness to the hopelessness that some participants felt about their grief. By offering myself compassion, I would strengthen my capacity to set aside my own feelings of discomfort in order to be more fully present to each person in their suffering.

I often emphasized at the beginning of the Grief Groups that I was not a psychologist and that these groups were not therapy groups. When participants expressed what might be termed “complicated grief” that might benefit from professional mental health support, I would talk to Jill about what to do next.²¹ Often this entailed following up one-on-one with the person to wonder/explore together whether there are more sources of support for them, including professional mental health support if they wanted that. This could also entail helping the person connect with additional forms of support. However, it’s important to note that COTW community members have often found that mental health resources are insufficient or inadequate. This carries a secondary layer of grief, in which the chaplains support community members as they grieve the lack of grief support and the concomitant feelings of disenfranchised grief.

The remarks about ongoing, chronic grief reminded me that overgeneralizing about the inability of time to heal our wounds could, actually, cause greater despair and frustration. It’s important to ensure the conversations on this agenda are nuanced and reflective of the many ways that people are experiencing grief.

Another important consideration related to grief amongst people who have or are currently experiencing homelessness is related to the idea of “normal.” The heading for question

²¹ For more on “complicated grief,” see Serban, Timothy G., “Complicated Grief: Exploring Arresting Grief and Survival Grief in Spiritual / Pastoral Care.” *Professional Spiritual & Pastoral Care: A Practical Clergy and Chaplain’s Handbook*, edited by Stephen B. Roberts, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012, pp. 312-325.

5 was previously “not wanting to return to ‘normal.’” One participant pointed out that “normal” for those who’ve struggled with homelessness and other related challenges is a pretty bad situation, so of course there’s not a desire to return to “normal.” I appreciated that this participant pointed that out, and from that point on, I avoided talking about “normal” as a happy baseline. I edited the heading of this section so that it now reads “not wanting to ‘get over’ one’s grief,” which both takes into account the participant’s comment and more accurately reflects what the section covers.

Finally, the quote from Melissa Kelley’s book in (4)(b) also caused a bit of confusion for one participant. They thought the last sentence was saying that “grief builds character.” The facilitator should be careful to clarify that this isn’t what the author means. Rather, Kelley is using the image of a character on a stage as a metaphor for how grief comes and goes throughout our lives.

January-February Grief Groups: Numbness and Fear of Being Overwhelmed by Grief (3 sessions)

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Print copies of Mary Oliver’s poem “Heavy”²²

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today’s group
 - a. Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or “fixing” others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people’s truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. Step up, step back: you’re encouraged to “step up” if you normally don’t share much and to “step back” if you normally share a lot so that there’s time for everyone
 - i. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - j. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying “oops” when we make a mistake and “ouch” when we feel hurt by someone else’s comments
 - k. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words

²² Oliver, Mary. *Thirst*. Beacon Press, 2006.

3. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
4. Numbness and Fear of Being Overwhelmed²³
 - a. Numbness can be a normal part of the grieving process. However, we may judge ourselves when we experience numbness. We may think that perhaps something is wrong with us because we can't feel the "right" emotions, or we may feel guilty for not caring "enough." Yet it's important to remember every grief journey is unique, and feeling numb doesn't mean our love is insufficient.
 - b. How has numbness showed up on your grief journey? Have you judged yourself when you felt numb?
 - c. Another reason we may feel numb is because we're coping with too many difficult situations, and we may be scared to touch our grief for fear that it'll overwhelm us. This may also lead to self-judgment that we're not grieving "properly." This self-judgment only increases our burden. During these times, we can have compassion for all that we're dealing with, knowing that we're doing our best and that the grieving process will unfold in its own time.
 - d. Have you experienced this fear of being overwhelmed by grief? Has there been self-judgment that comes along with this fear?
5. Heavy by Mary Oliver
 - a. First reading of the poem aloud: following along on your own copy
 - i. First impressions: what is one idea that resonated with you or stood out to you?
 - b. Second and third reading of the poem aloud: closing your eyes (if that's comfortable for you!), and seeing what word or phrases resonate with your experience and/or give you hope.
 - i. *After the poem has been read aloud twice, you're invited to circle the words/phrases that resonated with you. You will also have a few minutes to journal and write down why those words/phrases resonated with you.*
 - ii. What is one word/phrase that you chose? Why? Was it different from what resonated with you the first time the poem was read?
 - c. Discussion questions related to the poem:
 - i. Mary Oliver says that, when she was overwhelmed by grief, God and her friends helped her to get through. What/who helps you to hold grief when it feels like too large of a burden to bear on your own? God? A sense of universal compassion? Community? One good friend?
 - ii. Mary Oliver says that she had to keep "practicing" how to carry the weight of her grief, and over time, her laughter and gratitude slowly returned.

²³ This section is influenced by these two articles: Empathy's Grief Specialists. "Feeling numb after someone you love dies." *Empathy*, <https://www.empathy.com/grief/feeling-numb-after-a-loss>. Accessed 12 May 2023.; Haley, Eleanor. "Feeling Nothing During Grief: The Experience of Emotional Numbness." *What's Your Grief?* 21 April, 2015, <https://whatsyourgrief.com/feeling-nothing-during-grief/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

What practices help you carry the weight of grief? Prayer? Meditation?
Communal rituals, like church or COTW's interfaith service?

6. Interfaith Prayer: Compassion for Numbness and Fear of Being Overwhelmed
 - a. We belong to different religious traditions and/or no religious tradition. This prayer can be offered to whomever/whatever you believe the Divine/Ultimate Truth to be. Or if you don't believe in God, these words can be received in this community of people who care about you, with the wish that you feel this community's compassion and care for you.
 - b. You're invited to find a prayerful position, maybe with your eyes closed and hands clasped together. As I read these words, feel how they land in your body and heart, and offer them up to God/the universe/the community of care:

"Things are hard right now. It hurts, even though sometimes I can't feel the hurt or I'm scared to look at all the pain just below the surface. Please help me carry all of this pain. It's too much for any one person to carry alone. Please help me to know that nothing is wrong with me if I feel numb. Please help me to know that there's no right or wrong way to grieve, and I'm allowed to feel whatever I feel right now - even if it's numbness or a fear of being overwhelmed by grief. May my numbness be held in compassion. May my fear be embraced with love. May I hold my grief, numbness, and fear with soft tenderness and care, gently rocking them until all self-judgment and blame are soothed. May I know that I'm doing my best, and that my grief journey will unfold in its own way and its own time. Give me the strength to take just the next step forward, knowing that I am loved and cared for - just as I am. Amen."

7. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
 - b. You can also share an "oops, ouch, wow" ("oops" - I made a mistake; "ouch" - something was hurtful; "wow" - I am inspired by or grateful for something)

8. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

January-February Grief Groups: Commentary and reflections

One of the reasons that I chose this topic was because, when I went around the breakfast room and invited COTW community members to attend the Grief Group, several

people declined because they said they were afraid of touching into their grief, lest they become overwhelmed by it. I thought that having a Grief Group specifically dedicated to this topic might interest those people and encourage them to attend the group, if they wanted. However, on the particular days that we covered this agenda, those people were not at the breakfast program and thus didn't attend. However, I still think it was valuable to focus on this topic. One participant said that, while their own grief journey didn't align with this theme per se, discussing the fear of being overwhelmed by grief helped them to understand others' reactions to grief and thus have more compassion for others. I believe that these discussions about various manifestations of grief reinforce the idea that each person's grief journey is unique, which then helps cultivate a greater sense of compassion for others - even if their grief journey looks different from yours.²⁴

I chose to pair this topic of the fear of being overwhelmed by grief with the topic of numbness because they are interrelated phenomena. If one is scared of being overwhelmed by grief, that person may intentionally try to numb the pain. I also wanted to have a Grief Group that focused on numbness because of how many people had chosen the glass bowl representing numbness during the grief ritual that we did in the Nov. 16th session.

This agenda spanned three weeks. The first week, we covered discussion questions (4) (b) and (4) (c). The second week, we covered questions in (5) (a) and (5) (b). Finally, in the third week, we covered the questions in (5) (c). Between the weeks, I invited people to take the Mary Oliver poem with them and reflect on it further. Oftentimes people left behind the print-outs of the agendas or poems, but I believe that more people took copies of the poem with them after I encouraged them to do so. The reason why I split the discussion about the poem into two weeks is because people seemed to really like the poem, and it seemed worth discussing for two full sessions.

Several people also expressed that they found the interfaith prayer at the end quite supportive. I read the prayer at the end of each session, right before the closing circle. This prayer was aimed at helping people develop a positive coping practice that allowed them to relate to their unique grief experiences with compassion. For those with theistic beliefs, I hoped that the prayer would help them feel God's compassion, even if they couldn't feel compassion for themselves. For those who don't believe in God, I sought to emphasize that the community could hold them in compassion, even/especially if they struggled with offering compassion to themselves.

During these three weeks, the group was smaller than it had been the previous three weeks. This allowed participants an opportunity to share more, which I think was appreciated by those who hadn't gotten a chance to share much in previous weeks due to the large size of the group.

The topic of numbness particularly elicited a lot of conversation, and participants interpreted the term in different ways. Some participants saw numbness as a debilitating state that prevented them from engaging in normal daily activities, and often these participants related it to the Five Stages of Grief.²⁵ Some participants talked about self-imposed numbness

²⁴ Melissa Kelley writes that, in the standard psychoanalytic model, there was presumed to be a "normal" way to mourn. However, recently there's been increasing psychoanalytic theories that affirm the uniqueness of each person's grief journey and acknowledge "the innumerable and varied factors that may shape one's response to loss" (Kelley 36).

²⁵ A helpful explanation of the Five Stages of Grief and critiques of this theory can be found in Melissa Kelley's book *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry* on pages 45-49.

through substance use. Others saw numbness as an emotionless state that shouldn't be pathologized, but rather understood as one unique manifestation of grief. They also emphasized that numbness could last for years, but that this shouldn't be seen as a "problem." I affirmed these various definitions of numbness, saying that there's no "right" answer and that each person's grief journey is unique. I think the varied reactions to the term shows that this was a rich topic that was worth covering in the grief group.

When we got to the Mary Oliver poem, I think it was helpful to give people several minutes to underline, highlight, and even write notes on the page. This led to deeper discussions, and participants seemed grateful for the quiet reflection time. Some of the lines that resonated most for people from the poem were the following:

- "I did not die" → This line elicited conversations about participants' resilience and inner strength. I believe this conversation was in line with a "strengths-based approach," which rests on the foundational belief that care seekers "possess resources to address the problems and crises that erupt through the arc of their lives" (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 78).
- "Surely God had his hand in this, as well as friends" → This line seemed to support meaning making, especially among participants with theistic beliefs. However, even for those who didn't believe in God, this line seemed to resonate because it emphasized the value of communal support while one is grieving, and it also seemed to reinforce the value of the community that we were building through the Grief Group.
- "So I went practicing" → This line affirmed that our grief journeys have their up's and down's, but that we have to keep "practicing" to get through. I believe this affirms the value of coping strategies to support people's grief journeys.
- "The things of this world that are kind" → This also reinforced the value of community and the value of what we were doing in the Grief Group, namely being kind to one another through our grief.
- "A love to which there is no reply" → This last line validates the pain of grief and loneliness, without trying to erase it or make it go away.

February Grief Groups: Loneliness (2 sessions)

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Bring a bluetooth speaker, and be prepared to play the song "Tears in Heaven" by Eric Clapton through the speaker²⁶
- Print copies of the lyrics to "Tears in Heaven" by Eric Clapton²⁷
- Bring tissues! The song "Tears in Heaven" makes a lot of people cry.

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group

²⁶ Clapton, Eric. "Tears in Heaven." *Rush*, Russ Titelman, 1992. Spotify app.

²⁷ Clapton, Eric. "Tears in Heaven." *Genius*, 8 Jan. 1992, <https://genius.com/Eric-clapton-tears-in-heaven-lyrics>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

- a. Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or “fixing” others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people’s truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. Take space, make space: you’re encouraged to “take space” if you normally don’t share much and to “make space” if you normally share a lot so that there’s time for everyone
 - i. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - j. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying “oops” when we make a mistake and “ouch” when we feel hurt by someone else’s comments
 - k. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words
3. Check In: Name and how you’re feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
4. Loneliness Related to Grief
 - a. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are very common when we are grieving. This may be because we lost someone special to us and miss talking to/being with them. It may also be because we feel that others don’t understand us or what we’re going through. We may also feel pressured to not talk about our grief. We may be worried about burdening others, or we may receive unhelpful advice to “get over it.” **Gayle Huntress says that grief is “a force that makes you alone when really all you want is for someone to take care of you.”**²⁸
 - b. Has loneliness been part of your grief journey? Does the quote above from Gayle Huntress resonate with you?
5. “Tears In Heaven” By Eric Clapton
 - a. Eric Clapton wrote this song after his four-year-old son tragically died by falling out of a window.
 - b. We will listen to the song, and you can follow along on the [printed lyrics](#). Then, you’re invited to circle the words/phrases that resonated with you. You will also have a few minutes to journal and write down why those words/phrases resonated.

²⁸ This quote from Gayle Huntress can be found on page 114 of Tenzin Kacho Kiyosaki’s chapter “Grief and Bereavement.” (Kiyosaki, Tenzin Kacho. “Grief and Bereavement.” *A Thousand Hands: A Guidebook to Caring for Your Buddhist Community*, edited by Nathan Joshin Michon and Daniel Fisher, The Sumeru Press, 2016, pp. 113-116.)

