

MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSELESS: MY
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY
THROUGH GRIEF

by

JAMIE BOYETTE WELLS, B.A.

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Approved

Amy N. Heuman
Chairperson of the Committee

Patrick C. Hughes

David E. Williams

Accepted

John Borrelli
Dean of the Graduate School

August, 2005

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER	
1. FINDING OUT	1
Traumatic Loss	2
Questions I Ask Myself	4
2. CAUGHT BY GRIEF, EMBRACING	
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY	8
Grief	8
<i>The Funeral</i>	13
Development and History of Autoethnography	17
<i>Auto-eth-no-what-araphy???</i>	18
I Was Born to Take This Road...	19
Definition and Description of Autoethnography	22
Creative & For the Masses	26
Therapeutic	29
<i>Two Weeks</i>	29
Sense Making Tool	36
<i>Un-Named Stream of Consciousness</i>	36
Personal and Introspective	40

	Criticism Examined	42
3.	AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY	44
	Autoethnography as Theory	44
	Practice of Autoethnography	45
4.	THE STORY INSIDE ME	48
	<i>Finding Out</i>	48
	<i>Normal People</i>	52
	Immediate Shifting of My Reality	56
	<i>My Mother's Strength</i>	61
	Realizing My Appreciation for My Mother	67
	<i>Holding Each Other Up</i>	70
	<i>Magic Shoes</i>	73
	<i>Saying Goodbye to Chad</i>	75
	Finding My Place in the World: Losing My Place	79
	Support or Dependence?	81
	<i>Hope Held in a Dream</i>	84
	Importance of Dreams	86
	<i>Searching for Solitude</i>	89
	Appreciation of Family	92
	<i>The Road Back</i>	93
	Importance of My Experience in Counseling	99
	<i>Pulling Apart & Guilt</i>	100

	How Could I?	106
	<i>Waiting for Bobby</i>	109
	I am Vulnerable and I am Afraid	113
5:	MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSELESS	117
	Isolation	118
	Identity	119
	Guilt	122
	Communication	124
	Writing Through Grief	125
	Sense-Making	127
	Autoethnography	129
	<i>Seeing Chad</i>	131
REFERENCES		136

ABSTRACT

The loss of a loved one is an extremely difficult experience for anyone. Grief research points to isolation and identity shifts as being two of the main problems grievers face. Autoethnography is the method through which researchers use their own experiences to draw connections with culture. This practice is useful with grief research due to the individualistic nature of the experience. The following is my autoethnographic journey through grief. This journey has allowed me to explore grief, my identity shifts, and my feelings of isolation and of guilt. This project has utilized the theoretical constructs of symbolic interaction and autoethnography as forms of inquiry; revealing how I come to make sense of my lived experience in dealing with the loss of a loved one. I drew heavily upon personal journals, academic papers, and old newspaper clippings as field notes in order to construct narratives dealing with the day the Texas A&M bonfire fell, Chad Powell's death, his funeral, and my experiences with identity negotiation, isolation and guilt over the past five years.

CHAPTER 1
FINDING OUT

“Jamie, they found him!” The voice on the other end of the phone was that of my best friends from high school, Amy calling from Austin. Another member of “our group,” Loren, and I were sitting in Loren’s dorm room in San Antonio Texas. We had been good friends for years beginning in elementary school through high school and now we were approaching the end of our first semester in college. Amy was sobbing. Loud, heart-wrenching sobs interrupted with gulps of air and gasps. It sounded like she was drowning. It hurt my heart to hear her struggling.

“They found him?” the hope in my voice was undeniable. The sobs had to be sobs of joy. They found him and he was going to be okay. That had to be it. “Is he okay?”

“Nooooo!” This was a drawn out wail. It was a heart stopping wail. Unbridled emotion being thrown through the phone line like a javelin.

The he under contention was Chad Anthony Powell. My best friend in the world. The person I was closer to than anyone else, and another member of our “group.” There were seven of us, who were completely inseparable our senior year of high school. I had found out at seven o’clock this morning that Chad was missing. He had been missing since a little after two in the morning when the mammoth bonfire, symbol of tradition and spirit at Texas A&M University, had toppled during construction. Over half of the seventy students working on it through the night had been injured, trapped or already confirmed dead in the rubble. Since Loren awakened me via phone call my calm, stable,

happy, admittedly a bit sheltered, life had been turned upside down. My current reality at a little past one p.m. was in sharp contrast to the reality I went to bed with the night before.

I heard Amy's wail come through Loren's phone line and I felt the room spin around me; felt the blood pound in my ears; felt the tightness in my chest and throat choking me. I felt like I was suffocating or drowning. I felt as if up was down and down was up, as I felt my last straw slipping away.

*"How do you know? Are you sure? Who told you? How did they find out? Are you sure? Is there any way you are wrong? **Are you sure?**" I peppered Amy with a barrage of questions and was aware that my voice was getting louder. This new reality I could not accept. I needed Amy to tell me there was hope. There had to be. There had to be some way it could not be true. Someway Chad could still be alive. Someway to stop my spinning world. I felt tears prick the back of my eyes as I waited for Amy to ease my worries.*

All I heard on the other end of the phone were sobs and more gulps of air. And in the background of Loren's spinning dorm room she looked at me with the blank stare of grief. One I would come to know well.

Traumatic Loss

Chad Anthony Powell was my best friend. A young man who still to this day holds the place as the best friend I ever had and the best person I have ever known. Chad died a little over two months after his nineteenth birthday and just three months after we

left for our first year of college. Five years have since gone by and every day in between I have thought about him, most often wondering how different the world would be, not only for me personally, but in general should he have lived. On November 18, 1999, in one day's time, I went from being a sheltered and protected kid of eighteen to what felt like a grizzled and disenchanting veteran of life. My identity was changed the day Chad died. I reconstructed my reality and I reconstructed myself. I got up every day; I breathed in and out because I had to, but the damage had been done. I was different from that day forth and since that time every experience I have had, every day that has gone by has been colored by the loss of a very dear friend.

My experience is unfortunately not unique. With each day that passes, the U.S. Census bureau estimates, 155,131 human lives are lost in the world. That amounts to 108 a minute and in the time that it has taken you to read this sentence approximately five people have passed away (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Every minute 108 families and friends of the deceased begin in the long journey of grief. For many their losses are much more than I can even imagine. Death is a constant and universal aspect of life. As such, grief is a constant and universal aspect of life. Something everyone must go through at some point. The problem is that many individuals feel embarrassed and alone in their grief. Feelings of being alone are compounded by the uncomfortable nature of American society when dealing with death and the bereavement process (Kandt, 1994; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Sanders, 1999). Each of these authors point to a stigmatization of American society towards death and grief. Kubler-Ross (1969) outlines the fact that often times children are removed from the mourning rituals as being a reason why stigmatization and

feelings of isolation are furthered. There are profound changes in identity that take place and there are intense feelings of isolation (Sanders, 1999). It is my hope that individuals who suffer a traumatic loss, particularly those individuals who are in their late teens and early twenties, those who are learning how to be adults, can read my words and feel a sense of connection. Hopefully they can read my words and be encouraged to write their own story that might someday help someone else.

It is my desire to examine the impact traumatic and sudden loss has had on my identity as well as examining the experiences commonly felt by grieving individuals of isolation. Through this examination of my self and personal experiences and growth I hope to not only gain insight into myself, but to provide a source for other bereaved individuals. It is my hope that, at least to a small extent, others may find solace with the knowledge they are not alone by reading about my experiences. I will formulate narratives that will help me examine identity shifts within myself as well as helping others find ways to help themselves.

Questions I ask myself

The questions I examine throughout this thesis are as follows:

How have I been changed by traumatic and sudden loss?

What happened to my identity the day Chad died and in the time since that day? How did I change due to my experiences as a grieving individual without a best friend? I changed a great deal over the course of a short amount of time and I can still feel, five years later, myself changing as a result of this tragedy. How I look at myself and live my

life is different today and decisions I make are colored by the events of my past. This is most blatantly seen in my increased loyalty and protectiveness of those whom I love. I went through a spell immediately after Chad's death in which I would have liked to wrap all of those whom I love up in bubble wrap and send them on their ways through life. Still today I find myself looking at my beloved fiancé when he leaves for work and thinking, "Will this be it? Will this be the last time I see him?" or I find myself hugging him extra tight with tears in my eyes at the thought that he could be suddenly taken away from me. I want to explore these feelings and how I came to own them.

I was just eighteen years old when Chad died, and as an adolescent, the basis of my identity formation was my peer group (Gordon, 1986; Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Chad, as my best friend, was at the center of my peer group, and therefore at the center of my sense of self. His loss rocked the base in which my identity was situated. Furthermore, as a college freshman, away from home for the first time, I was already in, what adolescent scholars outline as a transformative stage of life, in which I was working on establishing independence from my family (Karp, Holmstrom, Gray, 1998). Noppe and Noppe (2004), point to the loss of a peer as drastically effecting the trajectory in the life of a bereaved adolescent. In this thesis I examine how these factors contributed to the changes in identity that I went through after Chad died.

How and in what ways did I isolate myself during the grieving process? In what ways did my culture impact my feelings of isolation?

After Chad's death I tended to seclude myself from others. I felt that I was in pain and that no one else could understand what I was going through. The only people I let in

where my closest friends, Amy and Bobby. They too had lost Chad and therefore could understand what I was going through. Grieving makes people uncomfortable. When I was grieving, especially in the first couple of weeks no one quite knew how to handle me. What to say? How to say it? Was I going to break down into tears at any minute (probably)? Was I going to blow up at something seemingly innocent that was said (probably)? Was there rhyme or reason for my actions? No. I felt that I had little control over my actions and emotions in the first few weeks after Chad's death.

Erica Michaels Hollander (2004) discusses her husband's sudden death, which was followed only a few weeks by her mother's end to a prolonged illness. She felt judged in how she was handling her grieving process; as though there was a rules system set in place and she was violating those rules in some way. Hollander and I share the feeling that others around us did not feel we were dealing with our grief quick enough. Both of us were told that we should "move on" so that life could, "get back to normal." What few seemed to understand in my case is that I did not want to move on. Moving on and carrying on life as if nothing had happened would negate the value Chad had in my life. Speaking of the tragedies in her own life, Hollander says, "I don't want to be numb to them (the tragedies in her life). It is feeling them that bears witness to their meaning and the loves and lives lost" (Hollander, 2004, p. 202). No one really "gets over" the loss of a loved one. Life goes on, yes, but it is drastically different and always will be. How have I dealt with life "going on?" How did the isolation I found myself in impact this process?

In order to answer these questions we must first look to areas of research dealing with grief and the process of autoethnography. As a means of doing so, chapter two reviews the literature on grief as well as the utility of autoethnography as a method for working through grief. In chapter three, I spend time outlining how I intend to use autoethnography, including the types of fieldnotes and how they will be used to create narratives. The fourth chapter contains the bulk of the narratives created for this autoethnographic inquiry. The fifth chapter serves as the discussion for this work and ties each aspect together.

CHAPTER 2

CAUGHT BY GRIEF, EMBRACING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Grief

There is little to nothing that has the capability to change a person like the loss of a loved one. In a single moment a life can be changed forever and identity lost in a tidal wave of unknown and unfamiliar emotions. This is particularly true when the loss is unexpected and violent (Sanders, 1999). When something traumatic or tragic happens to alter the life of an individual there is an immediate need to reframe experiences to fit the new situation (Ellis, 2002). This is often done with the help of loved ones or a professional counselor. However, for the most part there is a dramatic feeling of isolation that takes place within the survivor, as if now that his or her loved one is gone they will never be the same again. For any individual, but perhaps especially those who feel they have no one to turn to, writing can serve as a sense making tool (Ellis, 2002) and reading of narratives has shown to be a very valuable experience for those suffering with loss (Sanders, 1999; Ellis, 1997, 2002; Becvar, 2001; Smith, 1996; Finkbeiner, 1996; Walter, 2003). Each of the above mentioned pieces of grief literature use first hand narratives to explain concepts of denial, shock, sudden death, prolonged death and more.

This feeling of isolation and loss is particularly strong when hit with the first instance of death. For many the first time they experience grief is the most difficult. There are feelings of uncertainty that take place, which leave the bereaved feeling very unsettled and alone. For individuals who have lost a loved one it is “as if life started all

over again” (Smith, 1996, p. 82). Life is completely changed and must be remade by the griever. In fact it becomes obvious that one never “gets over” the death of a loved one. Rather we simply reconcile ourselves to the fact and begin to live our lives within this new reality. This is shown in the recent trend of grief research to focus on the “adjustment” rather than the “getting over” of a loss (Sanders, 1999).

Along with these feelings of isolation comes a great feeling of “looming vulnerability” (Ellis, 2002), which is especially apparent after a sudden and tragic loss. When a loved one dies in a violent and sudden way it often makes survivors question their own mortality and express feelings of fear and vulnerability. For many, especially adolescents, there has been the belief that good things happen to good people and that bad things happen to bad people. When a loved one is lost in a sudden and traumatic manner this basic belief is shaken, causing the bereaved to be fearful of the unpredictability of the world (Lord, 2000). Survivors feel plagued with ideas that “anyone can go at any minute”(Ellis, 2002; Sanders, 1999). This often leads individuals to push loved ones away during profound grief fearing that they too might be lost (Sanders, 1999) and that loss is easier to take if the relationship is a bit more distant.

Individuals suffering with the loss of a loved one are likely to pull away from their family and friends, they are less likely to show the warmth they did before the loss and they are likely to turn away help being offered by societal support systems (Sanders, 1999; Becvar, 2001). Many grieving individuals prefer to “go it alone,” to deal with their pain and sorrow within themselves. This can be especially prevalent in adolescents, who are attempting to become more and more independent. Adolescents may feel that

depending on others through the grieving process is a sign that they are not as in control and independent as they would like to be (Kandt, 1994). For both adult and adolescent individuals, feeling the need to “go it alone” writing and reading may be the best way to reach inside their protective bubble and to aid them through their grief. While some individuals would be likely to use writing as a technique to experience their grief, some would also view it as a way of distancing themselves from the loss and focusing on something tangible instead. For either option the outcome could be a very powerful one in terms of helping him or her to make sense of the event that has taken place.

The fact that grief and bereavement are compounded by the closeness of the survivor to the deceased and the suddenness of the death is a key reason why each person handles their experiences in a unique way (Sanders, 1999). No two people have the same relationship with the deceased and no two people view the same person’s death the same way, neither do they view the deceased in the same fashion. Many times the relationship the griever perceived with the deceased may be unique in and of itself. Therefore, if the relationship is challenged in some way after death it becomes that much more difficult for the survivor to maneuver the tidal wave of emotions.

For many grieverers if the relationship is challenged then the survivors’ very identity is challenged and this necessitates the renegotiating of identity. For individuals who have lost a child they have to reform their identity or sense of self. Are they still their child’s parent? How many children do they now have (Finkbeiner, 1996)? For an individual who has lost a friend, especially young adults for whom friendships are of such key importance to identity formation, they must ask themselves “who am I?” “Am I

still his/her friend?” (Smith, 1996) Additionally bereaved adolescents feel that their new identity as a grieving individual is especially prominent to their peers and that it sets them apart from everyone else around them (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Adolescents may feel that their change in identity to that of a bereaved individual sets them apart from others and may affect how new relationships are formed by either stunting or accelerating the process in which adolescents make new friends (Gordon, 1986; Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Some individuals find it necessary to immediately fill the void in their lives with a new person. They may have more children or find new friends who are not related to the tragedy.

When the attachment between the deceased and the survivor is particularly strong it may be impossible for the loss to ever be fully resolved, rather the survivor simply goes on with a new identity, as they are forever changed (Noppe & Noppe, 2004; Sanders, 1999). It is not unusual for the griever to continue feeling profound loss years later. For adolescents this is especially common, as they tend to grieve more intensely than adults do and have a greater portion of grief spasms, which may continue for many years (Lord, 2000; Noppe & Noppe, 2004). This attachment can be furthered by feelings of guilt, which can be especially pervasive if the death was sudden and violent. Individuals who have lost loved ones in sudden and traumatic ways experience a higher proportion of survivor guilt than other bereaved individuals (Lord, 2000). These feelings of guilt often times lead a survivor to feel as though they are being ostracized by society (Sanders, 1999). They may feel as if they have some sort of “scarlet letter” marking them as

damaged in some way. Feelings such as preoccupation with viewing the deceased and imagining the cause and scene of death can also lead to feelings of being ostracized.

It is important for those suffering a loss to know they are not the only ones who have felt this way or experienced a loss before (Sanders, 1999). Many griever will push away help and the verbalization of other's experiences, viewing theirs as unique and believing no one has suffered to the extent that they are suffering, and that no one can really understand them. These feelings are especially apparent in bereaved adolescents, who already have an egocentric view of life (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). This is furthered by feelings that their grief sets them apart from their peers and therefore they neglect speaking of their loss with peers (Kandt, 1994). Many who grieve would be open to reading about other's experiences rather than being told them face to face. It gives a modicum of distance which is often craved.

In terms of "our group's" relationship with Chad, our role seemed diminished during his funeral. The funeral seemed more like homage to Chad's day as a boy scout and his short time at A&M rather than a holistic representation that would have felt more like the Chad we knew. We felt that we were the closest to him and few seemed to acknowledge that fact. This was a painful blow, but one that in the long run pulled the remaining six of us together. Like many bereaved adolescents, when we felt the relationship we had developed with him had been diminished, we pulled inward (Noppe & Noppe, 2004).

The Funeral

As we walked into the sanctuary I was struck immediately by the massiveness of the room. This was, after all, the church that advertised “Over ONE MILE of pews!” This was not right. This was not where Chad would want to be. He had a church he loved. One he had gone to since he was a little boy, but with only a couple hundred seats it could not begin to hold the nearly five thousand mourners who were due here today. In the front of the sanctuary there was a large stage with seating up there as well and a baptismal pool built into the wall in the back. ‘Who sits up there?’ I wondered as we found our way down to the rows of seats right behind the area marked for the family. We wanted to be close. We wanted to make sure that somehow everyone knew we are not just another group of mourners. We are ‘the group.’ Chad’s group.

I was once again struck with how surreal the situation felt. This giant room was still nearly empty over an hour before the funeral began, and it looked impersonal and cold. I tried to take a deep breath and found myself nauseated by the effort. ‘Great!’ I thought wryly, ‘now even air is going to make me sick to my stomach.’ I had trouble keeping anything down as well as having any sort of appetite since Chad died. I ate just enough to make my mom happy and ease a little of the worry from her tired face. As I was trying to calm my turbulent stomach I saw it. My efforts were lost as my stomach lurched.

There was a casket. A deep cherry casket placed in the front of the stage. The casket was draped in a Texas A&M flag and I had to fight the urge to go up there and rip it off. ‘They killed him!’ I thought angrily! ‘They killed him and now he is draped in their

school colors?!' My pain was replaced temporarily with intense anger at the unjustness of the situation. He had been an A&M student for a little over three months and apparently he was supposed to take that identity with him to the grave? It was almost too much to accept.

Later four of us were lined up in a pew. Amy, Loren, Me and then Bobby were holding one another's hands and attempting to pool our strength to get us through this event. It seemed like a monumental task at the time. Matt and Davy were not with us. They were in the first row on the right hand side with the rest of the pallbearers. It seemed cruel making them sit apart from everyone else. I suppose it was meant to be an indication of their 'honor', but I knew they needed our strength to hold them up as well and they had been separated from us. Later that day on the news I saw a shot of Matt with his head in his hands and his shoulders shaking, and it made me angry with the media for exploiting his pain and it made me angry that he was suffering alone and we could not help him.

Chad's family filed in slowly. His mother was audibly sobbing and was being held up by her husband and youngest son. They had to almost drag her to the front of the church. My heart broke for her and her pain and somehow I felt as though we had put her on display. Following the family came those who sat on the stage. A troop of boy scouts filed in with military precision.

"And so it begins," Bobby murmured. Loren and I had missed a memorial service for Chad held a few days before. We had not made it back from San Antonio yet, but the rest of the group filled us in on the Boy Scout lovefest that had taken place. According to

the service Chad had been little more than a Boy Scout and A&M student. That is what his life had been reduced to.

Chad had been an Eagle Scout and incredibly proud of that fact. He had also worked at a scout camp during the summers. Every summer since he was child, except for his last one. He decided not to go away to camp because he wanted to spend time with us that summer, our last one before we went off to college. As the funeral began it was obvious that this was a strictly scout event. All the speakers were scouts, which left the six of us feeling more than a little shunned. The fact that not one of us could have made it through a speech about Chad did not seem to cross our minds. The point was we should have been given the opportunity. All and all there was a fair amount of grumbling between the four of us sitting together and even more once we got in the car for the funeral procession.

