

MASTERS DISSERTATION

DISCOVERING SPIRITUAL MEANING
THROUGH ONGOING BONDS IN THE FACE OF
DEATH

Submitted by:
SHRUTI JAIN
OCTOBER 2025

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INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with death came in childhood. In a dream, my mother appeared to me after dying, whispering that I would never be alone. Later, when my grandfather passed away, I cried for weeks—perhaps grieving on my mother’s behalf as much as my own. These early experiences seeded a lifelong curiosity about loss, love, and the persistence of connection beyond the physical.

That curiosity deepened when my parents died—my mother in 2018 and my father three years later. Their deaths dissolved the distance between theory and life. With my father, I shared long conversations about mortality and the afterlife; with my mother, I witnessed a serene readiness for dying. These were not simply losses to endure but thresholds that awakened a spiritual inquiry into what remains when the body is gone and how relationships might continue in new forms.

The sudden death of a close friend’s fourteen-year-old daughter intensified this reflection. Her mother spoke of signs suggesting her daughter somehow knew her time was limited—a recognition that echoed my mother’s quiet readiness. These encounters led me to wonder whether, at a soul level, we might sense when death draws near—and perhaps it is only those who have begun their own spiritual awakening who can recognise this knowing, even in the midst of profound grief.

This dissertation is both personal testimony and professional inquiry. As an existential psychotherapist who later became a death doula, I found that grief opened a path toward meaning and spiritual awareness. My story sits within the intersection of psychotherapy, spirituality, and grief theory and asks: **How might spirituality be discovered through ongoing bonds in the face of death?** Using phenomenological autoethnography, I aim to honour the intimacy of lived experience while contributing to the wider understanding of death, dying, and the human search for meaning.

Journeying through the deaths of my parents drew me ever more deeply into the existential concerns that underpin psychotherapy and human life itself—finitude, freedom, death, and meaning. What I had once understood theoretically became embodied in grief and love.

Through this I came to see that spirituality and existential thought are not opposites but companions in the search for meaning.

This journey did not simply change what I believed; it changed how I experienced being. The questions that arose—about mortality, love, continuity, and purpose—were not abstract or academic but lived and embodied. As both therapist and mourner, I found myself drawn to the existential ideas that had long underpinned my professional world, now illuminated through personal truth.

To explore these questions, I turn to existential philosophy, which illuminates how mortality, freedom, and meaning intertwine. Drawing on *Heidegger (1962/2008)*, *Sartre (1943/2003)*, *Frankl (2006)*, and *van Deurzen's (2012) Four Worlds model*, I examine how spirituality emerged through my lived experience of loss.

Finitude

Finitude reminds us that life is framed by its ending. Heidegger (1962/2008) suggests that authentic living arises when we live with death in view rather than in denial of it. My parents' deaths brought this awareness into sharp relief. Their absence made the fragility of existence undeniable, yet within that pain I sensed continuity rather than finality—an awareness that love and spirit endure beyond the physical. Finitude thus became not a boundary but a sacred invitation to live and love more consciously.

Death and Thrownness

Death confronts us with the ultimate boundary—where being and non-being meet. Heidegger (1962/2008) describes this rupture as *thrownness (Geworfenheit)*: the shattering of our taken-for-granted world. Sitting beside my mother's still body and later holding my father's hand, I experienced death not as annihilation but as transformation—a moment when the fabric of time dissolved, revealing both loss and mystery. Life and death coexisted in the same breath.

As a therapist, I had long accompanied clients struggling to live after loss, yet it was only through my own bereavements that mortality became real. Tonkin's (1996) model of "*growing around grief*"—which views grief as enduring and healing as expansion around its core—became not just a framework but a lived truth. It taught me that the task is not to overcome grief but to live alongside it as an ongoing expression of love.

My lived experience transformed theory into embodiment, grounding me as a more compassionate therapist. Acceptance of death, I learned, does not mean relinquishing love; it means integrating loss into living. In therapy I have seen how, when grief and vitality coexist, clients rediscover meaning and presence. The human capacity to hold sorrow and hope together makes existence sacred.

Thrownness and Spiritual Acceptance

Heidegger's (1962/2008) notion of *thrownness* describes how we find ourselves born into conditions not of our choosing—families, cultures, and histories that precede choice. This state of being “thrown” is not punishment but the human condition itself, the ground from which we must respond and create meaning within limitation.

When my parents were dying, I was thrown into simultaneous roles: daughter, caregiver, witness, and mourner. The sterile light of hospital rooms, the long nights of uncertainty, the rituals of parting—none were chosen, yet each demanded presence. For a long time, I resisted this thrownness, wishing to rewrite the story, to undo what had already unfolded. But no protest could alter what was before me.

It was within this surrender—this gradual softening toward what is—that spirituality began to unfold as an orientation rather than a belief. Meaning was not found in changing the circumstances of death but in deepening my relationship with them. To stay present with suffering became an act of reverence. In time, I realised that this surrender was not passive resignation but a form of acceptance that invited grace. As I sat beside each parent at the threshold of death, I learned that life itself was continually inviting me to let go—to loosen my grip on certainty, identity, and even control.

Paradoxically, this existential acceptance gave rise to a transpersonal understanding. Over time, I began to question Heidegger's assertion that we are entirely without choice in our thrownness. From a spiritual and Hindu perspective, I sensed that the conditions of our birth and death might themselves be chosen at a soul level—opportunities to evolve through lessons of love, loss, and surrender (Radhakrishnan, 1993; Vivekananda, 1896/2010). My parents, their deaths, and my grief became the very conditions through which compassion and

purpose emerged. What once seemed random began to feel intentional—a choreography of the soul guiding me toward awareness.

Sartre and Existential Freedom

Sartre (1943/2003) viewed freedom not as escape from circumstance but as the capacity to choose one's stance within it. Earlier in life, I often lived in ways that obscured that freedom—caught in cycles of disconnection, restlessness, and self-avoidance. My inner world was marked by tension and unhappiness; I buried discomfort in relentless busyness and surrounded myself with noise that left no space for silence or reflection. Alcohol and cigarettes became quiet companions that dulled what I could not yet face. Only later did I recognize that this, too, was a choice—a way of living that denied my own being. The slow awakening that followed was not redemptive but gradual, a turning toward self-awareness and compassion. Through grief, I learned that freedom is inseparable from responsibility: to honour one's own existence, to act with authenticity, and to choose presence over avoidance. In accepting my vulnerability, I began to understand Sartre's claim that we are “condemned to be free”—not doomed, but entrusted with the continual task of shaping ourselves through meaning.

Freedom, Responsibility, and Transformation in Grief

Frankl (2006) extends Sartre's notion of freedom into the realm of meaning, suggesting that true liberty lies not in external choice but in how we respond inwardly to suffering. Even in the most powerless situations, “everything can be taken from a man but one thing—the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances” (Frankl, 2006, p. 86).

In the aftermath of my parents' deaths, I began to understand this truth. While I could not choose for them to live, I discovered I could choose how to live after them. This choice was neither instantaneous nor heroic—it was slow and often resisted. Yet with each decision to stay open—to meditate instead of numb, to sit in silence rather than flee, to accompany others in their dying—I reclaimed the smallest but most vital freedom: the freedom to make meaning from loss.

As grief evolved, freedom became intertwined with responsibility and purpose. In choosing to live consciously with absence, I was also choosing presence. Engaging in ritual, prayer,

writing, and later my death-doula work became ways of transforming despair into devotion. This movement from suffering to service reflected Frankl's conviction that meaning arises when pain is transfigured into something that reaches beyond the self. What had once felt like unbearable emptiness became the ground of compassion—a space where life and death could coexist.

Together, Sartre (2003) and Frankl (2006) reveal two sides of the same truth: we are responsible for our choices, and through them we can transform suffering into significance. This understanding became the ground on which I rebuilt my world after loss, bridging existential philosophy and lived spirituality.

Van Deurzen's Four Worlds

Emmy van Deurzen's (2012) Four Worlds model offers a framework for understanding existence across four dimensions—the physical (Umwelt), social (Mitwelt), personal (Eigenwelt), and spiritual (Überwelt)—each shaping and reflecting the others. When movement between these worlds becomes blocked, people experience disconnection and loss of meaning. In grief, disruption occurs simultaneously: the physical world registers absence; the social world reorganises through altered roles and silence; the personal world confronts identity; and the spiritual world opens questions of transcendence and ongoing bonds. Her Structural Existential Analysis (SEA) uses lenses such as time, space, purpose, paradox, and passion to restore flow between worlds, helping mourners integrate loss so that continuing bonds become livable rather than obstructive.

The deaths of my parents shattered the fragile coherence of these worlds. In the physical realm, daily rhythms altered irreversibly—their belongings, once ordinary, became sacred relics. Within the social realm, my identity as daughter dissolved and conversations about death grew muted, exposing cultural unease. In the personal realm, my sense of self fractured; I oscillated between despair and awakening. Yet through the spiritual realm, a form of coherence began to return. Dreams, synchronicities, and moments of felt presence suggested that love and consciousness persist beyond form. This movement across the four worlds revealed grief not only as fragmentation but as reorganisation—an invitation to inhabit all dimensions of existence with awareness and authenticity.

Meaning as Existential Thread

Meaning, finally, is not given but created through engagement with life's realities (Frankl, 2006). Grief dismantled certainty yet revealed continuity, showing that love, memory, and spirit coexist with absence. In this interplay I discovered spirituality as lived meaning—the capacity to remain in relationship with what is no longer visible. Through confronting death, I came to recognise life itself as sacred, fragile, and infinitely interconnected.

The chapters that follow build upon this foundation. Through phenomenological autoethnography, I explore how encounters with death disclosed an emergent spirituality and transformed both my personal and therapeutic ways of being. By situating lived experience within existential philosophy and grief theory, this dissertation contributes to a growing dialogue on how meaning can be discovered not despite death but through it—revealing the continuing bonds that sustain our humanity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My exploration of grief and spirituality is grounded in both philosophical inquiry and lived experience. In this literature review, I draw upon existential thinkers alongside contemporary bereavement and spiritual writers, to situate my journey within a wider human search for meaning. Through these writings, I explore how awareness of mortality invites presence, how suffering gives rise to purpose, and how spirituality can deepen our capacity to accompany others in loss. This review forms the foundation for my phenomenological autoethnography—an inquiry into how love, death, and meaning intertwine through my lived experience of becoming a death doula.

Before turning to the existential thinkers themselves, it is necessary to consider the existing research that frames this inquiry. Few studies have adopted a phenomenological and autoethnographic approach to exploring spirituality in continuing bonds. One notable exception is Ter Haar and Smid (2025), who employ an autoethnographic grief narrative to examine how identity and relational presence evolve following the death of a loved one. Their findings reveal that through reflective writing and dialogical engagement with memory, the bereaved self becomes fluid and relational rather than fixed. Ongoing dialogue with the deceased—through ritual, imagination, and inner conversation—emerges as a process that transforms both identity and temporality. By framing grief as an evolving interplay between absence and presence, their study demonstrates how autoethnography can illuminate the existential and temporal dimensions of mourning, showing that relational continuity is not merely psychological but ontological. This insight underscores how lived narrative can disclose the evolving relationship between spirituality, identity, and meaning after loss.

Most contemporary qualitative research on spirituality and continuing bonds remains within thematic or narrative frameworks. For example, Čepulienė et al. (2023) explored spirituality-related continuing bonds among women bereaved by suicide, identifying patterns of connection through memory, ritual, and embodied presence. Spirituality often served as a bridge for reconstructing meaning and sustaining an inner relationship with the deceased—through dream encounters, symbols, and acts of remembrance that helped integrate loss rather than sever attachment. Meaning-making emerged less from doctrinal belief than from lived, experiential knowing—a felt sense of connection that restored coherence and purpose. While illuminating, such studies rarely position the researcher’s lived experience as primary

data. In contrast, phenomenological autoethnography allows embodied experience to become both subject and method, revealing the intersubjective textures of grief from within.