- c. What words or phrases did you choose? Why?
 - d. Discussion questions related to the song:
 - i. In the first verse, Eric Clapton is wondering whether his son will remember him and remember their relationship when they meet again in heaven. This shows that the loneliness of grief may arise because we feel like a “piece” of us went missing when the other person left our lives or when the relationship changed. Does this interpretation resonate with you? Does loneliness arise because it feels like a “piece” of yourself is missing?
 - ii. Eric Clapton writes “Beyond the door / There’s peace, I’m sure.” What does this phrase mean to you? Where do you find peace, or hope to find peace?
 - iii. Eric Clapton is longing for an ongoing relationship with his deceased son, and he wishes that his son would “hold his hand” and “help him stand.” Do you ever feel connected with someone who has died? Does this bring you support or comfort?
6. Circle practice: Feedback about today’s grief group
- a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
 - b. You can also share an “oops, ouch, wow” (“oops” - I made a mistake; “ouch” - something was hurtful; “wow” - I am inspired by or grateful for something)

7. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
 May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
 May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
 May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
 May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
 Amen

February Grief Groups: Commentary and reflections

This agenda spanned two weeks. The first week, we covered question (4) (b) and (5) (c). The second week, we covered the questions in (5) (d).

I chose the topic of loneliness because the analysis of the Grief Group survey showed that the phrase “I feel lonely because I’ve lost someone special to me” had the third highest composite rank (see “Appendix C: Grief Group Survey Results”). However, the discussion around loneliness tended more towards the loneliness that arises due to the difficulty of talking about grief with others. Participants specifically reflected on how some people told them to “get over” their grief and how painful that was. This reinforces the value of the Grief Group and the community-building focus of the group.

I chose the song “Tears in Heaven” by Eric Clapton because a Grief Group participant recommended it. I hadn’t anticipated what a strong response this song would elicit from

participants. Perhaps this is because I was only a year old when the song first came out, so I didn't have specific memories associated with that song in the way that many group members did. In fact, I don't remember hearing the song until the participant recommended that we discuss it in the Grief Group.

While the song was playing, several participants started crying, and two even chose to step away for a period of time because they were crying so hard. However, both chose to come back into the circle, which I was encouraged by. Another chaplain had to go find tissues, and I wished that I had brought tissues at the outset. During the discussion, one participant eloquently described the power of the song when they said that "it's not a song; it's an emotion." The other participants resonated with this description.

One reason that the song seemed to elicit such strong reactions was due to the fact that Eric Clapton had written it in response to the death of his four-year-old son. The tragedy of that death seemed to touch into the deepest parts of people's grief. Many people remembered when the tragedy happened and talked about how it had impacted them at that time.

Because of the song's power, people ended up sharing a lot about their grief journeys. Several new participants attended these groups, and they opened up about their grief stories, even though one of them had assured me that they were just going to listen. One new participant shared deeply personal griefs, and they later revealed that they had rarely shared those griefs with anyone before. I was touched that they trusted the group, and I credit the song (at least in part) with creating the space for this heartfelt sharing.

The discussion questions seemed to spark good conversations. All participants agreed that it feels like a "piece" of yourself is missing when a loved one dies, and a few expressed appreciation for this framing. Several participants noted that the lines "Beyond the door / There's peace, I'm sure" brought them comfort. I believe this line supported meaning-making related to grief, especially among participants who believed in heaven. However, even those who didn't believe in heaven seemed to derive comfort from the idea that those who've died are now at peace. In addition, participants noted that they did maintain connections with those who've died, and these connections are comforting and supportive.²⁹ I believe this song validates that experience.

Finally, participants noted that the lines "Time can bring you down / Time can bend your knees / Time can break your heart" provided an interesting counterpoint to the idea that "time heals all wounds," which we'd discussed a few weeks earlier. These lines seemed to reinforce that the healing journey is not necessarily linear and that our grief may always be with us, even if it lessens in acuity over time.³⁰

March Grief Groups: "Mycelial" Poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer (2 sessions)

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant

²⁹ See footnote 18 for more information about maintaining connections to the deceased.

³⁰ See footnote 6 for more information about grief theories related to time and healing.

- Print copies of the poem [“Mycelial” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer](#)³¹

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group
 - a. Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or “fixing” others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. Take space, make space: you're encouraged to “take space” if you normally don't share much and to “make space” if you normally share a lot so that there's time for everyone
 - i. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - j. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying “oops” when we make a mistake and “ouch” when we feel hurt by someone else's comments
 - k. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words
3. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
4. [“Mycelial” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer](#)
 - a. First reading of the poem: following along on your own copy
 - i. First impressions: what is one word or phrase that resonated with you or stood out to you?
 - b. Second reading of the poem: closing your eyes (if that's comfortable for you!), and seeing what word or phrases you feel strongly or that resonate in your body (maybe making your stomach clench, or your shoulders relax, or other bodily reaction).
 - i. *After the poem has been read aloud, you're invited to circle the words/phrases that resonated with you. You will also have a few minutes to journal and write down why those words/phrases resonated with you.*
 - ii. What words or phrases did you choose? Why? Was it different from what resonated with you the first time the poem was read?
 - c. Discussion questions related to the poem:

³¹ Trommer, Rosemerry Wahtola. “Three Poems in ONE ART, 9/11/22: Exploring Spaciousness in Grief.” *Word Woman: Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer*, 11 Sept. 2022, <https://www.wordwoman.com/three-poems-in-one-art-2/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

- i. Trommer says that grief can be “almost unbearably beautiful”. Have you had moments of experiencing grief as “beautiful”?
 - ii. She also writes that grief “pulls (her) closer in”. What do you think she means by this? Has grief ever pulled you closer in?
 - iii. Trommer also writes that grief can be “wildly generative” and can help her find “mystery, abundance, insight.” What insights has grief helped you to realize, if any?
 - iv. The poem says that sometimes grief “stays dormant for years.” Is there “dormant” grief in your life? Have you ever had the experience of suddenly grieving something that happened a long time ago?
5. Circle practice: Feedback about today’s grief group
- a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
 - b. You can also share an “oops, ouch, wow” (“oops” - I made a mistake; “ouch” - something was hurtful; “wow” - I am inspired by or grateful for something)
6. Grief Group Closing
- We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.
 May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.
 May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.
 May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.
 May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.
 Amen

March Grief Groups: Commentary and reflections

A new participant to the Grief Group recommended this poem. Even though it didn’t match any of the survey topics per se, I thought it described grief in such a beautiful and thought-provoking way, which is why I chose to use it in the Grief Group.

This agenda spanned two weeks. The first week, we discussed questions (4) (a), (4) (b), and (4) (c) (i). The last three questions in (4) (c) were discussed the second week. I wasn’t able to attend the second week, so Judy and Jill led the Grief Group that week.

The poem evoked a long discussion about mushrooms. I didn’t view this as a digression, but rather a chance for some fun, play, and connection to be incorporated into the Grief Group. I believe the sense of community was enhanced by participants sharing stories about documentaries they’d watched about mushrooms and expressing their awe at the capabilities of mushrooms to communicate with one another through underground networks. These conversations showed that it’s not just our grief that connects us to one another and that we can bond over joy, curiosity, and awe as well.

One of the lines that resonated with participants was “Not all growth takes place in the light.” This line sparked meaning making related to the growth that people have experienced due to their experiences with grief.

When we were discussing question (4) (c) (i) related to the idea of grief as “unbearably beautiful,” one participant shared that they experienced grief as beautiful when they vulnerably shared their story in the Grief Group a couple weeks before. This was the participant who said they had rarely shared their grief story with anyone, and they reflected on how beautiful it was that the group had listened to their story and cared about their grief. I believe that this comment reinforces the idea that “meaning in life is constituted through one’s sense of ‘mattering’ to others... Belonging to a group builds resilience and promotes a sense of meaning in life while providing protective factors that serve positive coping and well-being” (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 87). I was grateful that the Grief Group had helped this participant to make meaning of their grief and to rest in a sense of compassion.

March Grief Groups: Impressions and Reflections on the Grief Group (2 sessions)

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Bring post-it notes (enough for each participant to have three)
- Bring pens for each participant

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today’s group
 - a. Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay, lessons go
 - b. Not advising or “fixing” others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people’s truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. Take space, make space: you’re encouraged to “take space” if you normally don’t share much and to “make space” if you normally share a lot so that there’s time for everyone
 - i. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - j. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying “oops” when we make a mistake and “ouch” when we feel hurt by someone else’s comments
 - k. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words

3. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
4. Impressions of the Grief Group
 - a. You're invited to take three post-it notes, and write one word for each of the questions below. We'll go around the circle afterwards, and you'll be invited to put your post-it notes in the center of the circle and share the words you chose.
 - b. When you think of the Grief Group, what is the first emotion that arises?
 - c. What has been the best part of the Grief Group?
 - d. What is your main takeaway from the Grief Group?
5. Reflections on our Grief Group
 - a. This cycle of Grief Groups is ending on Friday, April 7. As our time comes to a close, I invite you to reflect on this experience of joining a Grief Group and the impacts it has had.
 - b. How has being in the Grief Group impacted you & your grief journey, if at all?
 - c. "Grief" is a loaded word. In this group, we talked about grief in a lot of different ways (e.g., deaths of loved ones, loss of a house, loss of relationships, grief around losing bodily capabilities as we age, etc.). Did calling this group a "Grief Group" make you want to join, or did it initially repel you? Why did you decide to attend?
 - d. How would you describe this Grief Group to others who haven't attended before?
 - e. What was your favorite memory of the Grief Group?
 - f. What was most challenging about the Grief Group?
 - g. How do you think joining this Grief Group has impacted your experience within the larger COTW community, if at all? And/or in what ways do you think the Grief Group impacted the COTW community?
 - h. When we plan the next cycle of the Grief Group, what do you think we should do differently? What aspects of our current Grief Group should we keep the same?
 - i. If we host another cycle of the Grief Group, how soon should we do so?
 - i. What other groups should COTW plan next? A joy group? A gratitude group? An anger group? Something else?
6. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.

- b. You can also share an “oops, ouch, wow” (“oops” - I made a mistake; “ouch” - something was hurtful; “wow” - I am inspired by or grateful for something)

7. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

March Grief Groups: Commentary and reflections

This group spanned two weeks. The first week, we discussed question 4 and question 5 (c). I skipped question (5) (b) because I felt like it was covered by the discussion on question 4. The second week, we skipped questions 5 (e) and 5 (f) because they could be covered under question 5 (h) and the conversation had already covered that topic. Perhaps these questions could be omitted from the Grief Group agenda altogether, though I think there is sometimes merit in asking the same thing several different ways because it encourages participants to think more deeply about it and sometimes elicits new information.

The post-it note method worked well, and I'd recommend thinking about other ways to use this practice. Some people forgot to put their post-it notes in the center, but I don't think that was due to their unwillingness to participate. Everyone was eager to share what they'd written with the group.

I believe that questions (5) (d) and (5) (g) are particularly important ones. Question (5) (d) helps people to see how they are co-creators/co-leaders of the group. Question (5) (g) invites reflections on how the Grief Group impacted the wider community. This can help people to see the ways that they are healers and the role they play in shaping the values of the community. It reinforces that the Grief Group is not just aimed at individualized healing, but rather it is building a resilient, compassionate community that cares about the hurts and pains of all of its members.

Finally, I believe this type of agenda was necessary to include at the conclusion of the group because of the nature of the group as co-created. It's essential to have the facilitator and participants debrief the group together. Participants had deep insights into what worked well about the group and what could be better, and they shared how they had brought the themes/values of the Grief Group out to others in the community. I believe that debriefing the group together helped people to see what an important role they played in the group, which has implications for future COTW groups and how actively community members will participate in those groups. Participants also had powerful insights into next steps and what groups we should organize going forward in order to meet the needs of the community.

The specific reflections and ideas that were discussed in these two sessions are included below in the “Overall Impact” section of the Conclusion.

April 7th Grief Group: Closing Ritual

Materials and preparation needed before the group

- Print copies of the agenda for each participant
- Print copies of [John O'Donohue's "Beannacht / Blessing"](#) for each participant³²
- Bring pens for each participant
- Bring bundles of thread in a variety of colors (at least as many different colors as participants, and ideally more)
- Bring scissors to cut the thread

Agenda:

1. Welcome and overview of today's group
 - a. Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)
2. Group agreements and covenant (we will go around the circle, with each person reading one bullet point)
 - a. Confidentiality - stories stay in the circle, lessons carry on
 - b. Not advising or "fixing" others
 - c. Anyone can pass
 - d. Speak from our own perspective
 - e. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
 - f. Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth
 - g. Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed
 - h. Take space, make space: you're encouraged to "take space" if you normally don't share much and to "make space" if you normally share a lot so that there's time for everyone
 - i. We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space
 - j. We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying "oops" when we make a mistake and "ouch" when we feel hurt by someone else's comments
 - k. We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words
3. Check In: Name and how you're feeling today, especially related to your grief journey.
4. Wrapping up the Grief Group
 - a. Today's the final Grief Group in this cycle. Stay tuned for more information on further discussion groups, which COTW is hoping to start hosting in May.
 - b. How do you feel about this being the final Grief Group for now? Do you have any grief related to the closing of the group? If so, how does that grief intermingle with the other griefs in your life?
5. Blessing for Going Forth

³² O'Donohue, John. "Beannacht / Blessing." *Scottish Poetry Library*, <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/beannacht-blessing/>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

- a. As we go forth from this Grief Group, we will engage in a ritual to offer blessings to each other and to remember that we're still connected, even though we won't be meeting in this configuration anymore.
- b. **Short writing exercise:** What blessings or well wishes do you want to offer your fellow Grief Group participants? Please write them below. (Also, you're invited to think about what color best represents the sentiments you want to express!)

