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# Love On - The Life of a Suicide Survivor: A Performance Autoethnographic Study

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Love On - The Life of a Suicide Survivor: A Performance Autoethnographic Study

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Communication and Performance

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Professional Communication

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by

Patricia R. Wheeler

May 2016

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Joseph Sobol, PhD, Chair

Patrick Cronin

Andrew Herrmann, PhD

Keywords: storytelling, narrative, autoethnography, performance, suicide, grief

## ABSTRACT

Love On - The Life of a Suicide Survivor: A Performance Autoethnographic Study

by

Patricia R. Wheeler

Suicide touches the lives of millions of people each year in this country alone, yet conversations about suicide loss and survival after a loss remain taboo and often do not happen. The story I performed for this performance autoethnographic study centers on my life as a survivor of suicide. It provides a starting point for dialog regarding trauma, grief, and suicide loss. The narrative was constructed directly following the sudden death of my father, which had a direct effect on my ability to produce artistic work. The development, staging and performance of the story were altered to account for the situational depression I experienced during my creative process.

I received feedback from the audience on what aspects of my telling were well developed, and what needed further development. I was able to experience the importance of balance in an autoethnographers personal life when writing about trauma and experiencing it directly.

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Paul Myers and Denny Wheeler, without whom none of this would be possible. The stories we created together were just the beginning. I'll keep things going in their names. Love on.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
COPYRIGHT.....	3
DEDICATION.....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	8
Project Summary.....	9
Statement of Purpose .....	10
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	13
Autoethnography.....	14
Storytelling.....	16
Performance Studies .....	20
Applied Storytelling.....	34
Suicidology .....	36
3. METHODOLOGY .....	38
4. “LOVE ON – THE LIFE OF A SUICIDE SURVIVOR” .....	44
5. REFLECTIONS.....	64
Audience Feedback.....	64
Story Feedback.....	64
Performance Feedback.....	67
Personal Reflections.....	69

	Reflections on the Story.....	70
	Crafting the Narrative.....	70
	Performance Reflections.....	75
6.	CONCLUSION.....	78
	REFERENCES.....	84
	APPENDICES.....	87
	Appendix A: Suicide/Trauma Support Resources.....	87
	Appendix B: U.S.A. Suicide: 2014 Official Final Data.....	88
	Appendix C: Suicide Statistics - American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ...	94
	VITA.....	96



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is defined as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). Ellis and Bochner (2006) point out that “the autoethnographer is first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller” (p. 111). They also state that “(a)utoethnography depicts people struggling to overcome adversity – you know, going through a bad time” and that “(a)utoethnographers show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (p. 111).

In my performance autoethnography, “Love On - The Life of a Suicide Survivor,” I share the story of my experience as a suicide loss survivor. Suicide bereavement varies greatly from that experienced with a natural loss, as is explained by Cvinar (2005) in the following:

One of the delineating elements found in suicide bereavement versus normal bereavement is the stigma experienced by survivors. Suicide has a profound effect on the family, friends, and associates of the victim that transcends the immediate loss. As those close to the victim suffer through bereavement, a variety of reactions and coping mechanisms are engaged as each individual sorts through individual reactions to the difficult loss. Bereavement following suicide is complicated by the complex psychological impact of the act on those close to the victim. It is further complicated by the societal perception that the act of suicide is a failure by the victim and the family to deal with some emotional issue and ultimately society affixes blame for the loss on the survivors. This individual or societal stigma introduces a unique stress on the

bereavement process that in some cases requires clinical intervention. (p. 14)

In fact, I did experience stigma associated with the death of my loved one to suicide. That stigma I felt offers me the opportunity to provide new personal insights into the life of suicide survivors. As Ellis and Bochner (2006) state, “(m)ost of our communicative acts express the personal and the cultural, the particular and the general, the unique and the universal” (p. 113). While my story is that of one woman moving through loss and grief, it is a story that connects to those universal experiences shared by all survivors. Autoethnography offers me a platform to share this personal narrative while performing provides me the artistic outlet that, as a storyteller, is necessary to have a full expression of that narrative.

### Project Summary

I conducted a performance autoethnography, in which I performed a personal narrative discussing the last decade of my life as a survivor of suicide. As a clarifying point, for our purpose, a survivor of suicide is defined as one who has lost a loved one to suicide. I also conduct post-performance talk back sessions, during which I asked the audience for feedback regarding subject matter and the presentation of such. I invited the general public to attend, as well as specific members of the mental health community on the ETSU campus.

This project came after three completed semesters of study in the Storytelling/Theatre concentration in the Professional Communication Masters of Arts program at East Tennessee State University. I was advised by professors on the frame of my project, but was given the freedom to create the show I felt best needed telling. As a storyteller, I primarily tell personal narrative, and while that is the overall purpose of this show, I incorporated statistics and facts regarding suicide and survivors in this piece.

## Statement of Purpose

My purpose in conducting this performance autoethnography is layered. I hoped to gain an understanding of how my work affects both those with experience dealing with suicide, and those to whom this is a new subject. I hope that the messages of my piece, that suicide loss affects many people, and that survivors of suicide can succeed in living full, dynamic lives, is clear at the conclusion of my performance. As such, I ask the question: how can performing personal narrative affect the way an audience thinks about a stigmatized subject?

Initially, I worked to develop a deeper knowledge of my craft of storytelling. In the processes of creating this long form personal narrative, I needed to assess what elements were necessary to the story and deserved to be shared. This ten-year period of my life is one I have spent much time reflecting on, and I have developed shorter stories about segments of that time prior to the creation of this piece. An hour long performance is a much different process.

Creating a longer piece that extends into the critical world of suicidology and survivor culture meant I needed to spend time with each major event that I had dealt with over the last decade, looking into what helped to shape my experience as a survivor. In terms of decided how to perform the show, as an artistic event, I immediately knew I wanted to create very simple staging to help focus the attention on the story. My intent was to tell my story without notes, using a chair and otherwise blank stage as a performance space. As a storyteller, this is a staging with which I am very familiar, but my research into performance autoethnography showed that there are no limits to how a piece can be performed. Keeping it simple and straightforward was the best course of action for me to take to foreground my purpose of presenting a compelling story.

I know that I am not alone in my struggles, and I hope this performance and the subsequent question and answer period helped people to acknowledge that they are not alone either. My second goal is to shed light on the stigma attached to surviving a traumatic event such as suicide. I have found that survivors of trauma from all walks of life are often embarrassed to share their experience, or even just to admit that it happened, because of the shame associated with such trauma. I hope to create a safe space in my work that allows others permission to speak openly about the loss of their loved one, or the abuse they endured, or the difficulties they had living with an addict. Whatever their traumatic event might be, I aim to empower those who experience my work by sharing my experience as openly and honestly as I am able.

Suicide and mental illness are, unfortunately, still very difficult topics for many people to discuss. The final goal of my performance autoethnography is to bring light to those subjects. My performance will include statistics and facts about suicide and mental illness, as well as information regarding survivors of suicide. I have been a member of suicide survivor groups, participated in suicide survivor walks, lit candles along the way. I realize many survivors aren't aware of those resources. I will make those resources very clear. I will also discuss the topic of suicide from a clinical perspective, referencing work by scholars and researchers in the fields of suicidology and mental illness. By talking openly about these statistics and stigmas. I hope to help everyone, not just survivors, to realize the importance of not remaining silent. I will also strive to help create conversations about suicide that can continue on beyond the time and space allowed by my performance by providing audience members with pamphlets providing facts and resources regarding suicide and suicide survivors.

The intended beneficiaries of my study are initially all survivors of traumatic events, focusing mainly on survivors of suicide. Beyond that, the intent of “Love On” is to benefit survivors, people struggling with mental illness, mental health professionals, or simply members of the general public. All groups have the chance of encountering a suicide survivor or someone contemplating suicide in the future.

It is my hope that the message of my performance autoethnography will remain with them, and that if an audience member is ever in the position to need the information I have provided, they will have it. It is more than just the facts that matter. It is knowing the story of someone who has personally been affected by such a dramatic loss. Having a face to put with an idea helps to make it more real. I am that face.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

I have reviewed literature on the general topics of autoethnography and ethnography, along with relevant works in storytelling, performance studies, and suicidology. I focus first on performance autoethnography. Performance autoethnography can be defined as the performance of “the documentation of an individual life as research” (Miller & Taylor, 2006), though it became very clear to me by exploring existing literature that even the definition of the field of study is constantly fluctuating. For the sake of this literature review, I will focus on the personal narrative component of autoethnographic performance and research.

I found many trends in the study of performance autoethnography. Consistently, I found researchers referencing the importance of performance in the study of human science, while pointing out the reliance of the academy on text based study (Conquergood, 1998). It is through that reliance the performance autoethnographer must present and defend their work.

I found a consistent need to consider the audience as an active participant in both the production and the research involved with performance ethnography. How an audience responds to the presentation of the work is often just as important as how the information is actually presented. It is essential that the performance autoethnographer take care to ensure the safety of their audience, both physically and emotionally (Morgan, Mienczakowski, & Smith, 2000). The performer/researcher is often exposing the shadow of the human experience, and with that comes great responsibility. She is a conduit for the audience’s own emotions, often bringing up feelings and memories those viewing the performance did not know previously existed (Morgan et al., 2000).

I reviewed the literature from a feminist approach. As the field of performance autoethnography has less scholarship than that of performance ethnography, I chose to include literature that focused primarily on ethnography, and apply its findings to autoethnography when necessary. Criteria of relevance included commentary on the relationship of the performer to the audience, explanation of the connection of the work to the larger field of study, and commentary on the emotional elements of performance ethnography. I compared that literature with several works by storytellers that deal with difficult subject matter. I also compared a study that included the possible effects on audiences of performances that graphically describe suicide events. That essay connects to my work, as I am performing a piece that has suicide as the central motivating plot point. I also chose to review an autoethnography. Though this was written and not performed, I felt that its inclusion was needed for comprehensiveness. I included literature pertaining to the use of storytelling in the therapeutic field. Finally, I chose to include data regarding suicidology and survivors of suicide.

### Autoethnography

In “My Father’s Ghost,” Herrmann (2012) “presents an autoethnographic, autobiographical investigation into the story of a boy (now a man) and his relationship with his missing father.” This article provides an example of emotional autoethnography. Through his reflection of life with and without his father, the author shares several personal experiences that draw the reader in. The article begins with the conversation that sets the piece into motion, during which the author reveals to his mother his lack of memories of his father. This conversation provides the structure of the article, in which we learn of the author’s experience

with his father through flashback, with memories beginning in 1974 and concluding when the article was published, 2005. Like Herrmann, I include reflections on the memories I present. I attempt to analyze why I felt or behaved certain ways based on my recollection of events that have occurred over a long period of time. Herrmann does this between memories, stating “Dad drifts in and out of the shadows of my mind and memory. I need answers, but there are none to be found. Mom has no answers, nor do my brothers” (p. 342). He comments on how he looks like a “carbon copy” of his father, yet continues to find his memories lacking. The reader feels the struggle of a man who has grown up without a father he longs to understand, and the difficulty of accepting that he will never be able to know him. The reader is left with the shocking revelation that two weeks after the author’s first visit with his father in decades, his father disconnects his number and becomes, once again, unreachable. Herrmann makes the decision to start thinking of his father as a ghost; he asks his ghost questions, he searches for answers in conversation with a figment of his imagination in a way that gives just as many possibilities of ever finding the truth as continuing to contact his dad ever will, probably more. This feels very right.

With its similar structure and emotional content, I found this piece to be a very helpful parallel to my own project. Herrmann crafts a critical stance toward his experience, relating what he’s gone through to that of other “adult children of divorce” (p. 337), and acknowledging his experience as a part of the larger study of people like himself. I hope to bring that same awareness to my experience as a suicide survivor.



## Storytelling

While Spalding Gray marketed his performances as “monologues,” in unguarded moments he often claimed the role of storyteller. His stories, as described in his obituary in Theatre World magazine, were “trenchant, personal narratives delivered on sparse, unadorned sets with a dry, WASP, quiet mania” (2003-2004, v.60, p. 316). Gray died from an apparent suicide, jumping off the Staten Island Ferry in 2004, following an automobile accident that drastically curtailed his ability to perform and left him in an unshakable depression. I have a great deal of respect for Gray as an artist, and had to fight the urge to mimic his trademark set of table, water glass, and microphone with “Love On.”

Gray’s breakthrough work “Swimming to Cambodia” tells the story of Gray’s experience filming a movie in Thailand about the Cambodian genocide. His partner is visiting him on set, and gives Gray an ultimatum: “Either you marry me or you give me a date when you’re coming back” (Gray, 1985, p. 6). Gray selects a date, but explains that he will not be able to return home until he has what he calls a “perfect moment” (Gray, 1985, p. 6). The rest of the show is devoted to his search for that “perfect moment” (Gray, 1985, p. 6). Judging from the printed version of “Swimming to Cambodia” (1985), much of the story focuses on his internal monologue he experiences after smoking marijuana on the beaches of Phuket, where he has gone to try and create a perfect moment. The magic that Gray creates within “Swimming to Cambodia” is explained by Leverett (1985) in the Afterword of the printed version of his show:

“Call it an epic monologue: remembering what ‘epic’ has meant during the several millennia of its history: a text performed first, written down later; a vessel for great themes expressed through mighty events extending past earthbound reality up into the

splendor of paradise and down into the devastation of hell; a canvas of life forever on the move between the individual and the universal...” (p. 129).

Gray is able to create what every storyteller hopes to achieve, that link between themselves and the collective, through his expert harnessing of the oral tradition. As well as reading the printed version of “Swimming to Cambodia,” I also viewed the film directed by Jonathan Demme in 1987. The film version uses Gray’s trademark stage construction, and relies mostly on frontal shots of Gray at the table. Demme also splices in portions of the movie Gray was filming while in Thailand. “The Killing Fields” (1984). This film allows those of us that were never able to see Gray perform get a sense of what being in the theatre with him must have been like, that is, electric.

The second piece of his work I reviewed was “Morning, Noon and Night” (2000). Gray wrote this piece later in his life, after he relocated from New York City to Southampton, Long Island with his two sons, step daughter, and partner (Gray, 2000). The pace of this piece is much slower than that of “Swimming to Cambodia,” perhaps because Gray is no longer young and living the fast paced city life, but is instead older and more settled (Gray, 1985). Having previously viewed the film version of “Swimming to Cambodia” (1987), I had a sense of Gray’s diction and could imagine him on stage, at his table with a glass of water, a microphone, and his notebook, performing this monologue. Despite the difference in his age and the subject matter, Gray’s personality still shows strongly in this piece. The story focuses primarily on a day in the life of Spalding Gray, and it isn’t until the last section of the piece that he turns the focus toward his desire to end his life. He explains to the reader (listener) that his children have given him reason to hold on for a while longer, something he had never had before.