“AHHHHHHHHH!!!!” Bobby, Loren and I turned to stare as Amy let out a primal scream after the van door slid shut. “HE WAS NOT JUST A BOY SCOUT!” The anger and the hurt in Amy’s voice were undeniable. It was the voice of what we were all feeling. To hear the funeral speakers it would seem that all Chad ever did was hike with boy scouts and build the bonfire that would eventually kill him.

“At least he died doing what he loved?” I voiced incredulously. This was a fairly common theme we had found in news articles and on television the past few days. “He died for a big pile of logs and to beat UT?”

“Ridiculous,” Loren agreed as we pulled into the huge caravan of cars.

*We grew quiet and I stared out the window as the North Texas town passed by, thinking: 'No one who spoke today really knew him. No one knew him like we did. Did they know about all the insecurities he discussed with me so many times? Did they know how scared he was about losing us when we went off to college? Did they know he hated yellow cheese? Did they know he was the worst bowler in the history of the world? Did they know he could raise half his unibrow when he argued with me just to make me laugh so he could win? Did they know he loved his little yorkie more than almost anything else? Did he walk any of them to the door the night before they left for college? Did he cry and tell them he loved them before turning and walking away? No that was **ME**.*

That was the Chad he was to me and that wasn't recognized at all. The hurt of Chad's death coupled with the pain of not being understood was crippling. I felt the familiar knot form in my throat once again. Tears began to pool in my eyes. I looked down to try and get them under control, and that is when I caught sight of mine and Amy's shoes. Identical pairs of Airwalks. Chad's trademark shoe had been worn by all six of us this day. A way to draw us together and show our allegiance to Chad. He was being buried in a pair of Airwalks and we knew as we made our way to the cemetery that all seven members of our 'group' were wearing matching skater shoes with dress clothes, and it gave us strength.

The shoes served as our symbol to one another and the world that we were still together. We were still, 'the group.' I steadied myself and the van drove on. We drove through the main street of the little town Chad and I had grown up in. Lining both sides of the street were the owners of small businesses, customers, and community workers all

pulled outside to say goodbye to the young man who was the Golden Boy of their hometown. Tears began to pool in my eyes again, but for a different reason this time.

'That is right. They are paying their respect to Chad. This whole town loved Chad and was proud of him,' A feeling of immense pride filled me along with the tears. They loved him and were proud of him. They knew how special he was. And whether or not everyone one else realized it the six of us knew how special we were to Chad. I took solace from the fact that I was very special to a very special young man.

Development and History of Autoethnography

My first foray into the world of autoethnography began with *Talking Over Ethnography*, by Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (1992). Since that time I have devoured anything I can find by Carolyn Ellis. Ellis and Bochner have found themselves spearheading the new movement of autoethnography. Indeed Carolyn Ellis(2004) has recently written what may be the quintessential piece of autoethnographic literature, *The Ethnographic I*. Ellis writes, "Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture" (p. 37). Autoethnography can take many forms. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, "short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing and social science prose" (Ellis, 2004, p. 38). The autoethnographic inquiry I propose draws upon personal narratives.

Auto-eth-no-what-agraphy???

It is a couple of days after Christmas and my family is gathered with my father's side of the family at my aunt and uncle's house celebrating the holiday as well as my grandfather's eighty-sixth birthday. The house is full of laughter and children, a giant Christmas tree in the corner and more than a little food and punch everywhere you look. I am enjoying being with my family, taking a couple weeks off from the stresses of being a graduate student as well as a public speaking instructor. I am currently telling my uncle Jon a story about a particularly annoying student when he asks about my own course work.

"You have a thesis to complete before you graduate right?" he asks

"Yeah, it has been a real struggle to find something I care about to work on. Apparently I can preach to my students about picking speech topics they are passionate about, but I couldn't seem to follow my own advice for my thesis." I lamented.

"Have you found something yet?"

"Yes! Finally... Actually I have been working on something really exciting for me. I finally feel like I have found my research niche and an interest that I think will be very valuable." I smiled as I could hear the excitement in my voice.

"That's great! So what are you working on?"

"I am going to do an autoethnography of grief, using my experiences with Chad," I replied dutifully. I could tell immediately that I had not answered the question as well as I could have. My Uncle Jon's forehead scrunched up and he raised one

eyebrow in thought. It was his trademark, skeptical expression that I recognized immediately.

“You are doing an auto-eth-no-what-araphy?” He asked. “I have never heard of such a thing. What is it? What does it mean?”

“Well, its... see it is still kinda new... I mean it takes...” I was struggling and aghast at how poorly I was handling this. I had finally found a research interest; finally found a topic I really and truly cared about, and I could not explain it to save my life. What is autoethnography? What is it I have been beginning to do? What is this form of research that has begun to mean so much to me? And why can't I explain it?

I was born to take this road... Wait? Who am I following?

Without realizing it I was born an ethnographer and an autoethnographer. It is a calling, and it seems that because autoethnography was calling to me I could not feel completely at home in other philosophies of knowing or in other forms of inquiry. They just were not right for me. I never could take myself out of the research I conducted, I was always tempted to write myself into it, but I scolded myself as being self-serving and attempted to realize that no one cared or could benefit from what I had to say anyway. As a small child I would watch the interactions of those around me and try and find the connections. I loved (still do) to sit at the airport with my dad waiting to pick up my mom from a business trip and analyze the people around me. Where were they going? Where had they been? What was their relationship? I was constantly trying to make the connections.

In short, I was born trying to figure out connections through observation and introspection. I simply cannot help but be fascinated with the world around me, and as I have grown older I have become increasingly interested in my own place in it. Since Chad died this investigation has deepened. I am constantly looking at myself and thinking about how the world around me continues to influence change within me. I am attempting to figure out how I fit into the larger picture. I am just one of many who have found themselves awkwardly placed into the world of more “traditional” research methods and looking for a way out. Throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s ethnographic scholars began to see a problem within their own discipline. They began to see the “crisis of representation” take place. During the “crisis of representation” ethnographers began to not only observe participants, but to observe their interactions with participants as well (Ellis, 2004). The “crisis of representation” centers on the debate about who should be able to study and to speak for a group of individuals (Goodall, 2000). In response to this, began a wave of work that questioned the place of reality and representation in ethnographic studies.

Two of the first pieces to highlight the need for personal involvement in ethnographic work are Gerry Philipsen’s (1975), *Speaking Like a Man in Teamsterville* and Tom Benson’s (1981), *Another Shooting in Cowtown*. Both of these pieces went where few others had dared to travel. While Philipsen stuck to more traditional avenues of ethnography, by keeping himself out of the research as he interviewed and engaged in participant observation of white male talk in the “Teamsterville” area of Chicago, there is still a strong evocative tense that has come to be indicative in what Goodall (2000) calls

the “new ethnography.” Benson’s work actively highlighted his own experiences adding in the creation of political ads for a friend who was a candidate in a small town. Benson highlighted his experiences through the use of narratives. These two pieces are of important note because both appeared in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* indicating that an important shift was taking place and gaining steam through more mainstream publications.

“New ethnographies” as defined by Goodall (2000), arose out of the desire of ethnographic scholars to not only examine the crisis that was taking place, but to write in new forms in order to study the crisis. Goodall (2000) asserts that “new ethnographic writing is constructed out of a writer’s ability to hold an interesting *conversation* with readers” (p. 13). A shift had taken place which took ethnographic narratives in a new direction; a direction that included the author as a central figure. Autoethnographies focus on the author as the central character and do not run from emotions, but actively describe what the author thinks and feels.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s scholars began to break more and more ground advocating for this form of inquiry. In the 1990s personal and evocative autoethnographic writing had a true growth spurt in large part due to the work of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner who published a plethora of articles and books, began a conference section, and started a book series all dealing with autoethnography and its value. Today they remain at the top of their field. Ellis’ newest work, *The Ethnographic I* (2004), takes readers through a fictional class on autoethnography. This book begins with the first day of class, discusses the history of the discipline and takes readers on an autoethnographic

journey through issues of ethics, therapeutic value, representation, construction, voice, and publication just to name a few areas. As a beginning autoethnographic scholar this work has been instrumental in taking me through the process of constructing a piece of autoethnographic inquiry as well as providing me with background information instrumental to the understanding of autoethnography. Beginning the 21st century it becomes clear that autoethnography is still growing and definitely going strong. As testament to this growth, H.L. Goodall (2000) published *Writing the New Ethnography*. It serves as a guide for not only how to write pieces of autoethnography, but a guide to help new autoethnographic scholars manage the rocky roads that are ahead of the “ethnographic turn.” It in a way teaches new autoethnographers their craft as well as how to feel comfortable in their own skin.

Definition and Description of Autoethnography

Examining the roots for the word autoethnography gives us a remarkable insight as to what it actually means. As Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes, “it is part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture. It also is something different from both of them, greater than its parts” (pp. 32). It is the self because pieces are typically, but not always, written in the first person and the story revolves around the researcher. The researcher is the researched as well. Autoethnography looks inward to discover things about the researcher that perhaps went unknown or unexplained until examined. It is culture because the researcher also looks outward into how he or she fits into society and the culture. There is a constant back and forth, inward and outward process that permeates this type of

research. It is both (self and culture) because the self and the culture work together to create the autoethnographic study.

Calling attention to the connections between the self and culture as characteristic of autoethnography, echoes the commitments of social constructionist ideology. Specifically those of symbolic interactionists (SI), who assert that the role of self, particular others, and society is crucial in developing a sense of self concept or identity (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Moreover, SI scholars, assert that symbol making and shared meaning are necessary factors for developing society. In this sense, the language and actions that have emerged through interaction construct and define the self and cultures as we know them. Also important for symbolic interactionists is the belief that the individual cannot be studied apart from the setting and society in which they reside. According to SI scholars, individuals under study cannot be removed from society; in fact they must be understood and empathized with in order to understand their actions. Each of these tenets of SI point to the important links between autoethnographic inquiry and a symbolic interactionist view of examining and, ultimately, coming to understand the experiences of people.

Reynolds (1987) contends that, “all meaningful human behavior consists of selves addressing action toward object, including the self as that which can be an object to itself” (p. 127). Society is constructed through human interaction and the self is constructed through society acting upon it. I handled Chad’s death based upon how I thought I was supposed to and I criticized myself when I felt I was going against a

societal approved track. Kortorba (1991) believes that social life is constructed through societal members and that the forces of society construct societal members.

Commitments to symbolic interaction are inherently linked within the realm of autoethnography; in that, autoethnography examines the self within the context of the cultural forces that act upon it. The use of narrative is especially important as Denzin (1984) points out, “Telling one’s story gives meaning to both the present and past of human experience, and allows the teller to see that present as part of a ‘constituted’ past and a future” (p. 256). By exploring, through narratives, my experiences with Chad’s death I am not only be able to better understand the past, I have a better understanding of who I am now and who I am becoming. Narratives are a major part of symbolic interaction as they serve as a sense making tool (Ellis, 2004). In fact Fisher (1982) argues that narrative comes closer to capturing the experience of the world simultaneously appealing to the various senses, to reason and emotion, to intellect and imagination, and to fact and value. My exploration through this thesis serves as a combination of autoethnography and symbolic interaction. Through the combination of these methods of inquiry I have been able to articulate my fluid, ever changing identity.

The goal of autoethnography is composed of two elements. The first of these is a personal goal. Autoethnographers attempt to learn something about themselves through their research. In my case it is my growth through grief that serves as the bedrock of my interest. However there is also the desire to help the outside world as well, which serves as the second goal. Throughout Carolyn Ellis’ work, much of which deals with grief, there can be seen a pattern of wanting to help others. She writes so that others will not

feel alone in their journey through grief (Ellis, 1993, 2000, 2004). Indeed she argues that there is an element of safety in numbers to get the bereaved past feelings of isolation as we read, write and share experiences (Ellis, 2004). Grief research points out the isolation that many bereaved individuals feel. Reading about the experiences of others allows for those who are feeling alone to make a connection with someone else. It allows them to connect with someone who is or has struggled with very similar issues.

Individuals are all members of society and as such culture passes through them and is regenerated and propagated over and over again. Symbolic interaction contends there that is no meaning that has not been assigned by individuals (Littlejohn, 1977). Society is a process of human interaction and is developed through language and symbol making. Society acts back upon individuals by assigning meaning and naming. The term symbolic interaction comes from the process of assigning meaning through the exchange and interaction of symbols. Because of the interaction and the construction of self through individuals, particular others and society it becomes impossible to separate the individual from culture, making it further impossible to deny the connection between individual experiences and the world outside of the self (Ellis, 2004). The ebb and flow of autoethnography comes from the examination of the vulnerable self that acts, interacts and responds within a culture and then the wider angle view of the culture surrounding that individual.

I realized through my discussion with my Uncle Jon that my difficulty explaining the process of autoethnography was not due to me being unprepared or not understanding the concept. It comes from the extremely complex range of

autoethnographic definitions and inquiries. There is not just one definition. I cannot put the definition into a quick sentence, not even a compound sentence; in fact many scholars much more advanced than myself have spent volumes discussing the concept of autoethnography. For the purposes of this examination, I will limit my discussion to four main areas: 1.) Autoethnography is Creative and Made for the Masses; 2.) Autoethnography is Therapeutic; 3.) Autoethnography is a Sense-making Tool; 4.) Autoethnography is Personal and Introspective. This is in no way a comprehensive list; it is simply the areas that will shed the most light upon my project. As I progress through a discussion of autoethnography each of these areas will be highlighted in turn.

Autoethnography is Creative & For the Masses

One of the first aspects that drew me to autoethnography is my insatiable appetite for books. I love to read. I have always loved to read. Throughout the summers of my childhood my mother and I would make a weekly trip to the library or book store and I would pick out three to five books, one of which had to be an award winner for children's literature. We had to go back once a week because by the next weekend I was out of new reading material. As an undergraduate and graduate student I was saddened by the decrease in my "pleasure" reading time. It is difficult to fit a novel in between heavy articles on communication apprehension and couple's conflict management and a book the size of *War and Peace* devoted to classical rhetoric. When I picked up my first piece of autoethnography, a dialogue by Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (1996) entitled "Talking Over Ethnography" I knew I was home. This did not read like a dry piece of

quantitative research, not even like one of the more interesting qualitative pieces. This read like a play, without sacrificing the implications for understanding our everyday lived and communicative experiences, and I was hooked.

Since immediately after Chad died I had begun to use my academic work as a vehicle for exploring my feelings and my desire to make sense out of what had happened. Throughout graduate school this meaningful event in my life was always there and always something I thought about researching, but I never knew I would go about doing it. After reading Carolyn Ellis' (1997) *Final Negotiations*, an autoethnographic book about her experiences with the terminal illness and eventual death of her partner, Gene, I realized how this could be done. *Final Negotiations* exemplified to me how an autoethnography of death, dying, and grief could and should be composed. As I thought about my questions about my identity shift and the feelings of isolation I felt after Chad died I realized that a study of my own experiences could be not only immensely valuable for me, but could also be useful to others in a similar situation.

In my search to discover autoethnography I was encouraged to read *Writing the New Ethnography* by H.L. Goodall (2000), in which he explains ethnographies as, "creative narratives within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences" (pp.9). Two issues are of key importance here: one that ethnographies are creative and two that they are addressed to the public world as well as that of academe. Goodall (1998) further explains in *Transforming Ethnography*, that ethnographies are a way to establish or reestablish an issue as relevant to the general public by,

"revel[ing] transformation, because they are personal as well as professional, and because they tend to be good reads for intelligent lay people as well as for subdisciplinary loyalists, they can and do connect the academic study of communication to important issues and lessons in the various localized complexities of our everyday world" (Goodall, pp. 367).

Because they are relatively easy to read and understand it is possible to use them to impact lay persons in a positive way. Ethnographies take on values outside of the academic community in order to help the greater culture.

Autoethnography strives to not only describe the experience faced by the researcher but to examine how that experience is representative of the culture of the researcher (Hanson, 2004). Autoethnography is able to reach across several boundaries including, sociology, anthropology, communication studies as well as folklore, linguistics, social history and cultural geography. As such, autoethnographic inquiries are typically easy to read and understand making it possible for both members of academe and everyday members of the general public who are grappling with issues of grief to read autoethnographic accounts and to draw something from them. It is in this way that I hope to be able to interact and move the outside world. Carolyn Ellis writes,

“Sometimes people tell me that one of my stories changed their lives. I have to tell you that’s like a manna from heaven for an autoethnographer. That’s what you hope for – to change your life and the life of others – for the better of course” (Ellis, 2004, pp. 35).

I can think of nothing greater than to know my work had been read by someone who needed help and that it did help that someone. My writing is designed to help me and to make my world a better place, but I write so that others can read it and be changed by it; for the better of course.

Autoethnography is Therapeutic

Two Weeks

I stare blankly at the clock in my sociology class. It is a small, cramped room for thirty-two students and a professor and the tiny wooden desks are too small for me at five foot three. I mentally send condolences to the six foot something guy sitting behind me. While the class cramped and a little warm for the first week in December, the corner setting allows for two walls of the second floor classroom to be filled with windows so the afternoon fall sun filters in and brightens the cramped space. I have no concept what my professor is speaking about. I have tuned him out, which two weeks ago would have been unheard of. Sociology was currently my favorite class. A charismatic forty-year old man with wire frame glasses and a tweed jacket had spurred an interest in me from day one. He focused on how we functioned in society and how we were constantly changing the world around us and how the world changed us back. It was fascinating for me and had this not been his last semester at St. Mary's University I very well could have ended up a Sociology major. But today I was not paying attention to him.

In fact I did not pay attention to him in Tuesday's class either. For both days I had spent the hour and a half alternatively staring into space, staring at the clock or writing my own thoughts on the lined notebook in front of me. Any other professor may have taken my staring into space or worse, at the clock, to be an indication of boredom or counting down the minutes to freedom, but this professor knew I had something on my mind that would not go away. Something that was not personal against him or his class or subject matter, but something that was causing a cascade of feelings and thoughts in

*my head and heart. He knew I had to work them out and that I was doing what I could.
There were tidal waves of pain crashing through me as I saw the clock hit 1:12pm.*

*'This was it' I thought closing my eyes. 'Exactly two weeks ago from right now I
found out Chad was dead. Two weeks ago from this minute Amy was sobbing on the
phone, and I was apparently yelling every explicative I could think of, although I have no
memory of that reaction. Two weeks ago my world ended and was replaced by this ghost-
like half life.'*

*I took a deep breath and tried to pull myself back into the discussion for the
day, but it was no good. My hand finds the pen and paper in front of me. It moves along
the paper with a mind of its own. After class I pick up the paper and read:*

"Two Weeks, Two Weeks, Two Weeks

How have two weeks gone by?

How has the world kept spinning?

When I am spinning out of control

The unfairness of life frightens me

I am alive

Chad is dead

Why?

How is it fair for me to still be here?

And him to be gone?

He never did anything wrong

Chad would never hurt anyone
He was taken away
He could have given so much
He wanted to give so much
He could have changed the world
Changed for the better
For two weeks
The world has been getting a little worse”

After Chad died I found the one way I could get past the pain was to write it down. The pain flowed out of my pen and onto paper and, while it was a draining process, once I finished I felt purged and more clear headed; at least for a while. One of the beauties of autoethnography is that it allows the researcher to use his or her own experiences to inspire others to examine their own lives and their communication (Sparkes, 2002). Writing autoethnographies about grief bridges the gap of isolation that many survivors find themselves trapped in, by allowing them to come to terms with their emotions, by showing the congruence of my own (Richardson, 1994). The bereaved need to feel connected with something or someone. Narratives allow for this connection to take place.

The telling of a personal story through any venue, including writing, can be a therapeutic measure and can teach the researcher, as much about herself as it does the subject under study. Ellis and Bochner (1992) discuss the fact that it may take time to be

able to tell the story, especially when the story is particularly painful. Ron Pelias (2004) describes the process as a box slowly opening, one that cannot be closed once again. For my own case it has taken me five and a half years to get to the point in which I am comfortable writing this story. And still today it is a difficult and painful task. It is as if when I write a narrative about Chad's death I am taken back in time five and a half years to when it happened. I can hear the voices in my head; the voices of those who I had to tell about Chad's death. I can hear the sobs of my now fiancé, Bobby and the quiet disbelief of my friend Davy. I can feel the pain in my heart that hearing their tortured voices has caused.