- c. You're invited to choose a bundle of thread, with the color of the thread representing the blessings that you want to offer the group. **You're invited to share aloud your blessings/well wishes with the group, and we will pass around the bundle of thread so that the piece of thread goes around the circle and each person is holding a section of it.**

- i. We will also have some thread in front of an empty seat, which symbolizes everyone who has participated in the Grief Group but who isn't here today. We offer all of them blessings and well wishes too.

- d. Once we've gone around the circle, we will read these words together as we all hold the threads that connect us all:

May all of these blessings wash over us and nourish us as we go forth.

We are grateful for the wisdom, kindness, and compassion that everyone in this group has offered over the course of our time together.

We have been blessed to hear the stories and insights shared by each of our companions on this grief journey.

This thread symbolizes how we're all connected. We've shared a piece of ourselves with this group, and the pieces offered by each group member will continue to live on in our hearts.

May we remember and cherish this interconnection, knowing that it lives on even as this group comes to a close.

**As we go forth, may we all find ease, rest, strength, and joy.
Amen.**

- e. The blessing of the threads will conclude with [John O'Donohue's "Beannacht / Blessing."](#)

- f. Finally, the threads will be cut so that each person has a section of the threads to take with them as they go forth.
6. Circle practice: Feedback about today's grief group
 - a. Share a word or short insight from this group that you want to be intentional about bringing into the rest of your day or the week ahead.
 - b. You can also share an "oops, ouch, wow" ("oops" - I made a mistake; "ouch" - something was hurtful; "wow" - I am inspired by or grateful for something)
 7. Grief Group Closing

We all know loss and pain. We all know grief, and our grief is a holy thing. It shows that our life has been touched in a profound way.

May we turn towards our grief with skill and wisdom.

May we hold our grief with kindness and compassion.

May we trust in our ability to carry our grief and carry on living.

May we live each moment fully: eyes open, hearts open.

Amen

April 7th Grief Group: Commentary and reflections

This session felt like a natural closing to this cycle of the Grief Group. I believe that this closing felt smooth because we'd notified participants several weeks in advance that the Grief Group would be coming to an end and because we hosted three sessions solely focused on wrapping up the group. I believe it's important to have a slow and gentle off-ramp for the group because there can be grief about the group coming to an end, which can intermingle with participants' other feelings of grief.

In response to the first discussion question (asking about participants' feelings about the closing of the group), participants reiterated that they were glad the group had existed, especially because they knew they could rely on it when they needed it. Participants also expressed feeling less alone in their grief when they participated in the group. One participant talked about how they wished that the group could have done even more, especially related to moving forward after grief. Participants also seemed to be looking ahead to other discussion groups that COTW was planning to do in May and June. The fact that COTW was planning to host somewhat similar groups in the coming weeks also helped to ease the closing of this group.

Having a writing exercise as part of this agenda worked well. Participants seemed to benefit from having a few minutes to write down their reflections and blessings for other participants, as well as some time to choose what color thread best represented their blessings.

I also believe it was impactful to leave an empty seat to symbolize anyone who had participated in the Grief Group who wasn't able to make it that day. Several participants commented on how meaningful that was and reflected on those who'd attended previous groups.

I believe the ritual with the thread was meaningful, though logistically challenging. The thread kept getting tangled, and participants got distracted by undoing knots and untangling the thread. Therefore, it was harder to pay attention to the blessings that others were offering. If

there was a way to make sure that the thread didn't get tangled, I believe this would have been a perfect closing ritual. Participants seemed to enjoy picking a color to represent their blessings, and they especially liked being able to take their section of all of the various threads with them. At the end of the group, they tied their rainbow set of strings around their wrists or bags, and/or they had specific ideas of what they wanted to do with their threads.

Conclusion: Analysis, Impact, and Implications

The Grief Group grew and evolved over the course of the 8 months that we met. The agendas and my facilitation were shaped by my experiences running the groups, the feedback that I received from participants, and the conversations that I had with Jill (COTW's Executive Director and my supervisor) debriefing each session. While the introduction to this project gives an overview of the goals of the Grief Group and the general structure of the content that was covered in the group, this conclusion focuses on my reflections regarding facilitation and participation and my process for choosing themes and practices to cover in the group. The conclusion also reflects on the overall impact that I believe the project had on the COTW community and implications of the project beyond this community.

Lessons Learned on Grief Group Facilitation and Participation

*Covenant and group agreements*³³

During the first couple months of the Grief Group, the group agreements were perhaps too casual and unsolidified. I would name off a few suggested agreements at the beginning of the group (e.g., confidentiality; not advising or "fixing" others; anyone can pass), and see if (a) participants would agree to abide by those, and (b) whether participants had anything else to add. In each session, everyone agreed to abide by them. Sometimes participants even expressed appreciation for particular ones, especially the agreement to not try to "fix" others. However, nobody added anything.

After meeting for a couple months, I dedicated an entire session to discussing and solidifying our group agreements (Nov. 30th session). This prompted a rich, fruitful discussion. Part of me wishes that I'd facilitated this discussion earlier. However, the other part of me wonders if we were able to have such a productive discussion because all of the participants who attended the Nov. 30th session were regulars to the group, and by that point they knew what had felt good and what had not during the group time. They were also invested in the group and the community that it had built.

³³ The Group Agreements and Covenant in their final iteration were as follows: (1) Confidentiality - stories stay in the circle, lessons carry on; (2) Not advising or "fixing" others; (3) Anyone can pass; (4) Speak from our own perspective; (5) When the going gets rough, turn to wonder; (6) Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth; (7) Be present as fully as possible, take care as needed; (8) Take space, make space: you're encouraged to "take space" if you normally don't share much and to "make space" if you normally share a lot so that there's time for everyone; (9) We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space; (10) We are invited to help each other live out this covenant by saying "oops" when we make a mistake and "ouch" when we feel hurt by someone else's comments; (11) We strive to pay attention to both the intent and impact of our words.

One of the key reasons for group agreements is to create a feeling of safety in the group. David Treleavan talks about how important community agreements are for trauma-informed care. He says that clarifying expectations regarding confidentiality and ensuring that participants know that they have a choice regarding how much to participate are essential (Treleavan 166-168). At the end of one of the sessions, a participant who had shared vulnerably emphasized the importance of the confidentiality agreement in the covenant. I believe that this agreement helped this person feel safe in sharing what was going on for them, and I think they wanted to remind the group of this agreement given the fact that they had shared openly during that session. This reinforced the value of having set agreements that participants can come back to when they're feeling unsure about participating in the group.

Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari also discuss how there are "unequal power relations between chaplains and careseekers," and thus chaplains must be sure to not re-traumatize people by pressuring them to share (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 84). This is why the group agreement "anyone can pass" was so essential.

Another key aspect of creating a trauma-informed space is naming the harms caused by racism and other forms of oppression and actively seeking to create spaces that feel safe to people with marginalized social identities (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 84). I was grateful that a regular participant added the agreement "We are committed to making this an anti-racist, anti-oppressive space" during the Nov. 30th discussion about the covenant. I also sought to name and normalize grief related to collective harm and systemic oppression through the agendas and my facilitation of the groups (see agendas and commentaries for the Nov. 16th session and the Nov. 23rd session).

Because the group was open and participants varied week to week, it was essential to read all of the group agreements at the beginning of each session. After one of the sessions in January, I saw how the agreements helped some people feel safe enough to share. During this group, a participant shared vulnerably about their journey, and after the group, this participant mentioned how important the group agreement on confidentiality was to them. I believe that if we hadn't had an agreement about confidentiality, this person may not have shared their life story or their current struggles with the group.

Circle practice

The format for almost all of the discussions in the Grief Group was a circle practice. Participants sat in a circle, often around a large table, and for each discussion question (in green on the agendas), we'd go around the circle and each person would have a chance to share. I believe that this type of structured sharing was helpful in ensuring that everyone got an opportunity to share their thoughts. Sometimes if there was a small group, I would open up the floor for a more casual conversation after a circle practice finished. This allowed people a chance to engage in informal dialogue and share anything that had come up for them while others were sharing.

I believe that the first circle practice (the check in circle) was one of the most important parts of the Grief Group. Often people came to the group with a specific idea of what they wanted to share, and the opening circle allowed them the opportunity to do so. Some people came to the group because of a recent loss that they wanted to talk about, while others attended because they wanted to share a longstanding grief that they didn't have an opportunity

to talk about in other spaces. Sometimes the check in circle could take up half of the Grief Group time. I allowed the check in circles to take as long as they needed, while being careful to not let one person dominate the conversation too much.

The closing circle evolved over the course of the group. For a while, the closing circle was aimed at soliciting participants' feedback about the content of that week's group. However, the feedback given was almost always positive and never very specific, and I figured out that a better way to solicit feedback about each group was through individual conversations after the group. Sophia in my Senior Seminar cluster suggested a closing circle practice where people could say a word or phrase that they're taking away from the group, and this practice seemed to work better. It was helpful for me to hear what was meaningful to participants from the group.

In addition, at the end of each meeting I gave participants the option to share an "oops, ouch, or wow" if they wanted to. In the "oops, ouch, wow" circle, participants are invited to help one another live out the covenant by saying "oops" when they feel like they made a mistake and "ouch" when they felt hurt by someone else's comments. Alternatively, they could share a "wow" to reinforce the times when the covenant was being lived out and when the group was effectively providing spiritual and emotional support to those in the circle. The "oops, ouch, wow" circle is a practice that we do at the end of the Waltham Community Leadership Group meetings, and thus it was familiar to many in the Grief Group.

While participants only occasionally shared an "oops, ouch, or wow", I believe this practice was important in reinforcing our covenant and shared agreements. The times when someone did share an "oops" or an "ouch" often led to powerful conversations that helped to strengthen the cohesion and trust of the group. For example, one time a participant shared an "ouch" related to something that had happened earlier in the meeting, and this prompted a back-and-forth between the person who shared the ouch and the person who had caused the ouch, with each participant trying to let the other know that they weren't trying to hurt the other person and explaining what they had meant. Jill stepped in to say that sometimes the best thing that we can do when someone says an "ouch" about our comments is to respond by saying, "Thank you for letting me know, and I'm sorry that it landed for you that way." I also stepped in to say that we can view someone naming an "ouch" as a sign that that person trusts the group and trusts the other group member to be able to receive it. Saying "ouch" is a sign of our commitment to the community and to strengthening our relationships with others in the community, rather than just giving up on someone when they say something that hurts us. This seemed to resonate with the group and help change the direction of the conversation. After the meeting, I heard participants using the language of "trust" in one-on-one discussions, which showed that the comment about how an "ouch" comes from a place of trust was impactful.

The format of the circle practice was also effective in mitigating some of the common challenges related to group facilitation. One of the most difficult parts of facilitating these groups was ensuring that everyone got an equal amount of time and that no one person dominated the group. The circle practice helped to make this happen. If one person's turn was taking up a significant amount of time (more than 4-5 minutes), it was helpful that participants knew who was supposed to share next, and I would try to gently but firmly indicate that it was time to move on to the next person. I believe it's important for the facilitator to be actively involved in ensuring that one person doesn't dominate the group. Otherwise, the rest of the group members can start to feel frustrated. I saw this happen in one of the sessions when a participant talked for a long

time during the check in circle (around 6 or 7 minutes) and I didn't effectively move the conversation along to the next person. By the time that we moved on to the next people in the circle, several of those people passed in order to "move things along." Even though I emphasized that we had enough time and weren't trying to "accomplish" anything, I believe that these people passed because of their frustration with one person dominating the conversation.

After consulting with Jill about this challenge, we decided that it would be best to introduce the circle practice at the beginning of each group (especially for new people), and Jill recommended sharing a suggested length for each person's contribution. Therefore, I added this sentence to the top of the agenda and began to speak about these expectations for circle practice at each session: "Format is circle practice: going around the circle with each person sharing between one sentence and one paragraph (or you can pass)." In addition to explaining circle practice at the beginning of each session, I would also explain it briefly each time a new person joined late, so that they knew what the flow of the conversation was and when their turn would be. In addition, I added this tentative new agreement to the covenant, and the group voted to add it to the covenant permanently: "Take space, make space: you're encouraged to 'take space' if you normally don't share much and to 'make space' if you normally share a lot so that there's time for everyone." Since making these changes, there hasn't been a group where one person has dominated the conversation. This is also probably because I've been firmer in guiding the conversation on to the next person and ensuring that everyone gets a chance to share.

The issue of what to do when someone spoke out of turn in the circle practice was nuanced and required a lot of discernment. When someone actively cut off another participant and started sharing their own story/thoughts, I sought to intervene quickly and remind people of the format of the circle practice. Oftentimes, though, someone would interrupt the circle practice to offer a short comment or direct support/validation of another participant's story. I would often allow these small interruptions, which I think helped the group feel more like a communal, co-created space.³⁴ It was a fine line to walk to determine when direct intervention by the facilitator was empowering (i.e., enforcing group norms so everyone felt safe and heard in the group) and when it was disempowering (i.e., minimizing people's voices or undermining their ability to feel like a co-creator of the group).