This dissertation therefore responds to a clear gap in the literature. It extends the conversation on continuing bonds by exploring spirituality not as belief but as lived, sensed relationship. Through phenomenological autoethnography, I seek to understand not only how connection with the dead persists, but how it is lived—through body, memory, and symbol. This approach contributes to existential psychotherapy by re-situating spirituality as an experiential reality rather than an abstract construct, bridging existential and transpersonal dimensions of practice.

Having established the limited scope of existing autoethnographic inquiry into spirituality and continuing bonds, I now turn to the existential thinkers whose philosophies underpin this study. Their ideas on finitude, death, freedom, and meaning form the theoretical foundation through which my lived experience can be more deeply understood.

1. Death and Finitude: Being-Toward-Death and the Awakening to Presence

Death is the most fundamental fact of existence, yet perhaps the least confronted. Within the existential tradition, death is not a tragic interruption but the very condition that gives life meaning. Heidegger (1962/2008) described human existence as *Being-toward-death*—a continuous awareness that our lives are finite. To exist authentically is to live “resolutely toward death,” recognising it not as a distant event but as an ever-present horizon. “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 298), inviting us to hold mortality as companion rather than intruder. This notion underpins my research question by situating spirituality within mortality rather than beyond it. In tracing how ongoing bonds with the dead emerge through this awareness, my study examines how confronting finitude can awaken an experiential spirituality—lived through presence, connection, and meaning rather than belief alone.

For Rollo May (1958), this confrontation generates the anxiety that underpins all human striving. When faced courageously, anxiety becomes a source of creativity: “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom,” May echoed from Kierkegaard (1844/1980)—a signal that we are alive to possibility. Paul Tillich (1952) called this stance *the courage to be*—affirming existence despite non-being. To live authentically, then, is to accept death as inseparable

from life, not its opposite. Both illuminate how mortality awakens the search for meaning, supporting my inquiry by showing that the encounter with death does not merely evoke fear; it can invite a spirituality grounded in choice, courage, and the lived experience of connection with those who have died.

Yalom observed that “though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us” (Yalom, 1980, p. 29). Awareness of mortality can awaken a richer, more compassionate engagement with life; in clinical work, it often reorders values toward connection and gratitude. I recognised this shift within myself. Sitting beside my parents as they died, I felt time dilate—each breath thick with significance. Their dying presence stripped away non-essentials, leaving only love, humility, and the fragile miracle of being. Yalom’s insight informs my research question by revealing how mortality awareness can expand relational life, aligning with my exploration of spirituality as a lived, ongoing bond rediscovered *through* death rather than *despite* it.

By contrast, Ernest Becker (1973) argued that modern Western culture represses this truth through “immortality projects”—distractions and ambitions that defend against the terror of non-existence. Recognising this softened my frustration with avoidance and deepened my resolve to create spaces where death can be spoken about without fear. Becker’s analysis clarifies why spirituality and ongoing bonds matter: they counter cultural denial by transforming silence into dialogue. Acknowledging death becomes the ground upon which spiritual connection and meaning can arise.

Taken together, these thinkers reveal that confronting death is inseparable from the search for meaning. Heidegger’s resoluteness, May’s creative anxiety, Tillich’s courage to be, Yalom’s vitality in mortality, and Becker’s exposure of denial converge on one truth: finitude discloses life’s depth. This understanding positions spirituality as an embodied response to death—an awareness that life and love persist through meaning-making, connection, and presence.

While existential philosophers illuminate meaning-making within mortality, spiritual writers extend this exploration into the transpersonal realm—where consciousness, energy, and love are seen to transcend physical death. Authors such as Sue Frederick (2013), Suzanne Giesemann (2020, 2021), Joe Dispenza (2019), and Michael Newton (1994, 2000, 2003)

offer experiential and metaphysical perspectives that resonate with the existential call to live authentically in the face of finitude. Their work bridges the psychological and the spiritual, suggesting that grief can become a channel for transformation rather than despair. Together, they deepen the inquiry central to this dissertation: how spirituality may be discovered through ongoing bonds with the dead—not as a denial of loss but as an expansion of being. Thus, within both existential and spiritual frameworks, death emerges as a paradoxical gift: it wounds and awakens simultaneously. In confronting finitude, we discover life’s depth; in facing loss, we encounter love’s endurance. This dialectic of pain and awakening sets the stage for the themes of freedom, meaning, and spirituality that follow.

2. Freedom and Responsibility: The Weight of Choice in Grief

If death discloses the limits of life, freedom reveals its weight. Existential thinkers view freedom not as permission but as responsibility. Sartre (1943/2003) put it starkly: “Man is condemned to be free.” We are thrown into existence without consent, yet cannot escape choosing. Even refusal is a choice; even silence speaks. Simone de Beauvoir (1947/2018) extends this insight, arguing that freedom must always be exercised *in situation*—within concrete conditions, relationships, and histories. Freedom is thus relational and embodied, never absolute.

In grief, this paradox becomes vivid. I could not choose my parents’ deaths, but I remained free to decide how to live in their absence. May (1953) called this the paradox of destiny: we are both determined and free, bound by circumstance yet capable of transcending it through awareness. My early attempts to manage grief through distraction and alcohol were, in retrospect, evasions of that freedom—choices made to avoid choosing. “To not choose is, in itself, a choice,” May reminds us. Recognising this responsibility was painful but transformative. It exposed the existential truth that we cannot escape ourselves, only return to ourselves through choice.

Kierkegaard (1844/1980) named the vertigo of possibility “the dizziness of freedom.” After my mother’s death, I felt this as both terror and invitation—to live mechanically or to live deliberately. Slowly, through journaling and therapy, I reclaimed agency: choosing to weep rather than suppress, to write rather than numb, to sit in silence rather than flee it. These small decisions became acts of faith in life itself.

Within this research, freedom becomes central to understanding how spirituality is discovered through grief. The awareness that I could not choose my parents' deaths but could choose how to live after them echoes the essence of my question: how ongoing bonds with the dead can become a site of spiritual transformation. Sartre's and May's insights reveal freedom not as the absence of constraint but as the capacity to respond consciously to life's givens—to create meaning within loss. Each act of choosing presence over avoidance, reflection over distraction, became an existential and spiritual act: to remain in relationship with my parents through memory, ritual, and love. This realisation paved the way toward Frankl's understanding of meaning—that even within suffering, we retain the freedom to choose our stance, and through that choice, to uncover the spiritual significance of our existence.

Frankl (1946/2006) framed this as the last of human freedoms: “to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.” I could not change what had happened, but I could decide how to meet it—with bitterness or with presence. This shifted grief from something happening *to* me to something unfolding *through* me—an ongoing dialogue between suffering and responsibility. Yalom (1980) identifies freedom as one of the four ultimate concerns—alongside death, isolation, and meaninglessness—observing that many fear freedom precisely because it exposes responsibility. Van Deurzen (2012) situates freedom within her Four Worlds model, noting that authentic living requires balancing freedom with the realities of the physical and social worlds: “Freedom always exists within limits; it is the courage to act despite constraint.” Ultimately, freedom in grief is not an escape from pain but an engagement with it. This freedom—tempered by humility and responsibility—became the quiet foundation of my healing and now informs my practice with clients.

3. Meaning and Suffering: Frankl's Will to Meaning and the Ordinary Sacred

The search for meaning lies at the heart of the human condition. Existential thinkers have long recognised that, when confronted with suffering, people seek not happiness but significance. Viktor Frankl crystallised this through his experience in Nazi concentration camps, asserting that “Those who have a why to live can bear almost any how,” (Frankl 1946/2006, pg 87). His logotherapy rests on the belief that meaning is not invented but discovered—that even the most devastating circumstances can reveal purpose when met with awareness and choice.

Frankl's *will to meaning* reframes suffering as potential rather than punishment. "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning," he wrote (Frankl, 1946/2006, p. 113). When I first read *Man's Search for Meaning*, I admired it as philosophy; I did not know it would become my lived curriculum. Through the deaths of my parents, I learned that meaning does not depend on the magnitude of loss. Ordinary heartbreaks, illnesses, and private farewells are equally valid crucibles for transformation. Meaning is democratic—available wherever there is consciousness and willingness to engage with life as it is.

For Yalom (1980), this process is not about explanation but encounter. He describes meaninglessness as both threat and invitation: to face the apparent emptiness of life and respond by creating meaning through authentic living. "The therapist," Yalom writes, "must help the patient confront the givens of existence and fashion meaning from them." In my own grief, I experienced this confrontation not in words but in silence—long nights when meaning dissolved and I had to choose, again and again, to believe that life could still hold value. Over time, meaning revealed itself not as revelation but as mosaic—pieced together through writing, ritual, and remembering.

May (1953) viewed suffering as the soil from which creativity grows: "The creative act is born of struggle and pain." Likewise, Tillich (1952) described the *courage to be* as the act of affirming life even when its meaning is obscured. Both suggest that meaning is not found but forged—an act of existential faith. In this sense, grief became my practice of meaning-making: every act of remembering or writing was a way of saying yes to life despite its brokenness.

Van Deurzen (2012) situates meaning within the *Überwelt*—the spiritual dimension of her Four Worlds model—where we seek connection with values larger than ourselves. She writes that meaning arises from "integration of paradox," the capacity to hold joy and sorrow, love and loss, life and death together without denying either. This paradox became central to my understanding of grief: meaning was not the opposite of pain but its companion.

Alongside existential philosophy, I found resonance in contemporary spiritual writers echo similar truths in different language. Frederick (2013) describes loss as "a bridge between worlds," while Giesemann (2020) writes that death reveals "a continuity of consciousness"

that invites us to live more awake. Mark Anthony (2021) reframes grief as “evidence of love enduring beyond the physical,” and Dispenza (2017) explores how awareness and energy can transform emotional reality. Though their vocabularies differ, their insights converge: suffering can become a portal to expansion when met with consciousness and compassion.

Reading these writers alongside Frankl and Yalom showed me that spirituality and existentialism are not opposites but companions. Both concern themselves with the mystery of being and the search for meaning within suffering. The difference lies in emphasis: where spirituality often invokes transcendence, existentialism insists on immanence—finding the sacred in the ordinary. My research stands at this intersection: the space where meaning arises through lived experience rather than doctrine. Meaning is not found by escaping suffering but by engaging with it consciously—a transformation I have lived through grief and continuing bonds.

Frankl proposed three pathways to meaning: through creativity, love, and attitude toward suffering. I found all three intertwined in grief. Writing, ritual, and presence became acts of choosing life while remaining in relationship with death—embodying the question at the heart of this study: how spirituality may be discovered through ongoing bonds in the face of loss.

What happens, then, when the will to live fades? Can meaning still hold us if the heart no longer wishes to stay? Frankl (2006) observed in the camps that survival often depended less on physical endurance than on an inner decision to find purpose amid despair. Yet he also recognised that this decision could not be forced—when the will to live is extinguished, meaning may not sustain life. In this way, Frankl illuminates, rather than resolves, the fragile interplay between freedom, will, and meaning at the edge of existence. His framework holds immense compassion, yet assumes the persistence of the will to endure. My experience, however, suggests that when this will collapses under the weight of despair, meaning may not disappear—but it may no longer be enough to sustain life in this world.