Writing autoethnographically allows the researcher to examine her or his own story in a greater context and could be a useful tool in aiding the grieving. It is through the writing and reading of narratives that reality is created and recreated (Ellis, 2002; Sparkes, 2002). A bereaved individual, especially one that has suffered a sudden and traumatic loss (Lord, 2000), feels as if the world is not the same as it was before the loss. Writing can help an individual put the world back into perspective and work through his or her feelings on what has gone wrong and how to adapt to the new reality (Ellis, 2004). A bereaved individual feeling isolated and alone in his or her feelings can read narratives written by others in similar situations and feel a sense of connection that allows for a greater deal of sense making and restructuring of reality. Furthermore it becomes apparent that survivors must be able to use the tools at their disposal since the predominant feeling is to push others away during the grieving process (Sanders, 1999). For those who are suffering with grief it becomes more apparent than ever that the self is

the best instrument they have for examining the self (Cottle, 2000). Being able to examine oneself through narrative and to perhaps examine the experiences of others by reading narratives allows for a reconciliation to begin. As earlier pointed out for those suffering from grief, reconciliation is as good as it gets. There is the reconstruction of reality and self and this serves as the reconciliation to the world as it is now presented to the bereaved.

For a society such as the United States, which does not encourage active mourning and grief (Sanders, 1999) it becomes important to examine and realize how isolating a stance such as this can be on the grieving and to use methods such as autoethnography to strengthen the public resolve. As Goodall (1998) points out, "ethnographies reestablish public relevance because they place the study and practice of communication directly into the rich, lived experiences of culture" (pp. 367). Grieving individuals may take solace in autoethnographies of grief because they will be able to see they are not alone. While no two people feel the same way, experience the same emotions or a loss of the same person it imperative that individuals see that it is okay to grieve that in fact it is a necessary procedure.

Writing about grief and reading what others have written about their own experiences can be a way to put some of the embarrassment about grieving aside. Ellis explains this concept further, stating, "I speak my story so that you feel liberated to speak yours without feeling guilty that others suffered more and therefore your story is not worth telling, your feelings unjustified" (Ellis, 2002). Carolyn Ellis, who wrote about the events of September 11th from the unique perspective of an American actually in the air

when the planes hit, describing that writing was a way to mark the experience for her. She used writing and the process of autoethnography as a method of coping with a tragedy that no one could really understand. For those who have lost a loved one there is no way to truly understand the feelings and emotions that are carried through. Therefore writing may be a method that can bring about a feeling of peace and begin the process of adjustment and reconciliation.

Ronald Pelias (2004) uses autoethnographic writing in order to come to terms with the events he faced as a young medic in Vietnam. The process is not an easy one as he states,

“Now I find myself coming to you to tell of loss, to heal my wounds through stories, stories that have been coming to me for over thirty years now; stories of going there, being there, and being here; stories of history and memory; stories of sorrow and disillusionment that have allowed me to keep Vietnam where I needed it – contained, safe as a storage box, taped shut but, at this moment, slowly opening” (Pelias, 2004, 46).

Not only does Pelias hope to heal himself through writing his story, he hopes to help others by placing his story into the world for others to read and gain insight from it.

I have never been to war, never seen the types of things Ron Pelias has before he reached my age, and I will never have the type of experiences that he has had. However, part of the value of autoethnography is that it is able to convey universal emotions and the most distant of stories can be related to and deeply felt by any reader. I myself openly cried hearing about Pelias’ trip to the Vietnam memorial after reading twenty pages of his experiences there. He drops to his knees and sobs for his lost friend, for many lost friends and for his lost youth and dreams.

The fact that I can relate to such a foreign experience for me indicates the far-reaching value of autoethnographic stories. Readers, myself included, relate to Pelias and find some solace in the connection. For me at least this story draws a connection between Ron Pelias and myself allowing for me to be empathetic about his experience and that his writing helped me learn a little something more about myself. He points out how he survived this rough time in life and has grown because of it. This makes me see the growth that has been impacted by loss. I do not feel I am unique in this connection. I believe that readers, whoever they may be, feel the issues presented by Ron Pelias. Whatever experiences they may or may not have had, chances are they can relate to lost friends, or friends taken suddenly and perhaps violently. Or who has not looked back on their life or the past few years of it and mourned for a youth and days gone by?

I lost a friend. I lost a friend in a sudden, violent, tragic manner. He was not killed in battle. That would have been more expected. No one expects a nineteen-year-old kid to be killed engaging in an extracurricular activity at college. No one who knew Chad expected him to die before he had changed the world. And he would have. I am confident of that. I read Pelias' work and even though I have never been to war, never seen the travesties it may cause, I shed tears for the man mourning friends and the direction his life was forced into, as well as how he was able to cope with these changes. I shed tears for the commonly held feelings of grief and lack of control.

Autoethnography is a Sense Making Tool

Un-Named Stream of Consciousness

So he is gone

What does that really mean?

It doesn't mean he has disappeared

He is still with me everyday

I am afraid to let him go

What if he disappears?

How can I let him go?

I can't, I WON'T

I still need him

I still think about him all the time

Why did he have to go?

I still don't understand

I am still angry

I am still hurting

I am still sad

I am still depressed

I still miss him

I am still guilty

I am still in shock

I am still aching

I am still confused
I still want him back!!!
Where would I be now
If he hadn't died?
I want to know
I want him here!
I don't want to hurt anymore!
It has been so long
I just want my best friend back.

I wrote this stream of consciousness around the second anniversary of Chad's death. I was twenty years old and still angry, still in so much pain over losing him that I was having a hard time concentrating on work and motivating myself. Reading these words now it takes me back to that time. I still cannot make complete sense of Chad's death, but through this process of autoethnography I do make headway. And while I am realistic enough to know I will never be "over it," I am beginning to make sense of my life since that point and make some sense out of who I have become.

Autoethnographic works are typically written in the first person and draw heavily upon the researcher's own experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 1992). Pelias (2004) points out that every type of research, from the most stringent quantitative study can be seen as a first person personal narrative. The very nature of research is personal in nature. What subject matter is a researcher interested in? Personal interest and agenda drive that

question. The goal of autoethnography is first to recognize the personal nature of research and therefore to link the researchers' experiences with that of the reader in order to shed light on a particular phenomenon. In doing so it allows the writer as well as the audience to make sense of the world.

Due to the extremely personal nature of grief many researchers are using autoethnography as a vehicle for explaining the treacherous water grief brings forth (Ellis, 1997, 2002; Trujillo, 1998). In Ellis' examination of her experiences with prolonged illness and the death of her partner through her autoethnographic novel, *Final Negotiations* (1997), shows an insight into her personal experience. For the last six months of her partner's life Ellis took extensive fieldnotes that not only served as the basis for her book, but which helped her make sense of her changing world. She had to tell the story in order to come to terms with it. Ellis (2004) argues that it is through storytelling that humans are able to make sense of the world around us. In a way it allows the writer to step back from the situation and see it in a different light and in a different time. As pointed out, it takes time to be ready to write a narrative about a traumatic or life changing event. The writer has to be ready. Part of the preparedness comes from understanding that one's construction of meaning has been challenged and also comes from wanting to make sense once again.

A few years later, Ellis (2002) utilized autoethnography in order to examine the tragedy that not only she experienced during September 11th but the tragedy that was gripping the entire country. Ellis was flying from her home in Tampa, Florida to visit her ill mother in Virginia when the planes hit the Towers in New York and the Pentagon.

Ellis (2002) uses the process of autoethnography to help make meaning of the tragedy and in order to move on from it. Ellis shows how fellow passengers worked with one another to gain information from the ground and how they stuck together once they landed. She uses her experiences here to highlight a situation that every American remembers. Ask anyone and they will be able to tell you where they were on September 11th. By showcasing her individual experience Ellis is able to help herself cope with the situation; she is a writer who admits in times of trouble she uses writing as therapeutic relief (Ellis, 2004), but more than simply helping herself she attempts to help readers as well. Individuals can read her piece on September 11th and a description and process that may help them to process the event in how it happened in their own sphere.

Nick Trujillo (1998) co-constructed narratives with his family members in order to make sense of the death of his grandmother and the reconstruction of his reality as a result of that loss. Trujillo used autoethnography to explore the various identities his grandmother embodied. This helped him to know her in a deeper way, which allowed him to come to terms with her passing. Furthermore Trujillo presents the identities that not only embodied his grandmother, but which could embody anyone's grandmother, mother, sister, or female self. This allows for the inward glance, learning about himself and coming to terms with his loss, as well as the outward glance; his grandmother's identities as indicative of female identity. Using autoethnography Trujillo was able to reconstruct his own reality, by finding out who his grandmother was, as well as helping others reconstruct reality, by showing identity characteristics and stories to go with each.

Readers could use this information to spur discovery of multiple identities in others which, as Trujillo argues, allows for deeper knowledge of individuals.

In each of the aforementioned pieces of autoethnographic grief research the methodology is chosen for the specific purpose of making sense of tragedy for the authors, as well as in hopes of helping others in similar situations to those in which the authors' were found. Furthermore most modern grief research, as well as literature intended for the benefit of the bereaved, focuses on the use of narratives to tell each individual story. This shows, first that narratives are a valuable aid for grieving individuals to read, but second reading narratives on grief may encourage bereaved individuals to attempt to write their own story. As we have seen before this process can be incredibly therapeutic.

Autoethnography is Personal and Introspective

“Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). Autoethnographers attempt to look both inward and outward in order to examine themselves and the culture that they are operating within. The introspective look is often painful and opens autoethnographers up for vulnerability that is not typically felt in other forms of research. The look outward allows the autoethnographer to “[Examine] the larger context wherein self experience occur[s]” (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). Autoethnographers examine the surrounding culture and larger issues at play by taking their own experiences and reconstructing their reality,

which allows them to make sense of the events that have transpired. The narratives written by autoethnographers often times do not have resolution, nor do they need one (Ellis, 2004). The narratives do not need to provide resolution because often times life itself does not have resolution. Not everything is tied up into a neat bow. Narratives provide trust and a sense of shared experience between those who write autoethnographies and those who read them.

Autoethnography allows for the researcher to use his or her own experiences to help others. It allows for the researcher to help in linking his or her own experiences with, "the everyday life events and to the larger mystery" (Goodall, p. 83). It is impossible for the ethnographer to take him or herself out of the research, therefore it becomes important to use these experiences in the best ways possible to the reader and future researcher. There is a profound connection between the researcher and the researched and rather than running from that connection it should be embraced and examined for the value that holds (Goodall, 2000; Conquergood, 1991). Jackson argues that the personal experiences of the researcher must be reconnected with the conceptual experiences in order to find common ground between the researcher and the researched (Jackson, 1989).

Ethnography and autoethnography are methods of using research to represent the culture of a particular set of individuals (Goodall, 2000). Death is a major or inevitable part of any culture. It is one of the few universals in the world and therefore ethnographic pieces on it can be seen as integral in the understanding of the unique place death has in each individual culture. Lindlof (1998) points out that one of the strengths of ethnography is its ability to present the "particulars" of certain cultures. It shows how

communication is used and accomplished in various cultures and formats within each culture.

The field of communication is vast and necessitates that researchers be able to examine both the "internal and external features of a behavior, activity, sequence or event" (Sigman, 1998). The loss of a loved one is a phenomenon that most if not every human has experienced at one point in his or her lifetime. It is a profoundly personal experience and value can be gained from exploring individual experiences and how these experiences may allow the bereaved to feel a sense of togetherness with others. Narratives of others who have experienced guilt, isolation, ostracization, and a loss of identity may allow those experiencing grief to find a level of comfort. This combats the feelings of isolation that accompany grief. The link of the personal experiences to that of the culture is a key factor in the autoethnographic practice (Goodall, 2000). Given that grief is a key element of culture the examination of it through autoethnography is valuable.

Criticism examined

I have yet to come across something in this world that does not necessitate criticism. Autoethnography is no exception. Critics of autoethnography argue that it is self-indulgent and lacks generalizability. Proponents for autoethnography, including myself, argue that it is the lack of generalizability that is a strong merit of the inquiry (Ellis, 2004). The issues and topics discussed through autoethnographic means are precisely the types of issues that cannot be generalized. Issues such as prolonged illness

and grief (Ellis, 1997; Trujillo, 1998), sudden death, (Hollander, 2004), abortion (Ellis & Bochner, 1992), societal tragedy (Ellis, 2002), bulimia (Tillman-Healy, 1996), mental handicaps and child abuse (Ronai-Rambo, 1996) and countless others are inherently difficult to generalize. Every individual has different experiences and by reading the narratives written by each, in his or her unique voice, you learn a great deal about the problem at hand. Perhaps more importantly you also learn about one person's struggle with that problem. This gives a personal face to very difficult issues moreover, while not generalizable it does allow transferability for readers as they relate to another person through the writing. It allows individuals who may feel isolated and alone to feel fellowship with other individuals who may be going through the same struggle.

CHAPTER 3

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

Within this thesis, I take autoethnographic inquiry to be akin to both theory and method. When I describe this thesis as an autoethnographic journey, I am referring to the process of *theorizing* (coming to know) through personal narratives and *doing* (method of coming to know) through the act of writing. For most interpretive and *new ethnographic* (Goodall, 2000) scholars there is a blurred line between theory and method. In commitment to this way of knowing and experiencing, I acknowledge and embrace the blurring of the ethnographic I (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography as Theory

Autoethnographers also differ from traditional forms of research that privilege theory as opposed to valuing personal stories and narratives. Art Bochner (1997) notes that theory has historically been privileged over the use of narratives in the world of academia, however when looking at the field of autoethnography it becomes apparent that autoethnographic narratives not only assist us in theorizing about our social selves and worlds but also serve a method or form of inquiry fitting for understanding our lived experiences. In fact, it becomes quite impossible to separate theory and inquiry when discussing autoethnography. Art Bochner(1997) argues that the line between story and theory [and method] is blurry, just as it should be.

Autoethnography serves as a theory of how individuals gain a sense of self. Authors make themselves vulnerable as they examine themselves inward. This inward examination allows for a rich way knowing. Autoethnography in this sense serves as an epistemological method, a way in which human beings come to know. Autoethnography further explores an individual's ontological perspective. It allows human beings to have say in, and to understand how life comes about. By examining the self, autoethnographers can examine the experiences and agency of human life as both are socially constructed. Autoethnography serves as theory in that it allows human beings ways of knowing, a description of how we might come to be and lastly it examines how we use inquiry to come to know. In short autoethnography combines, epistemology, ontology, and praxis to merge method and theory.

Practice of Autoethnography

Writing is a tool that is used to allow humans to make sense of their world (Ellis, 2004). As a form of inquiry the writing process, its components, and possibilities are crucial in understanding the practice of autoethnography. Autoethnography as practice consists first of fieldnotes, which can be comprised of journaling, professional notebook, audio recorded thoughts etc. (Goodall, 2000). For the purposes of the current study, I draw upon past personal journals, poems, and short stories written about my experiences with the loss of Chad. These documents have been collected over the past five years, with the majority of the writing taking place in the first year after his death and a reemergence on the anniversary of his passing every year. I also draw upon many scholarly papers

written in my first year of college. After Chad died the majority of the papers I wrote for school concerned death, mortality, the afterlife and bereavement. Most concern the loss of a friend and or the place of death in religion. Newspaper and magazine clippings of the bonfire accident also are examined for the details surrounding Chad's death and his funeral. More fieldnotes come in the form of emails and chat conversations between Chad and myself before his death, as well as correspondence with others before and afterwards.

Carolyn Ellis (2004) discusses making fieldnotes out of a chronological description of events to the best of the writer's memory. Ellis describes this through the use of Valerie, a student character, who constructs a series of fieldnotes from her experiences with breast cancer. A technique such as this can be helpful when the event has taken place a few months to a few years previous to the time of construction. This is a technique I have also been able to employ. I have been reconstructing the events, as I believe they have happened. It is the way they happened in my mind; therefore they serve as my reality. Ellis (2004) points out, however, that it is most helpful to begin to write fieldnotes as soon as you can. This is where the journal entries, creative writing, academic papers and media accounts of the bonfire crash will be helpful. Whether the fieldnotes be retrospectively constructed or constructed as the event takes place it should be the goal of any field note to showcase as much information as possible, including, sounds, sites, feelings, emotions, dialogue, whatever can be remembered about the event (Ellis, 2004). These notes can then be translated into a coherent narrative.

Through the use of these fieldnotes, I create a series of narratives that describe the events of the day Chad died as well as meaningful experiences since that time, including the loss of identity and feelings of isolation I felt at his funeral. These narratives were not easy to write. For many autoethnographers who study grief, the feelings of sadness and pain become real once again as the narrative process is undertaken (Ellis, 1997, 2002; Truilljo, 1998). Each narrative focuses on the re-negotiating of identity and feelings of isolation that I experienced as a result of Chad's death, with attention placed on how I have been able to cope with the loss of a dear friend. I examine the narratives in light of research concerning grief, bereavement, identity theories, communicative practices and the method of autoethnography.

Through my narratives, I hope to *examine the self* and use this examination to reach out to the greater grieving population, in the hopes that they may lose their feelings of embarrassment about their grief and feelings (Ellis, 2002), as well as allowing them to feel a sense of unity rather than isolation. Richardson (1994) notes that there are several ways to "[write] as inquiry" with narrative being just one of the many. I have chosen narratives as my vehicle for the primary reason that I know myself and my experiences better than anything else, and it is through narrative that I feel I can best represent the experiences I had with Chad and with the dealing of his death. MacIntyre (1981) points out, "narratives enable us to understand the actions of others because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives" (p. 197). Narratives will allow me to describe from the inside out how my transformation of identity took place and what emotions were drawn up through the isolation process.

CHAPTER 4
THE STORY INSIDE ME

Finding out

It was after two in the morning and I was still awake. I had a geology test in a little over eight hours and as usual I had put off studying to the point in which I was forced to cram. I was propped up on my lower bunk in a freshman girl's dorm at St. Mary's university in San Antonio. Above me my roommate slept peacefully. The room was dark except for my small clip on light above my head. It created a semi circle of light on the floor that did not reach my roommate above me. Why I remember all this five years later, a lifetime later, I know but I do not understand. I remember how my jersey cloud sheets felt against me. I remember how cold the room was. I remember that I was exhausted and that my eyes just kept burning as the clock moved on and on. Around two-thirty in the morning I had an uneasy feeling fall over me. I didn't know why, but I felt something was wrong. I chalked this up to my exhaustion and worry about the upcoming test. I made the decision that I had done all I could do, turned off my light and fell into an uneasy sleep around three.

I was jarred awake barely four hours later by the ringing of the phone. By the time I had realized what that annoying noise was and processed it my roommate dropped the cordless phone almost directly onto my head.

“For you” she mumbled in a still sleep-induced haze. ‘For me? No one ever calls this early,’ I remember blearily thinking. Confused, I picked up the phone and cleared my sleepy voice before answering.

“Hello?”

“Jamie, its Loren.” Loren was a good friend of mine that I had known since we were ten years old. She was going to a college across town from me and we were planning to drive home together the next week for Thanksgiving break. Why would she call at seven in the morning? Was it about the trip? Why this early? Questions rolled around in my head in the split second it took me to answer her.

“What’s up, Loren?”

“Bonfire fell and they can’t find Chad.” My blood ran cold in my veins.

Her voice was quick and tense, but calm and collected. I, meanwhile, was already wide awake and working to process this news. Chad was my best friend in the world. He was also Loren’s best friend. In fact Chad’s personality led him to sit at the center at the center of our group, and for all six of us to regard him as our best friend. He was a freshman at Texas A&M, where for the past few months he had been totally engrossed with the building of the traditional bonfire. The mighty bonfire had apparently fallen and my mighty best friend was missing in the rubble.

“What? How do you know? What? What?” I could hear panic begin to emerge into my voice as my heart hammered in my chest. My world had just been turned upside down. I actually felt my reality change in that moment. The world I thought I lived in was

different, and I had no idea how to hang on to the topsy turvey world I suddenly found myself in.

“His mom called a couple of hours ago.” Loren sounded much more put together than I was feeling at the moment. “She and his dad are on their way there now. They may be there by now.”

“What?” The question hung in the air, as I ran a hand over my weary face. I was eighteen years old and in the span of about five seconds I felt as if I had aged about thirty years. “What happens now?” Is the real question I wanted to ask.

I had led a sheltered life up until this point. Nothing had ever had me as worried as that one statement from Loren; “They can’t find Chad.” What did that even mean? Chad’s work on the 1999 Texas A&M bonfire had been a fairly ambiguous concept for those of us who knew Chad from home, who had never seen the mammoth structure. I had never paid any attention to it even when it made a blurb on the evening news at night. All I knew was that Chad was spending his free time swinging around a giant pile of logs that eventually would have an outhouse put on top and then would be set on fire. All of this was done with the hope that it would help Texas A&M beat the University of Texas in their yearly grudge match.

As soon as Loren and I got off the phone, I got out of bed and hurried to put on jeans and a t-shirt. I threw on socks and slippers, ignoring my roommate’s request and assurances that I wouldn’t disturb her. I flew downstairs to the deserted TV lounge in our dorm. In retrospect I know that I just needed out of there as quickly as possible. I laid on

the couch downstairs and turned on the TV hoping to get a news blurb. I need not have worried. Every major network and news network was covering the event.