This reflection is just one of many side bars that Gray takes as we ride around town with him on his journey throughout the day. He gives us access to his inner monologue, and allows us into even the most mundane workings of his mind. It is as if the reader is a part of, not just his day, but of him; and at the end of the story, I wanted to remain there.

From The Journals of Spalding Gray (2011) edited by Nell Casey, the reader is able to gain a deeper understanding of the daily struggles faced by this artist. He talks about his feelings of inadequacy, his mental illness, the relationships he has with the women in his life, and his mother's suicide in earnest tones. Gray's mother also committed suicide, and death was a consistent motif in his creative work. As a survivor of suicide, I have spent the last ten years of my life working through how to use that fact to fit in with my overall identity, both creatively and personally. Gray's work provides a strong example of needing to maintain a distance between one's creative narrative and one's real life. He says:

"I sometimes feel like that; like I am this open conduit through which I let other energies pass. It started as an actor, and the other energies were other people's scripts. Now it is my life that is passing through me." (2011, p. 65)

I have struggled with wanting to work creatively with this major event in my life, the loss of my fiancé to suicide, and at the same time not wanting to be defined by it. How can I let my experiences influence and guide me, without overtaking me both creatively and otherwise?

Casey talks about Gray's monologue "Rumstick Road," which "was an experimental exploration of Gray's mother's psychiatric problems" (2011, p. 33). Gray's acknowledgment of the importance of suicide in his life has helped me to feel comfortable talking about the difficulties experiencing a loss of this kind can be. I feel like it is important to talk about human experiences

in a very open and honest way, and Gray does just that in his work. I strive to be able to talk about suicide as he does. I am cautious, however, of letting my artistic self run too deeply into my reality. Gray died like his mother before him, and one can only wonder if his constant preoccupation with suicide helped lead him down that road.

Regi Carpenter is another storyteller who deals with mental illness in her work. At the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, I saw a performance of her one-woman show “Snap” in October of 2014. Carpenter shared with the audience her experience of being placed in a psychiatric hospital when she was in her teens, and her struggles to move past that experience. While Carpenter’s subject material is very relevant toward my work, I found it difficult to connect with what she was performing. Unlike Gray her style felt forced and did not connect with me. What was intended to be an honest sharing of an intimate experience instead seemed more like an uncomfortable conversation. I want to make sure when performing my work, I am able to engage the audience to feel that I am someone they would want to go on this journey with, not just someone who has experienced something difficult she wants to share. While I think Carpenter has an important story to tell, watching her perform helped me gain a deeper understanding of the importance of clearly defining one’s objective prior to sharing one’s work. Discussing mental illness and suicide is difficult territory and I have to work hard to make sure I am doing right for myself and for my story.

Sirdeaner Walker is a storyteller with The Moth, where she performed her story “My Son Carl,” (2011) about her eleven-year-old son’s suicide after being bullied by his classmates at a charter school in Massachusetts. In response to her son’s suicide Walker worked to help establish the “Safe Schools Improvement Act” in which all school workers are required by law to

report any incidents of bullying and the parents of both the child being bullied and the child doing the bullying are notified (2011). Walker's story includes specific details of the method of suicide her son used, and that detail helped to bring me into her world. She found him and afterward she was compelled to take action in his memory. She speaks out on bullying and his suicide, and in her story she mentions a woman who tells her she wishes she could speak out too. Walker assured the woman that she will be her voice. That notion resonates with me. Walker represents a group of survivors who have lost their young loved ones because of bullying. Her speaking publicly about how his death has affected her gives her cause a face. While my fiancé's death isn't backed by anything quite as politically charged, it was still a tragic loss. Walker gives me cause to reflect on the importance of my sharing my story. Hearing of her experience with another mother who has also lost a child to suicide inspires me to continue to share my story. I can only hope I am able to be the face for another person who has gone through a parallel situation.

### Performance Studies

The article by Morgan et al. (2000) entitled "Extreme dilemmas in performance ethnography: unleashed emotionality of performance in critical areas of suicide, abuse, and madness" (p. 167) reviews several performance pieces including an ethnographic piece relating to suicide. In their study, the authors primarily discuss what they refer to as "ethnodrama," which they define as "the staged performance of cultural texts developed, written, and authenticated by health care patients, their associated health care specialists, academics, and the general public" (Morgan et al., 2000, p. 167). While I am not currently under the care of a health

care professional in reaction to the suicide of my fiancé, I have been in the past, including during the time I refer to in “Love On.” This, along with the study’s subject matter, gives this this piece its pertinence to my study.

The authors conclude that including suicide as subject matter in ethnography and autoethnography may elicit emotional response from audience members. This serves as a basis for why I have chosen not to offer physical representation of the suicide I reference, but instead use verbal description to offer the audience an understanding of the trauma I endured during the experience of finding my loved one dead by suicide.

As posited by the authors, “(p)erformance is an emotional environment in which catharsis is always possible” (Morgan et al., 2000, p. 175). Dealing with mental health disorders and suicide makes it not only possible but a goal of the work. It is not necessary to treat the audience of a piece dealing with suicide as if they are bound to have a negative reaction to the material, but it is essential that the writer and performer of such a piece be mindful of the intensity of potential emotional responses, and be prepared to deal with whatever emotions audience members bring to them.

Morgan et al. (2000) surveyed the audience post-performance, and found they would have liked to have a question and answer period after the show to help them process the experience. This proved very useful for me, as I had been unsure as to whether a talk-back period would be beneficial. These findings persuaded me to offer a brief open-ended period of discussion post-performance, with the content determined by and expressive of the audience reactions. This enables me, as writer and performer, to get a feel for how the material I presented affected the audience, and allows me data to help shape my performance in the future.

On a broader scale, this study dealt with factual portrayals of actual human lives to an audience. “The intent to engage audiences at an emotional level is supported by the audiences’ understanding that the stage representations they are witnessing are also documented, informant-worded research narratives based upon real lives” (Morgan et al., 2000, p. 168). It is critical to the success of an ethnographic performance that the truth of what is being presented is communicated. An element of trust must be established between the audience and performer prior even to the beginning of the performance for that truth to be accepted as fact. The performances referenced in the study targeted audiences within the healthcare community, including mental health patients, as well as practitioners. While the performances of “Love On” will not specifically include members of that community, it will include members of the academic community of which I am a part. In the future, I intend to target mental health providers as members of the audience. In order for the performance to be viewed as truthful and to create trust, it is important for me to communicate the subject matter and autoethnographic content prior to an audience's viewing. I will establish this fact with use of program material to give background on what is about to be presented, as did the performances from the Morgan study.

Morgan et al. (2000) conclude that “some people may be damaged by exposure to some drama or ethnodrama on some occasions and under some circumstances” (p. 167). This conclusion helps to clarify the importance of sharing difficult stories with an audience; not matter what the subject matter might be, there is always a risk of damage. A performer should not be dissuaded from sharing their story because of fear of harm to the audience. The lack of representation from personal experience dealing with fringe, othered voices and material serves

to perpetuate an environment in which those that experience trauma or live on the edges of society will not speak up. Presenting autoethnographic tellings through performance gives the public a chance to experience what is it like to be on the other side, and has the potential to reach some who have remained silent, thinking that theirs was a singular experience. My hope is that performances like these will spark further conversation on why suicide, depression, etc. affect so many, yet are seldom discussed without stigma.

In conclusion, I found the study by Morgan et al. (2000) to be helpful and important. The study touched on many elements present in my work, and offered answers to my questions regarding how to ethically and safely present “Love On.” While the authors focused on ethnodrama, the writers of the scripts they reference were also often performers of the pieces, aligning those performances with my own autoethnographic approach.

The critical article by Miller and Taylor (2006) titled “The Constructed Self: Strategic and Aesthetic Choices in Autobiographical Performance” surveys several solo performance narratives and compares their techniques and performance goals (p. 169-187). Those featured are: Joni L. Jones’ “sistadocta,” “Refreshment” by Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, “Skin Flint (or, The Garbage Man’s Kid)” by Bryant Keith Alexander, and “A Clean Breast of It” by Linda Park-Fuller.

The authors spend time on both auto/biography, or the weaving of a performer's life with the narrative of an historical figure on stage, and staged personal narrative. For the purpose of this review, I will be looking at the staged personal narrative component only. I have chosen to exclude the auto/biography section due to its lesser relevance to “Love On.”



The article begins by discussing staged personal narrative as a whole. Miller and Taylor (2006) state that “stories mentor us and allow us to structure our awareness of the trajectory of our lives” (p. 169). This gives the writer and performer the opportunity to categorize and analyze events from their own lives, while presenting their story on stage and “expressing an aspect of the subjective self” (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 170). The performer must be able to connect their story, their life, with the lives of those in the audience. Through that connection, one is able to both see the universality of individual experiences, and feel a part of the collective. Audience members will always ask the question “Why is this relevant, here and now, to me?”, and so the writer/performer must be able to provide the audience with “some combination of reflection, challenge, and transformation” (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 171).

The authors also posit that staged personal narrative is dominated by “works that speak from the margins, seeking to position a life as connected to and as a distinctive instance of a particular identity” (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 177)--again, focusing on the performer’s individual experience and the necessity of the performer to connect to the collective experience, while still maintaining a viewpoint wholly their own. This remains one of the most difficult tasks for the personal narrative performer. “Love On” is about my experience as a suicide survivor; however, it is necessary for me to connect my experience to universal themes of loss, grief, mental illness, and survival. I must speak my own truth and strive to bridge a gap to the universal at the same time.

I will now look at the individual productions presented in Miller and Taylor’s (2006) study.

Joni L. Jones' "sistadocta" is a "harrowing account of the demands placed on a young black female professor working toward tenure at a large research university" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 180). Jones uses drumming and dance to highlight the intensity of her academic life, elements that are woven into the narrative and poetry that comprise the bulk of her performance. She engages the audience and asks for their participation by distributing lines for them to read during a party scene that creates increasing discomfort for Jones (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 181). These techniques all serve as mechanisms to help clarify and give shape to the experiences Jones and her colleagues' experience. Jones's use of these eclectic performance techniques leaves the audience with greater understanding of her existential dilemmas as a black woman within an antagonistic cultural milieu.

The authors conclude that Jones provides a "counternarrative to dominant narratives about the academic life" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 181). She represents both her unique perspective and, broadly, that of other women of color in academia. "sistadocta" connects the stories of those women with an audience of "outsiders (those who still don't get it, but with a little more help, just might)" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 181). Jones does an expert job of presenting often overlooked subject matter to an audience that includes those that strive to overlook it and her.

Gingrich-Philbrook's piece centers around the narrative of his experience at a gay pride parade. It "posits an audience familiar with Pride parades and gay culture" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 182). Even as such, the piece uses detail crafted to give those unfamiliar with such environments an understanding of the experience. Gingrich-Philbrook is "deceptively simple" in his presentation, using a minimalist set consisting of one chair and the performer on stage (Miller

& Taylor, 2006, p. 182). Through this simplicity, the performer is able to focus the audience's attention purely on the narrative without getting lost in effects. The authors point out that this technique works "because he tells it so well, with an eloquence and richness that reveal an elegant mind in action and a love of language play" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183).

Gingrich-Philbrook uses repetition in "Refreshment," reminding "us...of our shared vulnerability" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183). He employs this technique when speaking of both his positive and negative reactions to being at the parade.

As in Jones' piece, Gingrich-Philbrook assumes an intimacy in talking with his audience. Unlike Jones, however, he resists the "universalizing (of his) location or imposing it on others as a final site of authority" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183). Alexander uses the term "generative autobiography" to describe his performance piece "Skin Flint" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183). According to Alexander, this means "the performance that develops in response to and in dialogue with another performed autobiography" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183). Alexander's piece is a response to Tami Spry's "Tattoo Stories," which he felt connected to due to her inclusion of a family joke about being a garbage man's child (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183). As Alexander is actually the son of a garbage man, he took offense at the negative tone of Spry's family joke, and chose to create his own performance narrative from his reaction. While Spry's joke isn't at all funny, Alexander's witnessing of it sets off in him "autobiographical explorations and performance, written, as he says 'between the lines of her performance'" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 183).

The authors spend little time discussing the physical staging of Alexander's piece, and focus instead on the narrative technique of creating a story based on one narrator's reaction to

another's story. Alexander does an excellent job of "describ(ing) Spry's performance sufficiently for anyone who has not seen it to understand its significance as the catalyst for his own reflections" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 184).

As in all the preceding pieces, through sharing his personal story Alexander illuminates issues larger than himself. Jones's personal story wrestles with, issues of race and gender; Gingrich-Philbrook highlights LGBT concerns; and Alexander broaches issues of both race and class. The authors state that Alexander "powerfully portrays the act of silencing that can inhere in a performance designed to break silence and counter a master narrative" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 186). The authors state that Park-Fuller's piece about surviving breast cancer serves to directly educate the public, health care professionals, and other survivors on the experience of being diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 185). She shares her singular story, but makes clear that this is not just the story of one woman. She "wants to make sure the audience understands the emotional and practical impacts of breast cancer" and does so by "employ(ing) a largely chronological organizational structure as she narrates her experience from the moment she discovers a lump in her breast through diagnosis and treatment and the first few months of reorienting her life after cancer" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 185).

Like Jones, Park-Fuller uses music throughout her show. She begins playing a guitar and singing and "punctuates the performance with her singing as she continues with additional verses of the opening song" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 185). She lets the audience know she started playing the guitar as she was battling cancer, and the playing "becomes an integral manifestation of what she has learned about living from her cancer experience" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 185).

A striking theatrical punctuation mark: she sets a timer to go off every thirteen minutes, to symbolize the death rate of breast cancer in the United States (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 185). As the performer cannot know exactly when the timer will go off, the disruption makes her reset her narrative flow each time she resets the timer, causing her to be caught off guard and drawing attention to the frequency of breast cancer deaths (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 186).

Park-Fuller's piece includes a post-performance dialog with her audience, something I intend to include in "Love On." It is clear that her piece serves a greater purpose than entertainment. "The educational and therapeutic objectives have a primacy in Park-Fuller's piece that shapes several of (her) performance choices" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 186). She chooses to offer up her personal experience as a set of common tropes for those surviving breast cancer, much more than any of the other pieces discussed linking her experience to the communal whole (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 186).

