

SUNSHINE & SORROW: STORIES OF LOSS, GRIEF, AND RECOVERY-  
A PERFORMANCE THESIS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This performance thesis is designed to help tell the narratives of those who have undergone grief. The primary focus of this study is to express the impacts grief has had on these individuals' communication and to give hope to future individuals to encourage them to share their narratives of grief. Sharing narratives is a benefit within the scope of narrative medicine. The performance took place February 28, 2019, in the Hazel Kelly Wilson VIP Room in the Jack B. Kelly Student Center on the campus of West Texas A&M University. The performance was a compilation selection of the researcher's personal narrative and the narratives of others surrounding the loss of siblings and parents. One of the main ideas expressed by this thesis is to share personal narratives of grief in order to help the healing process. Through the sunshine and the sorrow, we must tell our stories of loss, grief, and recovery.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Larissa Leweke, thank you for being my constant, my constant hope, strength, and sanity. You are the greatest friend any person could ask for, and, if we are honest, the only reason, I made it through is because of your support. Love you dearly.

Thank you to my family for the phone calls and long-distance support, I love you and I would not change my story for anything, I like who it made me. Thank you and I love you!

To my mother, not a day goes by that I do not miss you or think about the amazing woman you were. While I hate that I am living a life without you, I know that somewhere my

story is helping others. I miss you greatly and hope I am making you proud. Love, Your  
Sunshine.



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lily Graham, international published author, once expressed the reason we experience grief: “Death is not something you get over. It's the rip that exposes life in a before and after chasm, and all you can do is try to exist as best you can in the after” (Graham, 2016, para. 1). Individuals in society may experience a sense of loss, like something is missing in their lives. This can become a common emotion when a loved one dies. This feeling of loss can be especially strong among adolescents who have lost parents or siblings (Institute, 1984, para. 5). While grief is not always an easy subject to discuss, let alone study, this performance program has highlighted some of the issues with grieving during this sensitive time. These stories need to be told and be heard for healing to occur. This study uses narrative medicine, or how the act of taking the stories of patients, aids healing through telling stories as an outlet for processing illness and grief and “reminds us that illness unfolds in stories, that our bodies... carry our scars, our bliss, and our memories, simultaneously both limiting and expanding our lives” (Charon, 2009a, p. 120). The goal for this study was to show the impact of grief on communication and to increase awareness of the implications of this somewhat taboo topic, while assisting those who are grieving to come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

Sadly, experiencing grief during adolescence is a harsh reality for many within society. According to Children's Grief Awareness Day (2018), "1 in 5 children will experience the death of someone close to them by age of 18" (para. 1). This reveals the existence faced by a staggering number of adolescents today. The transitions required when faced with the death of a family member only add to the complicated life of a teenager. This is a topic that is close to my heart as I experienced the overwhelming grief with the loss of my own mother when I was a teenager. Because of my firsthand experience, hearing stories of others, and knowledge of the role of society in processing grief, I have explored the healing that happens through sharing stories of grief and hope. In this process, I have also advanced my own healing.

### **Rationale**

With numerous people being impacted by death and grief, it is important to bring forward the voices of those who have experienced such a misfortune. These numbers are scarier than we may think, "in the U.S., 8 million people suffered through the death of someone in their immediate family last year" and "1.2 million children will lose a parent to death before age 15" (Children's Grief Awareness Day, 2018). Because of the numbers of people impacted by death, it is important that people learn how to handle grief and how to communicate about grief. It was found that "in a poll of 1,000 high school juniors and seniors, 90% indicated that they had experienced the death of a loved one" (Children's Grief Awareness Day, 2018, para 2). These individuals need to be able to express their grief freely and discuss their losses without judgement. Many people are fearful to express emotions or feelings related to this mourning, thinking that if they do express their emotions, they may not cease or be able to stop the cycle of pain and

sorrow, keeping many silent (Goldsmith, 2013). Many also feel like they are “not being listened to when [they speak] about their grief to others, or [are] offered advice about their grief that was unhelpful or even hurtful” (Gerrish, 2014, p. 167).

This research project provides insights about how grief impacts us in an assortment of ways from our communication in our world within close and intimate relationships, public relationships, or any form of communication the bereaved may encounter, to how this impacts our well-being, and even to how to start healing through a self-telling narrative process. This knowledge can be used to supply counselors and those who are in positions of guidance with insight to grief-related communication. For “the very act of telling and receiving ... stories” can help the “one who suffers and [the] one who might be of help” (Charon, 2009a, p. 120). Grief impacts more than just one’s emotions, it can impact behavior, and physical being as well (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018). Implications for psychological and physical health of survivors can be caused by the death of any person (Gerrish, 2014).

According to the American Society of Clinical Oncology (2018), there are diverse feelings one could have after facing a loss of a loved one. Some of these feelings could include “shock, numbness, sadness, denial, despair, anxiety, anger, guilt, loneliness, depression, helplessness, relief, and yearning” (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018, para. 2). We may never know what can trigger any of these reactions, and this can make it difficult to cope effectively with various symptoms. Popular prompts for these reactions can be certain dates of the year, songs, locations, or comments that remind us of the deceased. It can be common for those of us experiencing loss to burst into tears from any of these sources or for no apparent reason at all. On top of these emotional responses,

there can also be physical responses such as “tightness or heaviness in the chest or throat, nausea or an upset stomach, dizziness, headaches, physical numbness, muscle weakness or tension, and fatigue” (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018, para. 2). The bereaved can also have issues with sleep, energy levels, loss of interest, aggression, being restless, or social issues (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018).

Information from my research could be beneficial to society by helping reduce communication problems in people who suffered grief through the death of someone in their immediate family. This topic may appear to only apply to a small portion of the population; however, “one out of every 20 children aged fifteen and younger will suffer the loss of one or both parents. These statistics don’t account for the number of children who lose a parental figure, such as a grandparent or other relative that provides care,” and 1.5 million kids only have one parent households due to parental loss, which are large numbers of the population (Children's Grief Awareness Day, 2018, para 4). This sense of loss can move on with these children into their teen years, where “a grieving college student may experience a sense of social isolation, and changes in peer relationships that may place them at risk for problems in mental health difficulties” (Cupit, 2016, p. 495). It has been found that “children may need to repeat their grief processes as they progress into adulthood” then, in turn, that “may lead to longer, extended periods of grief” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 338). It is important to understand that “reactions to loss are called grief reactions” and “they vary widely from person to person and within the same person over time” (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018, para 2). Some of the reactions to grief can range from variations of emotions, physical ailments, moods, or behaviors (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018). We must realize that individuals can

express and experience grief differently. Some will find feelings like waves of grief or sections of time that can be painful, long, or intense. These waves of grief can cause a false feeling of recovery to the symptoms of grief, however after a bit of time these feelings will resurface, and individuals will find themselves back in a similar grief cycle. Common times for these feelings to arise are “around significant dates, such as holidays or birthdays;” however, “over time, some people experience these grief cycles less frequently as they adjust to their loss” (Understanding Grief and Loss, 2018, para. 4). In some cases, an individual may experience Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), or “previously referred to as complicated grief and traumatic grief” (Lichtenthal, 2010, p. 794). PGD can become a “painful and debilitating reaction to bereavement” that can be separate from typical depression and anxiety related to bereavement; those who suffer from this may “suffer more intensely and appear ‘stuck’ in their anguish for an extended period” (Lichtenthal, 2010, p. 794). For future relationships to improve, there needs to be an understanding that telling our personal narratives is vital in the healing process. This study focused on performing grief narratives in order to assist people in sharing their own narratives of grief. For my performance I posed the following question:

RQ: Using an oral storytelling approach, how do narratives of grief and grief recovery assist those who are grieving to come to terms with the loss of a loved one?