Spiritual teachers such as Frederick (2013) and Giesemann (2021) address this mystery from a transpersonal perspective, offering language for experiences existential philosophy hesitates to name. Both view the soul as continuing beyond the body, suggesting that suffering and death may form part of a larger spiritual evolution. While such ideas extend beyond Frankl’s

humanistic frame, they offered me a way to hold the paradox he describes—to accept that meaning can both sustain and fail, while love and connection endure beyond the physical world. This understanding feels especially vital when facing sudden or traumatic deaths, where human comprehension falters. It reminds us that even when meaning collapses, love remains—offering a thread of continuity and solace to those, like parents, who must live with the unanswerable.

Both Frederick and Gieseemann also introduce the idea of *soul contracts*—that, before birth, souls may choose particular circumstances, relationships, and even losses as opportunities for growth. From this view, suffering and death are not random tragedies but part of a larger, unfolding design. When I first encountered this concept, it resonated with my parents’ deaths, which seemed to hold a rhythm and timing my rational mind could not explain. While I approach this notion with humility and discernment, it provides a compassionate framework for understanding the soul’s freedom within destiny.

These reflections deepen my research question by expanding how spirituality may be discovered through ongoing bonds in the face of death. The idea of soul contracts reframes mortality and even self-chosen death as expressions of spiritual agency rather than failures of meaning. In my experience, this lens helped me hold my parents’ deaths—and their readiness to die—with reverence rather than resistance. It allowed me to see that freedom, as both existential and spiritual truth, includes the freedom to choose release when life’s purpose feels complete. In this light, even deaths by suicide—however painful and incomprehensible to those left behind—may be understood, not as acts devoid of meaning, but as moments when an individual’s sense of purpose or learning in this life has reached its natural closure. This perspective does not diminish the suffering such losses bring, but invites a more compassionate understanding of the mystery of human choice and the endurance of love beyond it.

4. Spirituality as Existential Awareness: Beyond Religion, Toward Connection

Spirituality, in its deepest sense, is the human yearning for coherence and connection amid uncertainty. It need not be defined by religion or doctrine; it is, as Kabat-Zinn (1994) describes, “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist and pioneer of the modern mindfulness movement, founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the

University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. His work bridges science and contemplative practice, demonstrating how mindful awareness can cultivate presence, compassion, and meaning amid life's uncertainty. This quality of presence—awareness infused with compassion—lies at the heart of both mindfulness and existential psychotherapy. Each invites us to inhabit life as it unfolds, meeting the mystery of being rather than explaining it away.

Within existential philosophy, spirituality is not an external realm but a dimension of existence itself. Van Deurzen (2012) names this the *Überwelt*—the spiritual world—the space in which we seek meaning, values, and orientation beyond the material. She writes that this dimension “gives us a sense of direction, a reason for being, and a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves.” In this sense, spirituality is ontological: it is the human impulse to reach toward significance, to find harmony between self and world. Tillich (1952) echoed this when he defined faith as “the state of being ultimately concerned.” Spirituality, then, is the existential movement of concern—the reaching for depth in the face of finitude.

May (1958) recognised this dimension as the creative source of resilience, suggesting that “the human spirit is the capacity to affirm life in spite of death and despair.” Similarly, Yalom (1980) observed that encounters with mortality often awaken a “spiritual awareness” even in those who do not identify as religious. In therapy, he found that clients facing death frequently spoke of “a quiet sense of wonder at existence itself.” This mirrors my own experience: in the wake of my parents' deaths, I found myself moving not away from life but more deeply into it. Grief opened a portal to presence.

At first, spirituality felt foreign to my professional identity. I had associated it with belief systems rather than lived experience. Yet as I sat with clients and my own grief, I realised that spirituality could be understood phenomenologically—as a felt sense of connection that arises when we meet life authentically. Pargament (2007) calls this *spiritually integrated psychotherapy*: using one's search for the sacred as a resource for coping and transformation. The sacred, he argues, need not be theistic; it may be found in relationship, art, or compassion. In this light, spirituality becomes an existential resource—a way of orienting amid uncertainty.

Maslow (1968) anticipated this perspective in his later work on self-transcendence. He proposed that the highest human motivation is not self-actualisation but the movement beyond self toward unity with others and existence itself. He described “peak experiences”—moments of awe, gratitude, and interconnectedness—as glimpses of transcendence within ordinary life. These insights resonate with my own mourning: the subtle feeling that love continued to flow even when form was gone. Such moments were not supernatural but profoundly human—experiences of the ordinary sacred.

Contemporary spiritual writers give language to these moments without displacing existential thought. Frederick (2013) writes that grief can become “a bridge between worlds,” echoing van Deurzen’s call to traverse multiple dimensions of being. Giesemann (2020) describes consciousness as continuous and relational, suggesting that death is “a change of address, not the end of love.” Read phenomenologically, these ideas articulate lived experience rather than metaphysical doctrine. While such ideas stretch beyond traditional existentialism, I found that reading them phenomenologically—as descriptions of lived experience rather than metaphysical claims—allowed me to integrate them without contradiction. They capture the essence of what Buber (1937) called the *I–Thou* relationship: a meeting that transcends separation, where presence itself becomes sacred.

Dispenza (2017) and Anthony (2021) speak in the language of energy and consciousness, describing grief and healing in vibrational terms. Though not scientific in the empirical sense, their metaphors of resonance and coherence offer poetic expression for what existential therapists might call attunement—the felt alignment between inner and outer worlds. Their work reminds us that spirituality and science, like therapy and philosophy, can converge in a shared inquiry into what it means to be alive and aware.

Thus, spirituality in this research is not a belief but a mode of being—the awareness that life, however fleeting, carries depth; that love, however interrupted, continues to echo; and that grief, however painful, can awaken us to connection beyond form.

5. Continuing Bonds and the I–Thou Beyond Death

The relationship with the dead does not end at death; it changes form. Early psychoanalytic theories, influenced by Freud (1917/1957), insisted that mourning required detachment—that the bereaved must withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it elsewhere.

For decades, this “letting-go” model dominated Western understandings of healthy grief. Yet lived experience and subsequent research have consistently challenged it.

The continuing bonds paradigm proposed by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) marked a radical shift. They demonstrated that maintaining connection with the deceased—through memory, ritual, conversation, or felt presence—can be both adaptive and transformative. “The dead remain with us not as haunting ghosts but as integral parts of our ongoing lives,” they wrote. This idea legitimised what mourners have always known: that love does not die with the body.

Yalom (1980) observed that facing mortality can deepen one’s capacity for authentic relationship. Confronting the impermanence of others invites us to be more fully present to them and our-self. He suggested that awareness of death transforms habitual I–It relating into I–Thou moments of genuine encounter. Grief, then, becomes an existential teacher of love.

Yalom’s later work, *A Matter of Life and Death* (Yalom & Yalom, 2021), co-written with his wife Marilyn as she faced terminal illness, embodies the essence of his philosophy: awareness of finitude deepens presence and tenderness. Across his career, Yalom (1980) positioned death as the ultimate teacher—an encounter that dissolves illusion and reorders priorities—but in this final collaboration, his ideas moved from theoretical reflection to lived embodiment. The philosophical became personal; his long-held belief that confronting mortality can awaken a fuller experience of life was tested and affirmed in the presence of love and loss. Their mutual reflections mirror what I have witnessed in my own work as a death doula—that death often evokes not despair but lucidity, a natural impulse to reconcile and love more freely.

Yalom’s notion of a ‘life review’ is what Frederick (2013) expands through her notion of the *soul’s review*—a compassionate reflection upon one’s life as part of an ongoing spiritual evolution. In this view, mortality invites renewal, not closure. Awareness of death becomes a catalyst for conscious living, echoing both existential and transpersonal wisdom.

Such insights invite a broader understanding of existence itself—one that recognises the interplay between the tangible and the transcendent. Emmy van Deurzen’s (2012) Four Worlds model offers a framework for this interconnection, providing language for what I

have intuitively experienced: that healing and meaning arise through integration across these worlds.

From an existential perspective, continuing bonds illustrate Heidegger's notion of *Being-with* (*Mitsein*). Our existence is always co-existence; we are constituted through relationship. Death does not negate this—it reveals it. When the other dies, their presence becomes woven into our being. Attig (2011) writes that mourning is “learning to live in a changed relationship” with the deceased. This learning is both existential and ethical: it requires fidelity to love while accepting transformation.

Spiritual writers express similar insights in other language. Frederick (2013) speaks of “soul agreements” that outlive the body, while Giesemann (2020) describes an “ongoing conversation between dimensions.” Read phenomenologically, these are metaphors for the same relational continuity that Buber and Yalom describe: connection surviving transformation. They affirm what I have felt—that relationship is a mode of being, not a material condition.

The paradox of continuing bonds is that they coexist with longing. No spiritual connection replaces the physical presence of my parents—the sound of my father's laughter, the warmth of my mother's hands. Yet, as Tonkin (1996) suggests, grief does not shrink with time; we grow around it. The relationship persists within an expanded self that carries both loss and love. Mourning becomes a lifelong dialogue rather than a task to complete.

6. Emmy van Deurzen's Four Worlds Model

Van Deurzen's model offers a multidimensional framework for understanding existence through four interrelated realms of being: the physical, social, personal, and spiritual. Each represents a facet of how we encounter life, and harmony arises when awareness flows among them. Her approach invites exploration of how imbalance in one world mirrors disconnection in another—how grief reverberates through body, relationship, identity, and meaning.

In essence, the Four Worlds model is integral to this research because it situates the spiritual dimension of grief within a holistic understanding of existence. By viewing life as lived simultaneously across these realms, it allows loss to be explored not only as psychological

rupture but as existential and spiritual reorientation. Within this framework, ongoing bonds with the deceased can be seen as movements across worlds—where love, memory, and meaning continue to resonate beyond physical separation. This perspective grounds my research question by illustrating how spirituality may be discovered through ongoing bonds in the face of death, revealing the continuity of presence that lies at the heart of being human.

In drawing together these existential and spiritual perspectives, this literature review establishes the philosophical and therapeutic foundations for the study. It situates my lived experience of grief within a continuum of thought that views death not as an ending but as transformation—an experience through which meaning, presence, and spirituality can emerge and sustain life beyond loss.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY METHOD

Considering the Structure of Existential Analysis (SEA)

I initially considered several existentially aligned approaches, including Emmy van Deurzen's (1998, 2012, 2025) Structure of Existential Analysis (SEA)—a phenomenological-existential framework for therapeutic practice, training, and qualitative research. SEA seeks to illuminate existence through its physical, social, personal, and spiritual dimensions while honouring the paradoxes of being human.

SEA bridges phenomenological description and interpretation, Drawing on Husserl (1931) and Heidegger (1962/2008). It uses three forms of reduction — phenomenological, eidetic, and transcendental — and encourages reflexivity rather than neutrality. Operationalised through the Existential Research Dialogue and heuristic lenses (Time, Space, Paradox, Passion, Purpose; van Deurzen, 2012), SEA balances structure with openness in examining experience.

Van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker (2025) further developed SEA as a qualitative framework for studying meaning, identity, and suffering. Its reflexivity and philosophical depth make it well-suited to existential topics like death and grief—the focus of this research.

Despite its value as philosophical scaffolding, SEA remains chiefly a therapeutic framework. Its heuristic filters may impose structure that restricts the spontaneous narrative flow of autoethnography, and its dialogical orientation does not fit my self-as-participant design.

Consequently, I adopted phenomenological autoethnography as a more coherent method for my aims. It allowed rigorous yet flexible exploration of lived experience so that emotion, culture, and meaning could emerge organically through narrative. Still, SEA informs the study's philosophical base with its multi-dimensional view of existence and commitment to reflexivity and paradox.