Miller and Taylor conclude that in personal narrative performance, "the audience occupies a pivotal role as witness and participant" (2006, p. 187). While there can be many different techniques in staging and telling, the authors state that one thing remains constant in all autobiographical performance: "to speak one's life in the presence of another is to claim a measure of consequence" (Miller & Taylor, 2006, p. 187). The authors show how each technique can provide an audience with a full, emotional experience. Each piece leaves the viewer feeling connected with the performer, and allows them to connect their own narratives to the one presented on stage.

In the first chapter of *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* "The Call to Performance," Norman K. Denzin outlines (2003), his belief that

“performance-based human disciplines can contribute to radical social change...” (Denzin, 2003, p. 4). He focuses on race as a specific contributing factor for a portion of the chapter. Denzin states that “performance is a form of agency, a way of bringing culture and the person into play” (Denzin, 2003, p. 8). He argues that by performing an action that has happened, it becomes an event, and can become a part of “public pedagogy” (Denzin, 2003, p. 22). His argument is highly academic, and focuses on the performer as ethnographer, and how autoethnographic performances can be used to inform the culture.

Denzin claims that “performance and performativity intersect in a speaking subject, a subject with a gendered and racialized body” (Denzin, 2003, p. 10). He contends that once a piece has been performed, it becomes alive, and that its subject has a racial and gendered face to represent its mission (Denzin, 2003, p. 10). When I perform “Love On,” I am giving my face to the audience as the face of suicide survivors. This is essential to remember when choosing material to present in a staged personal narrative. The performer is at once an individual and the face of a cause, as we have seen echoed time and time again in the literature. That significance of this cannot be over-emphasized.

This is made clear again in the assertion that “(w)e cannot study experience directly. We study it through and in its performative representations” (Denzin, 2003, p. 12). By providing a performance of the journey of myself as a suicide survivor, I am providing the opportunity for reflexive analysis. Seeing and hearing my own account gives a much more critical experience than other forms of ethnography might, as performance “reside(s) in the center of lived experience” (Denzin, 2003, p. 13).

Denzin also discusses the connection of performance to hermeneutics, stating that performance is an “experience as a way of knowing, as a method of critical inquiry, and as a mode of understanding.” In turn, the viewer feels emotion about the other object or subject, and connects that with the performance they are viewing (Denzin, 2003, p. 15).

Through his research, Denzin defines the “task of autoethnography” as a way to look back at the past, reflexively, and use one's history to define one's future, or to make “the past a part of the biographic present” (Denzin, 2003, p. 17). This is a key to the method of “Love On.” By cataloguing my experience as a suicide survivor, I am able to look back to whence I've come, see what I've overcome, and look ahead to where I'm going in a clear way. I am able to define my future because I have critically addressed my past.

Performance autoethnography “values intimacy and involvement as forms of understanding” (Denzin, 2003, p. 16). This means that the performer (the self) can “be vulnerable to its own experiences as well as to the experiences of the other” (Denzin, 2003, p. 17). Performance autoethnography becomes a larger project, on that is “centered on an ongoing moral dialogue involving the shared ownership of the performance project itself” (Denzin, 2003, p. 17). The performer and the audience are in this together, and together they must share the responsibility for the work within the greater community. The performer is not alone in her experience; she is merely the conduit for it (Denzin, 2003, p. 18).

Denzin presents us with the idea that “performance art pedagogy redefines ethnography as reflexive, performative autoethnography” (Denzin, 2003, p. 22) While I don't personally identify with the term “performance art,” I agree that the term has been used to denote a range of genres including that of performed personal narrative, and that fundamentally, those ideas can

overlap in critical discourse. Some performance art does not contain narrative at all, but the field as a whole is intimately engaged with questions of narrative and narrativity. That being said, I concur with Denzin's statement that performance art has become a part of ethnographic pedagogy.

In conclusion, I found chapter one of "Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture" to offer an essential overview of how performance autoethnography fits into the performance studies field, and how performers can serve as master ethnographers by presenting sections of their own lives for study.

Much of Conquergood's essay supports the argument that performance based research does not serve to do away with text, but instead exists "as a lever to decenter, not necessarily discard, the textualism that pervades dominant regimes of knowledge" (Conquergood, 1998, p. 26). When discussing the need for performance studies scholars to engage critically with those scholars who are firmly in thrall to texts, Conquergood offers the following:

It is important to take up this challenge for at least two related reasons: (1) performance-sensitive ways of knowing hold forth the promise of contributing to an epistemological pluralism that will unsettle valorized paradigms and thereby extend understanding of multiple dimensions and a wider range of meaningful action; (2) performance is a more conceptually astute and inclusionary way of thinking about many subaltern cultural practices and intellectual-philosophical activities. (1998, p. 26)

Conquergood also asserts that to exclude performance as a method of research eliminates the ability of those from non-literate cultures to participate in the conversation (Conquergood, 1998, p. 27). Historically, this included slaves and those on the fringe of society. The shift in



performance from “mimesis to poiesis to kinesis, performance as imitation, construction, dynamism” (Conquergood, 1998, p. 31) shows how performance as research has continued to evolve. Conquergood “emphasized performance as a counterbalance to the weight and prestige afforded to texts in the academy--both text as a metaphor for conceptualizing social reality, and actual texts... as representations of knowledge” (Conquergood, 1998, p. 33). This position validates the work of performance autoethnographers, and gives hope that performances will be taken as having equal weight to that of text-based research projects.

As a performance autoethnographer, I would only hope that my work would be considered with the same respect as that of a text-based researcher. The work of Conquergood and his peers would give this at least a theoretical possibility. This desire extends beyond academic work. Within the creative fields of writing and performing, a split occurs as well, and often performance is seen as less than, or just a supplementation of, the written work. One is considered a writer/performer, with the primary value on the first term. The pressure to publish is always there--one is discouraged from producing work just to be performed, but instead to perform and publish. Of course, publishing ensures that one’s work will be viewed by more people, and one hopes that this will in turn lead to more opportunity to perform. One medium rarely exists without the shadow of the other, and the struggle to maintain a stable identity as writer/performer can be challenging, especially if one is creating solo work specifically to be performed.

Conquergood’s essay provides an excellent overview of the difficulties the performance-based researcher faces within the academy. He also shows how the paradigm has shifted, and the work that must still be done to influence a text-based culture into accepting the worth of

performance-based research. Conquergood invokes this ancient boundary-crossing style: “Instead of a performance paradigm, I prefer to think in terms of a caravan--a heterogeneous ensemble of ideas and methods on the move” (Conquergood, 1998, p. 34).

Conquergood’s essay contributes greatly to the overall understanding of the role of performance-based research in the academic realm of text-based study. His radical rethinking of the politics of culture continues to pave a path of respect and acceptance for performance-based researchers, as well as providing guidance on how to navigate a complex, politicized terrain.

As the critical essays by Denzin and Morgan et al showed, it is essential for the performance autoethnographer to consider the audience as an active part of a performance, not merely a group of spectators. As I will be dealing with sensitive subject matter in my performance, I will take extra steps to elicit from the audience and oral equivalent of informed consent. I will also provide a post-show talk back to answer any questions the audience might have regarding my experience and what they have just experienced.

In my review of the literature, I found major gaps in the study of performance autoethnography. Literature on performance ethnography was readily available, but autoethnography was highly underrepresented. Often in a piece focusing on performance ethnography, a minor section would be devoted to performance autoethnography. Herrmann (2012) noted “performance and writing are not two distinct ways of knowing of two sides of the same investigative coin” (p. 136). I would be required to piece together fragments of critical information to make cohesive connections between the literature and my topics and approaches. It is clear the information was related, but when the subject is also the researcher, different

criteria are often required. I believe that as performance autoethnography becomes a more prevalent form of research, the gaps in the literature will narrow.

The literature I reviewed serves as a representative selection of the field of performance studies. Within the field, researchers are concerned with the audience to which they perform, as well as how their research will be regarded within the academic community. I conclude that performance (auto)ethnographers must place the concerns of the audience at the forefront of our concerns when mounting a piece, taking care to understand the emotional valences of the work that they are presenting. Watching work performed by the subject of the piece creates a vulnerable space for the audience, which might have concerns that the performer will misinterpret critique of the piece for critique of the performer/author. It is essential that the performer and the audience should share in the creation of a safe space in which to present the work. This does not mean compromising the integrity of the work to ensure the safety of the audience, but instead to make sure to communicate the intentionality and truthfulness of what is to be presented. This allows the audience to enter into the performance framework alert but trusting, with a balance of risk and respect.

As well, I conclude that what I have reviewed speaks to the overall field of performance studies and its relation to the academic world, more specifically to the world of qualitative research. When conducting and presenting their research, performance (auto)ethnographers must adhere to the same strict ethical guidelines any qualitative researcher must follow, and in turn that researcher's work should be afforded the same respect as the work of any other qualitative researcher.

## Applied Storytelling

Storytelling is used in many professional settings as a pedagogical, therapeutic, and homiletic tool. This is true in the case of suicide survivor groups. Charon, PhD, wrote about using story in medicine in her article “Narrative Medicine: A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Truth.” She writes: “The effective practice of medicine requires narrative competence, that is, the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others” (Charon, 2001, p. 1898).

Following the guidance of Charon, suicide survivor group facilitators can “reach and join (our) patients in (loss), recognize our own personal journeys through (loss and grief), acknowledge kinship with and duties toward others in similar situations” (Charon, 2001, p. 1901). It has been shown that using story, personal narratives, or true stories one has collected along the way in professional settings helps to instill trust and understanding in the listener. Annette Simmons points out in her book, The Story Factor (2006):

“They [survivors] do not believe they need to cooperate with you, that they should change their behavior, or that they should support your goals until they ‘see’ it. Facts don’t help them ‘see.’ The unbelievable (whether it is difficult or unpleasant to see) only becomes believable after they can ‘see’ it through personal experience-via story” ( p. 79).

Using story as a bridge between to solitary experiences of suicide support group members enhances connection. Facts are necessary, but not sufficient. As Simmons says, “A story has life. Facts don’t have a life. They are inert” (2006, p. 79).

Ellis and Niemi, in their book “Inviting the wolf in: Thinking about the difficult story” (2001) discuss the importance of telling difficult stories in both professional and artistic settings.

The authors believe “it is essential and beneficial to tell difficult stories, the stories of wickedness and loss, sorrow and grief” (Ellis & Niemi, 2001, p. 8). They assert that both the teller and the audience benefit from the telling of difficult stories. Niemi and Ellis write “if the role of the storyteller is to entertain, educate, and enchant, we believe that the careful consideration of the difficult story can help the artist achieve those ends” (Ellis & Niemi, 2001, p. 9)

I hope to be able to achieve those ends through the telling of “Love On.” Applied storytelling is a wide field, and as has been pointed out by these scholars and practitioners, a necessary one. I plan to have a finished version of “Love On” to perform for suicide survivor groups, mental health professionals, school counselors, and any other group of professionals that might be a good fit.

### Suicidology

In 2014, according to the American Association of Suicidology, 42,773 people died from suicide. That means there are 117.2 deaths by suicide a day. One person dies from suicide every 12.3 minutes (AAS, 2014). Statistics published by AAS show that for every one person that dies of suicide, 147 people are exposed to their death (AAS, 2014). 18 of those exposed have a major life disruption because of that death (AAS, 2014). If one person dies from suicide every 12.3 minutes, each year over 750,000 people have a major life disruption because of a suicide death (AAS, 2014). Looking at data from 1990 - 2014, that means 15.09 million, 1 in every 24 Americans, has suffered dramatically because of suicide (AAS, 2014).

Hanging is the second most common form of suicide (AFSP, 2013). Firearm death is the first. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, nearly 50% of suicide deaths are caused by firearms (2013). They also state that, in 2013, 7 out of 10 suicide deaths were of white males (AFSP, 2013). Men die by suicide 3.5 times more often than women (AFSP, 2013). According to Gelder, Mayou, and Geddes, only 1 in 6, or 17%, victims of suicide leave a note (2005). The AFSP also states that suicide costs the United States of America \$44 Billion annually (2013).

All of these statistics serve as further proof that suicide, and the loss of loved ones to suicide, needs to be talked about more. With my project, I will attempt to bring these facts to the public and to continue to work to help make this discussion less stigmatized.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

My research is conducted through a feminist paradigm which will guide my approach to preparation, writing, and performance. Feminist research can be defined as finding and bringing to light “inequities in human relationships and the systems of domination that maintain them” (Allen & Piercy, 2005). This does not mean gender is explicitly involved, but instead that the researcher focuses on personal and reflexive accounts of disparities in everyday life (Allen & Piercy, 2005, p. 155).

Autoethnography methodology is a direct result of the feminist outlook. “Feminist autoethnography is a method of being, knowing, and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized, and making good use of our own experience (Allen & Piercy, 2005, p. 156). I am able to use my experience to bring a deeper understanding to the life of suicide survivors and the understanding of mental health loss in general. My examination is inclusive, and also reflects on the state of mental health and suicide awareness on a whole. I will reflect on the way I was treated by law enforcement officials, and even friends, after the suicide of my partner, considering my position as a woman in their reactions.

As Creswell (2005) states, “any method can be made feminist” (p. 30). Performance autoethnography is a fairly recent and innovated method, one that is still gaining credibility and understanding. Allen and Piercy (2005) define feminist autoethnography as:

“(T)he explicit reflection on one’s personal experience to break outside the circle of conventional social science and confront, court, and coax that aching pain or

haunting memory that one does not understand about one's own experience. It is ideally suited for investigating hidden or sensitive topics" (p. 159)

Leavy's (2008) definition of performance autoethnography, cited below in its entirety, feels most inclusive and thorough:

"(P)erformance autoethnography combines the major tenets of autoethnography with the possibilities unleashed in a performance paradigm. Performance autoethnographies are highly reflexive texts that bring the personal into the public domain in ways that highlight links between biographical experience and social, institutional, material, historical context and then, via the performance aspect, seek to disrupt dominant ways of thinking by evoking emotional connections, inspiring social action, and inviting a complex, collaborative negotiation of meanings" (p. 350)

These two definitions work together to provide the framework for my research.

By performing the narrative that is my life after the suicide of my partner, I am sharing the most intimate, difficult, dirty parts of my life in an intimate way. As stated in my statement of purpose, one of my goals with this research is to put a face to suicide survival. Another is to open up discussion regarding suicide and mental illness as a whole, with the end goal being to help others create conversations about these difficult topics beyond the time and space allowed by my performance.