Other common challenges in Grief Groups are related to "comparing losses" and "advice giving" (MacNair-Semands 521). When one participant compares their loss to another participant's loss and/or gives another participant advice, the person on the receiving end can feel intruded upon or disrespected. They may feel like their pain is being minimized and/or their story is not being appropriately honored. The person offering advice may also be doing so because of their own discomfort and need to "fix" the situation in order to feel better, and thus the person receiving the advice may feel frustrated that their own story is being displaced for the sake of another participant's desire to feel better. The format of the circle practice helped to mitigate unwanted comparisons and advice giving because each person was instructed to fully listen to each participant's story and only share from their own experience/perspective during their turn. Having the covenant also helped to mitigate this issue, especially the following group norms: "Not advising or "fixing" others," "Speak from our own perspective," and "Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth." I tried to

³⁴ Towards the end of the Grief Group cycle, Monica (my faculty advisor) told me about another technique which involves establishing a group norm around a word or hand gesture to express validation of another person's story. This minimizes interruptions while also empowering people to offer support to one another. This could be a technique to try in a future iteration of the Grief Group.

model these norms by attentively listening to each person's story, validating their pain, and saying that this group makes space for that person's story just as it is. Whenever someone started to give advice or compare losses, I sought to intervene by reminding participants of our covenant. This was an aspect of facilitation that was particularly challenging for me, so I didn't always do this well. Whenever Jill joined the group, she modeled this type of intervention well, and I sought to get better at this over the course of the group. Finally, I sought to enforce this group norm by following up one-on-one with those who had started to offer advice, especially when it seemed like the person was doing so because they were overwhelmed by the enormity of another person's suffering. In these instances, I talked to the advice-giver after the group, asking how others' stories had landed for them and offering to support that person in processing what had happened in the group. I would also validate the person's care and compassion for the other participant, which had manifested as the desire to help that person.

A final consideration regarding circle practice is whether the facilitator participates in the circle or not. I often shared some remarks or a short story during my turn in the circle practice. My thoughts were often related to what others had shared in the group, and/or I would reflect on why I'd chosen a particular practice/resource to include in the agenda. Considering that I had a certain level of power as a facilitator, I tried not to abuse that power by oversharing and taking up a lot of time during my turn. During the debrief sessions in March, participants emphasized how helpful it was that I had participated in the circle practice. One participant compared this Grief Group to another group that they'd been in when the facilitator skipped over themselves in the circle practice. The participant said that they felt "less alone" in this group because I'd been willing to share my thoughts and stories during the circle practice. The others in the group agreed, saying that they wanted the facilitator to participate in the circle. This was valuable feedback that I think should be carried over into future COTW groups. However, as a chaplain, I'll note that it's also important to pair this feedback with the professional obligation of chaplains to center the needs of care seekers.

Simple, open space with light guidance

I believe that the best agendas were simple, with just a few discussion questions or a single prompt (a poem, a ritual) to help guide the conversation. For the agendas with multiple discussion questions, I allowed us to move slowly through them. Rather than trying to cram it all into one session, we often covered a single agenda over the span of several weeks. However, it's important to note that I only allowed an agenda to span multiple weeks if the content seemed to be resonating with participants and if the conversations were deepening through further discussion on a topic (e.g, the discussions around time and healing seemed to get richer and more expansive over time, which is why that agenda spanned three weeks). Sometimes, the topic or content didn't seem to particularly resonate, such as the song in the Dec. 7th session. When this happened, I simply read off any remaining questions toward the end of the session, and I allowed participants to jump in if they had thoughts. I then moved on to another topic the next week.

I also didn't try to make participants adhere closely to the prompt/discussion question. During each person's turn in the circle practice, I allowed them to share whatever was on their hearts and minds. Even when participants were "off topic," I noticed that they were most often sharing about a particular type/experience of grief. The container of the Grief Group itself

seemed to powerfully evoke grief stories and vulnerable sharing, and I wanted to honor each person's willingness to offer something of themselves into the space. This desire for space and open sharing is in line with research that's been done on therapy groups and grief groups led by psychologists. This research has found that "members preferred and welcomed a simple forum where they could talk openly" and that "spontaneous interactions and discussions ... are central to group treatment for loss" (MacNair-Semands 524, 528).

However, I believe that some amount of structure and guided discussion is also beneficial. In a study completed by Kari Madeleine Stabell Dyregrov, Iren Johnson, and Atle Dyregrov, grief group participants said that they benefited from having sessions organized by themes "that were sensitively adapted to their needs" (Dyregrov, Johnson, and Dyregrov 375). Participants advocated for semi-structured meetings where "the leader could introduce themes and topics in the group, which the participants could accept or reject" (Dyregrov, Johnson, and Dyregrov 371). Overall, this approach of introducing themes and allowing participants to accept or reject them was the one that I employed in this group.

I also believe that offering some specific content helped to deepen the conversations and to encourage participation. Content like poems, songs, and rituals helped participants reflect more deeply on grief, and this content often inspired people to share grief stories that they hadn't previously mentioned. I believe that having some specific content was necessary considering how long the group ran. Over time, people began to repeat stories and sharings in check in circles. While sharing a particular grief story over and over again can be helpful for the bereaved, I think participants (including those who were sharing the same stories) would have gotten frustrated over time if that's all the Grief Group was. One regular participant consistently suggested that the group not just focus on the pain but also on coping strategies and how to move forward. Adding in specific content and practices helped to achieve this.

Having specific prompts and content also seemed to allow for the participation of people who otherwise may not have shared anything. The survey, for example, seemed to be a particularly powerful tool in helping participants engage in the group. The low bar for participation (i.e., simply reading off statements that resonated with their experience) allowed participants who rarely said anything to be able to name what they were experiencing, even if they didn't explain what led them to choose each statement.

Finally, during the debrief sessions in March, one participant shared that the group had worked particularly well because the facilitation had encouraged people to talk to each other, rather than to just talk to the facilitator. I believe this shows that light facilitation reinforces the strengths-based model of chaplaincy upon which the group was founded. By giving participants open space to share their grief with each other, the group began to see themselves as a community that could offer healing and support to one another.

Consistency

One of my goals was to ensure that the Grief Group was as consistent as possible. Treleaven writes that having a predictable structure is essential in offering trauma-informed care. He says, "Given that trauma survivors are often coping with a lot of uncertainty (e.g., when they might have a flashback), offering up a schedule of a class beforehand - and keeping structures consistent - is a valuable way to promote safety and trust through predictability and transparency" (Treleaven 146-147). Thus, each Grief Group agenda follows a predictable flow:

an overview of the group, the group agreements, a check in circle, discussion questions, a closing circle, then finally closing words. I sought to maintain this consistent structure no matter how many attendees joined the group. For example, only two people attended the session that occurred the week after Christmas. Rather than just having a freeform conversation, I stuck to our consistent structure, even though “circle” practice was actually just a “triangle” practice. Even though it was a bit awkward to go through the formal structure with only two people, I think the awkwardness was outweighed by the potential sense of comfort, safety, and stability created by sticking to the regular structure.

Location and Set Up

Having the Grief Group occur at a regular time and in the same location was a key component in cultivating feelings of safety through consistency. However, midway through the Grief Group cycle, my desire to keep the time/location consistent was trumped by my desire to ensure that the group was as accessible as possible to the unhoused community. The location for the first half of the group had been the Trustees Room in the public library. This room had a microwave, coffee maker, and large center table, all of which created a communal atmosphere. The fact that it was a private space may also have helped some participants feel safe enough to share deeply about their grief journeys. However, by the time the weather was getting colder, the participation had leveled off to a core group of about 6-7 people, many of whom were housed. In order to make the group more accessible to the unhoused community, we moved the Grief Group to the church where COTW’s winter breakfast program was held. We tried to give as much heads-up as possible before this change occurred. Also, I knew that participants may have formed special memories and attachments to the room in the library where the Grief Group had been held for several months. Considering the vulnerable conversations that had happened in the room, I believe the space itself conveyed a sense of safety and comfort, and there could be grief in leaving it behind. Thus, I facilitated a short “ritual” of sharing memories about the space and saying goodbye to it. I believe this type of ritualized closure is helpful when participants are already dealing with numerous losses. I also think this sort of small ritual is important because it reflects larger rituals around loss - saying goodbye, sharing fond memories, having a ritualized sense of closure.

As we planned to move the Grief Group to the church, I intended to hold the group in a smaller, enclosed room near the church office. This would maintain a private space that was similar to the Trustees Room at the library. However, due to the lack of volunteers and chaplains during the first few weeks that the group was at the church, I ended up holding the group in the large, open room where the breakfast program was held. I worried that this may prevent people from sharing openly because others were nearby eating breakfast or sleeping in the designated sleeping area. However, I was pleasantly surprised that participants still seemed willing to share openly and vulnerably. Perhaps this was because many other guests had left by the time we held the group, so the breakfast tables were often relatively empty. Perhaps this was also because I set up chairs around a large table away from the breakfast area, and that layout may have helped it to feel like a closed group. While it’s possible that some participants felt less willing to share their grief in the open space, the conversations at the church seemed just as open and tender as those that we’d had at the library. In fact, many conversations at the church

seemed to be even more vulnerable, though this was perhaps due to the fact that the make-up of the group shifted considerably when we changed locations.

Having the Grief Group in the large breakfast room had unexpected benefits for participation, with some people joining the group who may not otherwise have attended. This included several people who joined because they saw the group gathered around a big table and were curious to see what it was about. Others joined midway through the group once they overheard what we were discussing. For example, one person joined because they overheard us talking about the memorials that COTW had conducted last year, and this person wanted to express gratitude for how helpful those memorials were for their grieving process. This person then participated in the rest of the group and shared their struggles with cumulative grief.

I often set up a few chairs outside the main circle, and I believe this was crucial in inviting in people who were more skeptical of the group. Often the people who sat in the chairs outside the main circle were those who weren't regular participants and who were scoping out the group to see if it was something they wanted to be part of. Participants in the main circle would often invite those on the edges to come into the main circle, but they consistently declined. Whenever we did a circle practice, I made sure to include those who were sitting outside the main circle, and surprisingly they often had a lot to share. I believe that being able to join the group from the margins was meaningful for them. One participant who sat outside of the circle said that they wanted to attend in order to share the deep grief that they'd been carrying around since childhood, and they expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the group. Even though this person only participated in the group once, I'm glad the group had felt accessible on the day they wanted to join and that they were able to share their grief in a community of care. Sometimes, those who were sitting outside of the main circle fell asleep. (This happened more often in the fall, when the group was held in the late afternoon.) I would skip over people if they fell asleep. I would strive to normalize it by saying to the rest of the group that I was glad this was a place where people felt safe enough to rest. I talked about how rest can be sacred, especially when one is dealing with all of the challenges of grief.

Having the group in the large, open space of the breakfast room had other benefits as well. It allowed participants to step out and get coffee or walk around as needed, and I believe this flexibility is essential for making the group accessible and trauma-informed (allowing people to move around and take a break if things are feeling too intense). I sought to validate this by saying that people can get up as they need and even that they can get up and leave the group, no questions asked. I emphasized that it's important for people to take care of themselves as they know best.

Both unhoused and housed participants

Although COTW's primary mission is to provide spiritual care to the unhoused community in Waltham, the chaplains are also available to provide spiritual support to housed volunteers and to previously unhoused community members who now have an apartment. Every COTW setting is open to all. This inclusivity seeks to dissolve lines that divide people (e.g., housed vs. unhoused, helper vs. helped, volunteer vs. participant) and to ensure that nobody is defined by the struggles they're facing. Thus, while many participants in the Grief Group were unhoused, many others were housed. This could occasionally lead to tensions in the group, such as after the holidays when an unhoused participant remarked that a housed

participant's stories about the holidays showed relative wealth and privilege. When this happened, I sought to reinforce the idea that we all have our own unique stories and lived experiences. I also emphasized that the values underlying this group were that we can come together across lines of difference and support each other through the universal emotion of grief, however differently we may experience it. Overall, I think it was effective to have a mix of housed and unhoused participants because (a) nobody should have to feel isolated from the COTW community once they are able to move into an apartment, and (b) having participants from diverse backgrounds could help to dissolve stigmas and stereotypes and create greater feelings of empathy and solidarity. I believe that the mutuality of support between the housed, unhoused, and previously unhoused community members was healing in and of itself - showing that we're not defined by our circumstances and that we all have great gifts to offer one another.

Open, expansive, and consistent invitations

Over the course of the Grief Group, community members would surprise me with their participation in the group. For example, a few community members whom I've never seen participate in COTW's communal gatherings or groups ended up attending the Grief Group after Jill or I personally invited them for a few weeks in a row. On the day of the Grief Group, I would mention the group to anyone whom I talked to and tell them that they were welcome to come. When COTW switched to the "winter schedule," I walked up to everyone at the breakfast program and invited them to join the Grief Group a few minutes before it was scheduled to start. I believe this was an effective approach. For example, one person who had consistently declined my invitation suddenly decided to come one week. They said that they had a lot of grief on their mind that day, and what they shared in the group seemed like longstanding grief that they'd been dealing with for most of their life. After the group, they said that they weren't sure if they would come back (and, in fact, they didn't), but they said that they were glad to have attended that day because their grief felt intense at that moment. I told them that I was grateful that they felt like they could rely upon the group when they needed it. In addition, another community member who had declined my invitations to join the group for several months finally decided to attend because I told them about the expansive definition of grief that we use in the group (discussing all sorts of losses and griefs, not just deaths of family and friends). This made the person feel welcome and willing to join, and they then became a regular participant. I believe that these examples show that it's helpful to plant seeds over long periods and to keep inviting people to the group, even if they've declined before. It's also helpful to have a consistent group so that, when someone feels ready to share their grief or when they are struggling under the weight of their grief, they know that they have somewhere to go.