I was absolutely horror struck with the images that hit my eyes. A giant pile of huge, telephone pole like logs was filling the screen. I could see dozens of people crawling around and carefully moving logs. In my head I just knew that Chad was among the volunteers. He was out there helping. That was just his nature. The ridiculous boy was worrying us sick by not checking in, but he was fine and out there helping others. "Wow, after all of this he will really be needing to see us. Don't worry Chad. I will be here when you need to talk." I actually said these words aloud to the empty void of the TV lounge.

Half an hour later two girls from the basement were on their way to class and stopped to ask me if I was okay. Apparently a bleary eyed, sobbing, girl in the lounge throwing tissues at the TV did not happen everyday. I was so frustrated the mean people on the TV would not tell me anything about Chad. And even more frustrating his wide eyed, smiling face was no where to be seen. I was so scared and worried, but I never once let myself think he was gone.

Finally after an hour in front of the TV I knew all about the crash, which had taken place about two-thirty in the morning. They still weren't sure how it happened but somehow it seemed the giant inner pole had snapped and as it fell the bonfire did exactly what it was designed to do. It began to cave in on itself. This design was in place to keep the fire contained, but this bonfire was not on fire. And instead of keeping fire in place it

was trapping college kids and making it near impossible to move the logs without the danger of it collapsing on people still underneath.

One of the most frightening little bits of news was that it was the freshman who had been primarily on the stack that night. Chad had been so proud to be named the freshman coordinator. He was there last night. But I already knew that. I had talked to him just a few hours ago, around eleven-thirty. We had one of the few arguments we ever had that night before he went out to stack. I had said things to him that I immediately wished I had not. I knew he was there when this happened. But he would be fine. He was helping. He HAD to be.

I staggered, exhausted, but with adrenaline pumping upstairs. 'I need to do something proactive' I thought. By the time I made it back to the room my roommate was getting ready for her first class of the day. She too had been glued to the television and the news of the collapse. I didn't see it at the time, so consumed within myself but now I see she had wanted to help me through this and I had fled the room and shut her out. She asked me how I was doing and I told her honestly, "I don't know". I didn't really know what I was feeling at that moment. I think terror would have best described it.

Normal People

I had returned to my room about fifteen minutes ago and was pacing the floor pulling at my hair. My roommate, fresh from the shower, was getting ready for class and watching me cautiously. I had spent the last hour in the basement television lounge of our dorm. I had not wanted to disturb my roommate with my emotional state due to Chad's

absence. I had not yet let myself think that this was as serious as I feared it was. Any time my mind went to that scary place in which Chad did not exist I hurried to pull it back, by telling myself I was being melodramatic. I told myself that no matter how rough things looked right now, even though no one had heard from Chad, he was fine.

Things like this, death, trauma, fear, did not happen to normal people. I was just about as normal young woman as you could get. And bad things like this only happened on television or in the movies. Things like this did not happen to people like Chad and me. We were normal eighteen-year-old kids. We were wrapped in the comfort of idealistic immortality that comes with a sheltered youth. He could not be hurt or dead, because that didn't happen to teenagers in my world. And me letting myself think that something could happen to him was just an overactive imagination and too much multi media.

Just as I was approaching the front of the room in the midst of my pacing a knock came at the door. I opened it and found my best friend at St. Mary's standing in the doorway, her hair wet and pulled back into a messy ponytail and a piece of computer paper with my handwriting scrawled across it in her hand. I had slipped that piece of paper under her door about twenty minutes earlier. I had not wanted to wake her up, once again not wanting to burden others with my invalidated and neurotic fears. I had slipped that note under her door so she would see it when she woke up. It asked that she come see me right away. Apparently she had been in the shower when I slid the note under her door and came over right after she got out and got dressed.

She stood there staring at me with concern heavy in her eyes. We had been close since day one. The day we moved into our dorm rooms right next to one another we had struck up a conversation and had been close friends ever since. By this point in time we had been friends for three months and were still keeping track of that first day as the anniversary of our friendship. She could tell by the tone of my writing and the strangeness of walking out of her bathroom onto a frantic note that something was wrong. I took one look at her standing there confused and concerned and the dam broke. The perilous grasp on control that I had disappeared instantly. I broke down into huge gulping sobs as I collapsed into her arms. She caught me and held me. We had staggered out in the hallway and after a moment I could no longer stand. I let myself slump down onto the floor as I leaned against the hallway wall.

Jess made sure I was seated firmly on the ground and went to get a box of Kleenex from her room. Over the past three months we had cried together often. Both of us went through breakups with boys back home and both had missed home quite a bit. Each time one of us was upset the other would come running with a box of Kleenex in tow. Not knowing what the problem could be Jess fell into our comfortable comforting pattern. I took a Kleenex and blew my nose trying to calm down, steady my breathing and be able to tell her what was bothering me. She sat down and patiently waited for me to be able to collect myself. She pushed the hair back from my face and squeezed my shoulder comfortingly.

“Sweetie, what’s the matter?” She finally could not hold her question in any longer. “What has happened?” I took a deep shaky breath and blew my nose.

“The bonfire fell during the night. A bunch of people are hurt. A bunch of people are dead. And a bunch of people are missing, and Chad is one of them.” A fresh wave of sobs hit me then. I fell sideways into her arms. She gasped and rubbed my back as I was racked with this fresh wave of sobs. It felt good to say it aloud. It felt good to feel comforted. “We had that big argument last night. I told him he had changed, was not the same guy who left three months ago. And now he might be trapped. He might be dead and that is the last conversation I will ever have with him. How is this possible?”

Jess seemed to be in shock. She did not have a lot to say. She held me and rocked me on the floor of the dorm hallway as I poured out what I knew so far. That it had happened about two-thirty that morning, that Loren had called at seven that morning to let me know he was missing. That the news media did not seem to know anything, but they kept reporting that nothing over and over again. I rehashed the argument Chad and I the night before, feeling in my heart that he was already dead, and that I had been the worst friend imaginable during our argument the night before and now I would never have the chance to take back the things I had said.

“I don’t want that fight to be the last part of me he remembers. What if I never get to talk to him again? What if that was...” I could not finish my sentence. I was wracked with sobs and I wrapped my arms around my knees, which were brought up to my chest. I rocked back and forth as Jess rubbed my back and did not say much. I do not think there was much she could say. I let myself be wracked with tears and worry, until finally my brain got the better of me. I took a deep breath and sat up. I was gripped with what I felt was an insight of practicality.

“This is crazy!” I calmly told Jess. “He is not dead. I am just being melodramatic. Things like this do not happen to people like me. I am just a normal person. This is something out of a movie or book. Something... This is not my life. This can’t be my life.”

Jess’ eyes were watery as she continued to listen. She kept patting my back, but did not say anything. Maybe she was thinking, but could not bring herself to say, ‘It is real people who die. Normal everyday people and it happens everyday. It is being a normal person that allows us to die and allows us to feel the joy of living and the pain of death. This is real. This is normal. This is life.’

Or maybe she was silent because she did not know what to say to her best friend. What could anyone say as they watch their best friend’s heart break before their eyes?

Immediate Shifting of My Reality

I had no way of knowing, but by the time any of this took place Chad was already dead. He was in the middle of the pile, crushed by the falling logs and his fall to the bottom. Loren’s phone call was my entry into a new world; a world I could have done without living in.

With any death there is an element of shock that bereaved individuals feel. Even if they believed they had expected and were prepared for their loved one’s passing there is still a moment when the mind of the bereaved cannot fathom the finality of death (Ellis, 1995; Lord, 2000). With sudden and traumatic death the feelings of shock and denial are more intense. The shock comes with trying to make sense of the new reality

that the bereaved may find him or herself in. Denial is common with sudden and traumatic death since often times the bereaved is discouraged from looking at the deceased body due to the trauma (Lord, 2000). When Loren phoned me I never expected that Chad was already dead. I did not allow myself to think such thoughts, feeling that was too melodramatic for the real world I lived in. My feelings of normalcy and what was right and wrong were being challenged.

I fell into an immediate feeling of shock upon hearing the news that Chad was missing. I did not know this at the time, but I was already preparing myself for him to be dead. I would not and could not have admitted that at the time, but on some level I knew that there was really only one outcome to this day. Later when Loren and I got the news from Amy my worst fears were realized. I began to scream and curse, I hit a wall, I threw my phone book across the room, and I screamed and cried forcefully. While I was fighting against the pain Loren sat on her bed in a state of shock. I cannot even remember how long she sat there, staring out into space. Many grief researchers discuss a fight or flight tendency that comes with the announced death of a loved one (Lord, 2000; Sanders, 1999). Fight is emphasized, by physical acts, such as my screaming and throwing of object. Flight is emphasized by either a physical fleeing of the situation, or a flee inward, showcased by silence and a lack of visible emotion. When giving the same bit of news I acted outwards and Loren inward.

As I struggled through the day of Chad's death I did not realize that I was already grieving for him. I was already aware that a shift in my reality had taken place, and as I worried and mourned for my friend I was also worrying and mourning the loss of self that

I felt. It is not uncommon for an individual suffering from sudden and traumatic bereavement to immediately feel shifts in reality and to immediately sense a change in himself or herself (Lord, 2000; Ellis, 1997). Up until the day Chad died the great tragedy of my life was the loss of the family dog when I was sixteen. I grew up sheltered and a bit spoiled, and in my world bad things did not happen to good people. Bad things did not happen to normal people. I had my fair share of complication as a child. My father lost his job, we moved, friends moved away, but until the day Chad died no one, save animals and obscure distant relatives, had died. My identity was firmly rooted in the fact that I was a “normal” person and my adolescent definition of “normal” did not include teenage friends being killed. Gordon (1986) points out that most adolescents desire to view themselves as the norm amongst their peer group and will struggle through bereavement against this belief. When Chad died my definition of self as a “normal” teenager changed drastically.

Because normal people did not die in my sphere of identity I had trouble the morning Chad was missing making sense of what was going on (Sanders, 1999). Not only was the thought of Chad being dead difficult on an emotional level it was also difficult on a mental level. I was constantly rationalizing with myself that Chad could not be dead and that I was being melodramatic in thinking that something that terrible could happen in my happy, sheltered suburban world.

Already my concept of “normal” was changing. From the moment Loren telephoned me my identity had begun to shift. I had to immediately start processing and attempting to make sense of the world I now found myself in. The rationalizing I did that

Chad could not be dead because that did not happen to “normal” people was my way of attempting to make sense of the world around me (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). I was struggling to make sense on what was happening and feeling very helpless in the process. By convincing myself, or attempting to, that Chad could not be dead and I was simply melodramatic I could make fit the events into a pattern I could understand and that fit into my picture of what was “normal” (Lord, 2000).

I, along with most adolescents, had an egocentric form of optimism that told me that while negative things happened to others, they did not and in fact could not happen to me (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). My expectation, that death was something that happened to older individuals and the very sick, allowed me to distance my peers and myself from mortality. After all if only the old and sick died and we were young and healthy it could not possibly touch us. Because of the sudden nature of Chad’s death my grief was sudden and acute, which Noppe and Noppe (2004) point to as a being a key factor in a prolonged grieving process.

At eighteen I was in the later stage of adolescence which included a shift my identity locus from my parents and family to my peer group (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Being a member of the group was a safe and comforting aspect of my life. I fit in with this group of individuals in a way I never had before and my self-esteem was greatly improved as a result. I had formed my identity with the help of my friends and when one of them was taken that identity was challenged. The sudden and traumatic manner in which Chad died forced me to grieve not only for him, but for my lost identity as well (Noppe & Noppe, 2004).

The time I spent at home with the group after Chad died allowed me to feel a sense of belonging again. We shared the same experience and pain. As a result once I returned to college, I felt isolated from my peers at St. Mary's after my return following Chad's death and funeral. It seemed to me that what I had been through set me apart from my fellow students, even those I had been close friends with before Chad's death. I felt different from those of whom I still regarded as "normal" people while I was now in an abnormal world.

In the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks, I withdrew from classmates and social activities. After returning to St. Mary's after Christmas I was still withdrawn, feeling that even though friends at college meant well they still did not understand and had not been to the emotional places I had been. I did begin to feel kinship with others who had lost someone. I felt that perhaps they did understand, I became closer to the group because they were the ones who knew what I had been through and who had traveled that road alongside me.

At the time of Chad's death I would have argued that as a college freshman, living away from home and making my own decisions I was a young adult. I now see that version of myself as a growing adolescent and from this perspective I see a great deal of difference in how I handled Chad's death. Scholars should note that adolescent grief is a process that can be very different from adult or child grief. The loss of a loved one during adolescence can have drastic implications for the future of that individual (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Understanding the special circumstances that surround adolescent grief can allow scholars and counselors to specialize grief research towards the adolescent age

group when feelings of isolation can often be the strongest (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). An understanding of the isolation and shifts in identity allows for professionals to aid those riddled with grief.

Until Chad died I had lived eighteen years with the assumption, like most adolescents, that good things happen to good people and that bad things happen to bad people. When this theory was proved wrong due to Chad's sudden, traumatic and violent death I began to feel frightened and nervous as if life had suddenly lost its predictability (Lord, 2000). Like many other individuals in my situation I felt scared and vulnerable. When Chad died I felt as if the world was not the place I had known it to be. Everything looked and felt different and that was a very scary time for me.

My Mother's Strength

My mother has always been very influential and active in my life, especially when it came to my friends. She has always wanted to know them, be able to talk to them. And out of all of my friends it seemed that she was the closest to Chad. Mom always loved Chad. She loved him for his easy smile, his humor, his care towards others, the fact that he gave great hugs, and a countless number of other reasons, not the least of which was how much I loved him.

When I called my mother around nine-thirty in the morning of November 18th I could hear the cautious tone to her voice. She had already heard of the collapse and was already worried about the adopted son she knew worked on it. She had heard of the collapse in the car on her way to work, but had not wanted to call me because she did not

know what to say and as was the typical for me as the youngest child she tried to shelter me from worry.

“Mom, the bonfire fell and they can’t find Chad,” I said in a long rush of words, in an incredibly shaky tone and blatantly scared voice.

“Oh no! I was afraid of that,” I could hear office noise in the background and knew she was at the agency and away from her home office. “What have you heard?”

“Not much. Loren called me this morning and since then I have been on the phone and computer constantly. Word of mouth reports range from ‘Chad wasn’t even working last night’ to ‘Chad was on the very top when it went down. He fell right into the middle!’” I felt my voice crack as I said these last words. I was leaning against the window in my dorm room, using the cool pain to calm the pounding in my head.

“Well what if he wasn’t out there and is just so busy helping out he hasn’t checked in?” I could hear the hope, heavy in her voice. I knew she was trying to keep both of our spirits up.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so,” I replied wearily. I rubbed my tired eyes, not wanting to tell my mom all that I knew. Ironically, I resented the fact that my family tried to protect me from... well... just about everything, and yet I was struck with the overwhelming urge to keep what I knew from her. To save her the very pain she would strive to save me from. Neither of us would have our wish. “Someone had to have called his parents in the middle of the night. They are already on their way to College Station. I don’t think they would be doing all of that if everything were okay. And I know he was out there. I talked to him last night before he went out. He was still getting over

pneumonia, and had a bad cut on his foot, but I couldn't get him to sit back this close to the lighting of the bonfire. It is only a week away. Stubborn."

"Ohh, Pooh Bear," my mom moaned into the phone. I could feel the hope draining from her voice. Even so she took a breath and steadied herself. "Well we still don't know anything for sure. You just need to keep your chin up and keep me posted."

"I will Momma. I love you."

"I love you too, Pooh. Call me later."

I did call her later. In fact she was the first person I called after I got the news from Amy.

"Hi Pooh Bear. Have you heard anything new?" my mother's caring voice hit me after the second ring.

"Mmmooooooooooooommmmm," I wailed into the phone followed by more impossible to discern sobbed words. I had told myself I was going to hold it together. I would calmly tell my mother that they had finally found Chad and that he was dead. However, upon hearing the pet name my mother gave me as a toddler all essence of composure was lost.

"Jamie, what are you saying, what's going on?" My mom's calm voice was now riddled with panic.

"He's gone!" I cried.

I needed the comfort that only a mother can deliver. In all honesty there wasn't much to be found. She was distraught and I was sobbing. There was very little conversing or comforting going on.

“What do you want us to do?” She asked through sobs. “We will come get you tonight. I will call your dad. I will make sure we are on the road within a couple of hours. We will leave now.”

“No!” I said quickly and without really knowing why. “You don’t have to rush down here.”

“But Honey, we want to get to you. You can’t be driving here by yourself while so upset. It is just not safe.”

“Well I can’t leave tomorrow,” I protested. “I have class tomorrow. I was supposed to take a test today. I have a paper due next week. I have to register for the Spring semester. I can’t leave it all.”

“Pooh, I think they will understand. We will talk to them, anyone at school we need to. It will be okay.”

“I have to go to class tomorrow.” I protested again weakly. I didn’t realize what I was doing at the time, but I was hanging on to my normalcy at least for a few more minutes. Classes, papers, due dates, traditional last half of the semester stuff. My normalcy. My parents rushing down and whisking me away amongst a slew of phone calls to administrators at my university, was just too much. It was just too foreign a concept for me to deal with at that moment.

My mother finally relented. ‘Stubborn’ she thought. She and my dad would come down the following day and we would leave for home Saturday morning. This was the same deal Loren worked out with her father, who offered to come get me, as did several people, including a few old high school teachers Chad and I had shared. Individuals who

knew of our bond and worried the most about me. Thanksgiving was only a week away and it was decided that I would not come back until after the holiday.

When I pulled up in front of my aunt and uncle's house the following afternoon I could see my father pacing along the front porch. He stopped as I pulled up into the circular front driveway and was there the second I closed the driver's side door. He wordlessly pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head. I fought back tears as I returned his embrace.

"Hi Daddy," I whispered from his chest. "I am glad you are here. I love you."
My dad swallowed audibly as I pulled away.

"Hi Kid. I love you too." He put his arm around my shoulder and steered me into the house. I looked back towards the car. "I will come out for your bag in a little bit, don't worry about it."

From the second I saw her I knew my mother was feeling completely powerless. She didn't know how to help me, didn't know what she could do to ease my pain. Rather she knew there was nothing that could be done. I was traveling this road alone and she couldn't do anything about it. She hugged me, listened to me, made sure I ate, tried to get me to sleep, and made sure I had something to wear. She did all she could, but knew this journey was mine. For a woman who had been looking after her children since the day my brother was born six weeks before her seventeenth birthday this feeling of helplessness must have been pronounced. Her mother's Magical Healing powers could not help her youngest child. This coupled with her own profound grief must have been staggering. I think back on all of this now, 'My poor mother.'

She sat two rows behind me at Chad's funeral and kept a watchful eye on me. She sent me a constant supply of care-packages throughout my remaining time at St. Mary's and watched over me as I withdrew away from the family during Christmas break.

"Pooh, want to run to the store with me?" My mother asked one afternoon close to my return to St. Mary's. "I thought I would make chicken fried steak tonight. I know it is your favorite."

"Yeah, that sounds good Mom. Let me go make a few calls and make sure we don't have dinner plans and I will let you know," I gave her a weak smile and headed towards the phone to begin calling the group to see if plans were in the works for the evening. In the time since Chad died the group had cleared any plans with one another. It was important that we spend as much time as we could with each other before we had to go back to school.

It was after seeing me scared to make a move without my five companions that my mom decided that I needed an appointment at the St. Mary's counseling center. She was afraid I would slip too far away and get lost at school. She came in to my room as I was packing my things to go back to school and sat down on the end of my bed.

"Pooh, I made an appointment for you with a counselor at school. I think you should go talk to someone about this," She said looking me in the eye.

"What good would that do?" I asked. I was honestly looking for an answer. I did not really know what good would come from me talking to a stranger about my problems.

“Well you seem to be overly dependent on your friends and I am worried what will happen when you go away to school and you don’t have the group there with you. I don’t know what to do for you, Sweetie, but I know you need something.”

I just nodded and went about my packing. I really had no special feelings towards going to a therapist one way or another. I was not worried about going, but I also did not think it would do any good. So I went because my mom told me to. I was not in the mood for decision making. Mindlessly obeying was so much easier.

Realizing My Appreciation for My Mother

I will forever be grateful to my mother for making that first counseling appointment for me. I am not sure I would have had the strength to do it for myself. My mother may not have known how to help me, but she did recognize that I needed something and was humble and intuitive enough to realize what I needed she could not provide at the moment.

As I sit here writing this I think about all of the people my mother has lost, and how she has been able to endure a great deal of hardships in her life. My cousin graduated from Texas A&M a year ago, and of course my parents and I were invited to attend. I could not have even if I wanted to because of school, but my mother had the time and theoretically could have attended. She did not however. She said that it would just be too hard for her to see where Chad had died. She just was not ready to see the ground Chad had died on. She missed Chad very much and did not feel she was strong enough to attend. It is one of the few times I ever remember my mother not being strong

enough for something. At “five feet nothing” she is one of the strongest and most courageous individuals I could ever hope to know.

