

ABSTRACT

A Conceptualization of Sufjan Stevens's Bereavement Process as Seen in his Album, *Carrie, and Lowell* Through Several Contemporary Mechanisms for Grief and Bereavement

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Sufjan Stevens is a singer-songwriter with a very complicated relationship with his mother, Carrie. She struggled with mental illness and substance dependency and eventually left Sufjan and the rest of her family when he was only one year old. Carrie would eventually reconnect with Sufjan in Eugene, Oregon for several summers throughout his early childhood. During these summers, Sufjan grew closer with his mother and would provide him with the memories he would later reflect upon after her death. When Carrie died in 2012, Sufjan spiraled into depression and experienced a prolonged and deeply painful bereavement process. To grieve his loss, find meaning through his experiences, and organize his thoughts about his mother, Sufjan channeled his grief into his music and produced eleven songs about his bereavement process. This thesis aims to conceptualize the grief Sufjan sings about within this album by analyzing the lyrics through the perspectives of four mechanisms for grief and bereavement. I will use models on grief and bereavement by Hoy (2016), Worden (2018), Gillies and Niemeyer (2006), and Stroebe and Schut (2010) in my analysis.

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CHAPTER ONE

Who is Sufjan Stevens?

Sufjan Stevens is a songwriter, singer, and multi-instrumentalist who has released nine solo albums, thirteen EPs (extended play), two mix tapes, several collaborative albums and has written and covered over three hundred songs. His debut album, *A Sun Came* released in 1999. Sufjan releases all of his music under the Asthmatic Kitty label that he co-founded with his stepfather, Lowell Brams. As a multi-instrumentalist and experimental songwriter, Sufjan has expressed himself in a plethora of different genres. His music ranges from the classical piano music of *The Decalogue* to the electronica of *Enjoy your rabbit* to the intimate and soft indy-rock seen on *Carrie and Lowell*. Sufjan has received both an Academy and a Grammy Award nomination for “Mystery of love”, a song he wrote and performed for the film *Call Me by Your Name*.

Born on July 1, 1975, Sufjan Stevens is one of six siblings and was born to Carrie and Rasjid Stevens in Detroit, Michigan. Carrie and Rasjid bore Marzuki, Djohariah, Djamilah, Sufjan, and two other children quickly after they got married (*Thomas Pletzinger by Sufjan Stevens - @BOMBmagazine*, 2011). Carrie left her family when Sufjan was one and the oldest child was ten years old (Eggers, 2018). Since his mother left, Sufjan spent most of his early life living in Michigan with his father and stepmother, Pat. During a couple of summers in his early childhood, Sufjan would visit his mother, who moved to Oregon shortly after divorcing Rasjid and getting married to Lowell

Brams. His visits to Oregon to see his mother would later inspire many of the songs in his 2015 album, *Carrie and Lowell*.

Carrie was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and she struggled with alcoholism and drug use throughout most of her life. She ended up leaving her family and moving to Oregon when Sufjan was a one-year-old child. The songwriter mentions that “She moved away quite far” in his song titled, “Romulus” (Stevens, 2003). She did not believe that she was capable of raising her children, so she left them to fend for themselves. Carrie soon married Lowell Brams, who encouraged Carrie to reconnect with her children. This reconnection with Carrie provided Sufjan and his siblings with the most stable years of their childhood. They would later spend three summers with Carrie and Lowell in Eugene, Oregon (Stosuy). These three summers hold the only memories Sufjan has of his mother. After these summers together, Carrie’s presence in her children’s lives would be intermittent until she died in 2012 (Dombal, 2015).

Carrie’s rekindled relationship with her children was desultory, and it required great effort from Lowell to keep them from falling out of contact again. The mother would occasionally call or send letters to her children trying to save a relationship that was quickly fading away. Carrie would occasionally see her children at their grandparent’s house for several days on certain holidays.