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter One has provided the rationale for my performance thesis and offered the research question I answered. Chapter Two includes a brief literature review, some operational definitions and the theoretical lens used. Chapter Three discusses my

production concept and the space I selected for the performance. Chapter Four provides a copy of the script I developed for the performance and Chapter Five includes my reflection about the performance, as well as the evaluations provided by members of my thesis committee.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Grief is an emotion we all experience within our lifetime. This grief can come in many different forms including pain, sadness, depression, worry, anxiety, stress and frustration (Carmon et al., 2010). These forms can impact how we communicate within society. Grief mostly involves common symptoms like “intense sadness, loss of interest in daily activities, problems with sleep and appetite, and difficulty concentrating” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 338). These are all expected responses for the bereaved to undergo during their grief process (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). We communicate daily in various ways, using verbal and nonverbal elements. Communicating is a crucial part of our daily lives and can raise difficulties when hindered; we may start to act different, begin to withdraw, or not fully be present with others during engagement (Goldsmith, 2013). This brief literature review provides operational definitions for the terms: *grief*, *bereavement*, and *communication process*; discusses the five stages of grief identified by Kübler-Ross (2014), discusses adolescent grief, and explains communication and grieving.

#### Grief

For the purposes of this study I am operationally defining grief based on the work of Carmon et al. (2010) who states, “family members may experience feelings of despair,

sadness, depression, and may blame themselves and other family members for the death” (p. 254).

### Bereavement

Bereavement is the period of time when one experiences grief. The individual undergoing the grieving process is known as the *bereaved*. Halliwell and Franken (2016), define bereavement as a “complicated process involving both expected reactions such as grief and sadness, as well as numerous unexpected emotions, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 1).

### Communication Process

The central importance of communication during the grief process is noted by Wilner (2014) in the blog “Successful Communication During Grieving”: “through the various stages of dealing with the death of a loved one, effective communication becomes paramount” (para. 1). Lunenburg (2010) clarifies that the communication process is how messages get from one person to another. Many of the elements of communication can be disturbed or altered due to how grief changes the communication process (Lunenburg, 2010). This process may seem simple; however, many of the emotions surrounding grief can lead to individuals feeling silenced, and this can become problematic because conversations and interactions can become challenging when one or more party is experiencing stress or grief-related emotion (Keeley & Yingling, 2007). This is central to remember as observing how grief impacts communication.

### Five Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (2014) shed light on the darker subjects of loss, death, and grief. Through the use of her Five Stages of Grief, Kübler-Ross explained “the five stages

denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost” (Kübler-Ross, 2014, p. 7). These are general responses that individuals have to the loss of a loved one and can look different for each person because, “our grief is as individual as our lives” (Kübler-Ross, 2014, p. 7).

Denial is the first of the five stages and can often go overlooked as a stage in the grieving process. In this stage, it is common for the bereaved to experience the feeling that their loved one is just away or maybe not there yet. This is when the person experiences a sort of numbness or shock (Kübler-Ross, 2014). The next stage is anger. In this stage, it is common for someone to grow angry for many different reasons, (e.g. they did not take proper precautions, the doctor did not make the best choices, there was nothing they could do to stop the death). This anger can be justified or can seem like it comes out of nowhere or for no logical reason (Kübler-Ross, 2014). The third stage is bargaining. In this stage, pleading becomes a common occurrence and many express feelings of “what could have been” and “if only I had done something” (Kübler-Ross, 2014, p.17). The fourth stage is depression. In this stage, one falls deeper into grief. It is common for one to feel like this stage will never end; however, it is important to realize that this type of depression should not be seen as a sign of mental illness; instead, it should be treated like what it is: a deeper level of the grief one is experiencing (Kübler-Ross, 2014). The fifth and final stage in the model is acceptance. In this stage, one is not “all right” with the loss they experienced, but instead, this is the realization that the person they lost is gone forever and that this is a permanent state (Kübler-Ross, 2014).

These five stages can help individuals understand what is going on after the death of a loved one and will help the researcher show how grief can impact the individual.

### Adolescent Grief

It is said that there is “no event as stressful or traumatic than the death of a loved one,” making it a “painful experience” that many are “unprepared to face” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016 p. 337). Many feelings, emotions, and actions are produced with the grieving process that are unexpected, along with many of the expected things like sadness or grief (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). These feelings can vary from person to person; upon learning about the death of their loved one, many begin to experience anger or a troublesome feeling, which can be followed by a time of numbness to where the reality of the death is avoided (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). Many of the relationships that impact adolescents the most are those of parents or siblings. Both of those styles of relationships can cause copious amounts of grief among adolescents when they are taken away due to the passing of the parent or sibling. While “sibling bereavement is unique from other experiences of loss,” many typically consider sibling grief to be not as impactful as other types of grief on people, causing the sibling to be overlooked in comparison to their parents (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p.337). These siblings become “forgotten mourners and must face their grief mostly alone” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 338). Most of the siblings experience pain that lasts longer than others and can be more intense than some as they try to get through the grief they are experiencing (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 339). Grief is all consuming if there is not a proper outlet to express it; one way this can be avoided for the surviving siblings is by finding “ways to keep their sibling’s memory alive” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 351). Communication for these siblings is vastly

important in making sense of the loss they have recently gone through and for them to gain purpose (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). Increasing communication with the bereaved can help “the adolescents feel acknowledged, understood, and less alone” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 339). Storytelling is one way for the bereaved to make sense of the loss, give the loss meaning, and open the whole family to better communication and togetherness during this difficult time, and becomes a way for individuals to cope with the loss and can help make sense of the entire family’s grief, all while “sharing stories of their experiences may help bereaved siblings recover from and make sense of their loss” (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 339). Similar ideals can be applied to the bereaved upon the death of a parent. In an article by Gray et al., (2011), it was found that “at two months post-parental death, bereaved children were significantly more likely to have a major depressive episode (MDE) compared to community controls” (p. 279). Within the same study it was stated that the loss of a parent was one of the more intensely stressful things an adolescent or child could experience in their life and that the loss of a parent can lead to a long list of psychological problems following the death and into the future (Gray et al., 2011). In an article published in 2011 by Biank, a young boy named Matthew was followed during his grieving process and for many years after the loss of a parent, this article shows how a child’s “grief is never fully resolved” and how each child must go through a series of stages to fully process through their grief (Biank, 2011, p. 277).

#### Communication and Grief

Toller and Braithwaite (2009) researched contradictions of marital interaction between bereaved parents that focused on how the couple communicated during their grieving process. They found that “changes in their communication as a couple following

their child's death created problems" (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009, p. 269). The main purpose of the study was to investigate the impacts a child's death has on the parent's interaction and relationship (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). During the time of undergoing the grieving process, these parents can find themselves having great difficulty communicating with their significant other and those within their own family (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). Many of these difficulties can come from the feelings of being "stigmatized and ostracized" and therefore the bereaved "may restrict communication with ... individuals to protect themselves from further harm or judgment" (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009, p. 258). Many factors go into influencing how people communicate. For example, some spouses will limit speaking of certain subjects to "avoid further pain and injury for either themselves or their spouse" (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009, p. 258). This can further impact couples because sometimes the spouse is the "main source of support and comfort" for the bereaved, "each lacking in the strength and energy needed to provide each other support" (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009, p. 258). This means that these couples can have a hard time communicating because of their shared loss, and that this can be applied further to families and close friends when experiencing loss of a loved one (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009).

### **Theoretical Grounding**

Many "researchers are faced with considerable challenges when deciding how best to capture the frequently complex and multidimensional aspects of bereavement" (Gerrish, 2014, p. 152). When talking about their loss, many of the bereaved recognize "that much of their grieving would inevitably be done alone," that they must be careful about choices of whom to "disclose to about their loss and who not to tell," and find

themselves rehearsing “their responses to questions they knew they would be asked so they could feel confident when responding” (Gerrish, 2014, p. 167). Many find that it is hard to speak about death with their friends and loved ones due to many of these friends and loved ones being hesitant to discuss the loss or the bereaved one’s grief (Toller, 2009). However, “talking and telling stories about ... death is a primary way of meaning-making” and can aide the healing process (Toller, 2009, p. 258). For many “following the loss of a loved one, individuals are often driven to search for meaning in both the loss and their lives” (Lichtenthal, 2010, p. 792). While some may disagree, “bereavement experts have proposed that finding meaning in the loss experience and restoring a sense of purpose in a world without the deceased loved one may be therapeutic and reduce suffering for many persons;” one popular way of doing this is through self-narratives (Lichtenthal, 2010 p. 792). Rooks (2001) shared her hope for everyone to use stories and to help those seeking to heal. Rooks writes that sometimes when we are in levels of grief, we can “bury our feelings deep within ourselves” and that this type of response is only a Band-Aid to our problems and will not solve anything when another traumatic event unravels (Rooks, 2001, p. 15). Individuals can reach a level where “the pain is so intense that any remedy seems worth trying” (Rooks, 2001, p. 15). Hearing stories from others can help us manage our own grief in ways better than turning to “silence, drugs, alcohol, and meaningless activities” (Rooks, 2001, p. 16). Rooks can recall a time when, by the mere telling of a story of her own son David’s death, a woman was aided and pushed forward to deal with her own grief in a new way (Rooks, 2001) It can be of great importance to listen to other’s stories about their own grief because, “as humans hear one another out, donating serious and generous attention, listening from the teller’s side, they

are able to perceive one another, bestowing and accepting recognition as a result” (Charon, 2009a, p. 120). Stories and personal narratives can become key instruments in the healing process.