It was after our conversation about her not being able to attend my cousin’s graduation that I first realized how difficult Chad’s death had to have been on her. I was so consumed with myself and with the group that I did not think much about how my family was handling Chad’s death. They had to deal with me and help me through the process, which was hard enough, but it did not occur me until much later that each member of my family had their own relationship with my best friend, especially my mother. All of my friends still call her Mom and when one of them was missing from the scene in many ways she felt as if she lost one of her children. At the very least my wasting away and pull away into isolation caused her to feel my loss.

In many ways my mother’s reluctance to go to Texas A&M four years after Chad died provided me with validation. Stroebe and Stroebe (1987) outline three areas that support individuals provide the bereaved. These are: (1) Instrumental support, in which individuals help with funeral arrangements, food, and other physical needs; (2) Emotional support, in which empathetic listening and other emotional maintenance; and (3) Validation support, in which individuals normalize grief behavior for the bereaved. I had felt that it was taking me too long to “get over” Chad’s death, buying in to the “one year stage” theories that proliferate grief literature (Lord, 2000). I did not think it was appropriate to still be so affected by Chad’s death after such a length of time. By my mother talking to me about not wanting to see the spot where Chad died I felt that it was okay for me to still be in pain and still struggling with his loss. My mother provided me

with validation support to help me understand that my grieving process was longer than I had expected and that was okay. Through the course of this ethnography I have also found evidence of sudden, traumatic grief lasting, intensely for three to four years as well as well as validation that stage theories are descriptive rather than prescriptive (Lord, 2000). This makes me feel better about my insistent jumping from stage to stage within quick periods of time.

Chad's death was a wake-up call into what could happen in the world. What could happen, even to "normal" people. We could die. It made me contemplate my own mortality, something that most eighteen-year olds do not do on a regular basis. Adolescent scholars point to feelings of vulnerability being especially prevalent in bereaved adolescents, who tend to believe that death will not happen to them, that it only happens to others (Noppe & Noppe, 2004; Lord, 2000). Chad's death made me think about what could happen in an instant. That I could be taken, that someone else I loved could be taken from me. Chad's death seemed to have a similar effect on just about everyone else. Bobby, who until Chad died had been a member of Texas Tech's skydiving club, never parachuted again. He said that he could just not think of doing something so dangerous and taking the chance of putting us through the kind of pain we had just gone through.

Not only did I become acutely aware of my own mortality, I became aware of others as well. The thought of losing my mother, father, sisters, brother, nieces and nephews became almost paralyzing. I began to see a greater appreciation for those whom I loved and kept close to me. I had the overwhelming desire to invest in a great deal of

bubble wrap and to wrap all of whom I held dear in it in order to cushion them from pain and hardships and even more so to keep them safe from death. Like many other bereaved individuals, especially adolescents, I became preoccupied that I could do something to keep those whom I love safe. Many bereaved adolescents feel the need to protect other loved ones who are grieving and be a shoulder for them to lean on, as well as desiring to keep their loved ones safe (Noppe & Noppe, 2004; Lord, 2000).

I saw a new side to my mother in the time immediately after Chad died. I had never felt free to cry, perhaps my mother just thought I did it too much. Strength is a virtue in a woman and strong women do not cry for little reasons. Rather or not this was her intended lesson, it is the one I gleaned. After Chad's death I feel like I connected with my mother in a way that I had not previously. Since Chad died I have always felt that I can open up to my mother. I appreciate all she has done for me and I appreciate the place she fills in my life.

Holding Each Other Up

On November 23, 1999 Chad Anthony Powell was laid to rest. It falls into a tie as the absolute worst day of my life with November 18, 1999. The day Chad died. The funeral was in the morning so I was up early. I say I was up early, but in all actuality I had not slept more than a couple hours a night since Chad died. I stayed up, afraid to go to sleep, tormented with thoughts and pain. I lay in bed and I talked with Chad for the better part of the night. I always tried to plead with him to come back home.

I was awake when my mom's careful knock came at my bedroom door. I was awake a few seconds later when her head popped in and her caring and soft voice calls, "Pooh Bear? Its time to wake up." I remember this morning so vividly it could have happened this morning instead of five and half years ago.

I am lying on my back, staring up at the ceiling, as I have been doing most of the night. This has been my position for most of every night for the past five days. I turn my head towards the sound of my mom's voice so she can see my open eyes in the hallway light trickling into my dark room.

"Thanks Mom," I say and she gives me a sad smile and backs out of the room. It is six-thirty in the morning. It is a Tuesday. The day of my best friend's funeral. He has been dead since early Thursday morning and while I understand my mother's need to come and wake me up, it was largely unnecessary. I haven't slept more than two broken hours a night since Chad died. Mostly I lay in bed and cry or talk to Chad or as I was doing when my mother came in I lay in bed and talk to God. God at this point in my life was an obscure belief that I had begun to question.

After finishing with one more, "I just can't believe how you could do this," I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and sit up. I turn on my bedside lamp and sit there in the circle of light thinking about how uncertain I am that I will make it through the horrid day ahead of me.

I rub my tired, bloodshot eyes, which fall on the open closet doors. The closet is sparse since my move, with most of my clothes and belongings at college in San Antonio. I can see on the edge of the ring of light the new black suit my mother had bought me a

couple of weeks ago. It had initially been a congratulatory gift after I won my first debate tournament. What had been a new, exciting power suit had changed into a black symbol of despair. It was now a funeral suit. It was a suit of mourning.

I stood up and began going through my morning rituals. I take a trip to the bathroom, and brush my teeth, splash some cold water on my face and then my own face in the mirror startles me. I don't even recognize myself. The word zombie comes to mind as I take in my pale, white face, all traces of a summer tan and healthy complexion gone. My eyes, typically dark brown, with bright sparkles of life looked lifeless and black. They are sunken into my head and surrounded by red tear stained eyelids. Underneath my eyes are dark purple circles, brought on partially by genetics, the Renfro Curse as my mother, sisters and I call it, but today they are deepened by the lack of sleep and buckets of tears shed in the last five days.

I close my eyes and turn away from the mirror with its frightful image of who I have become. I am eighteen years old and feel closer to eighty. I have aches and pains I cannot explain and every motion requires thought and concentration to get it right.

I put on make-up. I have never worn much, and today especially I see little reason to go through the hassle. The heartiest of waterproof mascara would not be able to survive my eyes. But still I go through the motions. Normalcy makes me feel a little better. Base, concealer (for the dark circles and the line of stress pimples that have broken out on my forehead), powder, and blush all go on. I can't help but think it has done little good and that the zombie still stares back at me. I omit the mascara thinking that lines of black trailing down my cheeks would do little good for my appearance. I

finish with a rose colored lipstick and satisfied that I have done all I can I head back to the bedroom.

I haphazardly run a brush through my long hair and pull half of it up into a clip. Undergarments, panty hose and the dress from my suit are next. I like the suit. It is black with brown pinstripes and goes to right above my knee. It has a long matching jacket that hits in the same location as the skirt. It is a shame. I would have liked to debate in this suit, but now I knew it would hang in my closet untouched after this day.

I grab a pair of sunglasses from my dresser and stick them on top of my head. A must have for a funeral with graveside service my mother had told me. She had said I would feel less self-conscious crying with those on. By the end of the day I would realize she was right. 'Okay,' I think, 'only one thing left.'

Magic Shoes

I sit on the edge of my bed and pull a new shoe box from the floor. I open the lid and for the first time I smile. Inside is a brand new pair of Airwalks. At least a full size too big for me, but the most beautiful shoes I have ever seen. They are navy and black with flat soles and are very chunky looking. They are meant to be skateboarding shoes. Except for the color they are just like the pair of shoes Chad always wore.

Chad always wore Airwalk tennis shoes. Always. With suits, with shorts, with khakis, whatever. It didn't matter he always wore Airwalks. They were his trademark. He debated in them, he went to dates in them, he wore them on a white water raft, and he

wore them every day of his life that I knew him. When they would get worn out. And he would wear them until the literally fell apart.

He would cut them up into shandals (his word). Shandals were cut up tennis shoes that Chad saw as now half shoe half sandal. They were incredibly ugly! But he loved them so I made fun of them while secretly loving them myself. The weekend Chad died the group went out and bought matching pairs of Airwalks; three matching pairs for the guys and three matching pairs for the girls. We still have them. I still wear mine whenever I need to feel close to him. And always on the anniversary of his death and of his funeral I put on my Airwalks.

Mine and Amy's have Chad's initials, CAP, written on the back in sharpie. I still get people who ask me why I have the word, "cap" written on my shoes and I enjoy telling them. It brings me close to Chad again and it shows to outsiders the type of bond I have with my friends. We wore our Airwalks, dress clothes and all to the funeral and we walked around proudly as people gave our feet a second glance. Those who knew Chad well knew the purpose and would laugh and/or cry upon seeing them on our feet. Several of the teachers who came to Chad's funeral that day would just sigh and shake their heads when a group of us would pass by with Airwalks laced snugly to our feet. They were and still are our magic shoes. As Forrest Gump said, "they would take [us] anywhere." We just needed them to take us through this difficult day and to help get us through the toughest time in our young lives. A lot to ask of twenty dollar shoes, but they have served their purpose well.

Airwalk sneakers with everything was Chad's trademark. And on the day of his funeral they would be our strength. Around our small hometown in five other homes eighteen-year olds drawn to the funeral of our shared best friend would put on matching pairs of shoes. They also matched the ones worn by Chad in his closed coffin, although few would know that. Chad had been our strength a glue that held us all together. He had been my strongest support and today he would be no less. He would hold us from the ground up by virtue of a pair of sneakers and what they symbolized for the six of us still left on Earth.

The Airwalks we wore would be a sign of unity. They served as a symbol of the bond the seven of us shared. It was a bond that no one else could touch. Those magic shoes would give us a sense of unity on this uncertain day, and they gave us a strength that none of us would have possessed otherwise. They carried us through that day. As I did one final check in the mirror before heading out the door I noticed a little of the light return to my face. The zombie was gone, at least temporarily. I had found the strength I needed to make it through the day.

Saying Goodbye to Chad

After getting ready for the day I headed down the street to Amy's house where we had all agreed we would meet. All of our parents and siblings would be going to the funeral as well, but the six of us felt a profound need to go together and be with one another. Matt and Davy had been asked to be pallbearers so we would take them but they would have to go to the cemetery in the limo so we would pick them up afterwards. Over

at Amy's the different ways we were all taking this was beginning to show. Matt came out of his car with a smile and did not understand why the rest of us were ready to go two hours a head of time. Putting off the inevitable seemed to make him feel better. I was quiet as I attempted to psyche myself up for the unbelievable task in front of us.

We pulled into the church over an hour before the service was set to start and discovered three huge satellite trucks set up in the parking lot. The media was there to "cover the event". The event? This was not an event this was my best friend's funeral and I heavily resented their appearance. Chad's death was public. Everyone in the world saw the pile of logs that killed him. I looked into that pile the morning he died and he was inside it the whole time. Chad was the sixth victim removed from the stack and I saw them bring him out without knowing it was him. It was just a blanket-draped stretcher. As I looked at those media trucks I remembered the media showing everything they possibly could the day he died and now they were out for me. It made us all very angry and resentful.

The largest Church in the area was to be used for Chad's funeral. His parents had wanted the funeral to be held at their own church, which was much smaller. The funeral director gently let them know that there was no way that close to five thousand people would fit into that small church. Five thousand people here for Chad. I was not surprised, but still when you think about 5,000 people at the funeral of a nineteen-year-old guy it seems almost outlandish. And then I felt a sense of pride. Five thousand people would come to this place to mourn Chad and none outside his family were as close to him as the six of us. Five-thousand people would mourn him and he was my best friend.

The church was almost empty when we got there. We went into the sanctuary and there was Chad's casket. Draped in an A&M flag. The sight of it made me sick to my stomach, and yet I could not hold in the morbid fascination of what he must look like inside. In my head he looked like Chad when he was asleep, but I knew it must be a very different sight. The casket was closed because of how damaged Chad had been in the crash. Closed so that we did not have to face the stark reality of what the bonfire had done to him.

Amy, Loren, Bobby and I sat down two rows behind the family pews. Matt and Davy had been called away for pallbearer training. The funeral staff were setting up the sound system and testing a video they were going to play, which as well as other bits of information and pictures also included Chad's valedictorian address given just six months prior to his death. Loren and I had been warned about this video. It had been shown at a memorial service that was given for Chad the day after he died. Loren and I were still in San Antonio, but Amy, Bobby, Matt and Davy had seen it. It was apparently a lot to take in. Chad's baby pictures, recent pictures, the sound of his voice. It was very painful to sit through. The concept seemed contradictory. I was not ready yet to celebrate Chad's life I was still struggling with the reality of his death. The second this video started the four of us headed for the door. But we didn't go far enough.

His voice filled the sanctuary and the second I heard it I crumbled like a piece of paper. I could not stand up. My knees buckled and I slumped into a window across from the sanctuary door. Loren and Bobby were still headed away from Chad's voice, Amy

grabbed me around my middle and held me to her. She gripped me under my arms and literally dragged me away from the sound of Chad's voice.

“Jamie, we have to get out of here. This isn't far enough. You can still hear it!” She said as she attempted to get me to stand. I tried. I really tried, but my legs would not hold me up.

As Amy dragged me through the entryway of the church I caught sight of my mother and two sisters arriving. They greeted an extremely worried looking Bobby who just shrugged his shoulders and looked my direction, too stricken with pain and worry to answer their questions. My sister Angie broke away and grabbed my other arm. Together she and Amy carried me out onto the porch of the church. They placed me against a pillar and formed a circle around me to keep me standing. I sobbed and sobbed and tried to get my legs back under me. This was the worst pain I had ever felt. I could hardly breath, my heart was hammering painfully and my entire body was shaking. I could not see through the tears and felt nothing outside of the pain in my heart. Before this time I had already understood the concept of heart break to be a metaphor. I did not know that one could actually feel her heart break. But after hearing Chad's voice at his funeral I knew what heart break felt like.

Amy, Angie and I stood outside against a pillar with me cradled in their arms sobbing for the next five minutes. An old friend of mine from high school Erin's father was walking in and stopped long enough to wrap all three of us in his arms for a moment before moving away. I have never in my life before or since felt that out of control. I have never felt that feeling of collapsing of losing control of my functions. Amy held me up that

day and took care of me. I will never forget it. I have recently asked Amy to be the maid of honor at my upcoming wedding. I am close to a lot of women, including Loren, but that one event, in that one moment has solidified my relationship with Amy in a way that I cannot even put into words. She literally held me up when I was going to fall and she drug me away from Chad's voice, knowing I was not strong enough to hear it. No one else knew what to do that day. Amy saved me.

I would not have made it through that day without Amy, Loren and Bobby by my side, and I know they needed that comfort as well. We formed a protective circle around one another. We sat through Chad's funeral. We made it through that video, by holding one another's hands and placing our hands on one another's backs. We held hands, dried eyes, hugged and hung on to keep the pain away. It didn't work, but we didn't let each other fall either. There seemed to be an unspoken bond made that day amongst the six of us. If we could keep each other standing through Chad's funeral then for the rest of our lives we could do the same. We would always be there for one another.

Finding My Place in the World: Losing My Place in the World

I grew up in the same school system from the time I was six until I finished high school, even so I never felt like I found my niche. I had transient friends through most of middle and high school, when so much of an adolescent's identity is formed. Adolescent scholars point to the later stages of adolescence (17 to 21 years) as critical to an individual's identity formation as that is when they begin to define their independence and move away from their family (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). The lack of belonging I felt

through middle school and high school resulted in my low self-esteem. With the emergence of the group, I found a way to identify myself as part of a whole.

The interesting thing about childhood and adolescence is the desire to be both wholly independent of everyone else, to stand out, and yet at the same time to be the same as everyone else and to fit in (Gilman, 2005). This is a paradox I found myself in through out high school. I constantly felt as if I did not fit in and yet I was constantly looking for ways to make myself stand out. In a study of college bound high school seniors, Karp, Holmston, and Gray (1998) found that high school seniors desired independence and a fresh start after high school and yet wanted a university with students similar to themselves, once again indicating a paradox between fitting in and standing out. Through school I struggled with this paradox until I found the group and finally my niche in the adolescent world.

The group was so close that anything that happened to one of us happened to us all. When Chad died it was a like a nuclear meltdown. All of a sudden the carpet had been ripped out from under us. To help us maintain our sense of identity as the group we donned matching shoes to each other and to Chad. We presented a united front and it was important to all of us that we keep up our sense of identity as a group. In light of our changing world with the death of Chad we were faced with the need to grip onto one another and to make ourselves stand out, not from one another, but from the rest of those suffering from Chad's death. We wanted everyone to know that we were the group. We were his best friends and we were still united. It allowed us to hold onto a bit of our

normalcy for a little while longer. It also allowed us to continue with the identity we had formed.

The group was a solidified unit before Chad died. Noppe and Noppe (2004) in a study of bereaved adolescents, discuss the importance of peer group formation in the establishment of identity. Much like Noppe and Noppe's claim, as a group we formed a support system and constructed a great deal of our identity around that unit. We were lucky in that we had a peer system in which to share our grief. We could depend on one another and trust that the others would be there when we needed them. We had the ability to share our grief which, "offers the most healing," (Sanders, 1992, p. 18). Because we viewed ourselves as a single unit we were able to share our feelings and emotions about Chad with each other, although for the most part we shut out anyone outside of our group. The group banded together and pulled into our own little world. It was as if we believed that there was a modicum of safety in numbers that would keep us from losing someone else, which Gordon (1986) pointed out as common amongst bereaved adolescents.

Support or Dependence?

The group spent as much time together as we could, choosing one another over our own families for the first couple of months after Chad's death. What might have been considered beneficial shared healing at first soon turned into dependence that was hindering our grieving process rather than aiding it. At the time, I just needed to be with people who I felt understood what I was going through. Noppe and Noppe (2004) found

that, “social support was one of the most important factors in helping bereaved adolescents cope with their loss” (p. 154). The social support system that I felt the most comfortable with was one in which others had experienced a loss similar to mine. The group had all lost Chad. We provided a strong support system for one another and because of how well we knew one another we could “tailor our responses to meet a specific need” (Becvar, 2003). Being able to provide a strong support system that is capable of not only good intentions but of knowing what the bereaved individual needs is very important in the support process (Becvar, 2003). I did not see that I was isolating myself from everyone but the group and shutting out family members.

After Chad died I found myself lost as I struggled to make sense of my reality and reconstruct my identity. Because of this I began to second guess myself and all of the decisions I made. Because of inability to make decisions I could not make simple dinner plans with my family without first discussing them with the group. I also immediately deferred to my mother when she suggested I go into counseling. I was not ready to make decisions because as Clements, DeRanieri, Vigil, and Benasutti (2004) suggest, my reality was not what it once was and I did not know how to make decisions in the new reality that I found myself in. It took a couple of months of counseling before I got comfortable enough for the ability and desire to make my own decisions to return.

In the weeks we were home after Chad’s death Bobby and I leaned on each other a great deal. Everyone handles grief differently (Sanders, 1992), and even though we had different emotions and feelings about what happened to Chad, even though we both brought in our own baggage Bobby and I handled our grief in very similar ways. While

some individuals, especially bereaved adolescents (Noppe & Noppe, 2004), tend to bury their grief and not discuss it, many desire closeness with an individual who has had a similar experience (Sanders, 1999). After suffering a sudden and traumatic loss many bereaved individuals, fall immediately into a deep depression and withdraw from social life, while others project anger towards the cause of their loved ones death.

While Matt, Loren and Davy tended to keep a lot of their emotions inside Amy, Bobby and I felt the need to talk it out. While Amy tended to channel her feelings into anger at Texas A&M, Bobby and I both felt comfort in reminiscing and crying. When one of us was down we would call the other and then sit for a couple of hours laughing, talking, and crying. We depended on one another implicitly and as a result our romantic relationship was much stronger. We have always felt like we have gone through the best and worst parts of life together and therefore we can make it through anything that life may have in store for us.

As horrendous as dealing with Chad's death was it has made me a much stronger person. In many cases bereaved individuals feel an enormous sense of vulnerability coupled with the thought that they can make it through much more since being bereaved than they ever could before (Lord, 2000). I realize now that this is a dichotomy I have dealt with and in many ways been strengthened by. I have grown more cautious, losing my youthful idealism and feelings of immortality. I have also grown stronger, feeling that I have been overcome the most awful event of my life and therefore can overcome just about anything.