Creswell (2012) says of autoethnographies: "(t)hey contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual's story" (p. 73). The performance autoethnographer must then create a framework for their narrative that includes theory and



reflections. I will be presenting my story of what happened to me as a result of losing my partner to suicide, but at the same time, I will be providing facts and statistics that connect my story with the larger narrative of suicide loss.

There are no specific requirements for how a performance autoethnography should look. It may take place in a field, a classroom, or a theatre. The audience may be composed of a specifically selected group of people, or a random assortment from the general public. As Miller and Taylor (2008, p. 169) explained, performances may include music, dance, multiple set pieces, or none of the above. Depending on what atmosphere the writer/performer wants to create, simply a chair and basic lighting might do. There are no rules on how an autoethnographic performer must present their work.

As mentioned previously, within the performance autoethnography methodology, the researcher must be able to provide the audience with “some combination of reflection, challenge, and transformation” (Miller & Taylor, 2008, p. 169). I will now discuss my specific methods and how I intend to meet those needs.

This performance autoethnography is a work in progress. I have found the most important element of this research is to remain as honest with myself as possible so as to properly critique my life and connect it with larger schema. This has been no easy task. It took great emotional work to commit to sharing elements of my life that are more negative than I have previously admitted. I discuss the loss of friendships in the wake of the suicide, drug use, my relationships with men, and the shift in my overall state of being since experiencing such a trauma, among many other difficult subjects. The actual suicide loss is just the tip of the emotional iceberg, just as it is just the tip of grief.

In the beginning stages of writing the autoethnography, I set the intention to limit the scope of material covered to focus primarily on my life after the death of my partner. While it is important to include biographical information to set up the life I had before his death, and how that contrasts with my life after, the before is a much smaller element than the after in this piece. It was still important for me to properly convey the nature of my partner as a person, and the life he and I shared. How we met and fell in love is an essential part in this story, without which it would be impossible to convey the magnitude of his loss.

Early on, I also made the decision to leave out important personal information that my partner shared with me prior to his death. While this information is important in the story of why he committed suicide, that is not my story to tell. I am sharing the narrative of how his suicide affected me, not the narrative of a dead man and why he decided to die. If only I knew the answer to that question, much of the story I do have to share would be quite different. I did choose to include some basic information on the change in his well-being and temperament, as those shifts had a direct effect on me and on our relationship.

A central theme throughout the narrative is my participation in suicide survivor group meetings, and how those served my process of grieving. I make the case that even though individual meetings can be very disappointing or frustrating, the concept of group therapy is powerfully effective, and that it was a major thread continually weaving through the fabric of my healing.

I collected research and statistics surrounding suicide loss, as well as statistics focusing on suicide survivors. I felt it was important to disclose at the outset the staggering frequency with which suicide occurs. Highlighting this fact helps make my case that a vast number of

people are affected by suicide, and that speaking out as a survivor of suicide is essential in easing the stigma that is associated with such a loss. I chose to interweave facts and statistics about suicide loss and survivorship with my personal narrative, intending to show just how intimately my status as a survivor is interwoven with my daily life. I cannot escape the fact that I am part of those statistics, any more than I can escape the memories I have of finding my loved one dead by suicide.

It was also important to me I make it clear how the journey of surviving a suicide loss never ends, it just changes. This is not a sad story, but instead a story of hope and accomplishment that, even though written only to encompass the last ten years since the loss, will never stop developing.

The performance took place in the intimate Black Box Theatre on the campus of East Tennessee State University on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016. I had intended to perform on two consecutive nights, but canceled the first performance due to weather. I held question and answer periods after the performance, giving the audience and me a chance to have a conversation about the information that was just presented. As I have stated previously, supported by the work of Morgan et al. (2000), taking care to ensure the safety of the audience is essential to the success of the performance. The audience was presented with a simple information sheet that contained resources they can access regarding suicide prevention and survivor networks.

I used simple minimal lighting, maintaining the same level of light throughout the performance. The set was a single chair that I placed in one corner of the stage, as well as a table with water and a copy of the script. Very simple staging and movement was used. This is

because I want the focus to be on the story being told. I intend to maintain the patterns of speech and movement that I use in daily life, and to use the simplicity of the staging to create a comfortable, intimate atmosphere that enables the absorption of such difficult subject matter. I am an open person by nature, and I intend to create an experience in which that openness between myself and the audience is fostered.

As stated, this performance autoethnography is a work in progress. I have taken the feedback given during post-performance talk back sessions very seriously, and will apply it wherever appropriate to future performances. This follows the autoethnographic practice of entering into uncomfortable situations in order to further the research. I intend to continue to develop this performance to a more polished piece that can be shared with groups to help raise awareness about trauma, suicide and the life of suicide survivors, as well as to help perpetuate the ancient, healing art of storytelling, and the power embodied in the telling and hearing of authentic narrative art.

## CHAPTER 4

### “LOVE ON – THE LIFE OF A SUICIDE SURVIVOR”

Performed February 13, 2016, at the Black Box Theatre at East Tennessee State University.

The performance was recorded with a digital video camera. I wore a black dress and low shoes, and created a stage area in the corner of the room. I set 20 chairs in a semi-circle, and all were filled during the show. The audience consisted of colleagues, friends, and a professor. All present had been personally invited by me. They ranged in age from early 20s to early 70s. I had taken care to make it clear this show was intended for mature audiences. What follows is the script from which I read. This was the first time I had performed the show.

*Music playing – Paul’s band “Detroit.” The audience is unaware they are hearing the voice of the man who will shortly commit suicide. Music fades.*

*I enter the stage and provide a prologue letting the audience know this is a work in progress, and also that the subject material is sensitive in nature. I encourage everyone to look to the resources I’ve given them on a sheet, and to provide feedback for me if they would like.*

*I leave the stage. Music plays – Ceremony by New Order.*

*30 seconds*

*Music fades. I enter, begin speaking before facing the audience.*

At exactly 9:15pm, on Wednesday December 28th, 2005, my life changed forever. I know the exact time because that's when my phone logged the 911 call. Before that moment, I was a fiancée. Before I was a fiancée, I was a best friend, and before I was a best friend, I was just a girl who moved in 14 houses down the street.

When I was 16, my family relocated from rural Hell, Michigan, to a suburb of Detroit called Farmington. Paul and I didn't know if we liked each other at first, but proximity of parental homes and mutual friends had us spending a fair amount of time together. He wore t-shirts with t-ball team's logos on them, full of holes even then, and jeans with blazers, way before anyone else knew that was cool. I didn't wear a bra, on principle. He walked with a swagger that was so perfect it was a little off putting. I hugged everyone I met. His knowledge of music was so deep, it made my Beatles obsession shrink into nothing as I soaked up everything he had to teach.

By the end of my first semester at Farmington High, we were inseparable. The two of us and our other best friend Nick started a band.

*Music plays – I wanna be your dog by The Stooges*

Paulie taught me how to play bass, the first song being "I wanna be your dog,"

*Music fades*

and we rocked the faces off everyone at our high school talent show with our performance of Alice Cooper's "I'm 18 and I like it."

*Music plays – I'm 18 by Alice Cooper*

Imagine teenage me, wearing nothing but an apron and a bikini, hair down to my butt, keeping time as Paul ripped the bridge of his ex-girlfriend's Telecaster clear off from shredding too hard, his head covered with a pair of my nylons, Nick making love to the microphone stand.

*Music fades.*

After the performance, my dad said we reminded him of the Stooges. It was the highest compliment.

For five years, I was the confidant of all of Paul's girlfriends. They would call me up whenever they were having problems, looking for some advice from me on why Paul was the way he was. I told them all the same thing, he's a passionate man. You have to let him breathe.

Just a few days after my 21st birthday, at that magic hour when the party is breaking up and everyone is a little drunk and a little sleepy, Paul gave me this look I'd seen once before, half a decade prior, back in his tin foil covered bedroom in his parent's house in Farmington, him playing Purple Rain on vinyl and me sitting on the floor, cross legged, completely oblivious to his intentions. Five years later, in my college apartment, I got up and walked over to him, and as Good Vibrations came on the hifi,

*Music plays – Good Vibrations by The Beach Boys*

he grabbed my hands, looked me square in the eye, and told me he was in love with me. And then he kissed me. I think in that moment, I wasn't really in my body. When I think back, I see

myself floating above us, watching as everything we had known left us, and a new way of being took over. I had never thought of Paul in that way before, but the moment the words came out of his mouth, I realized I was in love with him, too.

*Music fades.*

A few years later, we moved to Nashville and got engaged. We planned a wedding for June 2006, I wanted to be a June bride, back in Farmington where our story began. He was good to me, always thinking of how to make me happy, even if I didn't realize it. He rented us the house I wanted, even though it cost a little more, he sent me postcards from the road, always starting out "Hey baby." I could hear his voice. He kept lists of things he thought of to get me as gifts, little scraps of paper with "Yoko Ono - Season of Glass" or "new bike light" scrawled on them. We loved each other in that way people always talk about, with every ounce of ourselves and probably a little too much. We were all the other needed.

Things got hard the summer he was working as Leon Russell's tour manager.

*Music plays – A Song for You, Leon Russell*

He was on the road as much as he was home, and it was taking a toll on us both. We fought more and more, and his general disposition changed. Working in the music industry was his dream, and he was finding his dream wasn't maybe all he thought it would be. The band



went to Japan, another dream of Paul's, and it was there he made a choice that would shake my reality to the core. He wrote an email to his grandma, thanking her for giving him his love of music, for always telling him he was worth it. He started saying his goodbyes.

*Music fades.*

The weeks that followed his return from Japan were the best we'd ever known. It was like we were 16 again, carefree and, this time, fully in love. On Christmas day, we were alone in Nashville, and we went to a double feature, first to *Capote* and then *The Squid and The Whale*. I've refused to watch either of the movies since. We exchanged presents, in front of our miniature Christmas tree, one of those kinds that has the lights already built into it. He got me a copy of *The Yeah Yeah Yeahs* concert DVD. It sits on my shelf still, today, the cellophane intact. I got him nice pens and a new notebook, for his work on the road. He would never get the chance to use them.

I very vividly remember going to my friend William's birthday party the next day, a raucous affair with bands and boozy punch, and I smoke a joint with his parents. I didn't do much joint smoking in those days, and when Paulie and I decided to leave, I slid down the icy driveway in my fancy shoes, and he just laughed and laughed as I kept going. At the bottom of the hill, after I'd stopped, under the moonlight, we hugged tightly in our laughter, on what was just another Monday.

Exactly a month after his return from Japan, at exactly 9:15pm on Wednesday, December 28th, 2005, I returned home from work and opened our bathroom door. There was Paulie, a belt

tight around his neck, slumped between the toilet and the tub. Before I knew what was happening, I was on the phone with a woman at 911 telling her to send someone now. I needed someone to tell me this was real. I needed someone to tell me he was dead.

In the minutes between my call and their arrival, I spent my last time alone with this man that had already changed my life so many times. I loosened the belt from his neck, ran my hand over his just barely cold face, and became numb. They cut his clothes off him, in the hallway, and they took him away in a body bag. I was told I was a suspect for murder, but things seemed pretty clear, so I shouldn't worry. That was the first of many times I'd hear "murder" pointed my direction.

I called his brother back in Michigan, and became the person that told him his baby brother was dead. The sound that came out of Will's mouth is forever etched in my mind. Will and I had been close as long as Paulie and I had been friends. He bought me booze before I was 21. He took me to see D'angelo when I was 18.

*Music plays – D'Angelo, Untitled*

He was the most excited when Paul and I got together. He calls me sister, still. And now, now he has the memory of me calling him on a Wednesday, saying to him "Paul is dead. He killed himself. He's gone, Will." God, how I wish he didn't.

I still can't believe how many emergency personnel responded. -- there were so many of them. The **chief** of police was there. They sent six squad cars, three ambulances, and two ladder trucks. For a suicide.

The thing I remember most vividly from the time before I made that phone call to Will, the time after the police had taken over my house but his body was still there, the memory that is still so close I could touch it is Cara, my sweet best friend Cara, pulling my hair back into a ponytail as I walked through everything that happened, everything I'd found, with the social worker that was sitting at our, at *my*, kitchen table. My hair was matted from tears, and she had to walk past Paul's body to get the elastic, but she knew just what I needed. Her hands gently gathered my curls and bound them together at the nape of my neck. I needed her touch. She took care of me the next weeks, months, hell, she's still taking care of me now, ten years later, but right then in that moment, when all I needed was someone to show me they were there for me, she was. The weeks that would follow included many, many times when I thought there was no way I was going to make it, and Cara was always there, always doing the right thing. She was the first person I called, after 911. She lived in the basement apartment of the house Paul and I rented, and she'd become my best friend over the ten months we'd known each other, but in this tragedy, she became my sister. She stood up in my wedding years later, and I in hers. Her son knows me as Aunt Patti, and when my Dad died, she made her second trip to Michigan to take care of me while I was planning a funeral, to be there to know exactly what I needed when I had no idea. It's strange how death can bring people together, and so incredibly tear others apart.

In 2014, according to the American Association of Suicidology, 42,773 people died from suicide. That's 117.2 a day. One every 12.3 minutes. One person dies from suicide every 12.3 minutes. That's more than die from homicide. That means while America was collectively watching the Superbowl, over 19 people died from suicide. Over two people during Coldplay's performance alone.

As the sun came up the next day, I stumbled out of Cara's apartment to see my parent's car pulling into the driveway. They'd left immediately after I called them, and made the eight hour drive straight through the night to be with me. Before they left Farmington, they went to Paul's folks place, fourteen houses away from theirs, and I can only imagine what that was like. They, the parents of their son's fiancé, the parents of the person that had just found their son dead by his own hand, stopping by before they came to pick me, their alive child, up and bring me back to Michigan. It would be days still until I saw his parents. Days still until the shit started really hitting the fan.

My dad was an expert at making me do things I didn't want to do. This time, the day after my life changed, the thing was go to downtown Nashville to watch the parade for the college football bowl game that was in town. I was still in such a fog that any of this was real, that I went along with it. Cara came with us and the four of us ate noodles with brown butter sauce at Demos' and watched the University of Virginia marching band play in the middle of Broadway, and for a few hours, everything seemed normal. The next morning, we picked out the suit Paul would be laid out in, and began the drive back up to Michigan, to where the rest of the people who were experiencing this loss were waiting for me. Waiting to believe this was real.