Rita Charon has coined a term that goes beyond the scope of just medicine and can apply to a variety of individuals with a vast array of narratives. While this research was originally to benefit those within medical professions to view each patient as a person and to care about their story, narrative medicine has evolved into more than just an encouragement to hear out your patients, but a term that helps facilitate change in views of people’s narratives as a whole for many trying subjects. Bochner (2009) describes Charon’s own book about stories within medicine as a book you cannot read “without sensing the therapeutic benefits” of narrative medicine and how this helps to heal those who feel wounded (Bochner, 2009, p. 163). Stories help to handle the questions that arise around death, and we need to realize the “help we get from stories in the face of death” (Charon, 2009b, p. 200). Death can cause people to be impacted by many emotions and can “disclose its own pathways within us and among us, and those pathways are perennially narrative ones” (Charon, 2009b, p. 200). Even though some may feel that narrative medicine “may be a soft or touchy-feely” form of expression, this is one more way that individuals are “against feeling” and “against what is personal,” and we need to realize how narrative medicine is a valuable way to handle the grieving process and the emotions that come with it (Bochner, 2009, p. 163). Zaner (2009) felt “telling a story is the best way” people can “make sense of loss, grief, illness, [or] crippling injury” (Zaner, 2009, p. 174). Stories can be a wonderful way to help people to learn to care more for others and their narratives (Zaner, 2009). Zaner (2009) found that

even he needed assistance when faced with grief-centered circumstances and that by him sharing his story, maybe individuals will be more aware of other's stories and theirs (Zaner, 2009). Narrative medicine is a fascinating and valuable way to express stories, but "the highest virtue of narrative medicine is its capacity to give voice to gaping silence that surrounds the experience of death and dying in America" (Bochner, 2009, p. 165).

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Two has provided a brief literature review, including operational definitions I used for my study, as well as an overview of narrative medicine, which serves as my theoretical lens. The terms defined further for this study are grief and bereavement, and further in the chapter I breakdown the communication process and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. The five stages include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Articles and past studies about adolescent grief and communication and grief are used next to help explain the study. The chapter is closed with a look into narrative medicine as my use of theory for my study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **PRODUCTION CONCEPT**

Upon hearing of the performance thesis option, I immediately knew this would be the choice for me. I come from a performative background and am a speech and debate coach. My love for expression and personal flair can be seen through my entire production. I wanted to give my audience something to remember beyond a PowerPoint and research. I wanted to let people walk away with narratives and to get a full experience of emotions that come from loss, grief, and recovery. My performance was an excellent place to use my creativity to share my narrative about my mother's passing and the chance to share the narratives of the loss others have experienced. This chapter provides insight to my production choices and reasoning for my decisions for the performance.

#### **Setting**

The setting for my performance was the Hazel Kelly Wilson VIP Room in the Jack B. Kelly Student Center on the campus of West Texas A&M University. This space was chosen because of its cozy and home-like feeling. The room has couches, comfy chairs, a fireplace, and several home décor style items. Using this setting took the audience from a room on a college campus to a comfy living room to talking about

personal things like a family. This helped to set the tone for the performance and helped the audience to get

more comfortable with me and the other audience members just by allowing us all to relax and to avoid feeling of a sterile environment. The room has a long dining table on one half and the fireplace with the chairs on the other. The table was used for the reception area and had the food and drinks set up on it.

Then on the side with the fireplace, all the chairs were turned to face the fireplace and the



*Figure 1 Sunshine Cupcakes*



*Figure 2 Sunshine/Sorrow Cake*

wall it was on. The mantle and surrounding tables and ledges served as platforms for the props or for photos of the loved ones discussed.



*Figure 3 Fireplace Mantle*



*Figure 4 Side Mantle*

There was a chair placed at the front to allow me to sit for one of my narratives. As audience and committee members filed into the room, they were greeted by one of my friends and student, Belle Elliott; she asked all in attendance to sign in on a guest sheet and passed out programs.



*Figure 5 Side Chair with Pillow*

While individuals were coming in and finding seats, a list of strategically selected songs (Appendix A) were playing to help set the tone of the performance and to prepare people for the subject to come.



*Figure 6 Umbrella Next to Fireplace Screen*

### **Narrative Selection**

These narratives I performed were true and were taken from my personal experience, published books, articles, and online sources. Therefore, the selection criteria I set for narratives to be used in my performance were: actual experiences, not fictional ones; the storyteller is clearly identified; and inclusive of experiences that deal with coming to terms with grief and loss. I performed my personal grief narrative as part of the performance.

The performance followed Elizabeth Ellis' sequence for storytelling programs. This sequence has four main areas of story types and when they should be told in a performance. The four steps are: Ha-ha!; Aha!; Ahhh.; and Amen. (Stallings, 1997). These four steps show the teller to start with a humorous story to pull the audience together and get people ready to listen, then move on to a story that has twists and turns and keeps the audience thinking, then for the third section, to move on to a story that is deep and quiet, this story should be much more serious and have a reflection element for

the audience, then move to the last of the four types of stories by telling a story that gives the audience hope or will let them walk away with a positive outlook on even dark situations (Stallings, 1997). These stories were shaped and woven into a 30-minute performance to explore communication and grieving.



Figure 7 *You Are My Sunshine* Wooden Block

### **Blocking and Props**

Given my background in the performance arts, I used blocking and props to help portray my narratives effectively. I had photos of the deceased or their loved ones surrounding the performance area, I placed a *you are my sunshine* wood block on one of the side ledges, elephants were on the mantle, the pillow used in my story was on a chair in the front left side of the stage, an umbrella was leaning against the fireplace, and four black books were placed around the performance area. I used black books for each narrative that was not my own to provide clear distinction between my personal narrative and that of those other than mine. Such as, Figure 8 has images of Julie Yip-Williams and her daughters.



*Figure 8 Black Book on Mantle*

### **Use of Metaphor**

Throughout the performance the use of several metaphors became apparent. The main metaphors used included sunshine and sorrow, elephants, and flowers. Sunshine and sorrow were used for a few reasons. The first being the importance of the song “You are my Sunshine” to me and my family. This song was one that my mother used to sing to my siblings and me, and I later sang this song to my mother as she was in the hospital. We later played the song at her funeral, and each time I hear it, I cannot help but to think of her and our time together. The idea of sunshine from this song can be seen in many elements of my thesis from the poster, program, cake, narratives, props, and to many small choices throughout the production. However, beyond the constant “You are my Sunshine,” so much more meaning has been placed on the sunshine element. There is a

reoccurring theme of dark and light throughout my performance. This theme relates to the darkness of loss and grief, and the light or sunshine represents the recovery process, the focus on the good memories, and the hope to come. Elephants have also been a part of the on-going metaphors within my performance. The poem I read by Tom Kettering provides words to describe why our grief can seem like an elephant in the room. Flowers were also used as a metaphor in a variety of ways. There were flowers placed around the room, on the cake, poster, program, sign-in sheet, and even my skirt.