Adopting phenomenological autoethnography positioned me as both participant and researcher, engaging critically with my own experience as data through an existential lens. This kept me aligned with existential psychotherapy's experiential ethos and qualitative rigour.

As this dissertation explores spirituality and meaning-making through the loss of both parents, I required a method that honoured *being and becoming* and viewed lived experience as truth. Phenomenological autoethnography provided this framework, enabling exploration of grief as *Being-toward-death* (Heidegger, 1962/2008) while remaining faithful to my dual stance as psychotherapist and daughter.

Phenomenology returns us “to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1931, p43), the immediacy of experience before interpretation. Autoethnography positions the self as both subject and researcher within cultural and philosophical contexts (Ellis et al., 2011). Their integration enabled me to explore the texture of grief and spirituality through my own life and body while situating these within existential-transpersonal understandings of being.

This integration mirrors existential psychotherapy’s concern with authenticity, freedom, and meaning. Sitting beside my parents as they died, witnessing their readiness to let go, and sensing their continued presence became my data. The aim was not to generalise but to illuminate how encounters with death reveal the spiritual dimension of being.

Eight Stages of Phenomenological Autoethnography

This study followed eight interwoven stages drawn from phenomenological and autoethnographic traditions (Ellis, 2004; Finlay, 2011; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). They unfolded organically, mirroring the cyclical flow of grief and reflection. Rather than aiming for objectivity, I sought reflexive transparency to reveal how meaning emerged from lived experience.

Stage 1 – Awakening of the Question

My question emerged as a cry from experience, not an academic exercise. The deaths of my parents ruptured my world, turning private journaling — letters, dreams, therapy reflections — into a philosophical inquiry: *what does it mean to live with death, and can love endure absence?* The question was “lived into being.” As van Deurzen (2012) notes, existential questions arise from life itself. This awakening of wonder turned suffering into inquiry — what Finlay (2011) calls the “pre-reflective stirring.” My question arose from necessity: to grasp what it means to accompany, lose, and continue loving.

Stage 2 – Gathering the Lived Material

Returning to the lifeworld meant gathering traces of experience — journals, letters, reflective essays, therapy notes, ICU recollections, and digital artefacts such as WhatsApp messages, photos, and meditations. Reflexive journals captured sensations, dreams, and thoughts — letters, reflective essays, and ICU accounts forming the primary dataset. Hospital notes, photos, and family correspondences supplemented these, anchoring sensory and emotional recall.

Ellis (2004) calls this “autoethnographic data” — embodied narratives revealing lived meaning. Van Manen (2016) names them “anecdotal exemplars,” ordinary moments carrying phenomenological truth. I ordered and thematically clustered the materials, dwelling rather than coding. Tears, pauses, and silence became part of the data as repeated readings revealed new textures of meaning.

Balancing my research and lived worlds — mother, therapist, sister, friend, wife — required mindful separation so each informed but did not overwhelm the other. This became both an ethical and existential practice sustaining presence and balance.

Stage 3 – Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché)

From this balanced space between grief and inquiry, I practised phenomenological reduction, using Husserl’s epoché to suspend assumptions and see experience freshly. Following Finlay (2011), I treated bracketing as reflexive awareness rather than detachment—a discipline of slowing down to see subjectivity clearly and let longing or defence speak through grief writing.

Bracketing revealed rather than erased assumptions: I set aside professional frameworks when theory crept in (“anticipatory grief,” “attachment loss”), turning to felt textures of silence and presence instead. Creating a peaceful space for my father was intuitive being-with, not clinical technique. This distinction between therapist and daughter taught a humility of openness.

The practice extended into therapy: soon after my mother’s death I supported two clients grieving parents—what Spinelli (2007) calls “working with the clients you deserve.” I bracketed my own grief to stay present with theirs, living phenomenological reduction as

suspension without denial and recognising the permeability between researcher, therapist, and human being.

As Finlay (2008) describes, bracketing is “bridled openness” — disciplined awareness that lets phenomena reveal themselves. This stage taught me to dwell with experience rather than interpret too soon.

Stage 4 – Imaginative Variation

I used imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) to shift perspectives across roles (daughter/therapist/researcher), modalities (sensory/affective/relational), and contexts (home, ICU, ritual). Asking “what conditions make this experience what it is?” helped distil invariant themes of readiness, permission, and presence from situational detail.

van Manen (2016) describes this process as “free variation in imagination” — asking repeatedly, *What is essential here? What could change without losing the essence?* Through this method, I identified recurring motifs: silence, breath, time slowing, moments of presence, and continuing connection. Imaginative variation allowed paradoxes to coexist — that death is both ending and beginning, grief both agony and grace. By oscillating between perspectives, I arrived at insights that were neither purely emotional nor abstractly conceptual, but grounded in lived truth.

Stage 5 – Writing as Inquiry

Writing became not only expression but method. Richardson and St. Pierre (2017) describe writing as a *method of inquiry* in which language itself generates discovery. Each vignette—from hospital scenes to dreams and later signs—became a site where meaning unfolded through successive drafts.

Though often raw and difficult, the act was intentional. My therapeutic training had shown the power of naming experience; through research, the page became both mirror and container, holding grief until it revealed its wisdom.

I developed a reflective rhythm: writing freely, pausing, then returning phenomenologically. Meaning often surfaced through rhythm or metaphor more than analysis—when a sentence curved around silence or an image spoke more truth than explanation. As van Manen (2016)

reminds us, phenomenological writing seeks to *do justice to lived experience*; my aim was resonance, not closure—to evoke what it feels like to be with death.

Some memories resisted words: the light across my mother’s bed, the tilt of my father’s smile. Such visual and sensory fragments remained embodied, living as sensations rather than sentences. This resurfaced in therapy when a client’s gestures mirrored my mother’s, stirring visceral recall. Returning to bracketing allowed me to stay present for her while attending to myself. These moments taught that some griefs speak through image, scent, or touch—reminding me that writing traces only the surface of what the body continues to hold.

Stage 6 – Reflexive Dialogue

Writing had limits; meaning clarified through dialogue with my supervisor, therapist, and witnesses to the process. Phenomenological autoethnography is dialogical: data include inner/outer conversations that reshape understanding. Supervision and therapy enabled reflexive intersubjectivity (Finlay, 2012).

Supervisory prompts (e.g., “*What does this moment reveal about your being-with-death?*”) turned reflection into analysis, converting solitary writing into co-created meaning. I tracked resistance/fatigue as data, holding the tension between immersion and reflection to serve understanding, not confession. Supervision was a lifeline: I was witnessed as researcher and human being, held with containment and honesty. That steady presence provided ground and an ethical anchor — a trusted space where meaning emerged through relationship.

Stage 7 – Hermeneutic Interpretation

Dialogue reframed my experience, enabling the deeper work of interpretation. Interpretation followed Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle — moving between part/whole and experience/meaning. Insights from supervision and therapy were folded back into the text, echoing therapy’s recursive returns with new awareness.

I clustered meaning units by resonance (not coding), asking what united them and which existential concerns they voiced. Patterns emerged around embodiment, relational continuity, meaning-making, transformation — seeds of the themes. Following van Manen and Moustakas, I moved from description to essence — the felt sense of the universal in the personal (Yalom, 1980) — shifting writing from story to shared human insight.

Stage 8 – Emergence of Thematic Findings

Final crystallisation of insights yielded four interwoven themes, representing both content and process:

- Embodied Encounter with Death – Presence at my parents’ dying revealed death as embodied — known through breath, touch, and silence; re-writing showed how the body knows beyond words (Merleau-Ponty).
- Dialogical Grief: Letters, dreams, and meditations evidenced grief as relationship (I–Thou) rather than absence, sustaining continuing bonds across worlds (Buber, 1937).
- Meaning-Making & Integration: Iterative writing mirrored Frankl’s claim that meaning arises in response to suffering, transforming chaos into coherence and pain into purpose.
- Transformation of Self: From daughter within grief to witness-therapist-death doula; sustained reflection converted mourning into meaning and a vocation of service. In this way, I experienced the hermeneutic spiral of autoethnography — a deepening from lived experience to understanding, and from understanding to practice — a becoming that mirrors my movement from daughter, to witness, to therapist, and ultimately to *death doula companion*: one who can hold space for others at the threshold of life and death, as I once did for my parents.

Across eight stages, method became a lived conversation between philosophy and experience, moving in circles like grief itself. Rigour rested on authenticity, transparency, resonance, ethical integrity, and existential coherence. The measure of worth is whether it invites readers to reflect on their own relationship with death and meaning.

Ethical and Relational Considerations

Autoethnography inherently involves others. My parents’ dignity remained central. All names of professionals and relatives are anonymised, except my supervisors’. Ethical principles of *autonomy*, *beneficence*, and *non-maleficence* (BACP, 2018) guided my decisions. I sought implied consent from my brother and daughters to include sensitive passages, and I honoured relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) through writing “with care” about the dead.

I also engaged in continuous self-care. Writing about death reawakened embodied grief; I structured writing days around grounding rituals — breathwork, meditation, and beach walks — which later became part of my existential *toolbox* for meaning-making (discussed in the Conclusion).

Appraising Rigour in Phenomenological Autoethnography

In qualitative and existential research, rigour arises from integrity, transparency, and resonance rather than replication (Finlay, 2011). I evaluated my process through six overlapping dimensions:

<u>Criterion</u>	<u>Application in This Study</u>
<u>Transparency</u>	Each research stage was documented and linked to evidence in the appendices—journals, letters, artefacts, and supervision notes.
<u>Reflexivity</u>	Reflexive diaries reveal the shifting relationship between therapist-self and grieving-self, showing awareness of bias and vulnerability.
<u>Resonance / Evocative Validity</u>	The writing evokes recognition in readers—an emotional and existential response (Ellis, 2016)—reflecting authenticity rather than neutrality.
<u>Credibility / Trustworthiness</u>	Data triangulated across personal artefacts and timeframes (2018–2024) ensure consistency of lived meaning.
<u>Ethical Integrity</u>	Guided by BACP and relational ethics, sensitive material was anonymised and self-care maintained.
<u>Existential Coherence</u>	Interpretations remain faithful to existential philosophy, revealing the interrelation of finitude, meaning, and freedom through personal narrative.

Rigour, in this sense, is a form of fidelity—staying true to the phenomenon as lived. The existential criterion of authenticity replaced scientific objectivity: validity lies in whether it rings true to the human experience of grief and transformation.

In this spirit, the methodology's integrity rests on its capacity to illuminate the universality within the personal — an invitation for the reader to confront their own relationship with death and meaning.

FINDINGS

The process of phenomenological autoethnography allowed four interwoven themes to emerge from my lived experience of loss and meaning-making. These findings do not claim objectivity; rather, they reflect the essence of what it felt like to live through grief, to encounter spirituality, and to continue relating with my parents after their deaths. Each theme arose through a hermeneutic dialogue between personal experience and existential reflection—an unfolding conversation between what was lived and what was understood.

This chapter introduces the premise that anchors these findings and embodies the phenomenological essence of this research. It weaves together three interrelated domains of inquiry: the cultural and emotional difficulty of speaking about death, my lived experience of accompanying both parents in their dying, and the emergence of a spiritual belief in continuity beyond the physical world. Together, these strands illuminate how grief became both the method and the revelation of this study—a lived process through which meaning, love, and spirituality were not only explored but experienced. Although presented narratively, the premise forms part of the findings themselves, marking the point where lived experience becomes both data and discovery. Through existential and phenomenological reflection, this chapter situates the experiential foundation of the research—revealing how, in facing death, I came to understand spirituality as an embodied continuity of love, presence, and meaning that endures beyond loss.