Statistics published by AAS show that for every one person that dies of suicide, 147 people are exposed to their death. 18 of those exposed have a major life disruption because of that death. That means if one person dies from suicide every 12.3 minutes, each year over 750,000 people have a major life disruption because of a suicide death. Looking at data from 1990 - 2014, that means 15.09 million, 1 in every 24 Americans, has suffered dramatically because of suicide. That means I'm not the only loss survivor you know.

I firmly believe Paul killed himself in our house, a place where he knew I'd be the only one to find him, because he knew I could handle it. I don't really know what that means, but I think I did alright. I also think he knew if he did it somewhere else, if someone else called me on the phone to tell me he was dead, that I wouldn't have believed it. As fucked up as it sounds, I am so grateful it was me that found him. Even today, every time I walk into a bathroom, I see a flash of him, with the belt, between the toilet and the tub. Every time. I thought maybe it would go away after ten years, and it has faded, but it's still there. Even though I have that memory, that is better than not seeing him until he'd been dead for five days, like the rest of his family had to do. Can you imagine? A phone call late at night to tell you your brother, or your son, or your grandbaby is dead, far too young, and all you can do is wait until the fucking coroner is back from holiday and can sign the death certificate so his body can be put on a plane and sent back to Michigan so you can kiss the shell that used to be him one last time before they cover him in makeup? I can't. I got to hold him on that floor of our bathroom, to be with him in that silence. That was such a gift.

There were a few things that happened around the funeral that hurt nearly as much as his death did. I was told the loss of a son trumped the loss of a soulmate, like we were in some competition in grief. I was told, to my face, that there was no way he actually killed himself. That the only explanation was that it was me. That I had killed him. I was told the only time Paul seemed sad was when he and I were fighting, so even if I didn't kill him, it was certainly still my fault he was dead. Paul, like most people who commit suicide, was really good at hiding what was going on inside of him from everyone he was around. I was shoved, hard, by someone who deserved to be upset, someone who lost more than any of us should ever have to, but still. What about me? Not only had the person I had intended to spend the rest of my life with died, in our house, by his own hand, and *I found him*, but now all these people were mad at me because of it. I felt helpless.

During all that dark, something pretty amazing happened. Nick, our best friend from high school, the one that was getting it on with a mic stand during the talent show, we'd had a falling out with him a few years before. Why doesn't matter, we were young and all a little too emotional, but in the few months before Paul's death, we'd spent a lot of time talking about Nick. Paulie said he wanted to get back in touch with him, and I agreed. I didn't have his number, but remembered his parent's landline, and made sure they were reached right away. Minutes after my folks and I pulled into their driveway, after that long car ride from Nashville, Nick was there. He'd taken a train from Chicago and was just waiting for me to get home. I opened the door and fell into his arms and cried like I'd been wanting to cry since this

whole thing started. We, Paul and I, had wanted to get the team back together, and now we had, now Paul had. Only he'd never be there to see.

We sat on the front porch and smoked cigarettes and talked and cried and, just, *were*. It was everything. Those years apart disappeared with each exhale of smoke in the cold late December air, and I felt like me again, if even just for a little while.

With Cara, and now Nick, in my corner, I knew I could be strong like Paul had known me to be. The funeral was nice; dozens of people spoke about how much he'd meant to them. I was hugged over and over and over again. Snot got on my shoulder over and over and over again. I was asked over and over and over again why he did it. If I'd known something was wrong. If he'd left a note. How he'd died, like, they wanted *details*. We played the video of our talent show performance on repeat in the room with food in it, and someone asked me how we were so cool in high school, and that made me feel good. After it was over, I left the wake and walked home by myself, and took a nap. It was the first rest I'd had in over a week.

Hanging is the second most common form of suicide. Firearm death is the first. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, nearly 50% of suicide deaths are caused by firearms. They also state that, in 2013, 7 out of 10 suicide deaths were of white males. Men die by suicide 3.5 times more often than women.

Returning to life in Nashville was odd.

*Music plays – Pavement, Strings of Nashville*

I never slept at our house again, and only went back into it with friends in tow to help pack up all our things. Paul's parents and Will came down to get his stuff, and my parents were there, too, to help with mine. Paul's uncle had come up from Alabama to provide a force field around me to protect me from Paul's mom, who in her grief set her sights on me. I don't blame her. In fact, I even get it. I was, and still am, the closest thing to her baby boy. I can't imagine her pain. Her brother had killed himself a few years earlier, a brother I didn't even know existed until he was dead. Her eldest niece intentionally overdosed in the early nineties, the first of the three in their immediate family to take their own life. We figured it out, and twenty-five percent of their family has committed suicide. Twenty-five percent. And the last of those was her youngest son. And I found him.

*Music fades.*

While it was happening, in the midst of that grief, I was so upset she was behaving the way she was. That her brother felt the need to come and protect me from her, because he'd seen the way she'd treated me back in Michigan. That her own children had had to keep her in check. This, by far, is the most difficult part of this journey to talk about. We were the women closest to Paul, and I needed her. But she needed to be mad at me.

In the decade that has passed, his mom has gotten a lot of support through the Compassionate Friends Network, and it's helped guide her grief process. The Compassionate Friends is an organization that supports parents who have lost a child for any reason, not just



suicide. Through attending regular meetings, she has been able to connect with other mothers who know exactly what she's feeling, how huge that loss is. She lights a candle for Paul each December on their National Candle Lighting Day, and encourages others to do the same. She and I have spent a fair amount of time together over the years. I don't think she remembers how she treated me, I think her grief has shielded her from it. I've done my best to forget, too. Sometimes it's harder than others. Sometimes, I still want to be able to be mad.

After all the bullshit was done, I settled back into life. What that really means is I drank. A lot. And I had sex. A lot. Like, a lot. Remember that numbness I talked about before, that settled in when I took the belt off his neck? I kept that going. I was really good at keeping that going. I didn't have a home after the first few months, because I didn't have a job, because I just couldn't. I couldn't keep selling shoes to women who called me "honey" all day long. I could find the strength to go somewhere for 8 hours a day and pretend like everything was okay. I just couldn't. I had really good friends, however, still do. They let me stay with them, they fed me, they bought me beer. Man, we drank a lot of Sparks, the real shit. They took care of me. They never let me hit rock bottom, or even get close to it. Yeah, sure, some of them I had sex with, but I needed that, too. I needed to feel wanted, desired, after the man I loved ended his life. Imagine feeling that rejection. You'd probably fuck a lot of people, too.

I also joined a suicide survivor group immediately upon returning to Nashville. I knew I didn't want to find myself, 30 years later, just then addressing this incredible loss for the first time. I was 24! So young! I really, really wanted to make sure I didn't die, too. My experience

in that first group was really eye opening. There were just a few of us, two or three besides myself, and all the others were parents who had lost children. There was someone's second husband, because her first fell apart after their son had died, and it didn't feel right to have him there. The next week, he was gone. I sat in that dim room, light shining in between the vertical blinds that were swaying with the breeze from the heater, listening to these people who were exactly what I didn't want to become. One woman had never even told anyone until now that her son had shot himself 35 years before. She spent most of her life feeling shame for his death, and in her old age, she just couldn't take it anymore. Another mother, the one who had the weird husband, her daughter died 20 years before, and this was her first meeting. They were blown away that I was there, two *weeks* after Paul's death, ready to talk about it.

What they didn't know was that I couldn't keep it inside. I had to talk about it. I told everyone I met what happened, not because I wanted their sympathy, but because I needed to remember it was real. If I made Paul's death the topic of conversation at every turn, I was reminded always that he really was dead, that this wasn't some crazy fucked up dream where my entire world stopped one Wednesday evening. This was my life.

Every week, for the next nine months, I spent two hours with this group. There are different models of suicide survivor groups, this was a peer lead meeting. That means there is a moderator, that person might be a survivor, or just someone who thought this sounded like a good thing to be a part of. They make sure the group stays on track, that one person doesn't dominate the whole meeting, but they don't really intervene, not in the way a mental health care professional does. No one has answers, but sometimes they have facts, and facts feel like answers when you have no idea what is going on.

Sometimes, with this group, I felt like the leader. Like, somehow, even though I was the newest member of this fucked up club, I had more of an understanding on how to grieve than they did. Sure, I read every book in the grief section of the bookstore, and I fully embraced the notion that survivors have some sort of weird PhD, but I had no idea what was going on. Remember, I wasn't exactly living a virtuous life in those months, drinking a lot and bouncing from bedfellow to bedfellow. But still, they looked to me to help them. I did my best. I shared the statistics I'd found. We were all surprised to hear none of our loved ones had left a note.

According to Gelder et al., only 1 in 6 victims of suicide leave a note. That's 17%. That means that 83% of people that take their lives do not leave a note, yet that is one of the first questions people ask. Did he leave a note? Is this because they think a note will explain why he is dead? Man, I sure wish there was some way to explain why he did this. I wouldn't have had to spend years in rooms with strangers talking about all the reasons I can think of for why if he'd just told me! Shit, maybe I could have even stopped him if I'd known there was something wrong! But, yeah, I get it. We want some sort of explanation for this action that seems so incredibly hasty, and a note gives us that. But our loved ones most often don't.

I left Nashville behind for a four-month long escape to Portland, Oregon, where the number one occupation is getting drunk and fucking. It was in Portland I was told by a person I considered my closest friend I needed to get over Paul's death, that it had been ten months and I

needed to move on. It was in Portland I was stood up on the one-year anniversary of his death by that same friend, the friend that a few months prior begged me to move there so she could take care of me. Now, she told me she couldn't help me any more. She told me if I needed support, I needed to look elsewhere. I'm not sure what changed in four months. She'd been close to Paul, too, but how his death affected her was so incredibly different than how it had me. She needed to move on. She needed to not be reminded of his death all the time, and I did that for her. Every time I saw someone that was a part of the life Paul and I had shared, just my presence reminded them he was dead. It's like in my living, trying with all my might to be at least a little bit normal, I was throwing it back in the faces of everyone that he was dead.

It was also in Portland I experienced my first truly incredible suicide survivor group. We met every other week, and I felt something lacking in those weeks between. We met in an old house that had been converted into a facility that houses this kinds of thing, with baskets of artisan tea bags next to the reverse osmosis water kettle for our use. It was all very Portland. Our meetings themselves took place in a big room with a fireplace and squishy chairs, and sitting cross legged near the fire, crying a collective cry for our loved ones was the most comfortable I'd felt since all this happened. This group was also peer lead, but the leader was both a survivor and a therapist. She was able to answer questions for us from a clinical and emotional perspective, and it was beautiful. I remember running into another group member in the grocery store, and kind of like AA, you aren't really supposed to acknowledge how you know a person from group. Passing each other in the aisle, we made eye contact, smiled, and gently squeezed each other's hand as we walked by. That was all we needed to know we weren't alone in all this.

The disintegration of my friendship wasn't the only reason I left Portland. I also felt like my time there was a kind of vacation, this bubble of wonder that surrounded me and couldn't be sustained. I was, for the first time in what felt like forever, not just Patti with The Dead Fiance, as I had been in Nashville. I was able to create my own, post-Paul, identity, and that was so, so important in my healing. The drinking, the sex, those elements were necessary to grow, too, but the real reason Portland matters in my story is because it was there I got to be me, again. And then I moved to L.A.

Throughout this entire journey a few things have remained constant. I've surround myself with good friends, both old and new, I've had the incredible love and support of my family, and I've had the freedom to try new things without fear of failing. Once you lose the thing closest to you, that fear kind of goes away. My years in Los Angeles were like one giant experiment in seeing how far I could push myself, how close to the me I knew I was I could get. Each move, each month, a little bit more time and distance came between me and Paul's suicide. I went deep with my counseling in L.A. I had recognized in order to really move forward with my life, I needed help addressing some really deep shit.

L.A. brought my first relationship after Paul. He was a total douche. A bike messenger, sober alcoholic who smoked weed like I smoked cigarettes, but damn, was he good in bed. I dealt with his constant undercutting and down talking in part because of that, but also because I didn't think I deserved anything better. I still don't, really, but then, in the first years after, I had no idea why anyone would want me. Paul *killed himself* while we were engaged, and not that I

think, rationally, that I had anything to do with it, that kind of thing kind of messes with a girl's self esteem. So, total scumbag with a summer house on the East Coast and a penchant for telling me I was stupid wins. Hence, the therapy.

I still kept up with groups, going to my first psychologist-led group, which was... interesting. The doctor wasn't also a survivor, so there were times when he was talking and I wanted to tell him to shut up, let us work this out, just sit there and make sure no one does anything too fucked up. He wasn't a bad guy, he was doing the best he could, but there is just something about a room of people with a shared experience helping each other out. There is magic in that, an intangible thing that an outsider just can't understand.

Paul's eldest brother also lived there, and our relationship went from okay, to intensely close, to not speaking for six years. He and his partner of a decade split, and I chose her. When I broke it down, looked at who had really been there for me, who could give me what I needed going forward, it was her. And I couldn't have them both. Though it was hard then, to stop thinking of someone as a brother and instead as a person I once knew, it was the right thing to do. I needed to grow, and I couldn't do that in the shadow of our shared grief.

L.A. also brought a brief period of, probably too much, cocaine use. Then it brought less drinking, deep friendships, creative projects like I'd never been able to create before. It brought more and more of me back, less post-Paul Patti and more, just, Patti. For every bit of struggle I saw, there was so much more growth. You can't see what it's like to have it good if you never recognize that you've got it bad.

My move back to Michigan happened because I was finally able to see it not as Paul winning, but me taking care of me. There had been a strong push by my family for me to remain after the funeral, but that felt like such a huge step back, I resisted it for several years. When I finally made it, I couldn't believe I'd waited that long. Sure, the engine of my car exploded 60 miles outside of L.A. on my drive back, and then the radiator leaked in a dry county in Utah where my mom and I were stuck for four days, but once I finally made it back, I knew I was home.

I did the things I'd done since the beginning. I found good people and I made them mine. I found good work, continued learning, and went to group therapy. I had a relationship that was better than the last, and together we helped each other become better versions of ourselves. He just got married, and I'm happy I got to be a part of his story, even if he did set our house on fire by putting a cigarette out in a pile of kindling, because he was too high. After, I reconnected with the man I would later marry, though that short lived union is another story for another time, and I felt more and more at ease with who I've become. I accomplished goals I'd been holding onto since Paul first died, and every check mark in every box felt like I'd won the Nobel Prize.