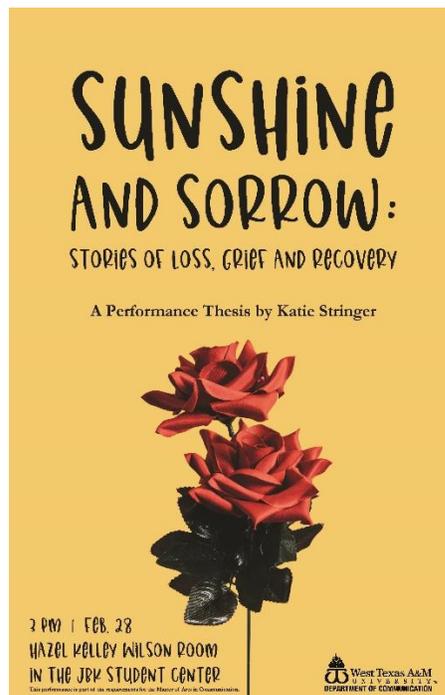


*Figure 9 Katie's Flowered Skirt*

Flowers are associated with funerals and can be seen as beauty and life. My use of the flowers stemmed from not just the idea of flowers for graves but from the imagery of the life cycle of flowers. Flowers can be stunning living things that one day will die, yet we can still find beauty and use for them after they are dead; they just take on a different type of beauty and memory.

## Advertisement

A poster and program were made for the performance. The program was used and passed out the day of the performance. The program included the following: the poster, a picture my myself (Katie Stringer), a small bio about me, a list of the narratives used in my performance, and an acknowledgement section. A copy of the program can be found in Appendix C. The poster for my performance was designed by an outside company based off the information and ideas presented to them of the performance. The poster adhered to the theme of sunshine, light and dark, and flowers.



*Figure 10 Poster*

## Publicity

To publicize my performance and invite the general public to attend, Deborah Howard, the communication department's public relations assistant wrote a press release

about my performance, which was sent to the *Amarillo Globe News*, *the Canyon News*, as well as being posted on the WTAMU website. Additionally, images of the poster were included on departmental Facebook pages and on the Graduate School Facebook page. A copy of the press release can be found in Appendix B.

### **Reception**

A reception followed my performance for all in attendance. The reception was set up on a long table within the Hazel Kelly Wilson VIP Room. During the reception, guests and committee members were encouraged to partake in the light food and beverages provided while I made my way around to thank everyone for coming. During this time, a playlist was playing with my production songs from before the performance. The table had a maroon table cloth borrowed from the communication department and held a variety of items. Yellow plates, napkins, and cutlery were provided to carry on the theme of yellow and sunshine throughout the reception. The food and drinks consisted of the following: veggie platter, meat and cheese platter, spinach dip with various crackers, yellow smiley face cookies, lemon cakes, a sheet cake with sunshine and sorrow, water, unsweet tea, and a few cans of various sodas. These options were chosen to provide things for an assortment of dietary needs and to keep up the theme of yellow sunshine.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Three covers the details and ideas behind the production concept for my performance. This chapter has explained the setting, narrative selection, blocking and props, use of metaphor, advertisement, and reception. Each section was carefully crafted to come together for my production in hopes to enhance the audience's experience and to help encourage the future use of narratives in the healing process.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PERFORMANCE**

The performance, *Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief, and Recovery*, took place in the Hazel Kelly Wilson VIP Room of the Jack B. Kelly Student Center on the campus of West Texas A&M University on February 28, 2019 at 3:00 in the afternoon. The performance was half an hour with a 10-minute question and answer session after the performance and a reception to follow the question and answer session. The audience present consisted of committee members, members of the Forensics Team, fellow graduate students, friends, and individuals from other departments on campus that I had not met before. A videographer recorded the performance to provide a DVD that allowed me to complete my self-evaluation, for those who could not be present, and for future use for those who read this thesis. A DVD of the performance is provided in a pocket found on the inside back cover of this thesis.

The script was compiled by weaving my personal narrative with the narratives of four other individuals. The narratives chosen were placed together to provide variety for the performance and to add diversity in the views around loss, grief, and recovery. While the script was planned, it was open for change and became a fluid document to allow the storyteller to react to the audience and to prevent the performance from losing the personal connection as many do with material that has been practiced continually.

## **Performance Script: Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief, and Recovery**

**[Katie starts stage center, in front of fireplace in a standing position.]**

Sunshine and Sorrow, Stories of Loss, Grief, and Recovery is a performance based on my own experiences, as well as those of others.

**[ Katie stays front center and gives slight pause to show the movement into a story.]**

When I was a little girl, we would often share fun ice breakers to learn something about everyone. My “fun” ice breaker always went, Hi, my name is Katie and I’ve had a lot of people close to me die. As you can imagine I got a lot of weird looks and whispers. To think about it that really explains why I didn’t have very many friends. But never the less, I had no idea that this wasn’t a common occurrence or that other kids didn’t experience death that often. I quickly learned death was something we didn’t talk about and to just stay quiet.

(Personal Narrative of Katie Stringer, 2019)

**[Move to table on stage left with the lamp and pick up the “to my brother” black book on the table, stay close to that end, open book, read the letter]**

Transition: My performance includes published narratives I have gathered from those who have experienced grief and loss, as well as my own story about grief. To begin, consider this poem by Anne Harskamp:

To my Brother:

Words are hard to describe feelings,  
I have always been better with images.  
Yet writing down how much I miss you,  
Seems to give me more tranquility.

Writing to let go, to give this all a place.  
It will never heal, it will never go away,  
But just learning to give it time and space.

I can tell you how much I care, how much I would give to have you back in my life,  
But you know all of this and it won't change anything, that's what I am learning within  
time,

Writing to tell you how much I have learned, to show you that through fragility I become  
a stronger person

More able to understand, more able to listen and to care,

Hurt through loss, I've become yet a wiser person

(Harskamp, A. (2008, March). To My Brother. Retrieved from  
<https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/letter-to-dead-brother>)

**[close book and place back on the table standing up. Then move to stage right and pick up black book on the ledge for the “dear dad” letter. Step one step forward and open the book and read the letter.]**

Transition: While Anne Harskamp mourned her brother, Kailah Price mourns her father in a letter she wrote on Father’s Day.

Dear Dad,

It's Father's Day again. I can't remember how many times I used to forget about it when I was younger, rushing to make you a gift last minute. But since you've been gone this day mocks me with its reminders; I can't look away.

But instead of trying to shut it out, the pain of not having you here on days like this, I want to tell you what I feel and how your parenting still resonates with me to this day.

I feel tired and sad and angry. I'm sad that you're not here; I miss you. I get angry watching other children celebrate with their Dads, and more so with those who complain about having to spend the weekend with their Dads because I would give everything to have you here. I wish I had appreciated moments like these more when you were here, but I know that's not how life works. Mostly though, I feel tired. These emotions exhaust me. I feel like I'm drowning, and these feelings are cement blocks slung around my neck and feet. It's awful. I miss you.

Don't worry though Dad, I'm okay. I'm used to this now and I know how to fight back. You taught me how. I'm sure you never would've imagined me using your advice to

help me cope with your death, but I do. You taught me to be strong and to keep my head up, no matter what, because I may have it bad right now, but so does everyone else.

Everyone is going through something, and it is no excuse to not keep living. You taught me that while mourning and expressing my emotions is necessary, I shouldn't let them control me or let them affect others around me. You didn't know it then, but just by being the amazing person that you were with strength and fortitude in the face of tragedy, you taught me these things.

So, I'm keeping my head up and my smile on, for you. You gave me so much Dad, and I wish I had been granted the opportunity to give it all back to you. I wish I could show you that you did the best job as a parent. You did everything.

I wish you were still here because I still need you. I need you to help me through life because it's scary and difficult and confusing. But mostly, I need you here to talk to. I need you here to love me. I need you and I miss you and I love you, Dad.

(Price, K. (2017, September 04). An open letter to my dead dad on father's day. Retrieved from <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/an-open-letter-to-my-dead-dad-on-fathers-day>)

**[Close book and place it back on the ledge. Then move a crossed to stage left. There is a chair with a pillow on the seat. Grab the pillow and sit on chair. Hold the pillow in lap.]**

Transition: My own grief for my mother has those same “wish you were here” thoughts of Kailah Price.