Illustrative data, including journal excerpts, letters, and reflective notes, are included in the appendices to support the narrative and demonstrate the reflexive depth of the analysis.

From this foundation, the following section explores the first strand of the premise—why talking about death and dying remains so difficult, both personally and culturally, and how this silence shaped my own encounters with mortality.

Why talking about death and dying is difficult

Despite being life's only certainty, death remains one of the most avoided topics. Through my own losses—grandparents, an unborn child, my parents, and later a friend's daughter—I learned how language can become a refuge from grief. After my mother's death, I could

barely say “dead,” softening it to “passed away” or “is no more.” This reflects what Becker (1973) and Walter (1999) identify as our collective denial of mortality.

Philippe Ariès (1981) described Western culture as “death-denying,” where dying is hidden within institutions and softened through euphemism. Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) suggests that reminders of mortality provoke existential anxiety, leading us to defend ourselves with denial and distraction. Yet, as Rawlings, Tieman, and Miller-Lewis (2021) note, such euphemisms—though protective—distance us from the emotional truth of loss.

Silence around death is often relational and cultural. Families avoid the topic to spare one another pain or, in some traditions, out of fear of inviting misfortune (Seale, 2004; Kellehear, 2007). My father, however, broke this silence after my mother’s death by expressing his readiness to die. His honesty, though painful, became sacred; it revealed how truth-telling at life’s end can foster connection, peace, and dignity.

The sudden death of my friend’s fourteen-year-old daughter deepened this understanding. Through immense sorrow she said, “This is all the time we were meant to have with her.” Her acceptance transformed grief into meaning and reminded me that love and mortality coexist. Speaking about death, once unbearable, has become an act of love, courage, and preparation—an existential practice that reaffirms life itself.

Accompanying my parents in dying

Following is an autoethnographic account of my parents’ dying, interlacing lived memory with existential and spiritual reflection. Occupying a dual role of daughter and researcher, I explore how witnessing death from the inside can deepen understanding of life, spirituality, and meaning.

My mother was strong-minded, creative, and unafraid of truth. Her life was shaped by hardship and trauma, yet she transformed suffering into authenticity and generosity. Faith gave her moral structure; art and compassion gave her purpose. She and my father followed a quiet, humanist Hinduism rooted in karma and kindness rather than ritual, which prepared them—and later me—to meet death not with fear but with reverence.

Only after her passing did I realise her readiness for death. From her wardrobe to her jewellery and art supplies, everything was pared down and distributed. That gradual letting go mirrored what Kellehear (2007) calls social death preparation—a conscious readiness to withdraw from material life and earthly concerns as part of an unspoken acceptance of life’s closure.

When she was hospitalised, I saw both fear and serenity in her eyes. She would gesture for music, and I would sing for her; her fingers tapped to the rhythm with a smile, looking again like a young art student—radiant and free. Music restored continuity of self even in decline, echoing research on music therapy in end-of-life care (Hilliard, 2005).

A brief recovery came when my brother’s visit neared. Reading his messages rekindled her will to live, affirming how love and words sustain the spirit at life’s edge (Steinhauser et al., 2000). Soon after, she looked toward the ICU door and smiled as if greeting an unseen guest—an exchange I later recognised as part of the “language of dying” (Atkins, 2014), when the dying speak of “visitors” or “rooms” others cannot see. Such moments are often seen as hallucinations but may be better understood as spiritual thresholds (Fenwick et al., 2010; Barbato et al., 1999). Later that night, intubated yet conscious, she raised her hands in prayer and met each of our eyes, silently asking for release. We took turns saying goodbye. In those moments, I felt what Yalom (1980) calls an existential encounter—a raw meeting with finitude that reveals love’s enduring truth.

Through her gestures, I began to perceive a sacred lexicon of dying. Bearing witness to her crossing initiated my own awakening—what I would later recognise as my vocation as a death doula.

My father’s journey was slower, marked by years of grief and loneliness after my mother’s death. In the first year, he saw a little girl and sensed my mother beside him; he slept on the sofa, unable to face her absence. The pandemic deepened his isolation and physical decline, his will to live dissolving with solitude.

Despite travel restrictions, guided by signs from my mother and an inner certainty, I left my family in Singapore and flew to India, choosing presence over practicality. In his final weeks, my father drifted between worlds—eyes closed most of the day, voice soft, appetite fading. He described relatives waiting for him, asking me to pack his wallet, glasses, and tissues.

Each day he rehearsed for departure, inhabiting both realms at once. When the end came, it felt like a homecoming rather than death.

Clearing my parents' home alone afterward—sorting every drawer into keep, donate, or discard—I confronted impermanence in its rawest form. Yet amid that grief was gratitude: the ordinariness of their lives had become sacred through memory.

Witnessing both my parents' deaths transformed how I understand living and dying. Their courage and acceptance taught me that death can awaken love, presence, and spiritual depth. For them, dying was a transition; for me, it became initiation—in their death they gave me my purpose and my will to live.

Belief in the spiritual world

The deaths of my parents dismantled the familiar architecture of my existence. Their absence was not merely emotional but ontological—an upheaval that fractured my sense of continuity and opened new questions: *Where are they now? Do they know I'm going through a cancer scare?* In grief, the ordinary world thinned, and I entered a liminal space where spiritual and material realities intertwined.

Within that threshold, my experiences began to defy conventional explanation. Each sign and synchronicity became both balm and initiation. Grief became a teacher—transforming disbelief into curiosity, curiosity into reverence. Spirituality, once an abstract ideal, became an embodied reality: an ongoing dialogue with my parents beyond the physical realm.

Guided by the writings of Frederick (2013), Gieseemann (2019), Landon (2020), Dispenza (2019), Newton (1994–2003), and Anthony (2021), I came to understand the spirit world as a dimension of higher consciousness intertwined with our own. Frederick (2013) describes this as “a continuation of life in a lighter body,” while Gieseemann (2019) calls it “the realm of higher consciousness where our essence remains connected to those on Earth.” Their perspectives affirmed what I had begun to live—that love, intention, and awareness are the bridges across worlds.

Frederick's idea of “divine winks” or synchronistic signs resonated deeply, encouraging the living to cultivate awareness, symbolic interpretation, and meaningful rituals to maintain the

bond. She suggests a shift of perspective—a “divine lens”—that invites seeing life (including loss) through the soul’s view rather than the ego’s, thereby revealing hidden meaning in suffering. Reflecting on moments in my own life that felt improbably aligned, I began to perceive my parents’ presence as co-authors of my story from beyond. Similarly, Gieseemann’s notion of “sacred attention”—a disciplined openness to intuitive signs—mirrored my own experiences of pausing, sensing, and silently asking, *Was that you, Mum?*

Michael Newton’s trilogy (1994, 2000, 2003) explores the “life between lives,” a spiritual realm described through hypnotherapy case studies of clients recalling the soul’s journey between incarnations. Across these works, Newton outlines a structured metaphysical model of the afterlife involving soul groups, guides, and life reviews. For me, his writings offered a cohesive vision of consciousness continuing beyond death and a purposeful process of reincarnation. This provided comfort and a framework for understanding death that addressed grief, meaning, and spiritual continuity.

Dispenza (2019) described consciousness as an “infinite field of potential” where thought and energy transcend the physical. Anthony (2021) grounded this further through his concept of the “electromagnetic soul,” proposing that consciousness is energy that persists after death. These frameworks allowed me to integrate spirituality and science—to see communication across realms as vibrational continuity rather than fantasy.

This belief crystallised through lived encounters. In the third week after my mother’s death, a cardboard box in my room began flapping rhythmically without wind or contact. The motion was insistent, unmistakable. Recalling Frederick’s (2013) notion of energy signatures, I interpreted it as my mother’s signal to visit the temple where I found peace. It became a ritual of prayerful stillness where I could feel her presence. Another experience involved a blue-eared kingfisher—long regarded in spiritual symbolism as a messenger of truth and guidance—appearing at moments of doubt. I understood it as a sign of reassurance, a gentle reminder of her continuing presence (Andrews, 2010).

Other signs followed: feathers appearing at moments of despair, white butterflies circling me before therapy sessions, faces forming in clouds on what would have been my parents’ 50th anniversary, and dreams where both appeared radiant and whole. Birds’ visits arrived at apt moments, evoking a sense of being gently watched over. Initially, I questioned these

experiences, but over time their precision and recurrence felt like deliberate communications—what Jackson (2015) calls “divine winks,” reminders that love transcends death.

I created an online memorial for my mother, posting letters and memories for a year. Writing to her spirit felt like dialogue rather than remembrance. Unexpectedly, it also became a collective ritual: friends and relatives contributed stories that revealed new facets of her life, weaving a communal tapestry of love and continuity. My dreams became a steady meeting place: my mother holding me, my father guiding me, both appearing with calm familiarity.

Through these teachings, signs, and rituals, my understanding of spirituality transformed. The spirit world ceased to be a distant abstraction; it became an intimate reality interwoven with daily life. I came to believe that we enter each earthly lifetime with a clear purpose—a lesson the soul intends to learn. Our circumstances, relationships, challenges, and even our losses are part of this learning path.

Death, I realised, does not end relationship—it changes its form. Love becomes energy, presence becomes vibration, and grief becomes the medium through which the living and the departed continue their conversation across the veil.

The experiences described above did not signify an endpoint but a movement toward deeper understanding. Through the phenomena of signs, synchronicities, and intuitive connection, my perception of death evolved from rupture to relationship, and from absence to a continuing presence. What began as a personal search for reassurance became an ontological exploration into how spirituality manifests as lived experience. These encounters revealed that the spiritual and existential are not distinct domains but overlapping dimensions of being, where love and meaning persist beyond physical boundaries.

Engaging in phenomenological autoethnography enabled these experiences to be examined through a reflexive and interpretive lens. Writing became both a methodological act and a form of phenomenological reduction—a way of returning to the immediacy of experience while remaining critically aware of the self as researcher. Through this hermeneutic process, patterns of meaning began to surface across the terrain of grief, embodiment, and transcendence. From this synthesis, four interwoven themes emerged, reflecting the

existential movements between finitude and continuity, suffering and transformation, presence and absence. These themes constitute the findings of this study, offering insight into how spirituality and meaning are discovered through the lived experience of ongoing bonds in the face of death.

Theme 1 – Living Through Loss: Grief as a Universal Yet Avoided Phenomenon

Grief, I discovered, is both universal and profoundly isolating. While death touches every life, few know how to speak about it. After my mother's death, friends would often ask, "How are you doing?" but rarely stay long enough to hear the truth of my grief. Their well-meaning discomfort revealed how culturally silenced the experience of loss remains. Conversations would quickly turn toward distraction—advice, reassurance, or platitudes—as if to avoid the unbearable vulnerability of staying with another's pain.

There were only a few who had the courage and capacity to hold space for my sorrow without turning away. Their presence illuminated the existential importance of *being with* rather than *doing for*. This disparity deepened my resolve to work with grief and loss—to become the kind of companion I myself had needed. As Yalom (1980) observes, authentic presence in the face of death is both rare and transformative; it demands that we confront our own mortality as we sit beside another's pain.

During those first months after my mother's death, alcohol became my quiet companion—not as indulgence but as anaesthetic. I can see now that my use of it was an attempt to silence what could not yet be spoken. In existential terms, it reflected an avoidance of being, a turning away from the confrontation with finitude. Yet even that evasion became part of the journey: it revealed how grief, when unspoken, seeks expression elsewhere. It also clarified my future path—that my work with grief must always begin by creating spaces where emotional truth can be voiced and witnessed without fear or judgement.