Sufjan sings about these interactions in his song titled, “Romulus”. He sings, “Once when our mother called she had a voice of last year’s cold. We passed around the phone sharing a word about Oregon. When my turn came, I was ashamed.” (Stevens, 2003). Sufjan never openly spoke about this shame he felt towards his mother. Yet from

this song, we can infer his mother embarrassed Sufjan. This sentiment may have been brought about because Carrie left him, or perhaps because he never built a relationship with her. Later on in the song, Sufjan sings, “We saw her once last fall. Our Grampa died in a hospital gown. Se didn't seem to care. She smoked in her room and colored her hair I was ashamed... of her” (Stevens, 2003). This song reveals a lot about who Carrie was as a person. She rarely visited her children, and when she did, she did not seem to pay attention to the events transpiring around her. Carrie smoked in her room while the rest of the family was mourning the death of their grandparent. She was distant from her family, not too close but never truly out of their lives.

Sufjan recounts in an interview with Pitchfork, “She was evidently a great mother, according to Lowell and my father. But she suffered from schizophrenia and depression. She had bipolar disorder, and she was an alcoholic. She did drugs, had substance abuse problems. She really suffered, for whatever reason” (Dombal, 2015). Carrie did what she could to take care of her children, but quickly realized that she was unfit to raise them. Sufjan would later say in that same interview, “It was in our best interest for our mother to abandon us. God bless her for doing that and knowing what she wasn't capable of” (Dombal, 2015). She left Rasjid and her children because She believed that they would have a better upbringing without her. Leaving her family behind, Carrie would soon meet Lowell, who would quickly befriend Sufjan during those summers in Oregon.

Lowell was captivated by Sufjan from an early age and formed a strong relationship with him. Lowell is an amateur musician and collector of musical records

and albums and introduced Sufjan to music when he learned that his father and stepmother's house was without music.

Lowell shared all of his music with Sufjan and would send him mixtapes throughout his early life. Sufjan's stepfather supported him throughout his early life, providing him with the consistency and support that was otherwise absent in his family. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Sufjan said ““There was so little consistency in our upbringing,’ ... ‘no allegiance to the family tree or to blood. But Lowell was there”” (Eggers, 2018). Where his stepfather was an active part of Sufjan's life, Carrie was nowhere to be found.

Having grown up without a mother and receiving little affection from his father, Sufjan frequently created fantasies about who his mother was. Sufjan spoke about these fantasies in an interview with Pitchfork. He recalls that “[He] had to construct some kind of narrative, so [he's] always had a strange relationship to the mythology of Carrie, because [he has] such few lived memories of [his] experience with her. There's such a discrepancy between [his] time and relationship with her, and [his] desire to know her and be with her” (Dombal, 2015). Without his mother in his life, young Sufjan explored the endless possibilities of who Carrie was.

Carrie died of stomach cancer in December 2012 (Lipshutz, 2015). Sufjan, thirty-seven at the time, accompanied her to an ICU. He found it difficult to reconcile her dying and express love to someone so unfamiliar to him. The death of his mother was difficult for him because he barely knew her. Sufjan felt a deep emptiness inside of himself while staying by her in the hospital. Distraught and afraid, Sufjan ““ was trying to

gather as much as [he] could of her, in [his] mind, [his] memory, [his] recollections, but [he had] nothing. It felt unsolvable” (Dombal, 2015). Yet while Carrie was dying, Sufjan only wanted to communicate his unconditional love for her. In the first song of *Carrie and Lowell*, he sings “I forgive you mother I can hear you and I long to be near you”. While in the ICU, they both expressed their unconditional love for one another despite everything that had happened in the past. Even though this experience in the ICU was healing, the aftermath of Carrie’s death was debilitating for Sufjan.

Once Carrie had died, Sufjan did what he could to make sense of his loss. There were great emotional implications and consequences because of this final emotional connection with his mother. During the tenth song in *Carrie and Lowell*, “No Shade In The Shadow of The Cross”, Sufjan laments, “Fuck me I’m falling apart”. For months following her death, Sufjan “was manic and frantic and disparaging and angry”. He recounts that his bereavement process felt long, convoluted, and “lacking in any kind of trajectory” (Dombal, 2015). He would work for several hours with an emotionless abandon, only to be struck by a grave sadness when encountering mundane occurrences like seeing a dead pigeon on a subway track (Dombal, 2015).