She passed two weeks before my sophomore year of high school started. I remember being in my fashion design class two weeks into school, it was the one month of her passing. I sat at my sewing machine makes this pillow **[hold up pillow]** which conveniently I was able to put a photo of her on. When suddenly, a song came on. **[music off stage plays song angel in the morning]** I lost it, this song just made me think of my mom, I know a song about a love affair shouldn't make me think of my mother, but I just remembered a time when we sang it together. But here I am in class crying and snot nosed, and no one even has the faintest idea my mother had just died. **[Place pillow on left side leaning against the chair on the floor.]** When someone you love dies everyone is there for the first month or two, they say all the right words like "I'm sorry for your loss", "let me know if there is anything I can do", or "I'm here for you" But are you? Are you really? Once my mom passed everyone seemed to shut down, I was never afraid to talk about it, everyone else was. Each time I turned to someone I was silenced. I was told to get over it, or that I needed to be strong. I was strong! My mother just died, and I was willing to face the world and talk to people and no one seemed to want to listen. No one understood me or my emotions. The older I am getting I realize that they may never. My mom will not be there for the big events in my life, She wasn't there to go prom dress shopping with me, to watch me graduate from high school, to help me move into college, to watch be graduate from college, she won't be a my wedding, or when I become a mother, and she isn't here today as I work on finishing a degree she didn't even know I wanted. But how do you say that? How do you ruin people's big days with your own grief? You don't? instead I sit in silence wishing there was a way to bring her back or for her to be here. I wear her perfume to all the big days **[lift arm]** to remind me of her.

People don't ever get it, no matter how many "adopted stand in moms" are there or how many times people say, "she's here in spirit", it will NEVER be the same. I can never tell you how bad it feels or what I would do just to have her here for one big life event. So instead of telling you, I stay silent.

(Personal Narrative of Katie Stringer, 2019)

**[ Stand up and move to right center stage. Grab the elephant in the room black book from the mantle. Turn back around, open book, and read the poem.]**

Transition: My silence is very much the elephant in the room, echoing the poem by Terry Kettering.

There's an elephant in the room.

It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it

. Yet we squeeze by with, "How are you?" and "I'm fine,"

and a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.

We talk about the weather.

We talk about work

. We talk about everything else, except the elephant in the room.

There's an elephant in the room.

We all know it's there

. We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together

. It is constantly on our minds.

For, you see, it is a very large elephant.

It has hurt us all.

But we don't talk about the elephant in the room.

Oh, please say his (her) name.

Oh, please say his (her) name again.

Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room

. For if we talk about his (her) death,

perhaps we can talk about his (her) life.

Can I say his (her) name to you and not have you look away?

For if I cannot, then you are leaving me

.... alone.... in a room.... with an elephant.

(Rooks, D. (2001). *Spinning gold out of straw: How stories heal*. St. Augustine, FL: Salt Run Press.)

**[Close book and place back on mantle. Move to far stage right and stand almost off stage.]**

Transition: What a relief it is to finally talk about the elephant in the room as I did this past summer with my friend Larissa

This past summer I went on a cruise with my best friend, Larissa. This cruise just happened to

fall during the 9-year anniversary of my mother's death. I made a promise to myself not to ruin our trip with talk of her. I didn't want my sadness to hinder my friends' portion of the trip. Our day went on and we found ourselves up on the deck during the afternoon. We walked to the very front part of the deck and looked out onto the deep blue ocean. [**Look off and give a slight lean like you are looking at the ocean and the waves off the side of the ship.**] It was sunny and beautiful. After a few moments the sky darkened out of nowhere and it began to rain. It was so windy that with each drop to touch your skin there was a sting and burn. [**Look down at arm and put grimace on face.**] The stringing rain pushed us back inside the ship and we made our way down to the lower decks. It was such an odd occurrence, but I didn't think much of it. We found ourselves at the casino. Larissa had never gambled before and wanted to learn. I explained the basics and we searched for a slot machine to start her on. I found the three kings, it is a game based on lions that was my mother's favorite and has turned into a family favorite. I sat down and showed Larissa the basics and placed my bet... Next thing I knew I won, the very first pull and I won a jackpot, it was small only \$11, but I won. I looked at the clock and saw it was 2 o'clock. [**Give facials of realization.**] We had been inside for about 10 minutes, putting us outside at 1:50. 1:50 was when the sky became dark and it started raining. 1:50 is when the drop stung my skin so bad, I couldn't bare it. 1:50 nine years ago was when it stopped raining. When the sun came back, and when the stinging pain would forever be a part of my story. Not only had it started to rain at the exact moment my mother had passed nine years ago but I walked in and instantly won on her favorite machine. I kept this information to myself, in order not to ruin the trip, until we went to dinner that night... I didn't even have to say a word Larissa looked at me and spoke them

for me. She asked what time my mother had passed and put it all together. I didn't have to say anything, I didn't have to explain how I felt, someone knew, someone cared, someone gave me a voice. "Linda was here today" she said. [ **Give hopefully tone and look, let audience see relief and joy.**] In that moment I knew I no longer had to be in fear of talking about it. Here I was hiding my emotion like I always had, not letting anyone see the real pain and here she was telling me it was okay... there was always sunshine in the sorrow.

(Personal Narrative of Katie Stringer, 2019)

**[Move to left stage center and pick up black book from the mantle. Open book and read the letter. Hold book more center of body and give a slight motherly voice.]**

Transition: While I knew the death of my mother was coming, I was nowhere near as prepared to face life without her as Julie Yip-Williams Daughters.

Julie was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer at 37 later passing last March at the age of 42. Leaving behind her two daughters to face the world without her. However, in that time during Julie's decline she prepares instructions for her daughters for some of the advice they will need in the future:

Dear Mia and Isabelle,

I have solved all the logistical problems resulting from my death that I can think of—I am hiring a very reasonably priced cook for you and Daddy; I have left a list of instructions about who your dentist is and when your school tuition needs to be paid and when to renew the violin rental contract and the identity of the piano tuner. In the coming days, I will make videos about all the ins and outs of the apartment, so that everyone knows where the air filters are and what kind of dog food Chipper eats. But I realized that these things are the low-hanging fruit, the easy-to-solve but relatively unimportant problems of the oh so mundane.

I realized that I would have failed you greatly as your mother if I did not try to ease your pain from my loss, if I didn't at least attempt to address what will likely be the greatest question of your young lives.

You will forever be the kids whose mother died of cancer . . . That fact of your mother dying will weave into the fabric of your lives like a glaring stain on an otherwise pristine tableau.

You would be foolish to expect fairness, at least when it comes to matters of life and death, matters outside the scope of the law, matters that cannot be engineered or manipulated by human effort, matters that are distinctly the domain of God or luck or fate or some other unknowable, incomprehensible force.

My sweet babies, I do not have the answer to the question of why, at least not now and not in this life. But I do know that there is incredible value in pain and suffering, if you

allow yourself to experience it, to cry, to feel sorrow and grief, to hurt. Walk through the fire and you will emerge on the other end, whole and stronger.

Sometimes, when you practice your instruments, I close my eyes so I can hear better. And when I do, I am often overcome with this absolute knowing that whenever you play the violin or piano, when you play it with passion and commitment, the music with its special power will beckon me and I will be there. I will be sitting right there, pushing you to do it again and again and again. . . And then I will hug you and tell you how you did a great job and how very proud I am of you. I promise.

Live a life worth living. Live thoroughly and completely, thoughtfully, gratefully, courageously, and wisely. Live!

I love you both forever and ever, to infinity, through space and time. Never ever forget that.

(Yip-Williams, J. (2019). *The unwinding of the miracle: A memoir of life, death, and everything that comes after*. New York: Random House.)

**[ Close book and place back on the mantle.]**

Transition: I would like to think my mother would have wanted the same for me.

**[Move to left center, sing “you are my sunshine” while walking. Grab the umbrella leaning against the fire place and twirl it a bit while finishing the song.]**

My mom used to sing you are my sunshine to us, I know this isn't some special unique song, but it was special to my family. When she wasn't feeling well or was in the hospital, I would sing to her [ **Sing a verse with a bit of emotion like in the hospital.**]

When I was 15 years old my mother, Linda Marie Stringer passed away. That day will forever be burned into my mind. July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009. It was a Friday, and it was rainy day. My father went to the hospital that morning knowing this was her last day. My mother had been sick for a long time and that day would mark three weeks of her in the hospital. I made the choice to stay home and let someone else get to be in the room for her passing. I spent all day pacing my street. I just walked back and forth all day, didn't stop for breaks, just walked. It kept raining, I seemed to give up on the rain, at times I couldn't even muster up the strength to hold up my umbrella. [ **Walk with umbrella back and forth slowly with each step of purpose. Recreate the actions**] I just let it drag behind me as the rain ran down my skin. Letting the drops hit me seemed like some sort of cleansing, like maybe if I let the water fall everything would disappear. [ **Walk stage right and then left dragging umbrella.**] It didn't... but it helped to hide the tears. People who knew what was happening tried to get me to go to the hospital, or to go inside. But I couldn't, I couldn't leave the safety of the rain, each drop was another drop of pain, another drop of a real thing. My mother was to be pulled from her ventilator at 2:00. I stood in my neighbor's driveway awaiting to be ushered to another house because no one wanted me alone. And then it stopped raining. [ **walk to left center stage and drop the umbrella, placing it almost behind you and to the side, out of the way, still open.**] And I knew... I knew that it was time. [ **Look up with hopefully look at sky.**] I looked at the clock and it said 1:50. I was taken down the street as I waited for my father.