It's been ten years since that Wednesday in December that changed everything. Ten years since the last time I was kissed by Paulie, since I've heard his voice say "hey baby." It's been ten years since I started learning who I really am. A smart, confident, beautiful, woman who has a whole lot to say. Paul knew that's who I was back then, back even in his foil covered bedroom in his parents house with Prince, and then Cibo Matto, and then Jeff Buckley,

*Music plays – Jeff Buckley, Hallelujah*

playing on the turntable while I sat cross legged on the floor, oblivious to what our futures would bring.

It might seem crazy to say, but I am so incredibly grateful to that man. He gave me a whole lot of heartache and pain, that's for sure. But he also gave me the courage and strength to know I can make it through anything. Failure, success, incredible loss, beautiful love. I can do it. Because I've already had to. Thank you, Paulie. Thank you for everything you gave me, in your life, and even deeper, in your death. Love on.

*I walk off stage as music rises. Entirety of song plays. Lights dim at end of song.*



## CHAPTER 5

### REFLECTIONS

#### Audience Feedback

I handed out feedback forms to each of the audience members and asked them to provide comment, both positive and negative, regarding both the performance elements as well as the content of the story. In the audience were storytelling professionals and students, as well as members of the general public, so the feedback I received was varied. I have separated the feedback into story and performance sections, as both provide unique opportunity for reflection.

#### Story Feedback

I was surprised by some of the feedback I received regarding the actual script of the show. When I crafted the narrative, I took care to leave out some of the more explicit details regarding Paul's death. Overwhelmingly, I heard from the audience a need to know more about the specifics of what the situation looked like. They wanted me to take them deeper into the moment of finding Paul dead. They wanted me to describe the distance between the toilet and the tub. They wanted to know what kind of belt he used. They wanted to know the height from the window to the floor, to really be able to feel what it must have felt like to him during those last minutes he was alive. More and more detail was desired, with the hopes that I would take them lower before I attempted to lift them back up. More than just a need for the darkness to be revealed, theirs was a desire to feel the world in which all that I presented took place – to go into that world in more defined scenes.

The audience wanted to know Paul more. They wanted to feel the pain he felt prior to ending his life. They wanted to know what his days were like, if he acted sad, if he was diagnosed with depression, and what I think might have caused him to take such dramatic action. They wanted to go down with him. As was desired with the feedback regarding the death scene, the audience wanted to know Paul's depression more than I thought they would.

There were certain things about Paul's story I kept out of the show for ethical reasons. The audience wanted to know those things. They needed to know more about what might have happened to contribute to his depression. There are things I know of that I am hesitant to disclose, but it is necessary for me to reveal some of those details in a discrete way to enable the listener to feed a deeper connection to Paul and his suffering. Even if I don't know anything, really, I should make that explicitly clear. I needed to state explicitly what I did and didn't know to be true.

Overall, the audience felt like the first half of the show was well-developed and included strong details and carefully crafted scenes. The second half of the show, however, had room to grow. When describing the funeral scene, for example, there was a desire for me to include a few scenes within that scene. Did anyone say anything particularly nice to me? What was it like watching the video of us at our high school talent show with Paul laid out in the casket one room over? What did his ex-girlfriends say to me? Where are they now? Through specific details, I must create a rich vision of the funeral, not just how it felt to be there. There was a dearth of pictures painted, and too much of a summary of the event.

This was true for the rest of the second half of the show. I was told it played like a catalog of events, and less like a series of scenes highlighting specifics from my experiences.

While I did talk about specific events that happened in each of the cities I lived in after his death, I didn't create effective scenes about those events. Again, details were lacking that would have created a richer narrative. I was advised to select one experience from each of the cities and go into deep detail about that experience. What it looked like, what it smelled like, not just how it made me feel. I need to get away from feelings and get more into creating pictures and scenes.

Within that same realm, I was told I did too much talking about me, and not enough talking about what was going on outside of me. This can be interpreted as me not caring about the environments in which I was doing this healing. In order to change this perception, I need to describe what was going on around me in more detail. That was the gist of most of the feedback regarding the script: use more detail. The things I attempted to shield the audience from, they wanted more of. The things I didn't think of as important, they wanted in greater detail. They wanted me to take them deeper, farther into the world of Paul's life, his death, and my reaction to those things.

I was advised the pieces of statistical information I provided made the piece feel more like an infomercial for suicide survivor groups than a part of the overall narrative of a suicide survivor. I was tasked with asking myself what the purpose of my show was, to guide survivors to resources, or to share my story of moving through that grief. I should not make the show feel like therapy, but instead concentrate on the aesthetics of my experience. Removing the therapeutic phrases and adding in more detailed scenes will help to achieve this.

I also received feedback that I did a good job of bringing levity into the story when it was necessary. When I did bring them down, I took care to bring them back up with humor. This was appreciated by the audience. I was told that the scenes in which I did provide appropriate

detail for were rich and colorful, and that the audience was able to get deep into the narrative and feel like they were experiencing what I went through. I need to take those scenes and look to their successful techniques to aid me in creating additional vignettes that would paint a richer picture of my experience.

### Performance Feedback

The audience had been prepared that this was a work in progress, which allowed me some leniency with the performance. No one was expecting a polished piece, so no one gave feedback that they felt let down by what was presented to them.

I heard feedback from a fellow student that she didn't know that storytellers were allowed to use notes or a script when performing. She thought this made the performance a much different experience than she was expecting, but she wasn't disappointed with what I did present. She and I do not know each other well, so she had not been kept up to date on what was happening in my personal life like others in the audience were. We had a private discussion in which I explained the limitations caused by the death of my father, and why I chose to read parts of the story from a script as opposed to attempting to perform completely from memory. She acknowledged that knowing the reasoning behind my choice made it clearer. She also commented that she thought it was liberating to see a raw performance.

Several audience members commented on the use of music throughout the show. We suffered from some technical difficulties, and the music cues were not as clean as I hoped they would be or as they had been during rehearsal. The songs were not faded in and out at the appropriate times or the appropriate volume. While these technical errors were mentioned, a

majority of the feedback I received regarding music indicated that the music took away from the performance instead of enhancing it as I had hoped it would.

The songs I chose to play directly related to the text, and helped me connect to the story in a deeper way; but that was not the case for the audience. Perhaps because I know the story so well, because these are things that happened to me, the connection of the music to the emotion is natural. I was surprised by this feedback, but upon reflection understand why the audience felt this way. They were interested in the text that I was speaking, and the lyrics of the music divided their focus. In future performances of the piece, I will omit the musical cues within the text but will still have pre and post show music.

The only set piece I used was a black chair placed in the corner of the stage behind center and to the right. I had intended to use this chair as a transition piece to help cue movements from one portion of the story to the next. The audience feedback I received indicated this was not clear. Comments included “Was use of chair intentional?” and “What was the purpose of sitting down?” --clearly showing that my intentions were not specific enough. I sat down when it felt right to me to sit down, but instead should have used the chair only at very obvious transition points.

Along those same lines, I received feedback that it would have been helpful to create a consistent gaze point that represented Paul. That is, I should have looked at a specific spot every time I was talking directly to or about Paul. This would have served to provide the audience with a representation of the other major character in the story. Instead, I either looked up to the ceiling or made eye contact with the audience, neither of which was consistent.

The audience also commented that they would have liked more dialog in the story. Conversations between myself and other characters in the story would have helped to create scenes and in turn to contribute to the overall success in the creation of a full-fledged dramatic story. Without those conversations, what could have been rich was lacking in texture and left the audience wanting more.

Positive feedback included that I “have a good aura” and that the audience wants to come with me on my journey. My presence is comforting and my tone of voice is calming. I also heard my vocal variety was strong.

In the end, while much of the feedback regarding the actual presentation of the piece was negative, this is very helpful. The audience was still able to enter the world of my story, even without these artistic elements in place. The feedback that was given to me regarding staging and performance elements will help a great deal in future productions.

### Personal Reflections

As I did with the audience reflection section, I have divided my personal reflection into two sections, the story and the performance. Within those sections, I discuss both crafting the narrative and performance, and the actual presentation of both, including reactions to feedback from the audience.

## Reflections on the Story

Crafting the Narrative. During the writing of this autoethnography, I experienced the sudden death of my father. He and I were very close, and his death hit particularly hard. This personal tragedy greatly affected my ability to work consistently and effectively on this piece. I would sit at my computer for what started as days, and turned into weeks, my thoughts paralyzed. I was unable to create anything, despite being excited and I thought prepared. I would often be shocked when I looked at the clock and hours had passed without a word written. Though I did not receive any diagnosis, as best I can tell, I was experiencing depression for the first time in my life. When Paul died I experienced grief but with the loss of my father it was much different. Despite being surrounded by people who suffered from the disease since I entered adulthood, I had never experienced it myself, and was completely unaware of its presence. I realized that this was happening, and knew I had to make changes to keep the depression from deepening. Since that realization I have been working to heal and move away from the depressive state, using daily yoga and writing practices as aids to healing. This realization and change didn't happen, however, until after I had lost nearly a semester's worth of time to devote to this story.

After emerging, I was able to use the darkness that surrounded my father's death as a reminder of how I felt ten years' prior when my fiancé took his life. This experience helped to highlight the dark that had been pervasive at that time, and the light that I have made in my life since. This is the yin and the yang of grief. While I wish my father was still alive, his death has already taught me a great deal about myself as a person, a storyteller, and as a performance autoethnographer. I am grateful to be able to use that experience to further deepen my research.

Being brought back into the world of grief as I was crafting a story about grief was essential in my ability to tap into the emotions that I had felt when Paul died. Memories were unlocked that I had pushed very far back, and I was able to access them and bring them back into my story.

As a result of this delay, I presented a work in progress, as opposed to a completed piece. I feel strongly this was the correct choice, as I have already learned much about how to work within the limitations faced when conducting autoethnographic research, whether planned for or unexpected. The work is so personal that it can be very difficult as a storyteller to separate the story materials from the moment-to-moment conditions of my life. Grief was pervasive both in my work and in my personal life. Figuring out how to use that grief to the benefit of the work was essential.

While it was not my intention to perform an incomplete piece, it became clear it was what I needed to do. I lost much, and not just time, during my depressive state. I was unable to utilize the resources I had put in place at the university, including working on script development with a professor, because I was unable to work productively. When I finally emerged, the choices were clear: either present a work in progress, or postpone my thesis work and, in turn, my graduation. In the end, presenting a work in progress was the only satisfactory choice. I could not be further held back by the death of my father, no matter how untimely his death might have been.

The first portion of the story is adapted from a shorter piece I have performed many times. As a result, I was much more comfortable with detail and imagery during the first section of the show. I chose to begin this long form piece with the story of how Paul and I met and fell in love because that is the actual beginning of the story. It's more than that, however. It is the



intersecting vector of our lives, and it is this conjoined arc that sets up the rest of the story. It is what I know. Without Paul, without our lives together, this story would not exist. My life as I know it would not exist. I thought it was important to give the details of the positive life we created together. Feedback from the audience let me know that it is also important for me to go into detail about the negative aspects of both our lives together, and Paul's life on his own. While I succeeded at showing the love and happiness between us, the loss of Paul made less sense without more detail about his depression.

This is a really interesting conflict for me. The audience wants to know more about why he died, about what was going on with him before he ended his life. I do not know the answers to those questions, however. I do not know what was going on with him. I do not know what he was feeling. I did not know that he was depressed. He did not talk about it. I know he was acting differently than he normally did. I know he was more aggressive than he usually was, as he was typically a somewhat passive man. I know our relationship was suffering because of those changes. What I do not know is *why* he was behaving the way he was. How do I give the audience what they need, a deeper descent before the culmination of his death, when I had no idea that it was about to happen? They want to know things I did not know.

I did touch on his beginning to say goodbye through his email to his grandmother, but other than that I did not notice anything else he did that was out of the ordinary that, in hindsight, could have been signs that he was making the choice to end his life. There were other events that could be included in this section. He went on a trip to Chicago alone during the month between his return from Japan and his death, seeing some old friends for the last time. He played a solo musical performance the week before he died, something he had never done since he started

working for Leon Russel. I was there, and he sang a new song he had never performed. After he died, I read the lyrics which included reference to suicide. At the time I was so excited to see him play, I didn't listen to what he was singing. Would it have mattered had I read his song book before he died? When they happened, none of these things seemed out of the ordinary. That he packed so much into that final month, things he would not normally have done in such a short period, seemed unremarkable at the time. It was just December, and the touring outfit had a little bit of time off work for the holidays. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

I also made the choice to omit specific information I was given by Paul that could provide insight into why he died, because I do not feel that it is my place to disclose such information. I do not wish to disclose things that I know will hurt people who are still alive. The problem, then, lies in figuring how to provide this information implicitly. After consulting with one of my professors, I came to the conclusion that the appropriate focus for this story is on me as a survivor, not on Paul as a victim. What I learned from audience feedback, however, is they do not particularly care about why I am working through grief if I fail to take them deeper into the life that was lost. The "why should we care" aspect of storytelling is unclear to the audience without that element as a counterweight and compounding of my own suffering. What is the ethically responsible thing to do? As a storyteller, I want to tell the truest story I can. I want to be open and honest about my experiences, and that includes my time with Paul and what I know. I do not want to betray his trust, even now. I am tasked with distilling the basic truth of what Paul told me and passing that information along in a way that is both impactful and precise yet circumspect. No naming names. Instead, what I must do is take the core of that message and include it in the narrative to help the audience understand his pain at a deeper level.

In the story, after Paul's funeral things become less organized and clear. This is the portion of the story I was working on when my father died, and therefore is a rough draft of what I hoped to present. I was able, with the help of my mentor professor, to develop the basic frame of moving the story along with each physical move I made. As I learned through audience feedback, I need to go deeper into each of those locations and create descriptive scenes within my time there. It was difficult for me to think back on ten years of my life and decide what the important events were. Ten years is a long time, and most things just *happened*, without my immediate reflection upon whether or not they were an important part of my healing journey. This might seem obvious, but it was so much more difficult than I anticipated to access those memories. I have spent much time thinking about the events immediately surrounding Paul's death, and about my experiences with suicide survivor groups. Those were the things I chose to focus on in the narrative; but feedback lets me know I need to delve deeper into the specifics of *living* as a survivor of suicide.

Because I was unable to spend as much time developing this portion of the story, the rich imagery I presented in the first portion was not sustained. In future adaptations of this story, I intend to focus on detailed events and experiences with other people to add substance to the telling.