There were many times when people told me that they were reluctant to attend because they were afraid that, if they started talking about their grief, they would become immobilized by the pain. (This is the main reason I chose the theme of "numbness and fear of being overwhelmed" as the theme for the grief groups in January and February). Many people in the COTW community are forced to keep their overwhelming grief at bay so that they can make it through the day and cope with the "tasks" of homelessness (e.g., meetings with caseworkers, endless phone calls to get unemployment benefits, innumerable applications for housing, etc.). For these community members, the Grief Group may seem both intriguing and intimidating - intriguing in that it does feel applicable and at some level they wish to come, and intimidating in

the sense that it seems risky or even foolish to open the “can of worms” that is grief. In these instances, I would emphasize that people could come and just listen; they didn’t have to share anything at all, but rather just come and see what it was like. And if they didn’t want to stay, they could leave any time, no questions asked. This expansive permission related to participation in the group led a number of people to attend and try it out. They often told me before the group that they didn’t plan on sharing anything, but, in the end, most did end up sharing vulnerably about their grief. I believe this shows that the group feels safer to people when sharing is not mandatory. Also, I think some people are reluctant to join because they’re not sure it will feel like a safe space. When the right container is set (group norms, circle practice, etc.), then people may feel comfortable to share. At the end of the meeting, these participants often had positive reflections about the group, and many attended (or at least wished to attend) subsequent Grief Groups.

On the other hand, some participants came to several groups and said very little. I sought to validate this and express appreciation for their presence, even if it was just as a witness to others’ stories. One participant shared that they were really tired and “dissociating” during the group, which is why they didn’t have much to share. I responded by saying that they were welcome to be there just as they were, and that we were glad to have them in the group regardless of how much they wanted to share. Another participant who attended the group a few times but didn’t share anything later told me that they still get a lot out of the groups. They said they appreciated being able to listen, and they seemed grateful to be included/valued as a member of the group. Another participant came to several groups and almost always “passed” during their turn. However, a few months later, they opened up and shared a lot about their struggles and journey. This example shows how important it is to allow people to participate without any strings attached. These participants may then come to trust the group over time and may rely on it when they feel safe and/or ready to share.

Finally, it’s important to note that some people always declined my invitations to join the Grief Group. In many instances, the community member and I would joke about my repeated invitations and their consistent declines, which made me think that it still mattered to invite them and let them know that they’re a valued part of the community. There were many reasons that people weren’t able to and/or didn’t want to attend. Most of the time people were busy (e.g., going to work, going to a medical appointment, filling out paperwork, making an important call, etc.). Other times people were exhausted (e.g., not sleeping well in the shelters or outside, feeling mentally exhausted from the stress of being unhoused, etc.). Sometimes people would decline because they were overwhelmed by others’ grief. They said that they found themselves consistently listening to others’ grief stories, and thus they felt like it would be draining, rather than uplifting, to be part of the group. I heard this response most often from those who were staying in the women’s shelter. When participants expressed this, I would offer to provide one-on-one grief support to them, if they wanted it. A final reason that people gave as to why they didn’t want to join the group was that they didn’t feel safe being vulnerable around others. These community members also sometimes expressed distrust in other members of the community. I took this response as a hard “no” to my invitation to join the Grief Group. In these rare instances, I would stop inviting the person in order to respect their wishes. I would instead offer them one-on-one support, if they wanted it.

“No grief required”

Over the course of the Grief Group, many people declined my invitation to join the group because they said that they didn't feel sad. Our society can promote a narrow conception of what grief looks like, and this made some community members opt out of the group because they didn't fit that mold. Thus, when I was inviting community members to join the Grief Group, I began to tell people that “no grief is required.” I told them that they could join the group feeling however they felt - happy, angry, ashamed, anxious, etc. Then during the groups, I would often name that grief can take on a number of different emotions and can cause numerous different physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions. For example, the grief ritual based on the Work that Reconnects' “Truth Mandala” validated emotions like fear and anger as parts of the grief journey (Nov. 16th agenda). In addition, the January-February agendas on numbness and a fear of being overwhelmed were also part of my attempt to normalize various reactions to and experiences with grief. I believe that this encouraged more community members to join and helped them to get more out of the group.

In addition, I emphasized that people could talk about whatever types of grief were on their hearts and that they didn't have to focus exclusively on deaths. One community member who'd repeatedly declined my invitation to join the group eventually decided to come after I explained this expansive view of the losses that could be discussed in the group.

A few people joined the group even though they said that they weren't grieving at all. However, they wanted to join in order to listen to and support others, and/or they wanted to learn about the various types of grief and reactions that people might have to grief so that they could better support others. For example, during the January-February group on numbness and a fear of being overwhelmed, one participant commented that this topic didn't resonate with their experience of grief, but they were grateful to know that this is how some people reacted to grief. They said this would help them better understand what their friends and other people in the community were experiencing. I was moved by the meaning and purpose that these community members found in helping and caring for others, and I viewed this as a perfectly legitimate way to engage in the Grief Group.

Finally, I will note that this idea of “no grief required” raises a question as to whether the group should be called something other than “Grief Group.” As mentioned in the introduction, the title came from a WCLG member who initially proposed the idea of forming the group. Perhaps the group has evolved and expanded beyond what the WCLG initially intended, though participants tend to view this expansive notion of grief positively (see Overall Impact section below). In the March Grief Group sessions where we debriefed the group, I raised the question about the name of the group. One participant said they joined *because* it was called Grief Group and they were intrigued because of the grief they were currently experiencing. Other participants said they liked the title because it was self-explanatory and connotes a support group, which felt applicable. Another participant didn't answer the question directly, but rather talked about the grief that was on their heart. This participant said, even though they didn't regularly come, they wanted to come today because their grief was on their mind. Some participants said they liked the term “Grief Group,” but they said it was important to emphasize the broad definition of grief and to say that all feelings are welcome. Other participants said they were skeptical to join because they didn't see themselves as grieving (as noted above), and they proposed alternative titles, such as “All Feelings Welcome,” “Exploring Emotions,” or simply

“Discussion Group.” Overall, there didn’t seem to be a clear consensus on what to call the group. However, all participants said that they wanted the Grief Group to continue or a similar group to be established, which underscores the value of our time together. (See more below in the Overall Impacts section.)

Analysis of Survey Results

I gave out a survey to Grief Group participants to determine what topics and practices to focus on during the Grief Group sessions (see Appendix B for a copy of the survey). A total of nine people filled out the survey. Five of the survey responses came from the Nov. 9th Grief Group session, which focused exclusively on the survey. The other four responses came from people who didn’t attend the Grief Group on Nov. 9th but who came to the group at a later date and were willing to stay after the group to fill out the survey.

I analyzed the survey results through calculating the composite rank of the various answer choices. The composite rank captured both the frequency with which a response was chosen as well as how highly the response was ranked. (See Appendix C for a full description of my methodology and my analysis of the survey results.)

While nine survey responses do not constitute a representative sample, I believe that the results of the Grief Group survey may suggest areas where more surveys and further research is needed. Two areas in particular stand out: (1) cumulative grief, and (2) disenfranchised grief.

Question 1 on the survey asked participants to identify and rank statements about various types of grief based on how much those statements resonated with their own experience. The statement that had the highest composite rank was “I feel grief due to multiple losses at once (cumulative grief).” Given the significant number of deaths in the COTW community in recent years, this response was not surprising. As discussed in the introduction, the relatively high mortality rate within the COTW community is not unique and has been noted in many studies and news articles about unhoused communities in the U.S. (“Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day”; Maglione, Kalisuch, Iglewicz 53, 57; Leung). Other studies have talked about how this high mortality rate causes unhoused individuals to suffer from “cumulative grief,” even though the studies don’t always use that exact terminology (Meris 105-106; McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian 342). Other studies about grief among the unhoused talk about how grief over deaths of loved ones and friends may also be intermingled with grief related to other losses, such as the loss of a relationship, job, or house (*Bereavement & Homelessness* 22, 30). However, while aspects of cumulative grief are mentioned in these studies, the impact of multiple losses is not the main focus. In fact, several articles describe the need for more research in this area. McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian argue that more research needs to be done on “the effects of experiencing repeated losses for people in the homeless community” (McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian 337). In addition, Catherine Robinson says that there has been a “lack of attention paid within social research to the bodily impacts of cumulative trauma and grief in the lives of homeless people” (Robinson, “Felt Homelessness,” 92). I believe that the results of the Grief Group survey and the high ranking of the statement on cumulative grief further emphasizes the need for more research on the impacts of cumulative grief on those who are unhoused.

An unexpected result of the survey was the fact that, for Question 1, nobody selected the statement “I don’t feel like I’m ‘allowed’ to grieve, or nobody recognizes my grief (disenfranchised grief).” This is surprising given that the research on disenfranchised grief among the unhoused community (Burns, Sussman, and Bourgeois-Guérin 175; Meris 106; McCarty, Marchand, and Hagopian 345). (See the “Background” section of the introduction for more about disenfranchised grief and the research that has been done on it.) There are many possible reasons why the survey results diverged from the existing literature on disenfranchised grief among the unhoused. One possibility is that the sentence about disenfranchised grief on the survey didn’t capture the full extent of what the category covers and/or was too strongly worded. Perhaps more people would have selected the response if it had said, “Society doesn’t honor my grief” or “Only a few people recognize my grief as ‘legitimate.’” Another possible reason is that the experiences of the unhoused populations described in existing research (e.g., older adults in the Burns et al. study; HIV-infected gay men in the Meris study) are not applicable to all unhoused individuals. Alternatively, perhaps the very fact that people are attending a Grief Group means that they’re in a space where their grief is recognized and honored. It’s possible that other COTW community members who don’t attend the Grief Group would have said that they experience disenfranchised grief. A final possible explanation is that the existence of Chaplains on the Way and the innovative work that it’s doing in providing spiritual care to the unhoused serves as an antidote to disenfranchised grief. COTW organizes memorials, provides 1:1 spiritual support to the bereaved, and hosts several weekly groups where the grief of the community is often named and validated (e.g., the meditation group on Tuesdays, the interfaith service on Wednesdays, and of course the Grief Group on Fridays). Overall, I believe the low ranking of disenfranchised grief on this survey shows the need for more research on why some unhoused individuals seem to suffer from disenfranchised grief more than others and what impact chaplains can have in alleviating this particular form of suffering.

Choosing Themes & Practices for Grief Group Sessions

Themes for Grief Group Sessions

The Grief Group survey was an important component in helping me decide on themes to focus on during the Grief Group sessions. Right after the initial group of participants filled out the survey, I planned a group centered on cumulative grief because it was the most highly ranked response (see Nov. 16th agenda and commentary). Later in the Grief Group cycle, I planned a group that focused on loneliness because the phrase “I feel lonely because I’ve lost someone special to me” had the third highest composite rank (see the February Grief Groups agenda and commentary).

However, the survey wasn’t the only factor determining the themes that I chose. I also listened for common remarks in my 1:1 conversations about grief with people who didn’t attend the Grief Group. For example, a number of people said that they didn’t want to attend the Grief Group because they were scared they’d be overwhelmed by grief, so I planned a Grief Group on that topic (see January-February Grief Groups agendas and commentaries). My goal was to give people an accessible entry point into the Grief Group, if they wanted it. In addition, not all

Grief Group participants filled out the survey, and I listened for themes among those whom I knew hadn't filled it out. The idea of maintaining connections with the deceased came up several times in our groups, which is why I planned a Grief Group on this topic (see Dec. 7th agenda and commentary). Finally, I listened for themes that may not have been included on the survey per se. Participants in the Grief Group and others in the COTW community often quoted or questioned the common phrase "time heals all wounds," and thus I thought it was important to plan a whole Grief Group on this topic (see January Grief Groups agenda and commentary).³⁵

I also chose not to plan groups around a couple of the statements that had high composite ranks on the survey. The statement that had the second highest rank was "I am grieving the loss of someone whom I had a difficult relationship with or who wasn't always good to me (ambivalent grief)." However, as I looked more deeply into the survey results, I realized that this was because the last two people who filled out the survey had ranked this response very highly. However, these people only attended 1-2 groups, and then they didn't come back. Therefore, it seemed more important to focus on other topics.

In addition, some topics that were of interest to Grief Group participants were addressed in other COTW spaces. For example, the statement "I am struggling with forgiveness, either for myself or someone else." was the seventh highest ranked statement. After a community member reiterated their interest in this topic, Jill led a forgiveness meditation in one of COTW's Meditation Groups on Tuesday morning. Therefore, I felt less pressure to include this topic in the Grief Group.

The topics that I wished that we'd had time to cover were: (a) anticipatory grieving and fear of death as contagious (based on how highly ranked these statements were on the survey; I believe these two topics could be combined into one agenda), (b) grieving non-human losses (based on how highly ranked it was on the survey), (c) collective grief (based on the conversations in the Nov. 16th, Nov. 23rd, and Nov. 30th Grief Groups), and (d) dreams about the deceased (based on the interest in this topic during the Dec. 7th session). The main reason we didn't get a chance to cover these themes was because I prioritized the poems and songs that Grief Group members gave me and asked me to include, as well as specific requests from regular attendees about themes. Although we didn't get a chance to cover these topics in this cycle of the Grief Group, I think these could be good topics to cover if COTW decides to organize another cycle of the Grief Group at a later date.