Once he came, we went home and not much was said. I asked him to tell me, still somehow holding on to the hope that maybe she was still here, maybe something happened, and I would still have my mom. That wasn't the case. He told me that she passed ten minutes before the doctors came in to unhook her... she passed at 1:50... she passed when the rain had stopped, and the sun came back out.

(Personal Narrative of Katie Stringer, 2019)

**[Move center stage and forward.]**

Transition: As long as we share the stories of those we love—Sunshine and Sorrow-- they will always be with us as emphasized by Robert Fulghum's Storyteller's Creed:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.

That myth is more potent than history.

That dreams are more powerful than facts.

That hope always triumphs over experience

That laughter is the only cure for grief

And I believe that love is stronger than death.

(Collins, R. & Cooper, P. J. (2005). *The power of story: Teaching through storytelling* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 107.)

**[Turn around in silence and grab the photo of mother in the center on the mantle.  
Turn to the front and stare at photo signing to the picture. Then hold picture close  
to chest and finish song.]**

**END SCENE**

### **Summary**

This chapter includes a copy of the script used for the performance. This script consists of my narrative and the narratives of four other individuals. The script provides blocking, vocal direction, and the narratives with sources listed.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **EVALUATION**

The performance, *Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief, and Recovery*, took place in The Hazel Kelly Wilson VIP Room of the Jack B. Kelly Student Center on the campus of West Texas A&M University on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019 at 3:00 in the afternoon. The performance lasted 30 minutes and was followed by a brief question and answer session for about 10 minutes. The question session allowed committee members and attendees to get further insight into choices made for the performance and the research for the thesis. There were 20 people in attendance including the four committee members and the videographer. Following the performance and question and answer session, all in attendance were encouraged to join the committee and me for a light reception.

#### **Self-Evaluation and Reflection**

I approached my performance with both excitement and some apprehension. As I have come to terms with my own grief at losing my mother, I also wanted those present to have a sense of the person she was and to go with me back in time to vivid memories I have of my mother and what she meant to me. As time passes, I realize the need to relive the memories we have with our loved ones. I think the Hazel Kelly Wilson room was an excellent choice as a performance venue. The fireplace and cozy chairs helped those who attended feel as if they were in a home. The intimate setting also allowed me to connect

with my audience in an effective manner and to help them let their guards down on this taboo topic.

I thought the program arrangement followed closely Elizabeth Ellis's performance suggestions. Because I am a speech and debate coach, my self-evaluation focused on delivery as well as content. I felt the flow of my performance was good and the blocking I had planned aided the audience in understanding each grief narrative I shared. The metaphor of the sunshine and rain also worked well and served to emphasize what I have learned about grief—that the road to recovery has both happy and sad moments, sometimes concurrently. Probably my biggest challenge came with the final narrative when emotionally I was a bit drained, remembering the day my mother died. While I did not cry—which was something I wanted to avoid—the emotion that came with those memories was almost overpowering.

If I were to go back and to do my performance over or to change something about it, I would have focused specifically on one type of loss. My performance covers a variety of relationship losses (father, brother, mother) and while I do not believe it took away from my performance, it could have been nice to narrow it down to only one type of loss experienced. For example, I would have cut out the elements of sibling loss or would have only focused on sibling loss.

My performance was not just helpful to me, but my goal was to help others in their own grieving process. Doing this performance helped me to come to terms with some emotions I had never addressed about my mother's passing, but it also gave me a chance to really open up and gave me a platform to share why it is so important to share our narratives about loss, grief, and recovery. During the time I worked on my thesis, I

had experienced several deaths of friends and family, I had attended two funerals, and had experienced endless nights of dreams surrounding my mother's death again and again. However, I feel that these things all served as reminders for why sharing my story is so vastly significant. Working on my thesis has given me a chance to process my own story and to further my healing process, a process for which I did not realize could still use so much work. I had many feelings throughout this year about grief and death, but my main wish for my entire thesis and performance was to help just one person to process through his/her loss and grief in a positive manner. About a month after my performance, a very dear friend and coworker, who was in attendance at my performance, lost her father. During the service she talked about how she had attended my performance and how not knowing she would soon lose her own father, she remembered the words I had said and my message of hope. She proceeded to then tell us a beautiful story of memories she had with her father. Even if no one ever reads this thesis, someone was given hope and was encouraged to share their narrative. I could ask for nothing more and I would call my thesis a success.

The thesis performance was evaluated by my four committee members. All members were present for the performance and the following are the written critiques provided by each committee member about my performance.

#### Evaluation of Katie Stringer's Performance

by

Dr. Trudy L. Hanson

From the moment that audience members entered the Hazel B. Kelley Room of the Student Center, they knew that a special performance awaited them. Katie had

arranged her performance to take place before the fireplace. On the fireplace mantle, she had placed items (3 elephants) and photographs of the people whose stories she would share. In the chair next to the fireplace was a handmade pillow that was key to her performance. Leaning against the side of the fireplace was an umbrella. On the right side of the fireplace there was a colorful wooden sign (*You Are My Sunshine*). As the audience entered, background music was playing that created a proper mood for the performance, especially the version of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* by Israel IZ Kamakawiwo'ole.

Katie chose to perform four of her personal narratives about her mother's death, interspersed with a poem, "To My Brother" by Anne Harskamp, a letter, "Dear Dad" by Kailah Price, a poem, "The Elephant in the Room" by Terry Kettring, and a letter from the memoir by Julie Yip-Williams (*the Unwinding of the Miracle, A Memoir of Life, Death, and Everything That Comes After*). She arranged these narratives according to the advice from storyteller Elizabeth Ellis, moving from a funny story (Ha Ha), to a surprise ending (Ah Ha), to a quiet, deep story (Ahh) to a story that confirms our best hopes for humanity (Amen). Her final narrative which she entitled "The Day It Stopped Raining" was particularly powerful as she sang in a clear and beautiful tone the song, *You Are My Sunshine*.

Katie's physical and vocal delivery was animated and confident. At the beginning of the performance, her pitch was a bit too shrill as she said the line: "Hi, my name is Katie and I've had a lot of people close to me die." However, as the performance continued, she gained greater control of her pitch and volume and appropriately expressed the content of the narratives. Her use of gestures during the narrative, "Cruises

and Casinos” was particularly descriptive and moved the story along. I think her vocal variety was best in the narrative “Pillows and Playlists” as she recounted the day two weeks after her sophomore high school year began and she heard the song *Angel in the Morning*. At this point, that song was softly played in the background and helped all of us imagine how a 15-year-old girl was grieving for her mother. The flow of Katie’s performance was seamless.

To designate the narratives that she had chosen from published works, she placed them in black binders next to an object or a photo that called to mind the author of the narrative. As she has been carefully taught, she handled each of the black binders with care in the opening and closing of each narrative as she replaced them either on the mantle or the small shelf near the fireplace. Her use of props was excellent. All of them, from the elephants to the umbrella accentuated the narrative she was performing. Particularly strong was her use of the umbrella, opening it, dragging it along behind her, and then dropping it to the floor. Her blocking reinforced each narrative whether she was standing or sitting. Her conversational tone in her personal narratives was most effective. Her performance of Yip-Williams’ narrative was very powerful. In each transition, Katie was careful to connect the preceding narrative with the one that followed, always clearly identifying the author. Her strong connection with the audience was in evidence as the performance ended and they applauded with appreciation.

Her opening frame, though brief, situated the performance within the context of her life and how it connected with the theme of her thesis, *Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief and Recovery*. Her closing frame included Robert Fulgham’s *The Storyteller’s Creed*. For the closing, she recited this brief creed from memory. Although

there was a slight memory lapse in reciting the Creed, only a couple of audience members noticed (and that's because both of us had also memorized the Creed!).