Audience feedback also indicated that the facts about suicide I presented were not as effective as I had imagined they would be. I included these facts to show that my experience is not uncommon, and that we are all much more affected by suicide than it might seem. Feedback showed that they seemed like disconnected elements within the show. I believe this is most likely due to the staging being under-developed and static due to the presence of the script. I still

think that including factual information is an important part of this show, and I believe that upon further refinement of the script and the performance technique its inclusion will be justified. I need to create a richer story world in order to place the stark reality of suicide and its effects into high relief.

In the end, the creation of the story was not all that I had wanted it to be. The sudden death of my father had a huge impact on my overall well being, and greatly set me back in the development of this narrative. Still, I am positive about the future of this story.

### Performance Reflections

I presented the story as a work in progress because I wanted to be honest with where I was in the development of both the narrative and the performance aspects to the audience. My initial intent was to tell a complete story without notes, fully staged. What I was able to do instead was a rough draft. A majority of the audience knew about my father's death and how it affected the development of this show.

As I knew the first portion of the story much more thoroughly than the last, I was able to perform about half the show without needing to reference notes. This half was received almost entirely positively. For the second part of the show, I needed to use my script, which limited the scope of my performance. Generally, I perform without a script, and follow a general outline of the story, making sure to focus on specific information I want to drive home. As a teller, I do my best to not memorize a story. Knowing the essence of a story always leads to better results for me. All the limitations I faced with this performance put me out of my comfort zone, and led me

to need to rely on notes during the telling. This limited my gestures and movement, as I was physically holding a stack of papers in my hand.

I tried to tell the story without the notes, and found myself walking over to the table on which I set them to reference the script more than I wanted. I decided that was more distracting, and that the story would be better served if I held the notes in my hands. I had attempted at the final hour to locate and use a music stand, but was unable to procure one. I think having one would have smoothed out a lot of the more difficult physical elements of the second half of the show. That being said, once I held the script in my hand, I was able to engage in my telling more completely and found a rhythm that worked to support me through the rest of the show.

I had intended to make music an integral part of the show, but that did not work. My background is in theatre, and sound cues are used all the time to create added emotion and tension to what is happening on the stage. As a solo performance, however, this proved to be much less effective. The execution of the sound cues was flawed, which served to highlight the music much more than I intended. Despite having practiced the transitions and execution several times, it did not work. Instead of being the extra boost I hoped they would be, the songs ended up being a distraction. This was disappointing. Music was such a huge part of the life Paul and I shared, and I had hoped to bring that into the performance in a meaningful way. In future performances, I will still utilize pre- and post-show music, including concluding the show with Jeff Buckley's version of *Hallelujah*.

As a storyteller I focus on personal narrative, so sharing intimate details about my life is not a new experience for me. I have also talked about my experience as a suicide survivor before in both casual and professional telling environments. This was different. Perhaps

because this is the culminating experience in my master's program, or because I was talking about having sex and doing drugs, but this performance bore more weight than I usually feel when telling. This was the first time I performed a full-length solo program, and it was more overwhelming than I anticipated to have twenty people in the audience just to see me perform. I was not nervous, but was much more self-conscious than I expected to be.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

“The shift away from seeing oneself as powerless, as a victim of external circumstances, begins with telling one’s own story” (Niemi & Ellis, 2001, p. 13). In their book “Inviting the Wolf in: Thinking about the Difficult Story,” Loren Niemi and Elizabeth Ellis ask the question “(w)hy tell difficult stories?” (2001, p. 19). Their answer is both at once simple and complex:

“We must tell difficult stories to be truly human. To be truly human is to acknowledge within our experience and imagination both sides of our nature. Spirit and flesh. Divine and profane. Hero and trickster.” (2001, p. 19)

Niemi and Ellis touch on elements that we as human beings rarely think about. All of us undergo difficult experiences, and in order to fully process those situations, we must take back the narrative of the difficult event and make it our own. Often times, we are not even aware of the effects that a particularly harmful experience may have had on us; sometimes we even repress the memory of it altogether, until we are faced with a parallel story that brings it back to mind. Because of this integrating power of story, it is essential for us as storytellers, and as human beings, to both tell our own difficult stories, and listen to those of others (Ellis & Niemi, 2001, p. 18-21).

The story of “Love On” is of one woman, myself, who experienced a traumatic event, finding my partner dead by suicide in our shared home, and the decade that followed in which I attempted to restore myself to a rich and fulfilling life in the wake of tragedy. I made sure I did not shove that experience aside, but instead worked to embrace it and the unique perspective it offered me. My fiancé committed suicide six months before our wedding. This fact has been a

headline element in the story of my life since I was 24 years old. From the very beginning, as early as three weeks after his death, I started attending suicide survivor meetings to take charge of my healing.

I did not want my grief to overtake me, but instead wanted to guide my process and remain in control of my life. I met so many people along the way who did not do that. I met so many people that were just beginning their journey of healing years, sometimes decades, after their loved one died. Carla Fine (2001) says in “No time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One”:

“(s)uicide is different from other deaths. We who are left behind cannot direct our anger at the unfairness of a deadly disease or a random accident or a murderous stranger.

Instead, we grieve for the very person who has taken our loved one’s life” (p. 13).

Those of us who are survivors of suicide don’t only need to deal with the loss of our loved one, but with the reality of how they died, and all the stigma that surrounds this kind of death. As Fine points out, we are both grieving the dead and the murderer, for they are one and the same (2001, p. 13). This seems like an impossible task, one that many people attempt to deal with alone. “The grieving process of suicide survivors is often shrouded by stigma and silenced by shame” (Fine, 2011, p. 14). It is because of that shame and stigma that many members of the suicide survivor groups I attended never admitted how their loved one died until they finally could not stand being silent anymore. I did not want this to happen to me. I did not want to wake up in middle age, realizing that I had allowed some outside circumstance to control my fate. This is why I started attending groups so early on.



During these groups, I got to hear stories that echoed mine. I was not the only person who had found their loved one dead. From a study conducted by Jay Callahan (2004), “(r)esults showed that seeing the body at the scene of the death was the most significant predictor of high levels of distress” (p. 104) among suicide victims. I fit into that category. I can say from my experience, there is nothing more harrowing than finding someone you love dead by their own hand. Suicide groups offered me the comfort of knowing I was not alone in my story.

Over the years, I developed a passion for storytelling and the oral tradition. I began as a writer and producer, but made the choice to study storytelling for my graduate career. I work professionally as a producer for an international storytelling organization, and wanted to focus on my craft as a storyteller in my own right. After some semesters of study, and careful consideration of what aspects of my life dominated my personal narrative, I knew the appropriate course of action was to unpack the biggest, most controversial event in my life: the suicide of my fiancé. I have spent years telling the story in survivor groups, to the point of me feeling like I was reading from a script every time I was in group I knew my story so well.

Despite all this sharing of my story, I never talked about many of the messy things that happened in the years after he died. These were the things I have been a little ashamed about, things I did not want to admit. I never unpacked the life I actually led after Paul’s death. In my training as a storyteller, specifically one who tells personal stories, I have learned the importance of searching for the truest version of our self we are able to share. I have learned the importance of dealing with the difficult material as if it has substance and weight--because it does (Niemi & Ellis, 2001, p. 23). My choice to explore the time after Paul died, to really examine my life and what that time meant for me, served to help me feel less shame and stigma not just about how

Paul died, but about how his death affected me. I had a lot of sex. I did drugs. I was without a place to live off and on for almost a year. I was a raw, suffering, healing, human being who deserved to be feeling and acting any way that felt right.

The process of crafting this story was much more difficult than expected. Limiting my scope was by far the hardest aspect of this project. There are things I have omitted because there was not enough space for them. There are so many other people who helped me along the way, and they deserve recognition. This telling of this story was not the place. There is Paul's eldest brother's partner, now ex, who I still call my sister, who continues to be a fighting force in my life. There is Khalid, and Collin, and Ryann, and more than one Lindsey, all who gave up things to be there for me. There are a series of men whom I shared a bed with that helped me with my recovery, even if that is not what it seemed like at the time. There are so many people I had not thought about in years, that came back to my memory as if they had just been waiting to help me with the crafting of this story. Even after I developed a basic framework, I learned more about myself as a storyteller through my performance.

This piece could certainly live in just the written word. Autoethnographers need not perform their stories just because they happened to them. The performance aspect of "Love On." however was essential in the life of this story. As Niemi and Ellis (2001) point out:

"It takes courage to see that there is a story to be told. It takes additional courage to decide to tell it. Once you decide to do so, it takes some care to shape the story in such a way as it can be heard for what it is. Sometimes you have to admit to your own faults, your foolishness or vulnerability. Sometimes you have to acknowledge failure of guilt.

There is always the possibility of shame and embarrassment. But as the Bible verse says, the truth shall set you free.” (p. 33)

By performing this story, I am challenging myself as a storyteller. I am telling my most difficult story, and I am telling it without building up walls of affectation or mannerism. I am going all in--I am admitting those faults and acknowledging those failures. I am allowing myself the freedom to get up in front of a group of people and talk about the most difficult parts of my life. I am freeing myself by sharing this story aloud.

Storytelling “can revitalize individuals and the culture as a whole” (Sobol, 1999, p. 4). Getting up on stage and sharing my story of survival certainly did revitalize me. Despite being a work in progress, I was happy with what I was able to present as my initial showing of “Love On.” Losing my father during the most crucial development time proved to be a huge setback, but once I was able to perform what I had prepared, I was renewed. Even though I received extensive notes on how to make the show better, I left the experience feeling like I had come out of some sort of awful funk, and here I was on the other side of yet another major death. This time, I did not have the support groups and the shared stories to get me through it. This time, I had *my* story to bring me back up. Performing “Love On” saved me from falling deeper into depression and enabled me to jump back into life.

The feedback I received from the audience was heartfelt and real, just as I hope my performance was received by them. Their guidance on how to better develop both the content of my show and the performance has been invaluable. Even though I was not able to perform a completed show that was fully staged, I am pleased with the results of the work in progress. I

am leaving with ideas and suggestions that I would never had been able to collect in any other way than by performing for a live audience.

The talk back session at the end of the show, as well as individual conversations I had after the performance, showed that I had fulfilled the goals of shedding light on both the stigma of traumatic events and on the events themselves. Audience members shared their stories of loss and trauma with me very openly, and several people let me know that they were also survivors of suicide. I heard from one woman, who is a storyteller as well, that had never spoken about her sister's suicide, even though both the death and funeral were enormously traumatic. She felt comfortable enough with me after watching my show to share what that experience was like for her. Her sister's death had happened decades ago, and she was now ready to talk about it.

While the performance and text of my autoethnography were limited by my situation, the outcomes of this thesis were still achieved. I established the necessity of the autoethnographer to adapt to situations in the researcher's life that might impact their ability to conduct their research. The benefits to a storyteller of performing works in progress for an audience were demonstrated. The post-performance conversations highlighted the audience's need to go deep into the truth of a story, to go deep into the difficult terrain. The importance of having conversations about suicide and survivorship, and of sharing our stories as they relate to those topics was made clear.

I intend to revise the script for "Love On" and to include greater detail and more descriptive language to help create clearer scenes for the audience. After revision, I plan to continue to tell this story to a variety of audiences, seeking to further expose those difficult stories that live within us all.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Suicide/Trauma Support Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention - <http://afsp.org/>

Resource for all sides of suicide awareness, including references for those experiencing thoughts of suicide, suicide attempt survivors, and suicide loss survivors.

American Association of Suicidology - <http://www.suicidology.org/>

Resource for all sides of suicide awareness, including references for those experiencing thoughts of suicide, suicide attempt survivors, and suicide loss survivors.

The Compassionate Friends - <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/>

Providing support for those who have lost a child, for any reason.

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE - 1-800-273-TALK (8255)



Appendix B

U.S.A. Suicide: 2014 Official Final Data

U.S.A. SUICIDE: 2014 OFFICIAL FINAL DATA

Number Per Day Rate % of Deaths Group (Number of Suicides) Rate

Nation	..... 42,773	..... 117.2	..... 13.4	..... 1.6
White Male (29,971)	..... 24.1			
Males	..... 33,113	..... 90.7	..... 21.1	..... 2.5
White Female (8,704)	..... 6.9			
Females	..... 9,660	..... 26.5	..... 6.0	..... 0.7
Nonwhite Male (3,136)	..... 9.6			
Whites	..... 38,675	..... 106.0	..... 15.4	..... 1.7
Nonwhite Female (956)	..... 2.7			
Nonwhites	..... 4,098	..... 11.2	..... 6.0	..... 1.1
Black Male (1,946)	..... 9.2			
Blacks	..... 2,421	..... 6.6	..... 5.5	..... 0.8
Black Female (475)	..... 2.1			
Elderly (65+ yrs.)	..... 7,693	..... 21.1	..... 16.6	..... 0.4
Hispanic (3,244)	..... 5.9			
Young (15-24 yrs.)	..... 5,079	..... 13.9	..... 11.6	..... 17.6
Native Americans (489)	..... 10.8			
Middle Aged (45-64 yrs.)	..... 16,294	..... 44.6	..... 19.5	..... 3.1
Asian/Pacific Islanders (1,188)	..... 6.1			

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Fatal Outcomes (Suicides): a minimal rate increase was seen from 2013 to 2014, continuing the recent rate increases after long-term trends of decline

- Average of 1 person every 12.3 minutes killed themselves
- Average of 1 old person every 1 hour and 8 minutes killed themselves
- Average of 1 young person every 1 hour and 44 minutes killed themselves. (If the 428 suicides below age 15 are included,

1 young person every 1 hour and 35 minutes) Leading Causes of Death 15-24 yrs

- 10th ranking cause of death in U.S.— 2nd for young -----
- >> Cause Number Rate

• 3.4 male deaths by suicide for each female death by suicide All Causes 28,791 65.5

• Suicide ranks 10th as a cause of death; Homicide ranks

17th \_\_\_\_\_ | 1-Accidents 11,836 26.9

Nonfatal Outcomes (Attempts) (figures are estimates): | 2-Suicide 5,079 11.5

• 1,069,325 annual attempts in U.S. (using 25:1 ratio); 2014 SAMHSA study: 1.1 million adults (18 and up) | 3-Homicide 4,144 9.4

• Translates to one attempt every 30 seconds (based on 1,069,325 attempts) [1.1 million = 1 every 29 seconds] | 10-14 yrs 425 2.1

• 25 attempts for every death by suicide for nation (one estimate); 100-200:1 for young; 4:1 for elderly | 15-19 yrs 1,834 8.7

- 3 female attempts for each male attempt | 20-24 yrs 3,245 14.2

Survivors ("know someone who died by suicide") and Suicide Loss Survivors (those bereaved of suicide): † (figures are estimates)