Practices and Rituals in Grief Group Sessions

The survey was highly influential in helping me decide which practices to incorporate into Grief Group sessions. I planned two groups centered around listening to a piece of music because of how highly ranked that answer choice was (see agendas and commentaries for the

³⁵ The survey somewhat touched on this theme with the statement "I feel unsure what "healing" means after a loss/death." However, I think that statement was too ambiguous, which was why a lot of people didn't choose it. I think it may have been more effective to instead include these two different statements on the survey: "I strongly believe that time heals all wounds" and "I strongly disagree that time heals all wounds." By adding in the adverb "strongly," I would hope to filter out anyone who is ambivalent on this topic.

One survey respondent also wrote "time heals all wounds" in response to question 5(b), which further demonstrates the salience of this topic.

February groups and the Dec. 7th group). The other practice that survey respondents expressed most interest in was “simple daily practices of self-care,” and thus I included questions about people’s individual self-care practices in several agendas. The idea was that individuals could share ideas and support each other in the self-care practices that worked best for them. I sometimes also included specific self-care practices that individuals could try out, such as the embodied, compassion-based practice in the January agenda on Time and Healing. Interfaith prayer was also highly ranked, which is why I included a prayer in the January-February sessions on Numbness and Fear of Being Overwhelmed.

I also included practices and activities that ended up not ranking as highly. For example, I included grief rituals into several agendas right after the initial group filled out the survey (Nov. 16th; Nov. 23rd). This is because the five people who completed the survey at the Nov. 9th session expressed more interest in grief rituals than the four who filled out the survey at a later date. When the later respondents expressed relatively little interest in rituals, I started focusing on other practices. Another practice that didn’t rank that highly was reading poems and reflecting on them. However, I ended up often incorporating poems into the Grief Group agendas because participants would suggest specific poems that they wanted the Grief Group to cover (e.g., the March session on the “Mycelial” poem).

One practice that ranked highly but that I didn’t incorporate into the Grief Group sessions was chanting or singing together. I thought that the group would need to develop more trust in each other before engaging in this relatively vulnerable practice, which is why I didn’t incorporate chanting into the sessions in the fall and early winter. Then, when the Grief Group moved to the church and we started having our meetings in the large breakfast room, I worried that people may be self-conscious about singing or chanting in such a public space. I also worried about waking up the people who were sleeping in the designated sleeping area that was right beside where our group met. However, I think there is rich potential for incorporating chants into the Grief Group, and I think this was a missed opportunity in this cycle of the Grief Group. If the Grief Group cycle were longer or if I were to plan a similar Grief Group in the future, I would definitely want to include chanting because of its benefits in settling people’s nervous systems and helping them feel more connected to others around them (Menakem 138-141, 145, 182-185).³⁶

In addition, I want to note that although meditation ranked the lowest on the survey, I don’t believe this was due to a lack of interest in meditation per se. Rather, I believe that participants felt like they could practice meditation in other COTW contexts, so they didn’t necessarily want the Grief Group to focus on meditation as well. Each Wednesday, COTW offers meditation as part of its weekly interfaith services. Also, after the Oct. 26th and Nov. 2nd sessions focused on the RAIN meditation, some Grief Group participants were so enthusiastic about developing a meditation practice that COTW started hosting a weekly meditation group. Thus, after the sessions on the RAIN meditation, I chose to not incorporate meditations in the Grief Group, even though I think meditation can be quite supportive to those who are grieving.

³⁶ Some of the chants that I’d hoped to incorporate are the following: “Loving Kindness - song.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Wake Up songs, 18 Nov. 2015, https://youtu.be/ul_wm68BIH_4. Accessed 12 May 2023.; Halpert, Aly. “Loosen Loosen.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Aly Halpert, 9 June 2020, <https://youtu.be/X-7XfaS7Mc>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

Finally, it's important to note that some people wrote on the survey that substance use (using drugs or alcohol) was one of their coping strategies. In addition, when various agendas asked about participants' self-care practices, several participants brought up substance use then as well. I believe that the best way to respond to such comments is to thank people for their willingness to share openly and honestly about their pain and the ways they cope with it, recognizing how human/normal it is to try to numb the pain. It was also helpful to name the spectrum of ways that people numb their pain - from netflix, to eating, to working long hours, to substance use, etc. This helped to normalize and not "other" people who were struggling with substance use as a way of dealing with their grief. In addition, it could spark a conversation about when we need to take a break from the intensity of grief and how we could effectively do so. From a nonjudgmental and strengths-based lens, I would ask people about their other coping strategies, especially if I knew they were wanting to curb their substance use. The most common responses then were being around other people and participating in the COTW community.

Understanding and exploring the best way to respond to people's stories about substance use was a journey that lasted the entire cycle of the Grief Group. I don't have a background in this area and, at first, struggled with how to most effectively respond to these comments. I benefited a lot from the advice of others, including Jill, Judy, and Monica. I also learned a lot from my conversations with community members who had lived experience of struggling with substance use disorder, and they were generous and patient with me when I fumbled with my responses and learned better ways to talk about substance use. In retrospect, I wish I'd done more at the beginning of the Grief Group to learn about the best language to use around substance use³⁷ and the various practices that are effective in supporting those suffering from substance use disorder.³⁸ I believe this sort of learning is essential for anyone working with those who are struggling with grief and trauma.

Overall impact

During and after Grief Group sessions, participants shared the impacts that the group was having on them individually and on the COTW community as a whole. The impacts that participants described showed that the group was successful in meeting its three main goals: (1) to help attendees discover and/or connect with a sense of **meaning** related to their loss; (2) to

³⁷ These two articles outline the discussions about the most appropriate and least stigmatizing language to use when talking about substance use: Volkow, Nora D., et al. "Choosing Appropriate Language to Reduce the Stigma Around Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders." *Neuropsychopharmacology* (New York, N.Y.), vol. 46, no. 13, 2021, pp. 2230–32, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41386-021-01069-4>;

Martinelli, Thomas F., et al. "Language and Stigmatization of Individuals with Mental Health Problems or Substance Addiction in the Netherlands: An Experimental Vignette Study." *Health & Social Care in the Community*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2020, pp. 1504–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12973>.

³⁸ Motivational Interviewing (MI) is one of those strategies, and there's significant overlap between the skills entailed in MI and chaplaincy skills. These three articles give an overview of MI: "Motivational Interviewing: An Overview." *UC Davis: Continuing and Professional Education, Human Services*, 12 Jan. 2022, <https://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/blog/motivational-interviewing-overview>. Accessed 12 May 2023.; "Motivational Interviewing." *Psychology Today*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/motivational-interviewing>. Accessed 12 May 2023.; "Understanding Motivational Interviewing." *MINT*, <https://motivationalinterviewing.org/understanding-motivational-interviewing>. Accessed 12 May 2023.

promote **cop**ing practices grounded in compassion; (3) to cultivate a sense of **communit**y and collective support.

First, participants described how the group helped them to make **mean**ing of their losses. As mentioned in the introduction, meaning is often constructed through sharing one's story with others. Storytelling helps us to see ourselves in a new light, and we are able to experience greater self-compassion when our stories are held with tenderness by others. This theme of meaning-making through storytelling was reflected in many participants' comments about the impact of the group. One participant said they valued the group because it was a place to "talk, reflect, think, and listen." Another participant said the Grief Group was a "place to be seen and heard." Another person said that the best part of the group was "sharing" while someone else said that it was having "listeners" who wanted to hear about their grief. I believe that the deep respect and care that participants showed for each others' stories helped each storyteller find new meaning and see their loss within a greater sense of wholeness.

During the debrief sessions in March, several participants said that they felt like the Grief Group was a safe place to bring up anything that was hard in their lives. A couple of people emphasized how the group's expansive notion of grief made them feel comfortable bringing up whatever was troubling them, including a "lack of a home" or a "lack of feeling wanted." I believe that having a space where people can discuss normally taboo topics creates a rich environment for meaning making. When people share stories that they normally don't tell others, they can release some of the emotions related to those stories and begin to see their experiences in a new light. Over and over again, participants expressed appreciation for the group and said that they had shared stories that they had hardly ever talked about before. I believe that the relief and gratitude that they expressed showed how they had found new meaning for their stories of loss.

Participants also talked about how grief had disrupted their worldview and how sharing their stories helped them to see their lives in new ways. For example, one participant said that the group allowed them to turn towards the fullness of their lives, exploring both how they wanted their life to be and how it actually was. This person went on to say that they had found new meaning by saying out loud what they were really thinking and what they were dealing with under the surface. I believe that the Grief Group helped this person integrate their loss into the story of their life and develop a more holistic perception of themselves that included how they'd been impacted by the loss. The brave and vulnerable work that this person did in the group seemed to help them reclaim a sense of agency over their life and feel empowered to construct new meanings related to their loss.

The impact that storytelling can have on meaning making can also be powerfully seen through one participant's remark during the March Grief Groups on the poem "Mycelial." This participant had attended their first Grief Group a few weeks earlier, and they had broken down and cried as we listened to Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven." After the song, the person shared with us a deep grief that they said they rarely talked about with anyone. However, it was something that had impacted them quite significantly. They expressed gratitude to the group for receiving their story and expressing compassion. A few weeks later during the session on the "Mycelial" poem, the impact of the earlier session on the participant was further reinforced. One of the lines of the poem is "Grief, like a mushroom, can be almost unbearably beautiful," and I asked whether participants had ever experienced grief as "beautiful." This participant

emphatically raised their hand and said yes. They said that they'd been able to see their grief as beautiful when the group had held their story and their tears with such compassion a few weeks before. The other participants seemed touched by this comment, and the atmosphere of the group seemed to be especially warm and tender for the rest of the session. I believe that this participant's comment shows how storytelling can help us find a new "plot" for our stories. When other people witness and care about our stories, we're able to break free from life-limiting narratives about our losses and to see how beauty can co-exist alongside grief.

Second, participants expressed that the group helped them to **cope** with their grief. Several participants said that they found the group "comforting" and "peaceful." For these participants, the simple act of attending the group seemed to be an effective strategy for coping with their grief-related stress. I believe the group's emphasis on compassion was a key factor in helping the group feel spacious and healing. When reflecting on her impression of the group, Judy (the other chaplain intern) wrote, "I also expect the experience of receiving and demonstrating compassion (the softening of hearts) has ripple effects that are able to manifest in other aspects of (participants') lives. (I leave GG with a bigger heart and it impacts the rest of my day)." One of the community members also reflected on how the comfort they derived from the group carried over into other aspects of their life. They said that they appreciated the group because it made "space for emotion, grief, discourse," and this spacious, gentle approach provided an alternative to "striving and forcing 'my way' into the day." I'm glad that the group modeled a softer, more compassionate way to be with grief. From this foundation, I believe participants are less likely to turn towards coping strategies aimed at distraction and/or numbness. When participants are able to feel compassion for their difficulties, they are better able to develop coping practices that accept the fullness of their experience and help them relate to their grief with more equanimity.

The Grief Group offered specific examples of spiritual coping strategies that could help participants manage their grief-related stress. The main aim of these practices was cultivating a greater sense of compassion. Some practices, including prayers and rituals, evoked a sense of divine compassion, while other practices, such as meditation, helped participants sense their inherent capacity for self-compassion. Participants often had positive feedback about the coping practices we did together. Some were moved by the words of the interfaith prayers (e.g., the prayer in the January-February Grief Groups on numbness and a fear of being overwhelmed). Others resonated with the meditations, even requesting that COTW form a weekly meditation group, which we did. This meditation group further inspired several Grief Group participants to start incorporating meditation into their daily routine, and I heard from several of them about how much the practice was helping them cope with their grief. Another participant shared with me that they were saving all of the printed Grief Group agendas and periodically going through them. They said the resources and practices in the agendas gave them a touchstone to go back to when they felt overcome with grief.

In addition, I would often ask participants what coping practices felt most supportive to them, and I would encourage them to take small actions aimed at self-care. I believe that this inspired some participants to take steps that they might not have otherwise. For example, one participant shared that attending the group had given them the courage to make a difficult phone call and to set a boundary related to their grieving. They expressed gratitude to the group for helping them to take this step in service of their self-care.

Third, I believe that the biggest impact that the Grief Group had was in the ways that it fostered **community** and a sense of belonging. During the March debrief sessions, many participants named that the best parts of the Grief Group were the sense of community and the support they received from others. One participant said they benefited from the group because “saying grief aloud makes us less alone.” A common theme throughout the group was people sharing how difficult it was to be isolated in their struggles and how much sharing their stories with others was helpful.

The Grief Group created a space where people felt safe to share the pain and heaviness that had been weighing them down, and it all seemed to pour out when they attended the group. I was continuously struck by the fact that people came to the group with specific things that they wanted to get off their chests. Some even went out of their way to come to the Grief Group because a particular loss was on their mind and they wanted to be able to talk about it with others. Even new participants shared vulnerably about their grief journeys, and I believe that the fact that they felt safe doing so was a testament to the container that we built in the Grief Group. When debriefing the Grief Group in March, one person said that the best part of the group was “trusting new connections,” and another said it was the “tenderness” of all that was shared in the group. Those who shared vulnerably in the group often expressed their sincere gratitude to the other participants for listening to their story.