My working assumption is that Sufjan’s bereavement process has been chaotic in part because he did not have a strong relationship with his mother while she was alive. Not only was Sufjan mourning the loss of his mother but also the loss of a prospective relationship he could have had with her. In an interview with Pitchfork, Sufjan recounts that,

[He] was so emotionally lost and desperate for what [he] could no longer pursue in regard to [his] mother... At the time, part of [him] felt that [he] was possessed

by her spirit and that there were certain destructive behaviors that were manifestations of her possession. ...It's almost like the force, or the matrix, or something: [he] started to believe that [he] was genetically, habitually, chemically predisposed to her pattern of destruction. [he] think[s] a lot of the acting-out was rebellion, or maybe it was a way for [him] to... [be] intimate with her (Dombal, 2015).

Desperate for an emotional connection to his late mother, Sufjan practiced some of her destructive behaviors to be emotionally close with her. Sufjan began to regularly use illicit substances, consume large amounts of alcohol, and engage in risky sex—trying to be near her in a time where he felt utterly alone.

After experiencing a painful loss, the bereaved can use music as a coping mechanism and as a medium through which they can express their grief. Music can be an important resource for the bereaved in learning how to cope with their loss and in learning how to rebuild their identity. Investing oneself in music can be a fundamental coping mechanism for the bereaved and can be integral to their healing process. Music can allow the bereaved to give a voice to the deceased, honoring them and acknowledging who they were as people. By integrating one's psychological memory of the deceased into a piece of music, the bereaved can also share their memories of the deceased with others. A study conducted by the Pennsylvania State University's Graduate school determined that music plays a vital role in the progression of the bereavement process. As the bereaved use music as a coping mechanism and to experience their grief, they can progress through their bereavement journey (Albergato-Muterspaw).

Sufjan may have recognized the healing potential of music and invested himself in creating *Carrie and Lowell* to cope with his grief. By utilizing his talents in

music-making, Sufjan could reconstruct meaning structures and build an identity that his bereavement process has shaped. By creating an album that directly connects him to his mother, Sufjan has invested his love and understanding of Carrie into something new and beautiful. By integrating Carrie's essence into his music, Sufjan can introduce others to his psychological memory of Carrie by letting them listen to the album.

CHAPTER TWO

Discourse Analysis and an Outline of the Mechanisms for Grief and Bereavement

Now that we have outlined Sufjan's bereavement process what does his attachment style to his mother mean for his bereavement experience?

With Sufjan's bereavement process outlined, attachment theory can be utilized to understand why this process was so destructive and prolonged. Theorized by John Bowlby and worked on by countless psychiatrists and psychologists, attachment theory is a way to conceptualize how humans form emotionally strong relationships with one another and how they react when those relationships are broken.

Bowlby theorized that these attachments come from an innate need for safety and security. These attachments typically form between certain individuals, such as between a mother and child, and persist throughout the rest of their lives. Attachment behavior can be seen when a growing child leaves their primary attachment figure to explore their environment. Yet the child can always return to the primary attachment figure for safety and support. When this attachment figure disappears or is threatened, the child can respond with frantic emotion and anxiety. Once the primary attachment figure dies, the offspring is under threat to maintain their proximity to their deceased attachment figure. The offspring usually enters into a state of separation distress which leads to a searching

behavior to reestablish the lost relationship (Worden, 2018). Many different attachment styles can form between a child and their primary attachment figure. This attachment style is determined by the way the primary attachment figure provides and cares for the child.

According to Sufjan's lyrics and interview responses, Carrie did very little to physically and emotionally care for Sufjan while he was growing up. She left him and was absent from his life apart from the three summers they spent in Oregon together. As a result of Carrie's absence and from the way Sufjan grieved her death, Sufjan may have an avoidant/fearful attachment style and an avoidant coping strategy.