Theme 2 – The Necessity of Release: Embodiment, Expression, and the Act of Crying

As the initial shock subsided, I began to understand that grieving was not only a psychological or spiritual process but also a bodily one. The act of crying—once something I had restrained out of pride or control—became a vital form of release. I learned that tears were not a sign of weakness but an essential function of embodiment, a physical manifestation of surrender to the aching pain of absence.

Finding the space to cry was not easy. Often, it happened in solitude—in the car, on long walks, in the deep darkness of night, or while writing. At times, I danced or simply moved my body to the rhythm of my breath, letting grief flow through movement. These acts of release—crying, walking, dancing, writing—became existential gestures of *letting-be*: moments in which I allowed myself to encounter the full weight of absence.

Heidegger might describe this as *being-toward-death* in its most intimate form—an openness to the temporality of life and the truth of loss. Through crying, I returned to presence; through movement, I remembered that I was still alive. The release did not remove the pain, but it transformed its texture—from paralysis to movement, from heaviness to flow.

As a therapist, I often invite clients to find their own forms of release, but it was through this process that I understood, with embodied conviction, what I had long encouraged in others. Expression—however it arises—is not an adjunct to grieving; it is the process of grieving itself.

Theme 3 – Love Beyond Form: The Coexistence of Physical Absence and Spiritual Presence

I still miss my parents—so, so much. That longing remains an unfillable space within me. The physical absence—the inability to hear their laughter, to feel my mother’s lap beneath my head, or to hear my father’s familiar *Aa gayi beta?* (“You’re home now, sweetheart”)—has never faded. No continuing bond, no spiritual sign, has ever replaced the simple, embodied comfort of their presence.

Yet, paradoxically, something else has arisen alongside that ache: a non-physical relationship that continues to evolve. I sense their presence in subtle moments—a song, a feather, a dream—quiet affirmations that love persists beyond visibility. These continuing bonds, as Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) describe, do not erase the pain of loss. Instead, they expand it, allowing love to be re-experienced in new forms.

Lois Tonkin’s (1996) model of *growing around grief* captures this experience vividly: grief does not shrink with time, but our life grows around it. My world has expanded to include the absence itself—to live with it, not despite it. The physical longing and spiritual connection coexist as dual truths.

Through this realisation came another learning: the importance of preserving the tangible. I often wish I had recorded more videos of my parents—captured their laughter, voices, arguments, and quiet moments. These recordings, I now see, become existential artefacts: ways of witnessing life’s finitude while keeping its memory embodied. This awareness has changed how I relate to those still living. I now record, photograph, and document not from sentimentality but as an act of reverence for impermanence.

Theme 4 – Transformation and Integration: From Daughter to Witness–Therapist

Across these years of grieving, a gradual transformation unfolded. Grief was no longer something that happened *to* me but something I learned to inhabit. As I revisited my journals, letters, and memories, I noticed a subtle shift in tone—from pain to presence, from helplessness to witnessing. I began to perceive how my lived experience of grief was shaping my professional identity as a therapist.

The daughter who once sought comfort became the therapist who could sit with others in their despair. My parents’ deaths initiated me into what van Deurzen (2012) calls *the spiritual world of being*—a dimension where mortality, meaning, and love converge. Their absence became the ground from which empathy, compassion, and existential awareness deepened.

This transformation did not erase vulnerability; it deepened it. In therapy sessions with grieving clients, I often recognise echoes of my own journey. Yet through phenomenological awareness, I can now hold their pain without collapsing into mine. The boundary between personal and professional, while permeable, has become a site of wisdom—a place where being-with-death translates into being-with-life.

Synthesis: Grief as an Ongoing Dialogue

As I bring these findings together, what stays with me is not resolution, but rhythm—a way of living with the constant motion between loss and love. Grief, I have come to see, is not something to overcome but something to walk with. It speaks in silences, in tears, in moments of surrender and return. It has become a dialogue between absence and presence, between the seen and unseen, reminding me that love does not end—it simply changes form.

Through this journey, I have learned that grief is both personal and universal. It belongs to every human life, yet feels utterly our own when it comes. Its isolation lies in our reluctance to speak of it, to stay with what hurts. But when we do—when we allow the body to release, when we name what we fear, when we dare to keep loving those who are gone—something opens. Grief softens us. It teaches tenderness, humility, and the truth of our shared mortality.

For me, this process has been both heartbreak and homecoming. The pain of losing my parents became a teacher in how to live, how to love, and how to accompany others through their own losses. It taught me that meaning is not found in answers but in relationship—in the ongoing conversation between life and death, presence and spirit.

In reflecting on these experiences through phenomenological autoethnography, I see now how the personal can reveal something universal: that grief is not an interruption to life but an invitation into its depths. These lived findings are not conclusions, but crossings—moments where theory meets heart, and the spiritual becomes real through experience.

What follows in the *Discussion* chapter situates these insights within the existential frame, exploring how philosophy, psychotherapy, and spirituality converge to deepen our understanding of death and the ongoing nature of love.

DISCUSSION — Locating the Findings Within the Existential Frame

The findings of this phenomenological autoethnography illuminate grief as an ongoing dialogue between life and death, body and spirit, presence and absence. What began as a private inquiry into my parents' dying became a lived exploration of being human—finite and vulnerable yet capable of meaning, love, and transformation. Through iterative writing and reflection, grief emerged as a teacher of Being. Yalom's (1980) line—"though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us" (p. 29)—ceased to be theory and became lived experience: facing death invited clearer living, deeper love, and a capacity to meet existence from despair to transcendence.

I had long admired Frankl (2006), but only loss made his insight visceral: "suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning" (p. 113). Meaning, I discovered, also resides in what Frankl called the "tragic triad"—pain, guilt, and death (p. 137)—and in the "ordinary devastations" of missed goodbyes, empty chairs, and identity re-formation. What follows situates these discoveries within finitude and death, thrownness, freedom and responsibility, meaning, death in the therapeutic space, the Four Worlds model, continuing bonds, and spirituality as existential awareness from lived event to existential sense-making and onto clinical implications for practice.

1) Finitude and Death: Confronting the Boundaries of Being

My parents' deaths brought finitude into piercing focus. Their absence dismantled the illusion that life can be negotiated into permanence. Heidegger situates finitude as the horizon that gives existence its shape; only through an authentic relation to death can we grasp the urgency of living (1962/2008). Across three years I carried my father's grief alongside mine—listening to his regrets and his readiness to die after my mother's passing, then later sitting at his bedside, aware that each breath might be the last. Time slowed. Moments thickened with significance. In that suspension, superficialities receded and only what mattered remained: connection, compassion, presence.

This encounter with finitude did not flatten the world; paradoxically, it enlarged it. Tillich (1952) speaks of the "courage to be"—not a bravado against death but a steadfastness within it. Continuing to love in the face of impermanence became, for me, a daily practice of courage. As mother and therapist, acknowledging mortality also opened channels for

dialogue—with my children, with clients, and within myself—where fear could be met without euphemism.

There were moments that condensed into Augenblick, the “moment of vision,” in which temporality seems to collapse into a vivid now. My mother’s final breaths felt suspended in a delicate eternity; my father’s last exhale was followed by a stillness that disclosed Being itself. Death, encountered directly, taught presence more fully than any technique I had learned in training. It clarified values, simplified choices, and revealed what deserved the finite energy of a finite life.

At the threshold, however, I also sensed something that the canonical existential texts do not emphasise: an expansion of consciousness, or an intuition that love may persist beyond physical form. This did not arrive as a doctrine. It emerged first through loneliness—the stark, existential aloneness that accompanied grief and stripped the world of colour. Over time, that loneliness became the ground from which a subtler continuity could be perceived: a sense that relationship transforms rather than ends. What began as confrontation with limit softened into the discernment of an unseen companionship. Heidegger’s authenticity, while rooted in finitude, was not contradicted by these experiences; it was extended by them into a transpersonal dimension where love continued to structure my being-in-the-world.

2) Thrownness: Givenness and the Possibility of Response

Heidegger’s notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) describes the givens into which we are born and by which we are shaped. I did not choose the pandemic that separated our family, the pacing of medical events, or the specific moments I missed. Early grief pulsed with “what ifs”: if I had insisted my father not fly just before the world shut down; if I had moved him sooner; if I had asked my mother to hold on; or, conversely, if I had helped my father release too soon, worn thin by the exhaustion of witnessing loss upon loss. These questions were unanswerable, but they were not meaningless. They expressed love entangled with guilt and helplessness.

Over time, I recognised that meaning could not arise from rewriting the past; it could emerge only from deepening relationship with it. Van Deurzen (2012) places acceptance of the givens as the starting point for authentic existence. Acceptance, in this sense, is not resignation but a precise contact with reality: “This—painful, unchosen—*is* what is.” From

that contact, responsibility can grow. In the language of therapy, this is the moment where the heat of self-reproach cools enough for self-compassion to be possible.

3) Freedom and Responsibility: Choosing How to Live With Loss

Sartre's claim that we are "condemned to be free" means we are always responsible for our stance toward the conditions of our lives (1943/2003). After my parents died, I discovered that although grief itself was non-negotiable, my relationship to it was open. I could numb with overwork, alcohol, and vigilance; or I could turn toward grief with rituals, tears, writing, and conversation. Freedom proved not to be the removal of suffering but the willingness to relate to suffering differently.

Frankl (2006) writes that our last freedom lies in the attitude we take toward unavoidable pain. This insight became a durable existential resource. The choice to write, to light a candle, to ask for help, to breathe through a dawn that felt too long—each was a small act of responsibility that affirmed life against despair. Over time, freedom softened from effortful agency into a form of attunement. There were moments that felt like gentle synchronies: white feathers appearing on walks; a blue-eared kingfisher hovering near me as though to say hello; parakeets landing on the balcony outside my quarantine window; answers arising in the heart when logic could not provide them. These events did not erase loss; they eased the sharpness of absence. They introduced a different register of freedom: spiritual responsiveness, the trust that meaning can be co-authored with the unseen.

This responsiveness did not contradict existential ethics; it extended them. The philosopher's freedom as resolute choice met the mystic's freedom as surrender to presence. Ordinary care—rubbing cream on my father's back in the ICU, singing for my mother, filling out forms slowly—became liturgies of love. In their ordinariness, these acts reoriented me. The sacred did not announce itself with thunder; it germinated in daily fidelity.

4) Meaning: A Continuing Dialogue Rather Than a Destination

Frankl suggests that meaning is created, not received, and often in confrontation with suffering. My experience confirmed this while adding an important nuance: meaning is sustained by relationship, not by conclusion. Through writing, reflection, and connection, I found myself entering the space Buber (1937) names the I–Thou: a stance of meeting in which the other—human, memory, the more-than-human—is encountered as presence rather

than object. Dreams, symbols, and intuitions were not escapist fantasies; they were modes of relationship that altered how absence was lived.

This continuing dialogue guided me through a tender academic transition: stepping away from a Doctorate to complete a Master's. I feared my father's disappointment and my own failure. Yet in quiet conversations before my parents' photographs, I felt their love as unconditional—a wisdom that did not demand achievement. Meaning, authored from within, included listening for the forms of guidance that arise in the body and heart.

In therapy, inviting clients—when they are ready—to cultivate dialogue with absence allows grief to evolve into connection rather than collapse into despair. The goal is neither to prove nor to disprove the reality of such experiences but to ask what they *mean* existentially: What do they invite? What do they strengthen? How do they orient life?