I believe that the group’s compassionate, non-judgmental acceptance of each person’s grief story helped to foster a deep sense of belonging. From this place of belonging and communal care, participants were able to see their grief in a new light and feel greater strength to cope with the pain. This shows how “grief is a profoundly relational experience” and how much coping and meaning making are interconnected with communal support (Kelley 121).

In addition to receiving support from the group, participants expressed how meaningful it was to care for other group members. The foundation of this group was an empowerment-based model of chaplaincy, and one of the main goals was to help participants tap into their inherent capacity to be a healing resource for themselves and others. I was glad to hear during the debriefing sessions that participants recognized this capacity in themselves and that they derived great meaning from the opportunity to support others. One participant wrote that the best part of the group was “hearing from people on ‘grief,’” and another wrote that they valued the opportunity to “practice deep listening.” Over the course of the group, there were several moments when a participant would share that they didn’t have any particular grief in their lives, but they had wanted to come to the group so that they could be there for others in the community. Those who came to the group to support others also often expressed that, ultimately, they themselves benefited from the resources and conversations. One participant shared that they originally came to the group to accompany others who were grieving the deaths of their loved ones. However, eventually their companions who were deeply grieving stopped coming, and yet the participant who’d accompanied them remained a regular attendee. This participant expressed how much the group had ultimately meant to them and how much they had ended up getting out of it.

Participants also noted that one reason that the Grief Group sessions (and all of COTW’s gatherings) were so healing is because the group brought together a beloved community of people from diverse backgrounds. This included people who were housed, unhoused, recently housed, and precariously housed. The group sought to cultivate a mutuality

of support that wasn't divided along the lines of housed/unhoused. This was impactful because it broke down stereotypes of the unhoused community as being in "need" of help, rather than recognizing how unhoused people can and *are* offering care and support to others. Being part of this diverse community was also meaningful for housed participants. During the debrief sessions, one housed participant said that group was so impactful because there were "different segments coming together around the same table." Housed participants often talked about how much they benefited from the non-judgmental care and abundant compassion that they received from the community.

The benefits of the Grief Group community also extended to those who were peripherally involved. For example, some participants only came to one or two meetings. And yet, even these participants expressed that they were impacted by the group. One said that they were "grateful that the Grief Group happens and is here for the few times that I've wanted to come." In addition, regular participants said that, through their conversations with those who were marginally involved, they saw how it was "meaningful that the group was there when people need it" and that it makes "a big difference even if someone comes once." The group also seemed to be meaningful to participants who attended the meetings but who almost always "passed" during their turn in the circle practice. These participants said that the very fact that they were allowed to attend the group and not say anything was significant. One said that it was "impactful to be able to share as much or as little as possible." They appreciated that there was "no pressure" and that they were "accepted to just sit and listen." Another said they appreciated the opportunity to attend and that, even though they often passed during their turn, they were still taking things in and learning. One participant also emphasized that the "Grief Group helps a lot of people with unspoken things." I believe this is an important insight. Often people attend the group because a loss is weighing on them, yet sometimes it's too painful to speak about their grief aloud. The group makes space for them to participate in whatever way feels right to them, which reinforces the idea that they're not grieving "wrong" and that they belong in the community just as they are. I'm glad that even the silent members of the group expressed that the community helped them feel less alone and supported in their grief.

Furthermore, Grief Group participants expressed that the group had ripple effects in the wider COTW community and that it benefited even those who never came to a group. Some of these beneficiaries were those who attended the breakfast program and who listened in as the Grief Group was happening. During the March debrief sessions, regular participants said that those sitting on the margins had expressed appreciation for the group, saying that it was "comforting to know that it exists." Another participant also said that the group "creates hope for people who may not have it." This person said that they've witnessed the ways that the group has helped community members who've never attended a meeting. Sometimes this was through a regular participant sharing an insight about grief, and other times it was because the general ethos of compassion for each person's grief extended beyond the formal meeting time.

Another interesting insight into the power of the Grief Group community was that the group helped to maintain connections with beloved community members who had died. One participant said the group was valuable because it helped to "carry on the memory of those we've lost in the community." The Grief Group helped people still feel connected with deceased friends and loved ones, and I believe these continued bonds brought comfort and solace. In addition, the focus on honoring those whom we'd lost reinforced the value and sacred worth of

each community member. For Grief Group participants who were fighting depression or dealing with overwhelming despair, I believe that it mattered for them to see how much the community missed each person who had died and how these departed community members continued to live on in our hearts. Overall, I believe these acts of remembrance were important in solidifying the community's bonds and helping each person feel a deep sense of belonging.

Having a time each week to talk about the pain underneath the surface of our daily lives and to touch into the most vulnerable parts of ourselves resulted in the creation of a tender, sacred space that I believe had lasting impacts on the relationships between various members of the COTW community. The group was valuable because it brought together people who may have been in the same spaces for a long time (e.g., the COTW breakfast program, the WCLG meetings) but who didn't necessarily know each other's stories or struggles. The Grief Group offered people an opportunity to share the pain or hardships they were experiencing, which then allowed other community members an opportunity to offer solidarity, support, or companionship. The tenderness of the group's care for each other could be seen in some of the blessings that they offered each other during the closing ritual on April 7. One participant hoped that the others in the group could honor their sadness, while another wished for everyone to be gentle with themselves. Another person shared that they hoped that each group member could allow themselves joy.

Surprisingly, joy was one of the feelings that people said they experienced during the Grief Group. When writing down the predominant emotions that participants associated with the group, one group member wrote "fun!" While the other group members laughed when this participant read their response aloud, I also think it touched on a deep insight that resonated with others in the group. Participants often smiled, laughed, and joked around during Grief Group meetings. I believe that this was because the group offered people an opportunity to express themselves authentically and openly, and thus it cultivated a deeper sense of connection that allowed for more warmth, light-heartedness, and joy. I believe part of this joy came from the relief at being able to speak honestly, while another part came from the community's nonjudgmental acceptance and compassion for each group member, just as they were. Judy summed up her observations of the joy she saw in the community by saying, "Participation in Grief Group builds deeper roots of connection and community - opening space for joy, hope, etc. When you've shared sadness together, you are better able to share joy and friendship together." As I watched the Grief Group grow and evolve over the 8 months that we met, I began to more deeply see how grief and joy are often two sides of the same coin. When we are able to open ourselves fully to the truth of impermanence and the deep sadness caused by the fleeting nature of our lives, we develop a deeper appreciation for small moments and simple pleasures – whether that's a good meal, a moving song, or a meaningful conversation with a friend. We are also able to connect more deeply and meaningfully with the people around us. I believe the beautiful, nourishing, and joyful community that formed through the Grief Group is a testament to the power of coming together as our authentic selves and of offering non-judgmental witness and abundant compassion for our companions in the journey of life.

Implications Beyond the COTW Community

One of the audiences for this project is other chaplains, especially those who are working with the unhoused. My hope is that they can learn tools and frameworks that might be useful as they co-create a Grief Group with their own communities. The three goals and focuses of the group (meaning making, coping, and community building) can serve as a foundation upon which to construct a similar group, and the procedures for community input and feedback (Appendix A) can help them to build the group together with those in their community. I hope they can also utilize the tools for community engagement within the agendas (namely the survey in the Nov. 9th Grief Group and the questions/framing for the conversation around community norms in the Nov. 30th agenda). Additionally, I believe the commentaries after each agenda and the lessons learned in the conclusion can provide scaffolding around facilitation techniques and best practices.

It's important to note that I wasn't aiming to create a resource that would be universally applicable in other contexts. In fact, creating such a resource would have undermined one of the core values of this project, which is the belief that each individual and community knows how to heal themselves if only they're given the right conditions and opportunities. I believe that resources are most healing when they are unique, reflecting the particular pains and distinctive wisdom of each care seeker and community. The deeper healing occurs when people fully come to understand their own capacity for healing - both for themselves and for others. The role of a chaplain is "support careseekers' own healing capacities by engaging their sense of agency, meaning-making systems, spiritual values, and resources" (Grefe, McCarroll, and Ansari 84). In this context, that meant working with community members to co-create a Grief Group that was uniquely suited to address and heal the pain of individuals within the group and the grief within the COTW community at large. Thus, I believe that what was so beautiful about this Grief Group was precisely its *particularity*, not its universality.

At the same time, I know that chaplains often have a lot on their plates, and there are few resources to draw upon when constructing interfaith rituals and groups. It's important for chaplains to share resources with each other so that we aren't reinventing the wheel in our separate silos. I hope that time-strapped chaplains may find some relief when discovering this resource, and I'd much rather they use this resource as is than not offer anything at all. I've now planned two interfaith groups within chaplaincy contexts (one spirituality group and one grief group), and both times I've wished that there was a resource like this one that I could learn from and draw upon. As I've juggled my chaplaincy work on top of a full-time graduate school schedule and many other commitments, there have been many late nights and moments of last-minute planning when I wished I could just use an agenda that another chaplain had already created. Perhaps then I would have been able to get more rest and attend more to my own spiritual practices, which are essential in helping me to be a better chaplain. Therefore, another goal of this project is to expand the genre of religious liturgical texts by creating resources that can be used in multi-religious, chaplaincy contexts. There are few resources on interfaith grief support overall, much less ones that specifically address the grief concerns of the unhoused. The hope is that this project can stimulate further developments and additional creations of interfaith liturgical texts that chaplains can use to support people through grief and other challenges.

My final hope is that this project provides insights into how to better address grief among the unhoused population. As noted above in the analysis of the survey results, I believe more research is needed on the impact of cumulative grief on people who are unhoused and on the effects that chaplains and/or Grief Groups like this one can have in alleviating disenfranchised grief. I also believe that agencies, churches, and others who are working with the unhoused can draw upon the best practices in this resource to offer grief support in an empowering, strengths-based way. The key takeaways are: (1) co-create grief support initiatives with people who are unhoused, (2) open groups with lots of flexibility help to form safe, accessible environments to process grief, (3) it's important to host the group in spaces where people who are unhoused already are, and (4) community-building is essential because it helps all participants see that they are a potential healing resource for others in the group. I believe further research and more initiatives applying these lessons in various contexts could build upon the findings in this project and yield greater insights into how to better support unhoused persons through their grief.

Appendix A: Processes and Protocols for Community Input and Feedback on the Grief Groups

Written survey: I created a survey where participants could provide written feedback about what they wanted the Grief Group to cover. I planned an entire grief group session dedicated to presenting and talking through the survey (see Nov. 9th session). After that, I asked new participants to fill out the survey as they joined the group (giving them a copy right after the first grief group session they attended and asking if they were willing to take ~3 min to fill it out). Filling out the survey was optional. See Appendix B for the copy of the survey.

Soliciting feedback during/after the Grief Group:

- **Asking for feedback at the beginning of the Grief Group session:** At the beginning of most Grief Groups, I said a version of the following disclaimer and request for feedback: “For my senior project at divinity school this year, I am creating resources on grief for COTW (for example, these grief group agendas), and I think it’s important to continuously improve these resources. Therefore, I write notes after each group that talk about how the group went in general. These notes don’t include anyone’s names, stories, or personal information. Rather, they say something like - “participants liked this poem, especially these two lines” or “people said we should talk about this topic more,” or “some people seemed uncomfortable sharing; we need to do a better job making sure that people feel like they can ‘pass’ during their turn”, etc. I’m storing these notes with the agendas so that we can continue to make our groups better and more helpful to the community. I’d love to hear any feedback and input that you want to share about how these groups are going for you.”
- **Asking for feedback at the end of the session:** At the end of the session, I also often encouraged participants to give me feedback on the Grief Group, including what we could be doing better and what topics they wanted the group to cover in the future. Participants would often come up to me after the group with feedback and ideas.
- **Final circle practice:** For a while, the final circle practice was a time when participants could share their feedback on the Grief Group overall and specifically on that day’s topic. However, I didn’t find this to be the most effective way of soliciting feedback (most participants had general, positive feedback). I switched the final circle practice to instead invite participants to say a word or phrase on what they were taking away from that day’s Grief Group. This was more helpful because participants had a variety of answers and I could discover what people found most impactful about the group.

One-on-one conversations: I asked participants individually for their input on the group and their ideas on what future sessions should cover. These were often informal conversations before/after the grief group or in other COTW settings (before/after our interfaith service, at McDonalds or the breakfast program, etc.).

Appendix B: Survey for Grief Group Participants

Question 1: Which of these statements sound like grief that you've experienced? Circle any that apply.

Then, rank the top 5 things that you'd like to talk about in our Grief Group (#1 being the thing that you want to talk about the most, then #2, etc.). Write the number in the box on the side.

	I feel overwhelmed by grief.	Things don't feel real.	
	I feel anger that's related to a loss/death.	I feel confusion due to a loss/death.	
	I feel lonely because it feels like there's nobody to talk to about my grief.	I feel lonely because I've lost someone special to me.	
	I feel like anything might set me off or make me cry.	I experience nightmares or dreams related to my grief.	
	I am not interested in things around me.	I feel numb.	
	I am struggling with forgiveness, either for myself or someone else.	I feel unsure what "healing" means after a loss/death.	
	I don't feel like I'm "allowed" to grieve, or nobody recognizes my grief (disenfranchised grief).	I feel grief from major events in our society, like mass shootings or police brutality (collective grief).	
	I've been grieving for a very long time (chronic grief).	I am grieving about something that happened a long time ago (delayed grief).	
	I feel grief due to multiple losses at once (cumulative grief).	I'm scared that death is "contagious"; I keep wondering "Am I next?"	
	I grieve losses that are not related to death, like a loss of housing.	I grieve losses that will happen in the future (anticipatory grieving).	
	I feel grief about ongoing, complicated situations, like being unable to get in touch with someone (ambiguous loss).	I feel grief about non-human losses, like the death of a pet or the loss of species due to climate change.	
	I am grieving the loss of someone whom I had a difficult relationship with or who wasn't always good to me (ambivalent grief).	I am struggling with maintaining relationships with living family members or friends after our loved one's death.	
	I'm interested in exploring how to add activities/practices into my life so that I can better take care of myself as I grieve.	I'm interested in exploring how to set boundaries so that I can better take care of myself as I grieve.	
	I maintain an ongoing relationship with someone who's died.		