Katie's performance while not actually mentioning Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, echoed them in a powerful way from denial to anger to bargaining to depression to acceptance. As Katie sang *You Are My Sunshine* to conclude the performance, the audience knew that while she still experiences sorrow when thinking about the loss of her mother, she has also accepted this loss and now looks forward to a sun-filled future.

Rita Charon (2009), one of the leading authorities on narrative medicine has written: "We unite in our quest for meaning—in the telling and in the receiving of accounts of self. . . . We are all seeking to understand what is at stake in these charged and fraught human events that occur when one gives an account of self and another receives that account" (p. 130). Katie Stringer skillfully shared her "account of self" and in so doing helped us understand our own sorrows.

#### Evaluation of Performance Katie Stringer – Performance Thesis

By

Dr. Noah Franken

Katie Stringer, in her performance of *Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief, and Recovery*, presented a series of narratives, including her own, on both the bright and dark sides of coping with the death of a loved one. The performance took place on February 28, 2019, in the Hazel Kelley Wilson Room at West Texas A&M University, a location expertly picked out for its intimate and homelike feel. The result was a performance of warmth and depth, bore out by Katie's sincere delivery and heartfelt presence. She turned the room into a stage – a living room, as a matter of fact –

framed with photographs, furniture, and a curious little umbrella leaned up against the blackness of an unlit fireplace.

Katie moved about the stage, offering different voices and perspectives on her subject, whether it was picking up and reading from a letter in “To My Brother,” one of her borrowed narratives from Anne Harskamp, or picking up and clutching the pillow she made in her high school fashion design class in the immediate aftermath of her own mother’s passing.

The structure of Katie’s performance followed Ellis’s format of Ha Ha, Ah Ha, Ahhh, and Amen, giving it an emotional arc. There were moments of laughter, insight, longing, and acceptance, and for the most part Katie struck these chords, but perhaps she could have offered more commentary between each vignette. The autoethnographic aspect of the performance – or, more precisely, the presentation of the study of a personal experience – could have been highlighted more. To example, at the beginning of the performance Katie said that it would “includes published narratives gathered” – much of them poems – but said little more about how she came across those particular narratives and how they fit into the larger discourse of grief. The selected narratives had the feel at times of being strung together, lacking a strong connection to an already existing and robust literature on grief and loss. Working that connection into the introduction and transitions, I think, would have added an academic backbone to the performance without sacrificing its emotional impact.

Overall, however, Katie’s performance was a success. She gave the audience a stirring and unique take on a familiar topic; each person in attendance, no doubt, identified closely with what was being said, and was comforted by the shared experience.

## Evaluation of Katie Stringer's Performance

By

Dr. Emily Kinsky

Katie's movement, stance, gestures and eye contact were completely natural in appearance. She had her blocking well planned so that there was enough space between items to make it clear she was moving onto a different topic/experience, yet close enough to show the connection between them. She used black speech presentation folders to indicate others' words, which was an excellent way to cue the audience to the difference in a subtle way. The photos were in the perfect place on the mantle as if this were her home. Katie's expression was powerful and effective. She used pauses to great effect, such as when she told the story of sharing a "fun fact" in a circle at school.

Katie's rate of speech was excellent. It was easy to follow, and it kept the presentation interesting. Nothing dragged, and nothing was presented too quickly to understand. Her pitch and volume were also appropriate to the topic and the room. Katie varied her speech well, especially when sharing her anger. She did not use any filler words. The flow of the performance was smooth. The only transition that needed additional work was when she shifted from people not knowing about her mother's death when she started crying at the sewing machine to talking about how people say all the right things during the first month after someone passes. I think she was shifting to a new set of people rather than her peers in that classroom, but that change could have been made clearer with the addition of a phrase.

Katie chose an appropriate thesis topic and clearly identified the various authors she quoted (again, the use of the black speech notebooks was an ingenious way to help

make that separation from her own memories). Sharing her perspective on grief was powerful, and it contributed greatly to the performance. She varied the stories well and put them in the perfect order to lead the audience through the narrative—through the experiences. Katie followed Ellis’ performance order well.

I continue to use the word “powerful” because it is so fitting for Katie’s entire performance, from the narratives she chose to include to her word choices and gestures and vocal presentation. Her transitions moved the audience to better understand Katie’s experience and that of others as they walked through the grief of losing a loved one

#### Evaluation of Katie Stringer’s Performance

#### Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief and Recovery

By

Connie McKee

It was a privilege to work with Katie in her journey to present a lovely performance. In the program she shared some deeply personal and beautiful moments for a very difficult period in her life. She was able to give of herself in a way that the audience left knowing that even through the darkest hours we can survive and see the light.

Katie spent a great deal of time planning what she would write. There were some late-night van rides discussing what would be good stories to tell that would get the message across. After she was finished with her writing, we began to discuss how the performance would play out. When we were able to use the room, we did a rehearsal to figure out the blocking so that the movement became transitions which helped the audience move smoothly through the performance. We knew that each position and object needed to portray a special moment.

Katie used her setting to help with the mood. When the audience came into the room, they were greeted with special songs that Katie had picked out to help create the ambiance she wanted. The setting had some representative items that became very apparent in the performance as to the meaning of each of the objects. The literature that was woven into the ethnographic pieces were placed excellently in the program and gave an additional depth to the message.

She did an excellent conversational performance. I felt like she was telling me a story and took me on the journey with her. She was very confident and polished. Even when the message was very close to her, she held her composure, gave us just a hint of the importance and let us feel the pain with her without having it just thrown into our faces. It made it a very enjoyable experience. Because of her conversational style she allowed the audience to feel what she was feeling. Her pacing seemed very relaxed and not rushed which enabled the audience to have the moments. I think that the order of the stories enabled us to each experience the different levels that can be felt in grief.

I particularly identified with the song at the conclusion, "*You Are My Sunshine*" because that is a song that my father always sang to me. I was surprised how much this performance allowed me to reflect on my own losses. Thank you, Katie, for allowing me to break down the walls that I have carefully crafted for myself, if only for a moment.



*Figure 11 Stringer and Committee Members at Performance*

Pictured left to right: Dr. Emily Kinsky, Dr. Trudy Hanson, Katie Stringer, Dr. Noah Franken, and Connie McKee.

### **Limitations**

As is the case with any performance thesis, the choices I made in selecting narratives privileged some narratives over others. One main limitation for this study was that I chose to use published narratives from known authors, which limited my amount of narratives I had to select from. As suggested by Dr. Franken, I could have woven more of the academic literature into my performance, perhaps mentioning the stages of grief and also noting that loss, depending on the relationship with the person who has died differs based on the familial connection. Another limitation I faced was that I did not get

to have any discussions with those who have experienced loss. While the authors of the selected narrative were clear, they did not give me the opportunity to gather my own information or ask these individuals questions about their experiences. Perhaps in the future I can conduct interviews or surveys to further my research within this area. As I arranged my performance, I first approached my own narratives in chronological order. However, after discussing the script with Dr. Hanson, I made the decision to move the account of the day my mother died to the end of the script. It is interesting to realize that remembering the day I suffered my greatest loss served to heal my grieving heart. For me, this research project has helped me to move from the grief stage of depression to acceptance.

### **Epilogue**

Following my performance in February, many things have changed, and a variety of emotions have been addressed within my own life. Professor McKee asked during my final meeting about, “When did it become normal? How did you manage to start coping? When did you get closure?” One problem with her asking these questions; I did not have an answer. I could not pin point a time when I found closure or had some sort of shift in my whole view of my mother’s death. I realize now, that is what this is for me. That is exactly what this thesis has given me. I never have faced my emotions surrounding her passing; I have only pushed my emotions down and pretended like I have always been fine. Telling my story, my real story, in front of a group of people was a monumental step for me. I have told hundreds of people my mother was dead before, but I always did so in a ‘no biggie’ type of way. I would laugh it off and just counteract all the “your mom” jokes people loved to tell. However, until my performance no one knew I walked down

the road in the rain wishing I could be washed away; no one knew I searched and searched for my father to tell me that maybe she was still here, and no one knew of the countless days I remained silent about my real feelings. During this same meeting Dr. Kinsky showed me the song *Crying in the Rain* by A-Ha. Not only is this song a perfect parallel to my story of walking in the rain the day my mother passed, but this song relates to so much more for me now. I can now get a sense of hope and closure, I never imagined possible.