Hope Held in a Dream

There is a trap door under the stack. Not many people know about it. Under the door is a small chamber barely big enough for two people and a few supplies. But in it there is canned food, and enough water to last for a couple of weeks. That is where he is. He helped design the room so of course he would make it down there. He is fine. Safe. He maybe hurt. He is definitely sad and in need of loving care and attention. But he is definitely safe. When they clear all the logs away they will find the door and open the room and he will come out and he will be fine. Silly us for worrying about Chad. He is indestructible. He is fine. I know it. No one knows him like I do.

*There is nothing we can't overcome. Nothing we can't do together. He needs his family and his friends right now to get him through this. We will take care of him. We can and will do that. Everyone thinks he is dead, but I know better. I know that he can't be dead. **HE just CAN'T BE** . I would not be able to make it. I know that is selfish, but I also know I could not survive without him. And I know him. He loves us. He wouldn't leave us. He is under the stack and once they clear it he will be fine. There is a room. It is small, but it is there. He is fine. He is coming home.*

They clear the last log. I am standing there on the site, behind a fence, but I can see everything. He is alive. I can see him. He is moving towards us. He is dirty and limping, but there is that smile. It still warms my heart. I want to run to him, but there is a fence blocking my way. That is okay. Now that I know he is alive we have all the time in the world.

I am happy. Happy for the first time in a week. A weight has been lifted. I laugh out loud as we lock eyes. We grin with a thousand shared thoughts. I feel happy and whole again. Things are right again. The world has righted itself and things will get back to normal. The sinking feeling in my stomach is gone. The sky has cleared and I begin to feel again; the numbness is ebbing away.

I awake still smiling and realize I woke myself up with my own laughter. I sigh and grin as the happiness stays with me. Chad is alive and I feel alive again for the first time in a week.

A week...

A week since Chad went missing.

Since they told me he was dead.

Three days since we buried him.

We buried him.

He was in a casket.

He was wearing his Airwalks.

I touched the casket.

Kissed it.

His mother was carried in.

I almost passed out hearing his voice on a video at the funeral.

I had to be carried out.

Amy held me up.

Oh God he is gone.

As everyday this past week I wake up and have a lead weight dropped onto my heart. My best friend is dead and not for the first time I was wishing I could join him. This is why I do not sleep. Or at least why I try not to. I dream he is alive. I dream he is dead. I see him both ways and I still wake up to reality. The hope of dreams is cruel and I wish it would stop. But at the same time I struggle to get back to sleep so that I can see him smile at me one more time. To dream is cruel. But so is life these days. I decide I will take my chances.

Importance of Dreams

For the first three months after Chad died I barely slept. I would have a terrible time falling asleep. Like most bereaved individuals the night was the toughest time for me (Sanders, 1992). I was plagued with negative thoughts, and in those last hours of the day, when it was dark and I was alone with my thoughts they would always turn to Chad. I would be plagued with thoughts of what I could have done differently that would have kept him on this earth. Dr. Weber would say that I could not stop playing the “What If Game,” quite possibly the most depressing game on Earth.

When I did finally fall asleep it was always uneasy and filled with disturbing dreams. I would dream that Chad was alive and we were doing regular things we had done when he was alive. I would have vignettes in which all I could see was Chad’s face and his huge, goofy grin. I would dream this had all been a mistake and that he was alive and well somehow, such as the hidden room under the stack. I would try to make sense of what happened through my dreams (Sanders, 1992, 1999). Carolyn Ellis (1995) writes of

similar experiences during the terminal illness of her partner, Gene. She dreams he is better, she dreams he is dead, she dreams a combination of the two extremes in which he is taking part in a meeting from his hospital bed. In her dreams the two worlds have been combined as she struggles to make sense of the new reality placed in front of her.

I would have dreams in which I could see how Chad died. I could see the pole cracking and Chad falling into the middle of the stack with logs piling on top of him, covering him until all I could see were his eyes looking into mine. In dreams such as this I was everywhere at once. I could see the outside as the stack fell, but I could also see what was going on in the middle of the stack and how he died. The worst dreams had me being privy to the struggle he went through while trapped as the logs sucked the life out of him. I saw him suffer in ways that I would never wish upon my worst enemy and I would struggle to wake myself up.

As painful as the dreams always were for me I still look forward to them. I still have them today, five years after Chad died, and I cherish every one. He is still alive for me in my dreams (Sanders, 1992). I can talk to him. I can see him smile at me. I can feel him close to me again and I cannot bear losing that on top of losing him. I like to know he is still alive and still real in my mind and in my heart. In my dreams I still smile when he smiles, I still laugh when he laughs and I still have amazing conversations about anything and everything. In my dreams I can have my best friend back, even for a moment. It is a way I can keep him close to me. I have them less often now than I did after he died, but they are still real and rarity seems to make them all the more special to me.

It is common to dream of a loved one after death. Modern literature and cinema support this idea as well. When recently watching *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) Tom Hanks' character, who lost his wife, is talking to their son about the concept of an afterlife. Hanks' admits that he never believed in an afterlife before his wife died, but since her death he saw her continuously in dreams. For Sam (Hanks) his wife appearing in his dreams is evidence that there is a form of afterlife. This concept is further evidenced by Alice Sebold's novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2001), in which after a young girl is murdered her family and friends still feel that they see her in various places and that she makes an appearance in their dreams.

I do not have a strong sense of my spiritual self and the concepts of being able to speak with Chad after he died and to see him in my dreams has always be a difficult pill for me to swallow. I have a difficult time aligning my skepticism regarding a higher being with my intense belief about a rewarding afterlife. It has taken me a while to come to terms with not believing in God but believing in an afterlife. This autoethnography has been the first time I have examined my conflicting feelings dealing with a higher power and an afterlife. Reading that others have had dreams of their loved ones that they regard as a view of the afterlife, and that others have had similar paths of strife dealing with a higher being and an afterlife (Ellis, 1995), gave me comfort, that once again I was not alone.

In most cases dreams of deceased loved ones have a soothing effect (Sanders, 1992). Most of my dreams of Chad do sooth me. I get to see him again. I can talk to him and regain a little of the closeness we shared while he was alive. I can watch him smile

and that smile has a strong impact on me even in dreams. It has a powerful soothing impact that I cherish. It has been years since I have had a nightmare about the bonfire crash. I think that once I was able to process what happened to Chad, my subconscious no longer had the need to figure out the problem for itself.

Searching for Solitude

Exactly one week after Chad died the rest of the country gathered with friends and family for Thanksgiving. I was with my parents and my sisters at my grandmother's house surrounded by my aunts, uncles, cousins and other assorted relatives. Typically Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays. I love the idea that for one day everyone just gets together to be together. We do not need presents we just get together for the joy of being with one another. However, this year I was feeling decidedly not in the Thanksgiving mood. I had spent most of the day going from room to room in my grandparent's small house, attempting to find a space of solitude. Thirty or forty family members came and went that day so solitude was hard to come by. I was in the kitchen leaning against the counter and staring out the kitchen window when my cousin, Lynn came into the room.

"Hey you, what are you doing in here all by yourself?" Lynn was my closest cousin. She is only six months older than me and was also a college freshman. I just shrugged my shoulders towards her question, upset that my solitude had been broken.

"You just seem to be under a cloud all day..."

"Under a cloud?" I asked.

I was shocked that anyone would ask me why I seemed distracted today. For the most part my family had taken to speaking in cautious tones around me. They approached me as they might a hurt stray animal, with care, but caution. Anytime I looked like I had been staring off into space for too long someone would jump up and ask if I needed pie. I love my mother's pie. Her coconut cream pie is one of my all time favorite foods, but I did not think that it could accomplish my family's goal today. For the most part everyone had seemed really uncomfortable around me. My reactions were not the same as they would have been on any other Thanksgiving and that threw everyone off.

"Yeah, you are just not yourself." Lynn responded.

I know she was trying to get some sort of dialogue going. She did not know how to approach me or check on me and so she acted as if nothing was happening and it was just as if I was moody. I looked into her earnest face and realized she just did not know. She had never lost anyone and could not begin to know what was going on inside me. I could not really blame her for this, but it did add to the already overwhelming weariness that took hold of me.

"Chad, died a week ago today and I am having a really hard time with that," I responded looking her in the eye, until she ducked her head. Then I just dove in and allowed the dam to break. "His family has to be in shambles today and I can't seem to stop picturing what their day must be like. We are here surrounded by family and food and laughter, and they are there sitting in mourning. Tonight they are supposed to be lighting that bonfire and tomorrow Chad should be coming home to spend the weekend

with his friends. None of that is happening and it makes me a little sad and makes me not feel like being very social.”

“Jamie, I am sorry. I don’t know what to say.” I reached out and took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“It is okay. I am sorry I am being so anti-social.”

A group of kids came rushing into the kitchen looking for fresh sodas and the moment was broken. I wandered back into the living room and sat myself down next to my grandfather’s easy chair. My grandfather was already sick by this point in time. He had already been sick for awhile. Emphysema and the early stages of lung cancer were slowly taking his lungs away from us. Two and a half years later my grandfather passed away and I would remember the comfort he always seemed to bring to me. I sat down next to him and leaned against his chair. He put his hand down on my shoulder and I reached up to hold it.

“I sure do love you, Jamie-Girl.” I looked up into his eyes. He did not look at me cautiously; he just smiled and touched my face.

“I love you too,” I responded as I settled down next to my grandfather and turned my eyes to the football game on television. I cared absolutely nothing about it, but here in the middle of all of my family, holding my grandpa’s hand I found the solitude I had been searching for.

Appreciation of Family

While I appreciated the proximity of my family during the time after Chad died I knew that they all knew I was grieving, and I felt as if I was put under a microscope when I was around them. Noppe and Noppe (2004) point out that adolescents tend to have an egocentric nature, which makes them believe that they are being watched and examined. I felt that my family were all examining my grieving process throughout the holidays following Chad's death. I knew they were aware of my grief and yet I felt that no one could possibly know what I was feeling or understand what I was going through. This is a common feeling amongst grieving adolescent's, who tend to grieve more intensely than adults (Noppe & Noppe, 2004).

It is not uncommon for adolescents to retreat inward during the grieving process since they feel no one understands them. Like many of my peers, I choose to keep most of my feelings locked up inside and tended to resent those outside of the group who attempted to communicate and understand about my feelings towards Chad's death (Lord, 2004). I felt the stigma of grief even when surrounded by my closest family members. They did not know how to talk to me, what to say, how to handle me, so for the most part they avoided talking about it. As Sanders (1992) notes, I felt victimized whether with my family or friends back at school, as if I had something wrong with me that made them uncomfortable. I see now that everyone close to me was really between a rock and a hard place. I did not want to talk about it with anyone but the group, but I resented that everyone was avoiding the issue.

The reaction from my family that I felt the most comfortable with and that gave me the most satisfaction was my tough talking aunt's "Life's a bitch, eh kid?" At least she was open and honest. She did not try to pretend that she knew what I was going through or that she could do anything about it. I respected the honesty she gave me. For most bereaved individuals, friends and family are most comforting when they are honest in their inability to understand, and their willingness to listen (Lord, 2000; Hansen, 1990; Sanders, 1992, 1999).

I remember how isolated I felt even when surrounded by family at home and friends at school. I have always been introspective, and after Chad died that quality intensified. I concentrated on my own thoughts and feelings and developed the ability to close myself off even during social situations. To a certain extent I still hold on to this desire and ability. This is evidence of the far reaching powers of grief and how it has permanently changed me.

The Road Back

About a week after my mother had sat on the edge of my bed talking to me about seeing a counselor I found myself waiting in a counseling center conference room. I was waiting for a kind receptionist to come back and lead me to a complete stranger with whom I was supposed to discuss my most private and painful thoughts. I had just finished a stack of preliminary paperwork necessary before being counseled. It included a contact sheet and a questionnaire designed to measure how depressed I was according to a clinical scale. 'How strange,' I thought. 'I should be nervous about this. I do not like

sharing intimate and private thoughts with strangers. Why don't I care about this? I don't feel anything at all. I don't think this is really going to help me. I know that I want it to. But I don't mind being here. I just feel empty inside.'

As I stared around the room, feeling numb to the entire process, I began to take my surroundings. This particular conference room looked like any other office or conference room on the St. Mary's University Campus. Blue office chairs sat around a fake wood table. The carpet was the same short, blue, Berber that was found in the dorms. The walls were decorated with San Antonio artwork and the required crucifix that was present in every classroom on campus. I was just contemplating what a gruesome image the crucifix made when I heard a voice behind me.

"Jamie, are you all done?" the receptionist appeared in the doorway. I nodded. She picked up my papers and placed them in a file folder. "Well if you will wait out front for just a few minutes Dr. Weber will be right with you." I went back out to the front and thumbed through a People magazine thinking of nothing in particular and certainly not reading, until a large, kind looking man of about forty appeared in the hallway.

"Are you Jamie?" He asked. I nodded and stood up. I was not nervous, and I was not upset. This situation was such a foreign concept to me and I remember feeling detached as if I was watching myself go through these motions. I was feeling numb, which tended to the feeling that dominated my day time hours. My feelings at night were a different story all together. "Why don't you come with me and we will talk for a while."

He had a very kind face. It was his eyes. He had very kind eyes that looked directly at me. My mother always told me not to trust anyone who would not look me in

the eye. By Dr. Weber automatically making eye contact I immediately trusted him. His office was a generic white walled room with a St. Mary's issued desk, bookshelves and a couple of blue office chairs. It was very reminiscent with the conference across the hall. What I immediately liked however was the mural of St. Mary's that took over the wall with the blue chairs. I recognized its design as being that of Brother Cleutus, one of the more famous Marianist brothers on campus. He was known in South Texas for his artwork and it was all over campus. The vivid use of colors and abstract design always drew me to pieces of his work. My favorite chapel on campus (St. Mary's has 5,000 students and five chapels) was designed by brother Cleutus including the abstract crucifix which was one of my favorite campus fixtures, perhaps because it did not include the same gruesome quality of the ones in the classrooms.

"I really like that mural," I remarked as we sat down across from one another. Dr. Weber was a big man and under certain circumstances I am sure he would have intimidated me, but there was just something about him which exuded niceness. I liked him instantly.

"Thank you, Brother Cleutus did it for me when I moved into this office," He remarked studying it. He then looked over at me and we made brief eye contact. For some reason I did not feel like I could hold his stare and I quickly looked down. "So Jamie, why don't you tell me why you are here."

"Okay," I took a deep breath, but I just could not seem to hold onto my composure any longer. There was something about this man, with his kind eyes and colorful mural that I felt I could not hide from. I had been used to holding so much in

with people at St. Mary's, feeling isolated and alone from my peers, and with his kind eyes I felt like I could no longer hold back. My breath became shaky and I could feel tears pricking the backs of my eyes. I plunged in. "Well about two months ago my best friend was killed when the A&M bonfire fell and I just can't seem to get my act together. I miss my friends and I don't feel like anyone here really understands what is going on with me and I just feel so awful. I don't know how to get past this."

By this point in time I had broken down into sobs and I am not sure I was even vaguely coherent. I let myself open up to my sobs for a couple more minutes. All the while Dr. Weber watched me kindly and handed me his Kleenex box. There was a part of my mind that could not believe I was sitting in this office, letting out all of this information and grief to a strange man I had met a scant few minutes before hand. It felt good though. It felt good to let this out. This was something I never felt like I could do with anyone in the group. They had their own grief to deal with. They would have gladly done anything they could for me, but I could not burden them with the venting I was able to get out with Dr. Weber. I had never had this type of open venting with anyone. I had done this myself countless numbers of times over the past two months. I had let out all of these feelings during my nightly talks with Chad, but I never told a living soul much of what I was telling to Dr. Weber. He took it all in and commented very little during this first session he let me do most of the talking.

"I just want to feel better," I remarked a little while later when I had calmed down enough to put a thought together. "I just feel so achy all the time. I feel overwhelming sadness when it comes to Chad, but I feel very little when it comes to

anything else in life. I don't feel happy anymore, but outside of losing Chad I don't feel sadness either. I don't feel excited or intrepid. I don't feel anything. It is like my grief has taken up so much of my emotions I don't have any left for anything else. I feel both numb and sad at the same time. I just want to "snap out of it."

"Well I am afraid it is not that easy," Dr. Weber consulted the file he held in his hands. He leaned forward. "Jamie, from what I see here just looking at your questionnaire you may benefit from our staff psychiatrist. You have twelve of the fifteen symptoms of clinical depression. If you want to see the psychiatrist on staff that is totally your call. He may decide you need medication to help you through this."

"Do you think I need to be medicated?" I asked. The idea of medicine had never crossed my mind. While coming to see a counselor did not hold a particular place of stigma for me I felt that being prescribed medicine would make me feel like I was crazy or unstable and for the most part I did not feel that way. I just felt sad and very tired.

"Well I can't really make that call. I am always a fan of treating what can be treated with counseling and not jump right in to medicine if counseling could do some good, but that is your decision to make and you can make it with the help of our psychiatrist if you like."

"I think I would like to see what could happen in counseling first. I don't like the idea of being put on medicine." Dr. Weber smiled. I think he was relieved that had been my answer.

"Okay then. I am going to write up my notes from our session today and talk about it with the other counselors and we will see who will be the best fit for you."

“What? I won’t see you again?” I was somewhat alarmed by this revelation. I had just spent half an hour sobbing to this man and felt that I had a connection with him. I did not want to have to go through this first session again and more than that I did not think I could talk to someone else the way I had been able to open up to Dr. Weber. For some reason we just clicked right away.

“Well what usually happens with new patients is that they go to whoever is free at that time and then we discuss the case and see who would work best with that patient. I do a lot of work with grief so in all likelihood I am the one who you will be seeing, but we have to discuss it.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Would it be okay with you if I took your case?” he asked with a slight smile. I think he could feel the connection we had made as well. In fact years later when I was still seeing him on a regular basis he would admit this to me. During my last session a short time before I graduated from St. Mary’s he and I would both cry at the loss of our weekly sessions. I have not seen him in over a year and have not had a session with him in two and I still miss that time powerfully. He was and will remain a very powerful influence in my life. I do not know if I would have graduated from St. Mary’s without him. I think I would have been tempted to leave San Antonio and go home for school. His encouragement and our weekly talks kept me in school and his belief in me did more for my self-confidence than anyone before or since.

Importance of My Experience in Counseling

Making that first appointment is one of the greatest things my mother has ever done for me. After a few weeks of seeing Dr. Weber I began to realize how much I appreciated my mother doing that for me. She saw that I had a problem, and it was her instinct as a mother to try and fix that problem and she found the tool that would. I could not have made through my grieving process without professional help.

Sudden and traumatic death results in a more complicated grieving process (Lord, 2000). Because there is no time to prepare for the loss of a loved one and because there is no time to come to terms with the change in the relationship shock is exemplified (Sanders, 1992). This increase in shock causes the grieving process to slow in a large part because of the added somatic stresses (Lord, 2000; Sanders, 1992). My lack of sleep, lack interest in food, and general aches and pains were all common for sudden and traumatic grieving, but I did not know this until I went into counseling.

I felt alone, that it was taking me an abnormal amount of time to grieve, and I did not feel that I could talk to anyone about this. After awhile I even pulled away from the group, feeling like they had their own problems to deal with and did not need mine on top of them. I needed the comfort of venting that Dr. Weber provided for me. His kind listening and helpful advise remain foremost in my mind today.

For many the waters of grief as just too difficult to maneuver alone and a professional counselor is necessary. It is important that individuals suffering from such strong grief not feel weak or inadequate because they feel the need to seek professional help. American society tends to be very uncomfortable with those who are grieving and

because of the stigma many bereaved individuals feel, they swallow their feelings and this can lead to a host of physical ailments (Lord, 2000; Sanders, 1992; Ellis, 1995; Kubler-Ross, 1969). Had I not gone to see Dr. Weber, had my mother not made that appointment, I do not think I would have made it through my freshman year of college. I do not know that I would have been able to stay in San Antonio. Dr. Weber remains to this day one of the strongest influences on my life. He helped me through the darkest hour of my life and he has believed in me in a way that I had never had anyone believe in me before.

Pulling Apart & Guilt

“So, Jamie, what are we going to talk about today? How are you doing?” Dr. Weber asked during one of our early sessions. I had only been seeing him about a month at this point. We had already laid most of the groundwork of what had happened with Chad and what brought me here to him.

“I cannot seem to shake the idea that I could have done something to stop this from happening. I talked to him the night he died. Surely I could have said something or done something so that he would not have gone out there,” I began. I had not been able to sleep the night before and had played out scenarios in my head for what I could have done to stop him from dying. I had played them out over and over again and had not slept more than two hours. The result was that I was fairly shaky and angry at myself for letting this happen.

“Jamie, you know you can’t play the what-if game. It is just going to make you miserable. Hindsight is always 20-20. You had no way of knowing at the time what would happen.”

“But why did I have to argue with him?” I asked as I began to be flooded with memories from three months ago.