°Recent (Cerel, 2015) research-based estimate suggests that for each death by suicide 147 people are exposed (6.3 million annually),

and among those, 18 experience a major life disruption (loss survivors; earlier, non-research based estimates were 6)

- If each suicide has devastating effects and intimately affects 18 other people, there are over 750,000 loss survivors a year

- Based on the 838,373 suicides from 1990 through 2014, therefore, the number of survivors of suicide loss in the U.S. is 15.09

million (1 of every 21 Americans in 2014); number grew by 769,914 in 2014

- If there is a suicide every 12.3 minutes, then there are 18 new loss survivors every 12.3 minutes as well

Suicide Methods	Number	Rate	Percent of Total	Number	Rate	Percent of Total
Firearm suicides (1st)	21,334	6.7	49.9%	All but Firearms	21,439	6.7 50.1%
Suffocation/Hanging (2nd)	11,407	3.6	26.7%	Poisoning (3rd)	6,808	2.1 15.9%
Cut/pierce (5th)	740	0.2	1.7%	Drowning (7th)	372	0.1 0.9%

#### U.S.A. Suicide Rates 2004-2014 || 15 Leading Causes of Death in the U.S.A., 2014

Group/ (Rates per 100,000 population) Group/ || (total of 2,626,418 deaths; 823.7 rate)

Age 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 Age || Rank & Cause of Death  
Rate Deaths

5-14 0.7 0.7 0.5 0.5 0.6 0.7 0.7 0.7 0.8 1.0 1.0 5-14 || 1 Diseases of heart (heart disease) 192.7  
614,348

15-24 10.3 10.0 9.9 9.7 10.0 10.1 10.5 11.0 11.1 11.1 11.6 15-24 || 2 Malignant neoplasms  
(cancer) 185.6 591,699

25-34 12.7 12.4 12.3 13.0 12.9 12.8 14.0 14.6 14.7 14.8 15.1 25-34 || 3 Chronic lower respiratory  
diseases 46.1 147,101

35-44 15.0 14.9 15.1 15.6 15.9 16.1 16.0 16.2 16.7 16.2 16.6 35-44 || 4 Accidents (unintentional  
injury) 42.7 136,053

45-54 16.6 16.5 17.2 17.7 18.7 19.3 19.6 19.8 20.0 19.7 20.2 45-54 || 5 Cerebrovascular diseases  
(stroke) 41.7 133,103

55-64 13.8 13.9 14.5 15.5 16.3 16.7 17.5 17.1 18.0 18.1 18.8 55-64 || 6 Alzheimer's disease 29.3  
93,541

65-74 12.3 12.6 12.6 12.6 13.9 14.0 13.7 14.1 14.0 15.0 15.6 65-74 || 7 Diabetes mellitus  
(diabetes) 24.0 76,488

75-84 16.3 16.9 15.9 16.3 16.0 15.7 15.7 16.5 16.8 17.1 17.5 75-84 || 8 Influenza & pneumonia  
17.3 55,227

85+ 16.4 16.9 15.9 15.6 15.6 15.6 17.6 16.9 17.8 18.6 19.3 85+ || 9 Nephritis, nephrosis (kidney disease) 15.1 48,146  
 65+ 14.3 14.7 14.2 14.3 14.8 14.8 14.9 15.3 15.4 16.1 16.6 65+ || 10 Suicide [Intentional Self-Harm] 13.4 42,773  
 Total 11.0 11.0 11.1 11.5 11.8 12.0 12.4 12.7 12.9 13.0 13.4 Total || 11 Septicemia 12.2 38,940  
 Men 17.7 17.7 17.8 18.3 19.0 19.2 20.0 20.2 20.6 20.6 21.1 Men || 12 Chronic liver disease and cirrhosis 12.0 38,170  
 Women 4.6 4.5 4.6 4.8 4.9 5.0 5.2 5.4 5.5 5.7 6.0 Women || 13 Essential hypertension and renal disease 9.5 30,221  
 White 12.3 12.3 12.4 12.9 13.3 13.5 14.1 14.5 14.8 14.9 15.4 White || 14 Parkinson's disease 8.2 26,150  
 Nonwh 5.8 5.5 5.5 5.6 5.7 5.8 5.8 5.8 6.1 6.0 6.0 NonWh || 15 Pneumonitis due to solids and liquids 5.9 18,792  
 Black 5.2 5.1 4.9 4.9 5.2 5.1 5.1 5.3 5.5 5.4 5.5 Black || - All other causes (Residual) 168.0 535,666  
 45-64 15.4 15.3 16.0 16.7 17.5 18.0 18.6 18.6 19.1 19.0 19.5 45-64 || Homicide (ranks 17th) 5.0 15,809

- Old made up 14.5% of 2014 population but 18.0% of the suicides • Young were 13.8% of 2014 population and 11.9% of the suicides •
  - Middle Aged were 26.2% of the 2014 population but were 38.1% of the suicides •
- 1,209,703\* Years of Potential Life Lost Before Age 75 (39,186 of 42,773 suicides are below age 75)  
 \* alternate YPLL figure (CDC): 1,206,515 using individual years in calculations rather than 10-year age groups as above.

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Many figures appearing here are derived or calculated from data in the following official data sources: downloaded 18 December 2015 from CDC's website:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm> and the multiple cause data file at  
[http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data\\_access/Vitalstatsonline.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/Vitalstatsonline.htm). Some figures derived or calculated from data at the CDC's WISQARS Fatal Injuries Report site:  
[http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal\\_injury\\_reports.html](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal_injury_reports.html), downloaded 18 Dec 2015.  
 SAMHSA 2014 study (2015): Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2015). Behavioral health trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (HHS Publication No. SMA 15-4927, NSDUH Series H-50). Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/>  
 Cerel, J. (2015, April 18). We are all connected in suicidology: The continuum of "survivorship." Plenary presentation at the 48th annual conference of the American Association of Suicidology, Atlanta GA. [data from Cerel, Brown, Maple, Bush, van de Venne, Moore, & Flaherty, in progress; personal communication 20 Dec 2015]  
 † Cerel, J., McIntosh, J.L., Neimeyer, R. A., Maple, M., & Marshall, D. (2014). The continuum of "survivorship": Definitional issues in the aftermath of suicide. *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior*, 44(6), 591-600.

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Rate, Number, and Ranking of Suicide for Each U.S.A. State\*, 2014

Rank	State [Division / Region]	Deaths	Rate
1	Montana [M / West]	251	24.5
2	Alaska [P / West]	167	22.7
3	New Mexico [M / West]	449	21.5
4	Wyoming [M / West]	120	20.5
5	Colorado [M / West]	1,083	20.2
5	Nevada [M / West]	573	20.2
7	Vermont [NE / Northeast]	124	19.8
8	Oregon [P / West]	782	19.7
9	Idaho [M / West]	320	19.6
10	West Virginia [SA / South]	359	19.4
11	Utah [M / West]	559	19.0
11	Oklahoma [WSC / South]	736	19.0
13	New Hampshire [NE / Northeast]	247	18.6
14	North Dakota [WNC / Midwest]	137	18.5
14	Arizona [M / West]	1,244	18.5
16	Arkansas [WSC / South]	515	17.4
17	Missouri [WNC / Midwest]	1,017	16.8
18	Maine [NE / Northeast]	220	16.5
18	South Dakota [WNC / Midwest]	141	16.5
18	Kentucky [ESC / South]	727	16.5
21	Washington [P / West]	1,119	15.9
22	Kansas [WNC / Midwest]	455	15.7
23	South Carolina [SA / South]	753	15.6
24	Florida [SA / South]	3,035	15.3
25	Alabama [ESC / South]	715	14.7
26	Louisiana [WSC / South]	679	14.6
27	Tennessee [ESC / South]	948	14.5
28	Hawaii [P / West]	204	14.4
28	Indiana [ENC / Midwest]	948	14.4
30	Pennsylvania [MA / Northeast]	1,817	14.2
31	Michigan [ENC / Midwest]	1,354	13.7
32	North Carolina [SA / South]	1,351	13.6
33	Virginia [SA / South]	1,122	13.5
33	Delaware [SA / South]	126	13.5
	Nation	42,773	13.4
35	Wisconsin [ENC / Midwest]	769	13.4

- 36 Nebraska [WNC / Midwest] 251 13.3
- 37 Iowa [WNC / Midwest] 407 13.1
- 38 Ohio [ENC / Midwest] 1,491 12.9
- 39 Georgia [SA / South] 1,294 12.8
- 40 Mississippi [ESC / South] 380 12.7
- 41 Minnesota [WNC / Midwest] 686 12.6
- 42 Texas [WSC / South] 3,254 12.1
- 43 California [P / West] 4,214 10.9
- 43 Illinois [ENC / Midwest] 1,398 10.9
- 45 Rhode Island [NE / Northeast] 113 10.7
- 46 Connecticut [NE / Northeast] 379 10.5
- 47 Maryland [SA / South] 606 10.1
- 48 Massachusetts [NE / Northeast] 596 8.8
- 48 New Jersey [MA / Northeast] 786 8.8
- 50 New York [MA / Northeast] 1,700 8.6
- 51 District of Columbia [SA / South] 52 7.9

Caution: Annual fluctuations in state levels combined with often relatively small populations can make these data highly variable. The use of several years' data is preferable to conclusions based on single years alone.

Suggested citation: Drapeau, C. W., & McIntosh, J. L. (for the American Association of Suicidology). (2015). U.S.A. suicide 2014: Official final data. Washington, DC: American Association of Suicidology, dated December 22, 2015, downloaded from <http://www.suicidology.org>.

Division [Abbreviation]	Rate	Number
Mountain [M]	19.8	4,599
East South Central [ESC]	14.7	2,770
West North Central [WNC]	14.7	3,094
South Atlantic [SA]	13.9	8,698
West South Central [WSC]	13.5	5,184
Nation	13.4	42,773
East North Central [ENC]	12.8	5,960
Pacific [P]	12.5	6,486
New England [NE]	11.4	1,679
Middle Atlantic [MA]	10.4	4,303
Region [Subdivision Abbreviations]	Rate	Number
West (M, P)	14.7	11,085
South (ESC, WSC, SA)	13.9	16,652
Midwest (WNC, ENC)	13.4	9,054
Nation	13.4	42,773
Northeast (NE, MA)	10.7	5,982

Source: Obtained 18 December 2015 from CDC/NCHS's Mortality in the United States: 2014 Public Use File and Web Tables

(released and accessed 18 December 2015; Table 19) (to appear in Deaths: Final Data for 2014, forthcoming) <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm>

[Note: Divisional and regional figures were calculated from state data.]

Some figures derived or calculated from data at the CDC's

WISQARS Fatal Injuries Report site downloaded 18 December

2015: [http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal\\_injury\\_reports.html](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal_injury_reports.html).

[data are by place of residence]

[Suicide = ICD-10 Codes X60-X84, Y87.0, U03]

Note: All rates are per 100,000 population.

\* Including the District of Columbia.

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Suicide State Data Page: 2014

20 December 2015 Revised 22 December 2015  
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“to understand and prevent suicide  
as a means of promoting human well-being”  
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Visit the AAS website at:

<http://www.suicidology.org>

For other suicide data, and an archive of state data, visit the website  
below and click on the dropdown “Suicide Stats” menu:

<http://pages.iu.edu/~jmcintos/>

## APPENDIX C

### Suicide Statistics – American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

While this data is the most accurate we have, we estimate the numbers to be higher. Stigma surrounding suicide leads to underreporting, and data collection methods critical to suicide prevention need to be improved.

Suicide is the 10 leading cause of death in the US

Each year 42,773 Americans die by suicide

For every suicide 25 attempt

Suicide costs the US \$ 44 Billion annually

#### Additional Facts About Suicide in the US

The annual suicide rate is 12.93 per 100,000 individuals.

Men die by suicide 3.5x more often than women.

On average, there are 117 suicides per day.

White males accounted for 7 of 10 suicides in 2014.

Firearms account for almost 50% of all suicides.

The rate of suicide is highest in middle age — white men in particular.

#### Suicide Attempts

No complete count is kept of suicide attempts in the U.S.; however, each year the CDC gathers data from hospitals on non-fatal injuries from self-harm.

494,169 people visited a hospital for injuries due to self-harm. This number suggests that approximately 12 people harm themselves for every reported death by suicide. However, because of the way these data are collected, we are not able to distinguish intentional suicide attempts from non-intentional self-harm behaviors.

Many suicide attempts, however, go unreported or untreated. Surveys suggest that at least one million people in the U.S. each year engage in intentionally inflicted self-harm.

Females attempt suicide three times more often than males. As with suicide deaths, rates of attempted suicide vary considerably among demographic groups. While males are 4 times more likely than females to die by suicide, females attempt suicide 3 times as often as males. The ratio of suicide attempts to suicide death in youth is estimated to be about 25:1, compared to about 4:1 in the elderly.

AFSP's latest data on suicide are taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Data & Statistics

Fatal Injury Report for 2014. Suicide rates listed are Age-Adjusted Rates.

If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

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M.A. Professional Communication (Concentration in Storytelling/Theatre), East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2016
- Teaching Experience: Graduate Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Communication Studies (SPCH 1300), East Tennessee State University  
Served as graduate teaching assistant/instructor for weekly workshop sessions  
Section 6, Spring 2016  
Section 11, Spring 2016  
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Section 4, Fall 2015  
Section 8, Fall 2015  
Section 12, Fall 2015
- Workshop Instructor, 826 Michigan  
Created and led storytelling and interviewing workshops for students' grades K-8
- Professional Experience: The Moth, Ann Arbor and Detroit, Michigan, 2013-present  
Michigan producer for monthly StorySLAM storytelling series
- Zingerman's Events  
Lead Event Planner, Ann Arbor MI, 2011 – 2014
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- Freelance Project Manager, Event Planner and Producer  
Nashville TN, Los Angeles CA, Traverse City MI, Brooklyn NY, Ann Arbor MI, Johnson City TN, 2004 –
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East Tennessee State University - 2016

Love On – Grant Presentation  
East Tennessee State University – 2016

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Eastman Chemical Company – 2015  
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Academic Memberships: Graduate and Professional Student Association  
President, 2015-16  
Vice President, 2014

University Strategic Planning Committee  
Graduate Student Representative, 2016

Interim University Planning Council  
Graduate Student Representative, 2015-16

Panel Discussion with Vice Chancellor of TBR  
Graduate Student Representative, 2015

TaleTellers Student Storytelling Organization  
Secretary, 2014-16  
Vice President, 2014-16

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