5) Death in the Therapeutic Space

Laura Barnett (2019, 2021) argues that death is not an occasional topic in psychotherapy but a constant presence shaping every meeting. My findings resonate and extend this view. Death entered not only my practice but my being. Witnessing my parents' dying stripped away the professional defence of offering solace too quickly. I began to trust silence, to acknowledge the sacredness of tears, to sit without needing to fix. Paidoussis-Mitchell's work on the Four-Worlds view of traumatic bereavement shows how devastating loss reverberates across the physical, social, personal, and spiritual dimensions of life. My data suggest that spirituality can bridge these worlds: simple rituals, dreams, and signs wove continuity between physical absence and relational presence.

In existential terms, the therapist's task becomes one of courageous witnessing. Yalom (1980) names death-awareness as the catalyst for authenticity. I would add: death-awareness refines the therapist's presence. Over time, I learned to honour two simultaneous truths in the room: the irreversibility of death and the irrepressibility of love. Holding both is not a neutral technique; it is a cultivated state of Being.

6) The Four Worlds Model: Situating Grief Across Dimensions of Being

Van Deurzen's (2012) Four Worlds model provided a structure to locate how grief lived in me.

Physical world (Umwelt) -After my parents died, the physical world was altered: empty chairs, a silent phone, rooms that remembered voices. My own body carried grief's impress—exhaustion, tightness, a hollow ache. Medical scares and cysts brought home how mourning can lodge in tissue. Over time, simple bodily rituals—lighting a candle, placing flowers, breathwork—anchored spirit through matter. The body became both site of impact and instrument of reconnection.

Social world (Mitwelt) - Roles shifted; relationships reconfigured. Some friendships thinned under the strain of discomfort; others deepened into quiet solidarity. Communities formed around mourning: the neighbour who left a meal at the door, the friend who said nothing and stayed. As a therapist and death doula, I observed the same dual movement in others—grief isolates and unites. Presence itself, even unskilled, is a profound act of love.

Personal world (Eigenwelt) -Identity reshaped around absence. Who was I without the daily rhythm of caring for my father or calling my mother? Through journaling, psychotherapy, and meditative practice, I began to form a self that included grief rather than trying to outgrow it. As acceptance grew, my body's symptoms softened—a sign that existential integration often has embodied correlates. Authentic living after loss required coordination between insight, habit, and flesh.

Spiritual world (Überwelt) -Here I experienced the most dramatic transformation. The Überwelt is often framed metaphorically as the world of ideals and orientation. My findings suggest it is also tangible and relational: a dimension where the sacred manifests within the ordinary. Feathers on the pavement; parakeets at my window; sudden, grounded intuitions; dreams that brought my mother to the bedside with a calm smile. These were phenomenological experiences of knowing. They did not replace grief; they widened it, allowing love to continue in a new mode.

Bringing the worlds together created movement and balance. Healing was not linear; it was cyclical, tidal. Some days the physical dominated; on others, the spiritual clarified everything. Holding all four simultaneously, even briefly, produced what van Deurzen calls existential balance: an openness to life in its completeness where death is neither denied nor made into spectacle but held as part of sacred continuity.

7) Continuing Bonds Theory

Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) challenged the assumption that healthy mourning requires letting go. My data affirm and extend their thesis. The connections I experienced

with my parents were not merely intrapsychic representations; they were relational ways of being that restructured time, identity, and action. Tonkin's (1996) model of "growing around grief" became a lived map: grief remained a constant kernel while life expanded around it. I did not "finish" missing my parents. I learned how to live where they were absent physically and present relationally.

After my mother's death, I dreamt of her sitting by my bed, whispering reassurances I could sometimes recall and sometimes only feel. After my father died, his presence arrived in sea breezes, in strangers' phrases that sounded like him, in the intimate memory of my name on his tongue. These moments defied rational explanation but felt experientially coherent. In Buber's (1937) terms, they were I–Thou encounters—modes of meeting where the other is present as Thou rather than object. The point is not to adjudicate metaphysics. It is to recognise that for many mourners, relationship transforms rather than ends.

8) Spirituality as Existential Awareness: Integration and Vocation

Gradually, I came to name spirituality as existential awareness: the capacity to remain present to paradox—finite yet connected, separate yet belonging, wounded yet whole. The practices that supported this awareness—meditation, breathwork, small rituals—were not techniques so much as disciplines of attention. They helped me remember presence in the midst of impermanence.

Existential thought and spiritual sensibility converged. Heidegger's being-toward-death awakened authenticity; Frankl's will-to-meaning showed how purpose can arise from suffering; Sartre and de Beauvoir reminded me that meaning is enacted through freedom and responsibility; Yalom and van Deurzen illuminated therapy as a place to meet death without denial. Eastern philosophy's counsel to act without clinging to outcomes—"You have the right to action, but not to its fruits"—resonated as an ethic for grief work. Together these streams shaped a vocation of service.

Long before I knew the term *death doula*, I was practicing its essence beside my parents: keeping vigil, listening without fear, helping them orient toward peace, and discovering that my presence could be a form of prayer. Only later did I learn that the global death-doula movement (Rawlings et al., 2022) articulates these acts as non-medical, holistic support at the end of life—attending to emotional, spiritual, and practical needs often left unmet by clinical

systems. From an existential vantage, the doula holds space for Being at its most vulnerable: freedom-within-limitation, meaning-within-finitude.

Grief had been my initiation; accompanying my parents was my apprenticeship. What began as private heartbreak became a professional and spiritual calling. The shift from daughter to doula embodies an existential principle: meaning arises through engagement, and suffering can be transformed into service. The doula's way of being integrates therapist and mystic—rooted in the here-and-now yet attuned to the beyond—honouring both the irreversibility of death and the continuity of love.

Limitations and Reflections

As an autoethnographic inquiry, these findings are necessarily situated within my cultural, familial, and spiritual context. They do not claim universality. Rather, they offer one textured account of how grief, when lived attentively, can open existential and spiritual dimensions. The phenomenological stance seeks faithful description, yet language always simplifies. Some experiences—like the stillness after a last breath or the felt-sense of a parent's presence—resist capture. Moreover, the integration of spiritual meanings remains contentious within segments of existential psychotherapy. My intention is not to replace critical rigour with credulity, but to invite the field to consider that what many mourners report may be ontologically significant for their lives, even when not empirically verifiable by conventional standards.

Alongside these limitations, I continue to encounter what I have come to call a *hierarchy of loss*—a subtle inner ranking of suffering that surfaces when I witness other forms of devastation: the death of a child, acts of genocide, sexual violence, or the relentless pain of trafficking and displacement. In those moments, my own losses can feel smaller, almost unworthy of grief. Yet I recognise that this comparison is itself an expression of compassion, a yearning to make sense of suffering within the unbearable vastness of human pain. As a therapist and spiritual companion, this remains an area of ongoing growth—learning to stay present to all losses, without diminishing or measuring them, and to meet each with equal reverence. The work ahead is to cultivate a presence spacious enough to hold both the intimacy of personal sorrow and the enormity of collective suffering, trusting that each encounter, however different in scale, calls for the same qualities of love, humility, and sacred attention.

Future research might explore dialogical methodologies that pair first-person accounts of continuing bonds with therapist reflections, or mixed-method designs that examine therapeutic outcomes when such bonds are validated. Cross-cultural perspectives would deepen understanding of how ritual, community, and cosmology shape the experience of ongoing relationship after death.

Conclusion: Toward an Existential Understanding of Grief

Existential philosophy and spirituality converge in lived grief. Where existentialism offers authenticity, freedom, and responsibility, spirituality brings reverence and continuity. Together they reveal grief as an ontological event—a transformation in how one inhabits the world. The death-doula role symbolises this integration: rooted in the here-and-now, attuned to the beyond, holding freedom within limitation and meaning within finitude. To serve at the threshold is to participate in the mystery of Being; awareness of death becomes a beginning in which love, meaning, and presence find their fullest form.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS IN PRACTICE

Translating these findings into practice has shown that working with grief is not merely a professional endeavour but a deeply human one. To accompany another through loss is to meet finitude together—to recognise that love, pain, and mortality coexist within every therapeutic encounter. These implications, drawn from my lived experience of mourning and meaning-making, invite a way of working grounded not in intervention but in presence—honouring both the reality of death and the mystery of what endures beyond it.

- **Name finitude clearly.**

Support clients to speak directly about death. Clarity reduces isolation and anchors values. The goal is not to resolve death-anxiety but to hold it as part of human life. When clients describe moments that “open” around the dying of a loved one, therapists can help articulate these experiences as disclosures of value and presence—without reducing them to sentimentality or pathology.

- **Normalize thrownness.**

Treat “what ifs” as love’s labour rather than cognitive error. Honouring the legitimacy of “what if” as the heart learning to live with what has happened helps release shame and invites agency.

- **Cultivate response-ability.**

Encourage small, repeatable acts—writing, lighting a candle, or mindful breathwork—that embody chosen attitudes. When therapists move from “helping clients get over grief” to accompanying them in living with it, the space becomes one of shared humanity. Attending to small acts of care stabilises meaning more effectively than cognitive strategies.

- **Invite dialogue with absence.**

Use letters, memory work, or silence to support continuing bonds. Meaning-making as dialogue reframes “closure” and legitimises relational continuity without imposing metaphysical claims.

- **Use the Four Worlds map.**

Identify where movement is frozen and introduce practices bridging the worlds—breathwork for the body, community ritual for the social, journaling for the personal, contemplative stillness for the spiritual. This helps grief flow across dimensions, legitimising embodied and reflective practices as complementary routes to integration.

- **Hold spiritual experiences phenomenologically.**

Ask, “What is this like?” or “What does it invite?” rather than “Is it real?” Validating clients’ experiences of continuing bonds—dreams, rituals, sensed presence—protects dignity and restores coherence. Therapists need not confirm belief but can recognise existential meaning. The core competencies here are humility, curiosity, and willingness to be changed by what clients share.

- **Tend the therapist’s mortality awareness.**

Reflective spaces, grief debriefs, and rituals sustain the therapist’s capacity for presence. Training in existential psychotherapy can include competencies long practised by death doulas: bedside witnessing, family work, and spiritual sensitivity. Tending to one’s own mortality awareness prevents defensive or avoidant practice.

- **Integrate doula sensibilities.**

Where appropriate, collaborate with end-of-life doulas—especially around vigil keeping, family support, and ritual—bringing embodied compassion and ritual literacy into clinical work.

Integrative Synthesis: What These Findings Offer the Field

Across these themes, several contributions emerge:

1. Existential–spiritual coherence:

Spirituality need not sit outside existential psychotherapy; it can be seen as existential awareness—a disciplined attentiveness to paradox that many clients naturally develop in grief. Framing it this way legitimises lived experiences (dreams, signs, rituals) without requiring belief.

2. Relational ontology of grief:

Continuing bonds are more than coping mechanisms—they express a relational ontology where love persists as a structuring force of being. This extends existentialism into a relational spirituality that honours lived connection.

3. Embodiment across worlds:

The Four Worlds model helps trace grief’s movement through body, relationships, self, and meaning. Integration is mutual: as the body softens, meaning settles; as meaning integrates, embodiment finds ease.

4. Therapeutic presence as practice:

Presence is not neutral containment but an ethical and spiritual act. Silence, ritual awareness,

and openness to transformation are not techniques—they are the ground of authentic encounter.

5. Freedom reconceived:

Freedom after loss is not willful assertion but spiritual responsiveness—trusting that meaning reveals itself through attunement. This redefinition honours experiences that may otherwise be pathologised or dismissed.