The night Chad died he and I got into a discussion about the group pulling apart. Actually it was more of an instant messaging argument. The group had become fond of sending out, “mass emails.” Letting everyone know what was going on in our lives. It was the quickest and most effective way of keeping in touch. We had just gotten one from Chad filled with exploits from his trips to “cut” (where the bonfire crew would go out and cut down all the trees for the stack). Chad had apparently cut open his foot on an ax and that upset me. I took this as evidence he was not being careful enough and that scared me, although I did not realize this at the time. I just thought this made me mad. I was also upset that he was still suffering from walking pneumonia.

The most disturbing part of this email, however, focuses on the killing and torturing of a small squirrel. Apparently out at cut a group of bonfire workers had killed a squirrel and someone was swinging him around and wearing him like a prize pelt. While Chad did not directly take part in this he did not stop it. The whole description of the event made me sick. It was so unlike Chad to condone the torture and killing of anything and I saw this event as proof that my kind, easy-going and quick to laugh friend was gone.

“This bit about the squirrel, Chad. This is just sick. How could all of you do this?” I asked angrily.

“Well I didn’t do it. Some of these other guys, who had been drinking did it. Everyone was just out there having a good time.”

“Having a good time? Chad this isn’t like you. What has happened? It seems like bonfire has changed you. I don’t like it.”

“What do you mean, changed me? I am the same guy. This is just what I am doing now.” Chad reasoned.

“No, you don’t seem like the same guy. The Chad I knew would not have stood by while some poor animal was hurt. That is not like you at all. I don’t think I know this new guy and I am not positive I want to.”

The rest of the conversation poured out in a similar fashion. I was very harsh with him and I could tell he did not really understand where I was coming from. This had to have hit him somewhat out of the blue. He had no way of knowing I had been pouring out a lot of these troubles to my best friend at St. Mary’s, Jess. As smart as Chad was he always had trouble understanding women. That is where I would come in. I, as his female best friend, could give him a glimpse into the female psyche and he would reciprocate with men. But now his translator was the one giving him problems and I could tell he didn’t really know what to do. I was just getting more and more upset, telling Chad that he had changed and that I didn’t know him. I went on and on until I just couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Look I will just be glad when next week comes around. I am ready to go home for a while. It will be Thanksgiving and we can all be there together again,” I finally conceded. I wanted to think that we really hadn’t changed all that much that no matter what the seven of us united would bring order to the tumbling world. By the end of the chat I had calmed down a bit.

“Chad, I just love you and worry about you. I hope that this testosterone filled logging practice hasn’t changed you into someone I know you wouldn’t want to be. I just need to know that everything is going to be all right.”

“Everything is fine. I am fine. I haven’t changed into some meathead. You will see. We will spend some time together next weekend and you will see that I am fine and no matter still the same person and still your best friend.” I smiled. This was much more like my Chad. He knew what to say to make me feel better. “I have to get going. I have to get ready to head to stack.”

“Are you still sick?” I asked worriedly.

“I am fine. Not 100% but I will be fine,” he assured me.

“You are never going to get over that pneumonia if you keep staying up all night playing Lincoln Logs with telephone poles,” I reasoned. I did not want him to go out. He was sick and needed to stay in and tend to that. “Don’t go just this once. Stay in; get a good night’s sleep. It will do you a world of good.”

“I am the freshman coordinator. I have to go,” Chad repeated. “Don’t worry this will all be over in a week. I will rest then and get better.” There was no changing his

mind. "You worry too much. I will talk to you soon and then next week we will get to spend some time together. Try not to worry."

But I never did see him again. That was the last conversation we would have. About three hours later the center pole would snap and the giant pile of laced together logs would come crashing down. Chad, who had been on the very top, would drop right down into the center and hopefully be killed on impact. In my head that is how it happens. He falls and loses consciousness before he can feel any pain. It is as if he simply goes to sleep while falling and wakes up in whatever sort of heaven there may be. He feels no pain and is most certainly not trapped, fighting for his life under a ton of logs. In my head he does not suffer. He passes peacefully from this world to the next.

I do not know if this is true or not. He did fall straight down, but I do not know what happened after that. I honestly do not know how he died. And I do not want to know the truth. I am frightened it will be much worse than the images in my head and I could not stand that. Chad died. I can accept that. I cannot accept that he suffered. No the beautiful lanky boy with the runners body, with the soft, floppy hair, with the kind eyes, with the warm, contagious smile. In my head he does not suffer. He must never suffer.

In the months after Chad died I replayed that last conversation over and over again in my mind. I was wracked by guilt for years. Still five and half years later I feel it. I still play the 'what if' game over and over again in my head. Dr. Weber has always cautioned me against. Telling me what I already know. That it does no good. That it only makes things worse, but I cannot help it.

“I know that I should not hypothesize what would have happened or what could have happened, but I just can’t seem to help it. I think what would have happened if I had made him stay and talk to me? If I made him talk things out more with me that night maybe he would not have gone. If I had let him know more about how I was feeling perhaps he would have stayed longer and missed the crash. Even if we kept talking just a few more minutes that might have been enough time to keep him from being on the very top at the moment it fell. In my head I could have manipulated time. I could have kept him from the place he was when he died.

If he had just been a few feet lower, or on the other side he could have tumbled off with a few bruises, maybe a broken bone or two, but still been alive. There were some who made it off that stack with no injuries, not even a bruise or a scrape. If I had kept Chad talking a minute longer or let him go a minute earlier maybe he would have been somewhere else. If I had not felt the need to berate him for his strange bonfire behavior maybe he could have been out at stack sooner and gotten done whatever needed to be done for him to get off the top earlier. All it boiled down to was that there was something I could have done to prevent what happened to him and I did not do it and he was dead. And worse than that I argued with him right before he left. I feel like somehow I am responsible.” The tears were falling down my cheeks by this point in time. I was exhausted and the guilt was overwhelming.

Dr. Weber talked to me until I felt bit better. He made sure I had enough Kleenex and by the end of our session I was feeling better. It he instructed me to go home and get some sleep.

Through years of therapy sessions Dr. Weber tried as he might to make me see that I was not responsible for what happened to Chad. That there was nothing I could have done. And I do see that now, at least my brain does, my heart still has a difficult time with it. There is just no reason for him to be dead. It makes no sense and in some way blaming myself at least made it make sense. There was a reason this happened. That reason was me. For a while this was easier to handle than the complete lack of reason.

How Could I?

Chad and I rarely argued. We were very similar in a lot of ways and had such a strong level of respect for one another that we squabbled over stupid, joking little things, but big issues we could always talk out and not be reduced to arguing. Of course our largest argument took place the night he died. To this day I cannot stop thinking about it. I cannot stop being racked with guilt over what happened.

I had been unhappy and stressed about the distance I had felt emerging amongst the group and was harboring a fair amount of resentment towards A&M already for changing my best friend and bonfire for making him act “weird” in my mind. I let my frustrations with everyone get taken out on Chad and that was not fair to him. While most bereaved individuals feel a degree of guilt throughout their grieving process mine has stuck with me because, not only did I feel bad about arguing with him, I have always felt that somehow, someday I could have changed things. I could have stopped him and he would not have gone out there that night and he would not have died. I still blame myself,

even though I realize intellectually that I am not to blame. I did not cause Chad to die, and yet I cannot get past the feeling that somehow I did.

I have felt alone in these thoughts for the last five years. I have told few people how serious my guilt really is, I do not think I was even honest with myself as to how bad it still is until I began this project. I have put myself out there to hopefully place myself in a position to connect with other bereaved individuals who are still racked with guilt for whatever reason over the loss of their loved one. I write to help myself understand this guilt and to help others feel connected to someone who may be going through something similar (Ellis, 1995). Carolyn Ellis, who has established herself as an autoethnographic leader explains throughout her studies of grief dealing with her brother's sudden death in a plane crash (1993), her experience with the prolonged death of her partner (1995), and she and Art Bochner's experience with abortion (1996) the importance of writing autoethnographies that readers can relate.

In a way blaming myself has helped me cope with Chad's death. It is not just a meaningless and random act, something happened to cause it and I can have someone to blame that is not the obtuse Texas A&M system, not individuals I have never met, and not Chad. I can blame myself and somehow give the tragedy meaning. It has been one of the only ways I can make my reality fit together and one of the few ways I can construct my new reality. Carolyn Ellis writes the stories of her brother's sudden death (1993) and her partner's prolonged death (1995) in order to better understand what happened and why. Richardson (1990) states that, "narrative is the best way to understand the human experience, because it is they way humans understand their own lives" (p. 65). I have

been able to use this experience to make sense of my own life and how it has been affected by the loss of a very dear friend.

In many ways blaming myself and the guilt I have carried around for so long has been my way of punishing myself (Kubler-Ross, 1969). It seems so unfair that I am still alive, graduating college, graduate school, getting engaged, planning my wedding, fantasizing about my children, when Chad, who had so much promise and such a zest for life, is dead and will never be older than nineteen. I always looked up to Chad and saw him as something of an older brother. We would torment each other at times, tease and poke fun, but we were also the first ones to stand up against a wrong done to our friend. It has always seemed wrong that I am now older than he is. Somehow his finite age of nineteen will always remain older to me than whatever age I find myself.

The carrying of the guilt, the lack of sleep, lack of interest in food and enjoyment for the first few months after Chad died was my self inflicted penance for outliving him and for arguing with him. Grief research shows that often times bereaved individuals, especially those suffering from a sudden and traumatic loss, are riddled with survivor guilt. This guilt manifests itself in subconscious self-punishment of lack of appetite and sleep, which often leads to physical illness (Sanders, 1999). I have been able to stop blaming myself in large part because of the examination I have conducted throughout this project. I have been able to see what I am doing and investigate why I am doing it. I still have flashes of “what-if,” but I see the folly in that now. I also see the naturalness of it. I will always wish I could change what happened to Chad. I will always wish that I could go back and change one little thing that might have made everything different, but I

cannot and I have been able to come to terms with that through this project in ways that four years of weekly counseling could never accomplish.

Waiting for Bobby

It was an early evening on an October Thursday, and the air was just beginning to grow chilly. It had been drizzling all day and the view outside my kitchen window was more than a little dreary. Inside, however, the house was bright and warm. I had just placed a chicken casserole in the oven and was merrily multi-tasking as I washed dishes, sang loudly and off key with my Michael Buble CD of old standards and watching our two new kittens reaching under the refrigerator for a lost fuzzy white ball. All in all it had been a content afternoon. I had taught my morning class and then rushed home eager to spend time with the new additions to our family. I had spent the dreary October afternoon playing with the cats or curled up doing some reading on the couch with the two of them snuggled in my lap.

About five o'clock I got up to begin dinner which with preparation and cooking time would take a little more than an hour. This would put dinner ready between six and six-thirty, which was just right. My fiancé, Bobby, and I had been living together for about six months and were settling nicely into domestic bliss. We had a system. On nights I had class Bobby would come home from work and start dinner. Then I would do the lion's share of the cleaning up. Days when I made it home first I would cook and he would clean up. Most of the time we were both in the kitchen for the cooking, cleaning and discussing of the day.

On this particular rainy Thursday it did not occur to me until after I had dug the fuzzy white ball out from under the fridge and had sat down on the living room floor to bat it around with the girls that I noticed how late it was. It was six o'clock on the dot when I glanced at the living room clock. My eyebrows knitted together in concern as I considered that Bobby was almost an hour late. We had a system by this time with lateness as well. If he got caught up at work or I at school for twenty minutes or so there was no need to call. Anything more than half an hour or so and we would call home. This was as much for the quality of dinner as it was for the amount of our concern. But tonight Bobby was an hour late and had not called. This was not like him at all. He knows I am prone to worry and does not like to upset me.

I scanned my memory for mention of an appointment or meeting and could find neither. I picked up my cell, tried to calm my quickly beating heart and attempt his cell phone. No answer. Well if he had a meeting he would have it on silent or turned it off. I tried to not let this new development bother me. I absentmindedly reached down to pet one of the cats who was running herself through my legs. This was a big moment as this particular kitten had been caged most of her life and was having a difficult time adjusting to life in a house, out in the open, with two humans and a scrawny, younger kitten constantly on her heels. Bobby and I had managed to pick quite possibly the two most misfit kittens the Lubbock Pet Project had to offer. One was four months old and had barely left her cage. She was skittish and hid under the bed for the first two days we had her. She would run and hide if there was a sudden noise in the house, which with an eight week old kitten around is all the time. The little one was tiny, less than a pound when we

brought her home, and mal-nourished and flea and ring-worm infested. She was fond of jumping, climbing, and was fearless in her mischievousness. They were our own little misfits and to this day continue to fill the house with light, love, cat toys and of course, noise.

After fulfilling Sidda's need for attention I moved back to the kitchen and looked out the window above the sink. The drizzle had turned to rain and the warmth from the house around me seemed to turn suddenly cold. 'Something has happened to him,' I thought. 'Oh, God, he's dead! There was an accident, he's gone.' My hands on the counter turned clammy and began to shake as I saw the scenes begin to play out in my mind.

I imagined I could see a police cruiser pull up in front of the house. A kind and well-meaning police woman would get out and make her heavy hearted way to the door. I would fall to the floor and scream and wail. I flashed to a funeral where I sat blankly holding my head in my hands and staring at a cherry casket. Well-meaning friends and family would try to console me thinking they understood and could help me. They could not really understand that with the loss of this man, the loss of the love of my life, that everything was gone for me. Every dream I had was wrapped up with him. My future. My children, with Bobby's big blue eyes and my curly hair, the dreams I already had for them were now gone. Everything was gone. I saw myself living my life alone. All of these images flashed through my mind in an instant. I felt a tremendous ache in my chest. I would not survive something happening to Bobby and all of a sudden I was certain

something had. The air in the house had changed. Even the two tiny cats seemed to feel it as well. They peered out at me from their spots curled up together under the futon.

I was so scared and almost burst into instant tears when I saw Bobby's white truck pull up. It was almost six-thirty and I could tell from a distance he was tired. I stayed in the kitchen, fighting the urge to run to him, as he hurried through the rain up the front steps, checked the mail and unlocked the door. I took a few moments to take some deep cleansing breaths and to mentally berate myself for being so neurotic and shaming myself for being so scared all the time. I was always waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under me.

If Bobby noticed anything was wrong that day he didn't question me. The deep prolonged hug and my face buried in his neck were not exactly unheard of in our house which still had the feel of a newlywed home. I explained away the tears in my eyes by saying that it had been a long day, that I had missed him and just got a little overwhelmed in my feelings for him from time to time. All of this was true and he took it at face value as he explained his tardiness as a sudden meeting that had come up at the last minute and a dead cell phone battery.

Eventually my heart slowed down, and I could let myself stop touching his arm every two minutes to ensure he was real. I never have been able to completely shake the way that fear consumed me that day. As I write this it is late on a Tuesday night in May. Bobby is sleeping beside me, or trying to as the cats, now older and somehow even louder and more mischievous, play tag across the bed. I glance over at his sleeping face and I am once again gripped by the knowledge that at any moment he could be taken from me.

I don't let it consume me, but in these quiet moments of our lives I look towards his thin frame and see the vulnerability of life and it frightens me. But I realize as I can barely keep my eyes open that the time I have with him, however long it may be is precarious. I whisper, "I love you," into the dark and whether or not he is awake his response is subconscious. "I love you too," he mumbles. I put my hand on his chest to feel the steady beat and the rise and fall of his chest. And then I drift off to sleep.

I am Vulnerable and I am Afraid

After Chad died I began to fear that someone else would be taken away from me. I no longer felt that the world was predictable, and that people were safe. These are common feelings amongst individuals who have suffered a sudden and traumatic loss (Lord 2000; Sanders, 1990). The world was not the same place I had imagined it to be, therefore I felt I could no longer assume that friends and family would go on to live long lives. While some individuals go to the extreme of excessive risk taking, I became, and remain to this day, excessively cautious. Every few days I am gripped with a powerful fear that something has gone wrong with someone I love. If my mother does not answer my phone calls my mind immediately goes to heart attack, stroke or car accident long before it goes to work meeting. Instead of calling to check in with her if I am taking a road trip, I find myself requesting that she call me as soon as she gets to her destination. If she does not I am compelled to call her and make sure she is okay. My grief has fundamentally changed me in how I view the world and how I interact with others.

I was never a risk taker and became even less of one in light of Chad's death. Again, with Bobby, who was a member of the Texas Tech skydiving club before Chad died, never parachuted again afterwards. The emotions a bereaved individual goes through has long lasting implications for that individuals behavior (Fleming & Adolf, 1986). Bobby admitted to me that he just could not see taking the chance of jumping out a plane the same way. Like my own bubble of immortality Bobby became aware that bad things do happen to good and normal people. In light of what we have gone through after Chad's death Bobby decided that taking the chance and jumping out of an airplane was too dangerous in its implications to his own well being and the well being of those who love him.

For Bobby and myself our feelings on what was just and fair, and who God was drastically changed when Chad died. My theories on what was right and what was wrong in the world were gone. This is common amongst bereaved adolescents, especially those who have lost a friend or peer (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). I became enraged that such a good, young man who could have done so much with his life was taken away so early. I questioned God in ways I had never questioned him before. I became very cynical; I traded my dreams of a life of public service and environmental lobbying in for the cynical view that I, as only one person, could not make a difference. I became convinced that the world was a harsh and cruel place, and I no longer paid attention to the positive aspects of life. I no longer believed that any one person could make a difference.

In my head if Chad could not live to make a difference then there was little to no hope for the rest of us. I lost faith in absolute Truth; instead I began arguing vehemently

in each of my theology and philosophy classes that there was not Truth. That instead life was relative, and governed by multiple truths. All of these are ideas, which are still with me today and are a direct result of the drastic unfairness of Chad's death. My value system as an adolescent when Chad died was rocked to the core and it has affected the trajectory of my future life.

These are not uncommon feelings among individuals in my position (Noppe & Noppe, 2004), and yet I felt completely isolated and guilty with my new feelings on spirituality and God. I felt that I was the only person feeling this way and that I was doing something inherently wrong. It is important for others to know that they are not alone, that they may find their feelings of justice and fairness wavering, but it is okay to feel that way. Narratives that discuss these feelings may help adolescents feel a sense of connection with others. Perhaps they do not feel connected with their peers any longer, but they can read and feel a sense of connection that the author has had similar experiences, has lived to tell the tale and that their feelings are valid and normal.

My relationship with Bobby has been a core aspect of my existence and a major part of my feelings of belonging since we began dating in high school. For the past six and a half years he has been at the foundation of my life, and when the fear hits me of losing someone I love it is the hardest when I think about Bobby. I fear his loss the most. I look at him and I see a vulnerable being, who can be taken away at any moment. After Chad's sudden and traumatic death I, like many other bereaved individuals (Sanders, 1999), felt for the first time that I was vulnerable to death. When I realized my own mortality I also became keenly aware that anyone could be killed as suddenly as Chad.

When I think about Bobby's mortality I have very morbid thoughts of what life would be like without him and they alone cause me tremendous pain and anxiety. Bobby has been my rock since the day we began dating and while I feel his vulnerability I am now able to use this feeling to allow me to appreciate him more and appreciate each day we have with one another.

CHAPTER 5

MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSELESS

This has been a journey I know I will never forget. Constructing this autoethnography has been the most challenging, academic undertaking I have ever experienced. Through this process, I was able to learn a great deal about myself and how the loss of Chad has effected me, still effects me, and will continue to effect me for the rest of my life. Every day of this project has been a struggle, mentally, physically and especially emotionally. I have experienced exhaustion the likes of which I have not known since the time immediately after Chad died. As exhausting and painful as this experience has been for me I have learned more than I could have dreamed throughout the process.

I could have written about Chad's loss forever. I could have explored it from numerous angles outside of the ones I have covered. As I read back through my narratives, and experience my journey once again, I am struck by the three main emergent themes of isolation, identity, and guilt. The narratives contain much more than these three elements, but they serve as the umbrella, under which the finer points of my journey reside. The narratives I have written contain discussions of my immediate shift of reality, my appreciation for my mother and family, my finding a place in the world, the importance of dreams, the benefits of my time in counseling, my feelings of guilt, and the vulnerability of life. Throughout this thesis I have been able to examine how I found my place in "the group," and how losing that place when Chad died and the resulting

stigmatization I felt contributed to my feelings of isolation. I have seen changes in my identity and sense of self as I now hold a greater appreciation for my family and friends. I have also examined how feelings of worry and vulnerability continue to impact me. I have finally made peace with the feelings of guilt I have been harboring over the past five years. I have been able to examine how communicative processes have helped me identify my feelings of isolation, identity and guilt. I have also learned a great deal about the process of autoethnography and the challenges it carries.