Question 2: Do you have other experiences with grief that weren't listed, and/or are there other topics that you want to talk about in our Grief Group?

Question 3: What practices, rituals, or activities do you turn to for comfort or support as you're grieving?

Question 4: What rituals, habits, or small practices do you do to remember and/or honor people whom you've lost?

Question 5: Which of these practices/activities would you like to explore during our Grief Group? Circle as many as you like.

Then rank the top 3 activities (#1 being the thing that you want to explore the most, then #2, etc.) Write the number in the box on the side.

	Meditation	Simple daily practices of self-care	
	Listening to music and reflecting on it	Reading poems and reflecting on them	
	Chanting and/or singing together	Interfaith prayers	
	Simple mindful movement practices	Grief rituals (activities or crafts to honor our losses and our feelings)	

Other ideas? Write them here:

Appendix C: Grief Group Survey Results

Total number of surveys: 9

Methodology for analyzing survey results: The responses to question one and question five of the survey are analyzed in the tables and charts below. These tables and charts sort the various answer choices by composite rank, which captures both the frequency with which a response was chosen as well as how highly the response was ranked. For the responses to question one, an answer choice was given 6 points if someone ranked it #1, 5 points if someone ranked it #2, etc. Each answer choice received 1 point if someone simply checked the box, and zero points if nobody chose that response. The total number of points was then divided by the total number of responses (9) in order to generate the composite rank. For question five, the method for determining the composite rank was the same, though the possible points were different. Because one participant ranked their top six answer choices, an answer choice received 7 points if someone ranked it #1, 6 points if someone ranked it #2, etc. Each answer choice received 1 point if someone simply checked the box, and zero points if nobody chose that response.

Three respondents didn't rank their choices. Rather, they simply checked the boxes of grief statements that applied to their experience and practices that they wanted to explore in the Grief Group. For these three respondents, every answer they chose received one point.

Five of the survey responses came from the Nov. 9th session, which focused exclusively on the survey. The other four responses came from people who didn't attend the Grief Group on Nov. 9th but who came to the group at a later date and were willing to stay after the group to fill out the survey.

A summary of the open-ended survey questions (2, 3, 4, 5b) are also included below.

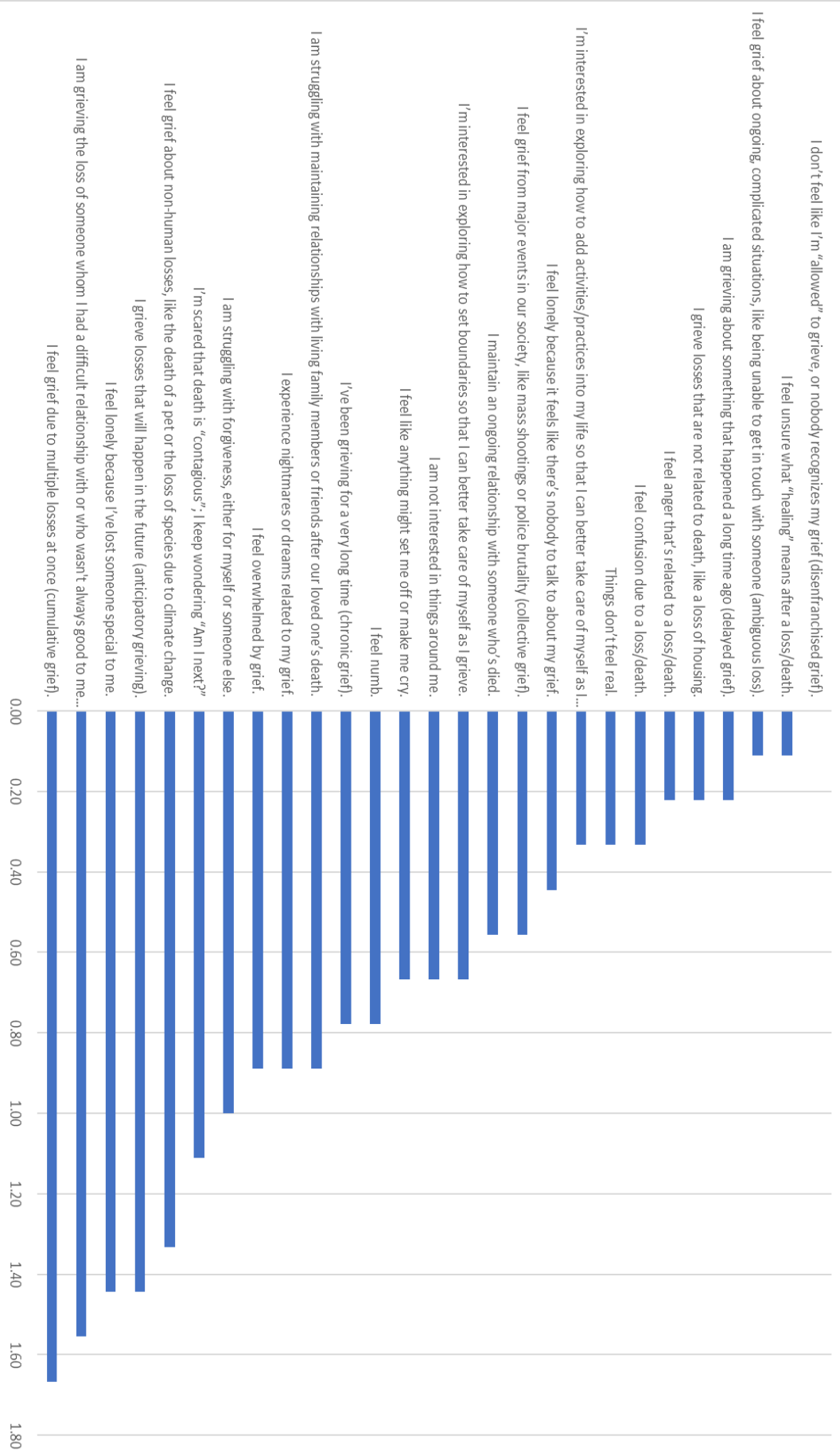
Question 1: Composite Rank

Statement	Composite Rank
I feel grief due to multiple losses at once (cumulative grief).	1.67
I am grieving the loss of someone whom I had a difficult relationship with or who wasn't always good to me (ambivalent grief).	1.56
I feel lonely because I've lost someone special to me.	1.44
I grieve losses that will happen in the future (anticipatory grieving).	1.44

I feel grief about non-human losses, like the death of a pet or the loss of species due to climate change.	1.33
I'm scared that death is "contagious"; I keep wondering "Am I next?"	1.11
I am struggling with forgiveness, either for myself or someone else.	1.00
I feel overwhelmed by grief.	0.89
I experience nightmares or dreams related to my grief.	0.89
I am struggling with maintaining relationships with living family members or friends after our loved one's death.	0.89
I've been grieving for a very long time (chronic grief).	0.78
I feel numb.	0.78
I feel like anything might set me off or make me cry.	0.67
I am not interested in things around me.	0.67
I'm interested in exploring how to set boundaries so that I can better take care of myself as I grieve.	0.67
I maintain an ongoing relationship with someone who's died.	0.56
I feel grief from major events in our society, like mass shootings or police brutality (collective grief).	0.56
I feel lonely because it feels like there's nobody to talk to about my grief.	0.44
I'm interested in exploring how to add activities/practices into my life so that I can better take care of myself as I grieve.	0.33
Things don't feel real.	0.33
I feel confusion due to a loss/death.	0.33
I feel anger that's related to a loss/death.	0.22
I grieve losses that are not related to death, like a loss of housing.	0.22
I am grieving about something that happened a long time ago (delayed	0.22

grief).	
I feel grief about ongoing, complicated situations, like being unable to get in touch with someone (ambiguous loss).	0.11
I feel unsure what “healing” means after a loss/death.	0.11
I don't feel like I'm “allowed” to grieve, or nobody recognizes my grief (disenfranchised grief).	0.00

Relative Importance of Statements based on Composite Rank



Question 2: Do you have other experiences with grief that weren't listed, and/or are there other topics that you want to talk about in our Grief Group?

Summary of Responses to Question 2

- How to begin moving forward/moving on, and practices that support that
- Learning about and communicating with ancestors
- Violence and violence prevention
- Practices that support living longer
- Secondary losses
- Prayer and faith
- Acceptance and peace

Question 3: What practices, rituals, or activities do you turn to for comfort or support as you're grieving?

Summary of Responses to Question 3

- Exercise (walking; martial arts)
- Substance use (drinking; smoking cannabis)
- Uninterrupted time for mourning
- Eating
- Sex
- Art
- Being around people and/or talking with friends
- Prayer
- Embodiment and meditation
- Music

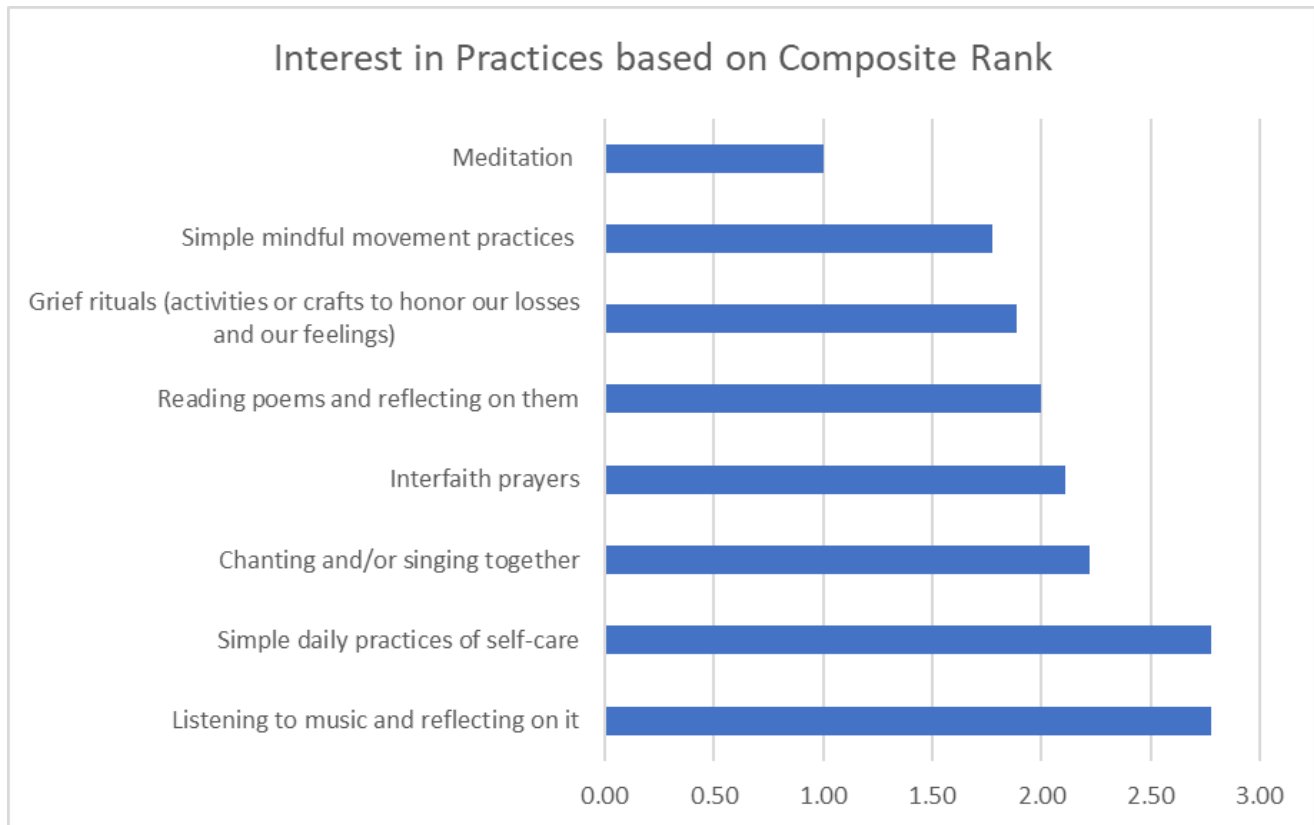
Question 4: What rituals, habits, or small practices do you do to remember and/or honor people whom you've lost?

Summary of Responses to Question 4

- Looking at photos of those who've died
- Communing with nature
- Talking to the deceased
- Remembering
- Prayer

Question 5: Composite Rank

Practice	Composite Rank
Listening to music and reflecting on it	2.78
Simple daily practices of self-care	2.78
Chanting and/or singing together	2.22
Interfaith prayers	2.11
Reading poems and reflecting on them	2.00
Grief rituals (activities or crafts to honor our losses and our feelings)	1.89
Simple mindful movement practices	1.78
Meditation	1.00



Question 5(b): Other ideas? Write them here:

Summary of Responses to Question 5(b)

- Crafting and creating vision boards
- Time as healing
- Discussion around exciting and positive things
- Loving-kindness practice

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