Ultimately, therapy is not about leading clients away from pain but walking beside them toward truth. The existential therapist's task is to hold the space where sorrow and meaning breathe together—to listen without fixing, to trust what unfolds in silence. In these moments, the existential meets the spiritual in presence at the threshold between the known and the unknowable. Dialogue becomes prayerful; the therapeutic space, a sanctuary for being. My encounters with death have taught me that when we meet grief with grace and humility, both client and therapist are transformed. As Wolterstorff (2013) reminds us, true companionship arises from deep listening, humility, and faith in the mourner's inner wisdom. In this way, grief work becomes not just healing but a living dialogue with love, mortality, and the fragile beauty of being alive.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has traced a journey through grief, loss, spirituality, and transformation, using phenomenological autoethnography to weave lived experience with existential inquiry. Emerging from the deaths of my parents, it has explored how meaning and spirituality can be discovered through continuing bonds with the dead, and how such experiences reshape both personal life and therapeutic practice.

A yearning for purpose and a fragile will to live became the crucible of transformation. During my father's final weeks and the solitary dismantling of my parents' home, I encountered isolation in its rawest form. Yet solitude revealed itself as a teacher, echoing Whyte's (2015) view that loneliness mirrors our longing for belonging. Within that silence, grief became both pain and guide. As Klass (2012) observed, sorrow is the weight of grief, yet within it lies solace. For me, solitude became a threshold to connection—with my parents and the sacred dimension of being.

Throughout this process, the idea of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Walter, 2009) offered a counterpoint to Western ideals of "letting go." Dreams, synchronicities, and inner conversations affirmed that relationships with the dead do not vanish but transform. These experiences aligned with Hindu notions of Atman and reincarnation, affirming that consciousness endures beyond bodily death. My parents' subtle presence—through signs, guidance, and love—helped me move beyond the dualism of life and death into a new grammar of relationship that defied finality.

Spiritual teachers such as Frederick (2013), Giesmann (2021), Dispenza (2019), and Newton (1994, 2000, 2003) articulated what I was already living: grief as spiritual curriculum and love as enduring consciousness. Their writings reframed loss as transformation rather than pathology, supporting the experiential knowing that love continues in altered form.

Accompanying my father through dying revealed a vocational calling—the work of the death doula. In this role, I embodied what Wolterstorff (2013) calls effective grief companionship: deep listening, empathy, and presence that honours suffering rather than erases it. During the pandemic, when many died in isolation, this role of sacred witnessing felt even more vital. Sitting beside my father taught me that readiness cannot be given but only accompanied.

Through these encounters, I came to see that spirituality and psychotherapy are not separate but complementary languages of meaning. In therapy, clients often share spiritual experiences—dreams, signs, or felt connections that transcend logic. When ignored, these moments can silence healing; when honoured, they restore coherence and trust. Spiritually integrated psychotherapy (Pargament, 2007) and existential practice (van Deurzen, 2010) both affirm spirituality as a dimension of being. To acknowledge a client's encounter with the dead is not to prove, but to witness—to validate how they live, grieve, and hope.

From my mother I learned readiness; from my father, truth-telling about death. Together, they modelled acceptance—not resignation but freedom grounded in presence. Their legacy teaches my daughters that death is not taboo; that it can be met with tenderness; and that love endures precisely because it recognises impermanence. To live well is to live with awareness of endings.

This work inevitably has limits. Word count constrains fuller descriptions of the rituals and practices that integrated grief into daily life. Breathwork, journaling, letter-writing, and ritual-making grounded my process and linked spirituality with embodiment—an area future existential research could explore more deeply.

Methodologically, phenomenological autoethnography proved uniquely suited to this inquiry. It demanded honesty and reflexivity, showing how meaning unfolds through inhabiting, not analysing, experience. Writing became a phenomenological reduction—a dialogue between experience, reflection, and theory that demonstrated how the personal and philosophical can coexist with scholarly rigour.

This dissertation contributes to existential psychotherapy by framing spirituality as an existential response to death. It positions ongoing bonds not as coping mechanisms but as expressions of our ontological need for connection and continuity. It offers an integrative way to recognise the sacred within the human—to see spirituality as lived meaning-making rather than dogma.

Death, once my greatest fear, has become a companion—a reminder that time is finite and precious. Writing this dissertation has been a pilgrimage from rupture to integration, from

despair to purpose. Walking beside my parents as they died taught me that death is both ending and teacher, silence and dialogue. The task of the living is not to master death but to live in its presence with honesty and grace.

At its core, this research is about presence—the presence I offered my parents, the presence I bring to clients, and the presence I now inhabit. It is about legacy: my parents’ teachings carried forward through my work, and the compassion I hope my daughters will inherit. If there is one truth from this journey, it is that the dying teach us how to inhabit life more fully—with love, courage, and consciousness. That is the meaning I have found in finitude, and the gift I offer back to psychotherapy and to life itself.

Two words, *Aham Brahmāsmi*—I am one with the ultimate reality—are an awareness that love, consciousness, and being are not extinguished by death but return to the same source from which they arose.

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APPENDICES

1. Mom and dad – the photo I say good morning to everyday and sit and talk to them while sitting by them



2. Magical moment - Mom on the sofa waiting for her son to arrive



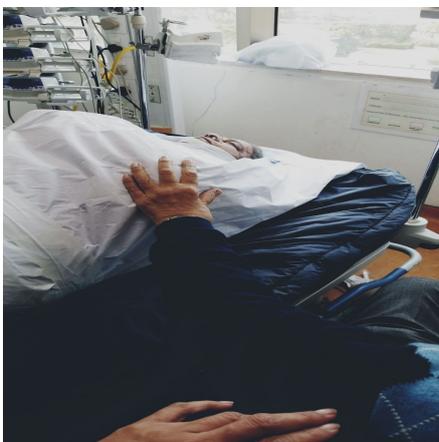
3. Mom in the ICU



4. Dads hand held tightly to moms – not letting go...



5. Dad with moms body at the hospital, he stayed with her for an hour



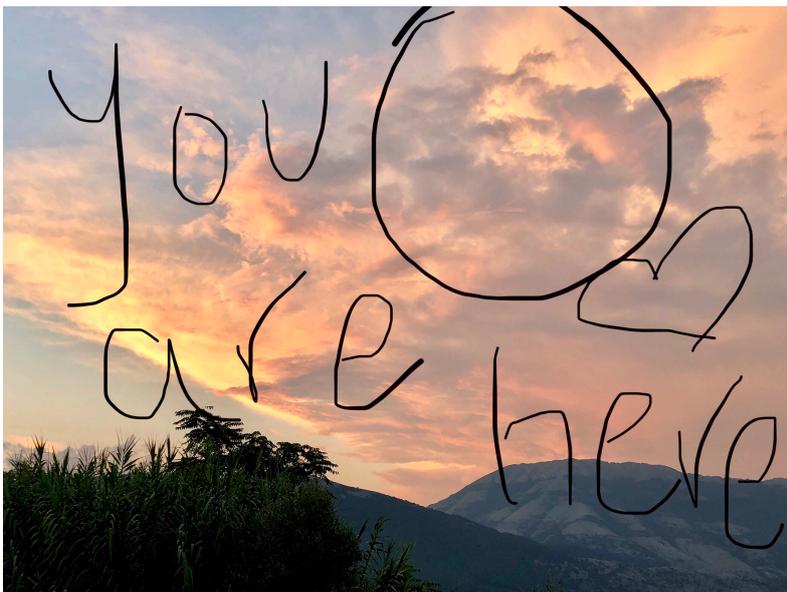
6. Moms funeral – the daughter who lost her best friend and confidant



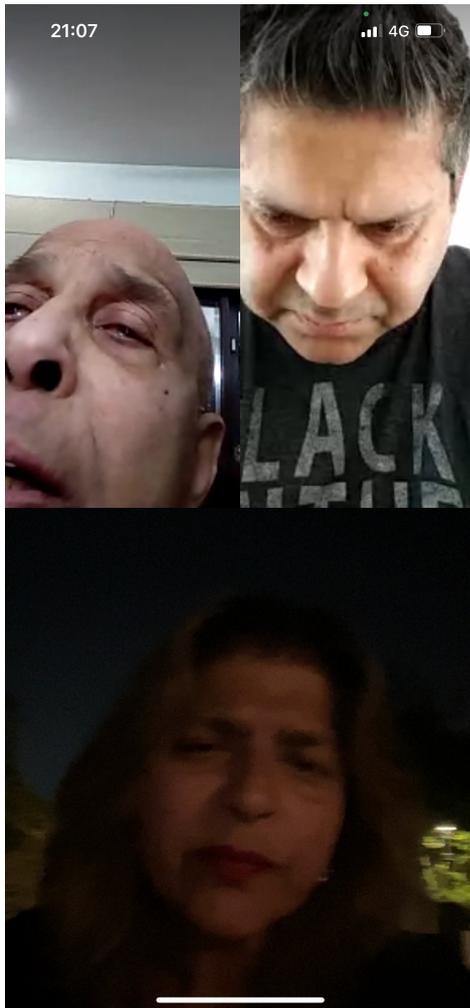
7. Dad at moms memorial – heartbroken....



8. Moms face in the clouds – 50th anniversary present for us



9. Dads phonecall on 17th feb 2021 to tell my brother and I that he is ready to die



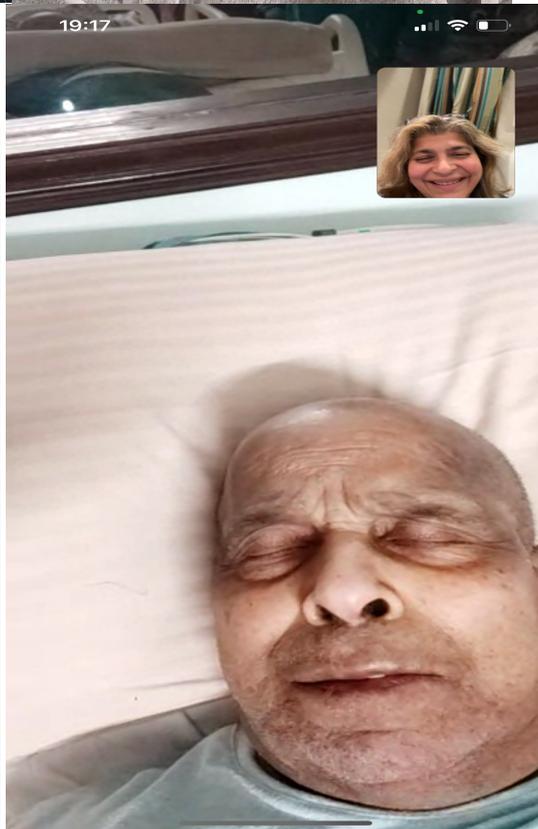
10. Isolation vs. Loneliness essay

<https://community.existentialanalysis.org.uk/hermeneutic-circular/hermeneutic-circular-october-2022>

google drive link -

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lzp4yowv6wODujpBwMLOQX0ZJTU_sLeY/edit?usp=sharing&oid=101139500312314378132&rtpof=true&sd=true

11. A month with Dad being his companion and death doula in the making



12. witness to my own sadness/grief



13. dad's last breaths / body



14. Shrine for my parents after their transitions



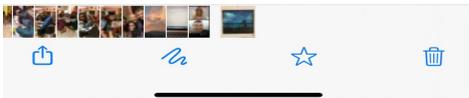
15. Long walks by seaside



16. Friends daughter's face in the painting



This is the painting she'd given my sis few months ago ..



17. Article

- a. Endings – My mother and me – Feb 2018

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/13FRaCRIWtLQJdsBnVqyhTsCMCSSV77X6/edit?usp=sharing&oid=101139500312314378132&rtpof=true&sd=true>

18. Letter to mom – incomplete /work in progress