Isolation

Even amongst the group, I have always felt alone in my grief over Chad's death. I appreciated the group, and I leaned on them heavily, but no matter how many caring individuals I surrounded myself with I still felt isolated with my grief. I withdrew from my peers at St. Mary's because they did not understand what I was going through. I shut out others who would have liked to help me because I did not feel that they could comprehend the feelings of grief I was being riddled with. I shut out my family because I felt the burn of a stigma upon me. As an adolescent I felt that everyone was watching me grieve and judging how I was struggling through the process (Noppe & Noppe, 2004).

A great deal of my isolation came from the immense feelings of guilt carried around with me for years after Chad died. I felt angry with him, and then guilty for being so angry with my dead best friend. I did not know how common it was for those going through the grieving process to blame the one whom had died (Lord, 2000). I thought and felt that I was the only one who had been experiencing such a strong emotion and

therefore I could go to no one with these feelings. I further felt isolated by the loss of my best friend. As an adolescent, the peer group I surrounded myself with was more than a social group - it was my identity (Noppe & Noppe 2004; Gordon, 1986). Chad, as my best friend, was at the core of this identity forming peer group. With his loss I felt that I had lost a part of myself and therefore was no longer whole, causing me to pull away from others and place all of my energy into mourning Chad.

Identity

Surviving Chad's loss has profoundly impacted my sense of self as well as my identity. I have the feeling that I walk around having been through something that no one else has been through. In a way, knowing that I can make it through the loss of dear friend and come out on the other side battered and bruised but still standing has increased my self-confidence. I have been through something incredibly difficult and survived. I have gotten up mornings when all I wanted to do was hide under the covers and stay where I was forever. I have breathed in and out every day, even when it felt I was choking on each breath. I did not let grief take me down, even when I wanted to. I am stronger and I am a better person for it.

I have lost the shelter of my upbringing, and have a clearer picture of what the world is like. I have lost my egocentric and spoiled ideas that bad things only happen to other people, and now my eyes have opened to what the world is really like. I have a greater appreciation for those who I love and need, and I am not afraid to admit that by telling others how important they are to me. Due to the time I spent in counseling, I am

also more open to asking for help and admitting that I need something from someone else.

Losing a close friend in adolescence can cause a bereaved individual life long consequences and changes in trajectory (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). The path I thought I was on before Chad died became drastically different after his loss. I was planning a life of public service, but my cynicism caused me to jump that ship under the belief that because the world was such a harsh and difficult place I, as one person, could not make a difference. My feelings were that I could do nothing to change the unfairness of the world so why even try. If bad things were going to happen to anyone, at any time what could I do to make a difference? My concept of the world was shattered which caused my concept of self and my identity to be changed as well.

After Chad died fear became a part of my identity in a way that it had never been before. After Chad's sudden and traumatic death I could now see and feel the vulnerability of life as my youthful concept of immortality was shaken off (Noppe & Noppe, 2004; Lord, 2000). I began to fear losing another person I loved and became vigilant about making phone calls and ensuring that those I am closest with are healthy and safe at all times. I still keep this up today and feel immediately nervous if someone is not available when they normally are, or are not answering their phone when it seems that they should be. At times I admit the fear is a bit paralyzing and I struggle with it everyday. I struggle to not feel that at any moment the rug will pulled out from under me, and that my reality will be sent into a tailspin once more. I now know that the world is

not a safe and secure place where as long as you are normal person you will be spared abnormal fates. The world is vulnerable and I fear that.

Not all of my restructuring of self was negative. Since I had realized that bad things do happen to good people, to normal people, I began to see the value in all of those who I held dear. While I am much less likely to see that things happen for the best, I am much more likely to view those around me as the best of humankind. I have formed a strong relationship with a wonderful man. This relationship has endured many hardships, which has lead us to feel we can be ourselves with one another and that no matter what we face, we can face it together and overcome it, because we have already endured great tragedy. I have a greater appreciation for my mother and all that she and my father have been through and have had to give up to make my life as easy as it has been.

I think often about what is written on Chad's grave marker: "It is not about how much you take. It is about how much you give." It is a direct quote from Chad, and is the mantra for how he lived his life. He was always thinking of others and taking care of those around him. He had a great appreciation for those who he loved and he was not afraid of telling everyone how he felt. That is perhaps the most important thing that Chad and the experience of his death have taught me. I cannot be afraid to tell people how I feel about them. My identity of a sheltered and spoiled adolescent has changed into one of a strong minded and willed young woman who is not afraid to speak her mind and not afraid to admit her feelings. I do not get off the phone with someone I care about without telling him or her how I feel. "I love you" have taken on new importance in my world.

My identity as a believer in a kind, caring, and all powerful higher being is gone. My cynicism and anger has replaced this concept with one of a more hands off higher being. Some form of energy that has created the universe and set back to let it run itself. I believe in very few, if any, Truths. Instead I see that much of the world is relative. As human beings and members of whichever society we are a part of, we create and recreate that society through our interactions with one another. This creation and recreation of society is done through symbol sharing and communication. The theory of Symbolic Interaction argues that the world does not exist “out there,” but is constructed through interactions between society members. As Denzin(1977) points out, “Any theory of society must ultimately answer the question, ‘How do selves develop out of the interaction process?’” (p. 114). Autoethnography is both a method and a theory for how humans development a sense of self and create and recreate society. Through my autoethnographic exploration I have been able to examine how Chad’s death has impacted my identity formation, my feelings of isolation and guilt and how they have permanently changed the trajectory of my life.

Guilt

Going into this project, I had thought I had worked through my feelings of guilt dealing with Chad’s death. What I found out, through my writing and through the reading of old journals and notes from the past five years, is that I never overcame my feelings that I could have done something to save Chad and that I was to blame for how dastardly our last conversation was. I found myself drawn to write about that last conversation over

and over again, and I could not finish this project without exploring how I still felt about my guilt. Writing about why I was continually riddled with feelings of guilt finally purged me of many of these feelings. It was difficult to write and it was difficult to relive many of those emotions, but I feel better for having done so.

I realize that I blamed myself, not because I felt I could have actually done something to stop Chad from dying, but because I needed to make sense of his death and to create reason where there was none. Sanders (1999) and Lord (2000) both outline survivor grief as primarily a sense making tool. Chad's death was a tragic accident that does not make any sense. By blaming myself I could make it make sense. If it was my fault then perhaps the assumptions of justice that I had always lived with made sense. It was easier for me to believe that Chad died because of something I did rather than for no reason at all. Chad's death did not make sense to me and blaming myself made it make sense.

I have been able to find comfort in the literature I have read dealing with survivor guilt. Lord (2000), Sanders (1999), Noppe and Noppe (2004) each describe the elevated level of guilt that comes from being a bereaved adolescent. This is furthered by the typically sudden and traumatic nature of adolescent death (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Through the reading of narratives and examples throughout each of above mentioned texts I have been able to see that I am not the only bereaved individual to blame myself. This has helped me work through the feelings of isolation I have still carried with me as well. By working through these feelings of guilt, and finally being able to do something proactive about them, I believe I have found closure on this issue that four years of

counseling alone could not provide for me. The only way for me to work through my feelings of guilt was to write them out and work through them on paper. I believe that counseling was a vital part in grieving process and I believe that writing autoethnographically was the next step necessary to get me through my guilt.

Communication

Throughout this process I have become keenly aware of how my identity was reconstructed after Chad died. The ways in which others interacted with me, their methods of communication and how I was able to view myself in relation to others demonstrates how reality is created and constantly recreated through communication. Carolyn Ellis writes in *The Ethnographic I* (2004), that “[she] perceive[s] the discipline of communication as flexible and open to alternative methodologies” (p. 14), which makes it a prime outlet for autoethnographic writing in areas that are well served through narrative analysis, such as grief research. I have used this experience as an opportunity to examine how I responded to various types of responses communicated to me during my grieving process.

Humans are symbol using beings. I have been able to explore the symbols I have used and that have been used in response to my grieving process. These symbols have helped define my world and construct my reality. Blumer (1969) points out that meaning is created through symbolic interaction between individuals. I constructed my world after Chad based upon what I was thinking and feeling about his death. I was influenced in my

thinking and feelings by those around me. I constructed meaning from the ways in which others acted towards me with regard to Chad's death.

Furthermore after writing and exploring my narratives I am able to see what Richardson (1997) was speaking of when she described writing as not only a mode of representation, but also a method of knowing the self. I have been able to explore and communicate my feelings with not only the outside world of other bereaved individuals and scholars, but with myself. By using autoethnography I have been able to gaze inward and examine my self, and I have been able to stand outside of myself and explore what I have found.

Writing through grief

I felt alone in my feelings of guilt, anger, isolation and heavy-handed sadness. Feeling alone with these emotions only intensifies them. Hopefully others, especially other bereaved adolescents, can take some solace from my work and realize that they are not alone with their feelings. Every experience of grief is unique and must be handled on an individual level; however, it is important for bereaved individuals to not feel stigmatized in their grief. Sanders (1999) points out that American society tends to be uncomfortable with grief which leads the bereaved to feel, "embarrassed, even shameful" (p. 14), about their feelings. Feelings of shame and embarrassment tend to be increased when a loved one was lost in a sudden and traumatic manner (Lord, 2000). This happens because of the commonly held belief that "bad things happen to bad people" and therefore if a loved one was lost suddenly it was a punishment for something the

deceased had done or often times a loved one will feel as if she is being punished.

Individuals attempting to help loved ones deal with grief often do not know what to do or how to help the bereaved. The fact that so many bereaved individuals feel that they cannot talk to anyone because of the stigma makes the reading and writing of narratives all the more important. It is my hope that others make take an aspect of my writing and my experiences and use it to help them understand the situation they find themselves in.

I hope that scholars in the grief community can use my work to better understand how bereaved individuals grieve and to see what the process is like for someone. There are numerous examples and cases that are studied for how individuals understand and progress through the grieving process, and yet each helps and can add to the research on grief (Ellis, 1995). Mine is just one of many examples of how individuals experience grief, but it is a perspective unique to itself, just as each person's experience is unique and can aide in the process. For those in the counseling community, autoethnographies of grief could be useful to provide an insight to grieving clients to read and to perhaps encourage them to write their own narratives about their own experience.

The writing process has been therapeutic for me and has allowed me to uncover issues, such as my feelings of guilt which have been simmering for over five years (Ellis, 2004). The writing of narratives may not help everyone, but it did help me and I believe it can help others, at the very least it can be an opportunity to purge feelings that perhaps have no other outlet. Through writing I was able to construct what happened to Chad and what happened to me as a result. I was able to construct my reality through my writing

(Ellis, 2004), and this helped me make sense of what happened and how I have been effected by my experiences.

Sense-Making

So I am now left with the question: “Have I been able to make sense of the tragedy of Chad’s death?” Well the answer to that would be both yes and no. Chad’s death was an accident. A cold, cruel, tragic accident and there is no making sense of accidents, except to understand that they are exactly that. However, I can now come to terms with that fact in a way that I could not before. I can accept that Chad died in an accident. I can accept that I am not to blame and that he is not to blame. The simple fact of the matter is that sometimes bad things happen to normal people. It is not fair, and it is not right that Chad died at nineteen, but it is a fact of life that I must come to terms with. I do not have to get over Chad’s death, that is impossible, but I do have to move on with life and I feel that I have done so.

I have had this story inside me for five and a half years. I have needed to write my story, but before I began this project I was not ready to do so. For years after Chad died I held this story inside and did not know what venue I could use to tell my story. Once I began to learn about autoethnography a light bulb went off in my head. I had found the way to tell my story and the audience to direct it at. I have had a topic for five years and no way to explore it until autoethnography found me. Once it did I found a home and place for my story and my healing process.

My healing process will never be complete, because even though he is dead my relationship with Chad has not ended (Lord, 2000; Noppe & Noppe, 2004). “Grief is a process not an endpoint,” (Clements, et. al. 2004) and I am glad to finally know that. I have been running around for five and half years wondering why I am not “over it.” I have felt that perhaps I have grieved too much; that there is something wrong with me because I still mourn Chad. I have felt like I am holding on to an apparition because I have not been ready to let go. What I realize is that in all the fear I have carried about not being normal I have secured myself as a normal person with normal feelings and emotions. They are not like everyone else’s, because Chad, our relationship, and I are not like everyone else. We are unique and the feelings I have are unique, but normal. I am not as alone as I have felt.

Feeling grief, allowing oneself to mourn is very important (Ellis, 1995; Sanders, 1992, 1999). I have never pushed away my feelings of grief. I have let them come and wash over me, even when it hurt so bad I could barely breath. I have often felt that I was grieving too long, but I understand now that there is no cookie cutter time line and that feeling the grief in the way I have been may be very healthy. Kubler-Ross (1969) and Sanders (1992, 1999), both point out that it is very necessary to mourn and that while the first year of grief may be the locus of pain it is not uncommon or unhealthy for grief to last longer and for grief spasms to continue for years. Lord (2000), who studies sudden and traumatic bereavement points out that the main crux of a sudden loss may take three or four years to normalize. It does not honor Chad to dwell on my grief, but at the same time I cannot push away feelings, which are real and important to me. I have expected to

one day be better and not mourn Chad anymore. What I have learned through this process is that I will continue to mourn Chad forever. The experience of mourning will change. It is continually easier, but I still have “grief spasms” (Lord, 2000), and should expect to continue having them. Grief spasm often flare up around the anniversary of Chad’s death, occasional discussions of the crash that still pop up in the media, and trigger examples, such as television stories, movies and books.

I had to make sense of a new reality that included teen-age friends being killed and in order to do that I had to realize that not everything is fair and just and that things did not always make sense. I created my reality through the experiences I had after Chad’s death and the interactions I had with others. The society in which I was grieving was acting upon me to recreate my reality and as I was doing this I was acting back upon society. As Carolyn Ellis (2004) states, “those who practice symbolic interaction are interested in people communicating in social relationships, people who act back on culture at the same time they’re influenced, constrained and liberated by it” (p. 14). Individuals acting upon society and society acting back upon individuals create and recreate reality.

Autoethnography

I will never finish the journey of my relationship with Chad, but before I wrap up the journey of this thesis I feel the need to explore some of my feelings about the process of autoethnography. It is hard! That is the best way I can describe it. It is a much more difficult process than I ever imaged it would be. The construction of my narratives was

one of the most painful experiences I have had since Chad died. I have sat in my dimly light office or at my favorite coffeehouse and let stories unfold about the most painful time of my life. As I wrote my narratives I felt as if I had been placed in a time machine and sent back in my mind and emotions five years. As I wrote about finding out Chad was dead I was forced to relive how that moment felt. My throat constricted, my heart hammered, my stomach was upset the rest of the day, as I allowed those emotions to wash over me once more.

Going through Chad's death was hard enough the first time, and as I explored it through narratives I often asked myself why I was doing this. I often told myself I was crazy for going through all of this again. But then I began to explore what I had written. I began to see my emotions and what I had gone through in a different light and I realized why I was doing this. I was doing this to finally understand what I had gone through. Immediately after Chad's death I was too caught up in the struggle of day to day life, of dealing with loss still fresh in my mind and heart, to explore what these feelings meant and how they were effecting me. I think that is why I was never able to fully deal with my feelings of guilt. I was so busy in the moment that I could not understand what I was feeling or why. The distance I have now, the time I have had to formulate my story has allowed me to see it in a new light and be a bit detached from it. This has been one of the most painful and yet rewarding experiences of my life. I have been able to look deep into myself and it has been an enlightening experience.

As I read back through my narratives, I am struck with how much more I could have added. The single most experience in my life and over five years of growth since

that time could have kept me writing on this project for years. I have left out more than I even realize, but what I think I have here is a core of writings that give a unique insight into my experiences. They are not comprehensive, but they are indicative of my experiences. There have been some narratives that I did not write because they were not relevant or did not fit into the overall pattern I was crafting. Some did not fit into flow and some I just was not ready to tell. I am grateful for the opportunity to tell this story. I have always liked to talk about Chad. He was an incredibly wonderful human being and I hope that throughout this autoethnography I have been able to honor him and how truly special I feel that he is.

Seeing Chad

*I still see Chad. It has been over five years since he died and I still catch site of him from time to time. I see him lopping across the engineering key towards me as I walk to my building. I see him out of the corner of my eye browsing at Barnes and Noble. I catch a whiff of him in passing at Target. My heart will catch and I will turn around for one blissful moment lost in a past that still contains a living, breathing Chad Powell. But the moment passes and I shake my head. Almost disgusted with myself for not being able to move on from this point. I berate myself for being foolish. He is long dead and gone. He is not coming back. And yet I still cannot shake the feeling that perhaps it is him. I recently read an interesting account of the after life in Alice Sebold's (2002) novel, *The Lovely Bones*. In this account Heaven is a place that still allows the dead a chance to communicate with the living. It addresses those moments in time when I feel I see Chad,*

smell him, and hear him. It is him communicating with me for only a moment his way of still touching my life. I have felt him before. Not just the aura of him, but his touch.

One rainy morning when I was still at St. Mary's I was crossing our slipping stone quad and I slipped. I would have fallen on my rear end if a hand had not touched the small of my back to break my fall. I felt it at that moment. I felt Chad reach out to catch me. There was another time when a friend and I were driving to dinner in San Antonio. As I was heading down the road an eighteen wheeler jack-knifed coming straight at us from the opposite direction. I did not have time to react. Somehow without touching the wheel our car was out of the way. If I did not know better I would have sworn the truck had to have passed right through us. I have never put much stock in the concept of guardian angels until Chad died. No one protected Chad for whatever reason the night he died, but he protects me. He keeps me safe.

A few weeks after Chad died I had a concerning conversation with Loren. She had not been doing well. She was strangled by grief and was falling headfirst into depression. One night after a particularly scary conversation with her I began my nightly ritual of talking to Chad. If my roommate ever heard my whispered conversation with Chad she never mentioned it. We were not exactly what I would call friends, although we did care about one another and would help each other out in any way we could. She knew I needed these chats with Chad and did not want to interrupt.

"Chad, I am really worried about Loren," I began as if I was just chatting with him over the phone. She is depressed and doesn't feel like she can feel you anymore. She is worried sick about you and is plagued with guilt and images of your death. She is

having some pretty bad dreams so now she doesn't want to go to sleep. You need to do something to help her. I need your help to fix this."

Some nights I would talk to him for hours. I would outline my day, problems I was having, school or family concerns and discussions about how the group was doing. These were little mundane things to make him feel he was still apart of this world. But eventually the tone would always change. I would cry and plead with him to come back. I would apologize over and over again for our argument. I would barter, saying I would give anything to have him back. I would tell him how much he meant to me and how much I needed him. Often times I would dissolve into anger. Anger at Chad for leaving. Anger at A&M for letting that stupid pile of logs get built. Anger at what I felt was a very unjust and unloving God. Anger at myself for not appreciating him enough. I would end every conversation with Chad with a simple, "I love you so much and miss you more than anything. I wish you would come home."

The day after I pleaded with Chad to help Loren she called me. She sounded much better.

"You sound like you are doing a bit better," I said cautiously.

"I feel better," Loren said with a smile I could hear through the phone. "Okay don't think I am crazy, but I had a dream about Chad last night. I was as if he came to make me feel better. It was not scary like the other dreams. He told me that he was okay. That I would be okay. He wanted me to be okay. He gave me permission to be okay. I think I needed that and didn't even know it."

I was startled by her revelations to me. The night before when I was talking to Chad I told him Loren was not going to be okay until she felt it was all right with him. I never told Loren about this. I never told anyone, but I did get off the phone with Loren and spend a few moments thanking Chad. He had helped us both with Loren's dream. I knew he could still hear me.

Since I began this autoethnography I have dreamed often of Chad. I still see him and I still feel his presence in my life. A relationship does not end simply because one of the individuals dies. It continues in an altered form in the memories and experiences of the individual still living. I believe that the way a relationship endures past death is through dreams and conversations the living individual still has with the deceased. While dreams may never end for the bereaved they can be seen as a way in which the deceased says good-bye, as was the case with Loren's dream (Sanders, 1992).

I read this back to myself and I realize it sounds a bit metaphysical, but it is honest. I do not have a clear idea of what the afterlife is, but I believe in it wholeheartedly. To imagine that the couple of years I had with Chad is all we will ever have is unacceptable to me. I must believe that there is something more. I have been able to explore these feelings in detail throughout this process and come out from under the embarrassment and isolation of feeling as if I am the only one who believes I can still have a relationship with a deceased friend.

While I do not accept that my relationship with Chad will ever come to an end, and while I realize that my grief will also be never-ending, I do realize that this specific

autoethnography needs closure. I do not think I can ever be prepared for the loss of a loved one. Each loss is unique in the emotions that it brings forth because of the unique relationship I have with each of my loved ones. While I know that I cannot prepare for future crises I can say that I have been able, through this process, to develop skills and pieces of knowledge about myself which will allow me to feel better prepared for whatever the future may hold. I am not prepared to lose another loved one, but I am prepared and more confident in my abilities to survive and continue moving forward down the road of life.

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