During April, I was given the opportunity to go to California with my Forensics Team for Nationals. The school where we competed was only about half an hour from the cemetery where my mother and sister are buried. Things aligned perfectly, not only have I spent the last year reading and writing about death every day, but my year ended with being right around the corner from my mother. My team made it possible for me to go visit her grave one morning. I cannot express how much this meant to me. This was my first time to ever spend time alone there; the two times I have gone before others were with me and I am not one to open up with emotions with others present. It was a beautiful day, rabbits were running free around her plot, and I got to just take it all in. I stayed there for about 45 minutes and got to cry my ugly tears, sing *You Are my Sunshine*, and just talk about all the emotions of the past year. It was like a perfect cleansing or final closure. I know I will still grieve the loss of my mother throughout my life, but for once I felt like I was able to process some true emotion. The cherry on top? I took this visit to my mother's grave three days before her birthday. Happy Birthday, Mom!

As readers review my thesis, they may find themselves asking if this performance is valid, or if it shows any change or point. I am here to say, it does; it is valid to me, it

has changed me, and that is the entire point of my work. My greatest hope is that readers will join me in sharing their stories. Who knows? They may find a deeper healing as well.

### **Summary**

The research question which served as the focus of this study was:

*Using an oral storytelling approach, how do narratives of grief and grief recovery assist those who are grieving to come to terms with the loss of a loved one?*

Chapter 5 has provided my own self- evaluation of the performance, as well as the evaluations written by my four committee members. Additionally, I have included my own reaction to the process of researching and performing grief narratives and some limitations of my study. My performance sparked healing and conversation surrounding grief, loss, and recovery. I think this performance provided a space, as noted by Professor McKee, which allowed those present to contemplate their own losses and focus more on *sunshine* than *sorrow*.

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APPENDIX A

PLAYLIST OF SONGS FOR PERFORMANCE BACKGROUND MUSIC

## **Playlist of Songs for Performance Background Music**

1. “Angel of the Morning” – Juice Newton
2. “Crying for Me”- Toby Keith
3. “Dancing in the Sky” – Dani and Lizzy
4. “Gone Too Soon”- Daughtry
5. “If Heaven Wasn’t So Far Away” – Justin Moore
6. “One More Day” – Diamond Rio
7. “Sissy’s Song” – Alan Jackson
8. “Someone’s Watching Over Me” – Hilary Duff
9. “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” – Israel Kamakawiwo’ole
10. “Supermarket Flowers” -Ed Sheeran
11. “Who You’d Be Today” – Kenny Chesney
12. “Wind Beneath My Wings” – Bette Midler

APPENDIX B

PRESS RELEASE FOR PERFORMANCE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

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### Grad Student Performs Thesis about Grief, Recovery

CANYON, TX. West Texas A&M Communication graduate student, Katie Stringer, will perform her master's thesis on February 28 in the Hazel Kelley Wilson VIP Room of the Jack B. Kelley Student Center at 3:00 p.m., covering the difficult topic of loss, grief, and recovery. Stringer's performance includes using a combination of her own experiences losing a loved one and pre-published literature describing the grieving process of others. After experiencing the death of her own mother at age 15, Stringer realized how much grief and loss affected her relationships and her ability to communicate with others. Stringer said, "Over the years I have found that most people who have suffered from a great loss tend to not want to speak about it, and that is exactly why I hope to break down those walls and stigma around grief and loss."

Stringer said dealing with tragedy is a part of life and impacts communication, which makes it worthy of research. "Within the field of communication, we tend to avoid some of the sensitive or taboo subjects we feel could bring uncomfortable emotions to individuals," Stringer said. "I feel like my work helps to start those conversations in order to help people realize and process how grief can hinder communication within their relationships."

Stringer will present her thesis in narrative form, detailing her experiences overcoming loss and sharing similar stories of hope and recovery. Stringer said it was difficult

describing her own story because it brought her mother's death to mind every day.

However, she enjoyed the freedom of shaping her thesis as a performance instead of a traditional presentation. With experience performing in speech circuits and now coaching the Forensics team at WT, Stringer looks forward to sharing her personal story with others.

The performance is overseen by Dr. Trudy Hanson, who is directing Stringer's performance thesis, and thesis committee members: Dr. Noah Franken, Dr. Emily Kinsky, and Prof. Connie McKee. The performance is open to the general public. For additional information, contact Dr. Hanson at 806 651 2800 or by email,

[thanson@wtamu.edu](mailto:thanson@wtamu.edu)

APPENDIX C  
PROGRAM FOR PERFORMANCE

## Program Cover

### Acknowledgements

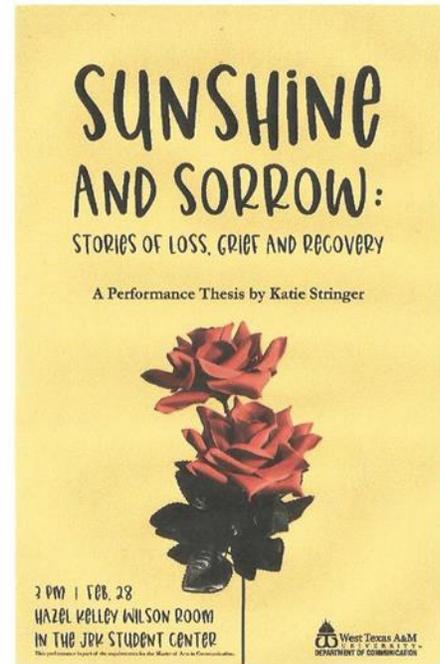
I am truly honored and blessed to have a chance to share my story. I would first and foremost, like to thank God for giving me the strength to get through this time, I would have never been able to do this on my own accord. I would like to give my deepest thanks to Dr. Trudy L. Hanson, chairperson of my committee, for always being willing to make my countless edits, answering all my silly questions, and for always being that guide through this process, helping me each step of the way. I would also like to extend a huge thank you to Dr. Noah Franken and Dr. Emily Kinsky, committee members, for all of the wisdom they have given me, the grace they have extended to me, and for being willing to walk with me through this process. A special thanks to committee member, Professor Connie McKee, words cannot express how much you have done for me, thesis related and beyond. I am greatly appreciative of everything you have done for me over my past two years here at WT. Thank you for watching my performance in that final round and picking me to be your Graduate Assistant three years ago. I wouldn't want anyone else to be present for my most meaningful performance.

A special thanks to the Forensics team for putting up with my thesis related stressors and for being so willing to work with me around my crazy schedule. I love you all deeply and am truly blessed to have you in my life!

Larissa Leweke, thank you for being my constant, my constant hope, strength, and sanity. You are the greatest friend any person could ask for and if we are honest the only reason, I made it through is because of your support. Love you dearly.

Thank you to my family for the phone calls and long-distance support, I love you and I would not change my story for anything, I like who it made me. Thank you and I love you!

To my mother, not a day goes by that I do not miss you or think about the amazing woman you were. While I hate that I am living a life without you, I know that somewhere my story is helping others. I miss you greatly and hope I am making you proud.  
Love, Your Sunshine.





### **Katie Rose Stringer**

Katie has a B.A. in Speech Communication from The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and will be receiving her M.A. in Communication from West Texas A&M University in Spring of 2019. Katie is a Graduate Assistant for the WTAMU Forensics team and has a great passion for the speech community. She has always had a love for performing and the performing arts. Her hope is to carry on that love into her professorial career as a professor and for her own Forensics team. She believes that laughter is a great medicine for grief and that each of us has a unique story and should share it with others, for you never know when your pain could help with another's healing.

#### **Sunshine and Sorrow: Stories of Loss, Grief, and Recovery**

"Ice Breaker"  
Katie Stringer

"To My Brother"  
Anne Harskamp

"Dear Dad"  
Kailah Price

"Pillows and Playlists"  
Katie Stringer

"The Elephant in the Room"  
Terry Kettering

"Cruises and Casinos"  
Katie Stringer

"The Unwinding of the Miracle: A Memoir of Life,  
Death, and Everything That Comes After"  
Julie Yip-Williams

"The Day it Stopped Raining"  
Katie Stringer

"Storyteller's Creed"  
Robert Fulghum