Individuals with an avoidant/fearful attachment style are often those who have experienced many tentative relationships throughout their lives and are hesitant to form few new attachments out of fear that they, like many previous attachments, will be broken. Sufjan's relationship with his mother was sporadic and lacking in any form of consistency throughout most of his life (Worden, 2018).

This attachment style is characterized by a poor adaptation to the loss because death has stripped away one of the few attachment figures that the bereaved had. Even though Carrie was absent throughout much of Sufjan's life, the mother is still an important figure in any person's life. After the death of an attachment figure, those with this attachment style are prone to high levels of depression and extensive social withdrawal (Worden, 2018).

Avoidant attachment styles give rise to what are arguably the least effective coping mechanisms when responding to emotional distress. Avoidant coping strategies

can make one feel better in the moment when responding to emotional distress but do little to help heal the individual. Avoidant coping mechanisms include social withdrawal, illicit substance use, the blame of both the self and others, denial, and the pursuit of distractions. Some of these coping strategies are not inherently unhealthy, but they can quickly become detrimental to the individual if they persist for an extended period (Worden, 2018). The avoidant coping strategies effectively delay the inevitable “grief work” that the bereaved must undergo if they are to incorporate their dead loved one into their “psychological memory” (Hoy, 2016). Not only did Sufjan utilize avoidant coping mechanisms while mourning the death of his mother, but he may have also had an avoidant and fearful attachment style which did little to help him effectively grieve. With an understanding of the avoidant/fearful attachment style and avoidant coping strategies, it is clear why Sufjan’s bereavement process was rife with deep depression and copious amounts of distraction, drugs, and desolation.

Having discussed Sufjan’s attachment style and its implications of his bereavement process, we can now outline the methodology for my discourse analysis. Sufjan’s songs are deeply metaphorical and the meaning behind the lyrics can be tricky to discern with great confidence. As a result, I will be utilizing several preconstructed interpretations proposed by the lyrical analysis website, Genius, along with my understandings of the lyrics throughout my discourse analysis of Sufjan’s *Carrie and Lowell*. Additionally, many verses throughout the album can be understood by various opposing interpretations, each offering a unique perspective with implications for Sufjan’s bereavement process. As such, I will be detailing each interpretation of the lyrics

where it is appropriate. The structure of my discourse analysis is as follows, I have arranged each song in the order they appear in the official album. To introduce each song, I have included the title of the song along with the lyrics contained within. Beneath each verse, I have written my content analysis along with the conceptualizations for Sufjan's grief according to each mechanism of bereavement where they apply.

Now that we have described who Sufjan Stevens is, what his bereavement process was like, and the methodology for my discourse analysis, it is imperative to now describe what the remainder of this text will include. Sufjan's album, *Carrie And Lowell* features eleven songs, each of which depicts both Sufjan's grief and emotions while he mourns Carrie's death. The grief that Sufjan expressed through his lyrics will be conceptualized through the various bereavement mechanisms developed by several contemporary scholars in the study of grief and bereavement. Included are William Hoy's (2016) compass model of bereavement, J. William Worden's (2018) task-based model, the dual-process model of coping with bereavement by H.A.W. Schut and Margaret Stroebe (2010), and Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) meaning-making and reconstruction model.

Hoy's work includes a bereavement model described as the Compass Model of Bereavement and can be seen in figure one. This model describes the bereavement process's four adaptive processes titled remembering, realizing, releasing, and reaffirming. This model also includes a fifth process originally known as renewing but Hoy has since renamed this process as integrating and is placed in the middle of the compass. The bereaved undergo these five processes in no particular order and may undergo each process multiple times. The compass point of Remembering focuses on

sharing stories about the deceased and assessing their impact on the life of the bereaved. The point of realizing marks the duration of time the bereaved individual finds themselves admitting the reality of their loss and bearing the grief and pain that this realization brings. The process of releasing pertains to the bereaved redefining their relationship with their dead loved one and shifting their conceptualization of the deceased from a physical entity to a psychological memory. The fourth compass point, reaffirming, describes the process of adapting their philosophical, religious, and spiritual beliefs within the context of their loss to find meaning and understanding. Finally, the process of renewing describes how bereaved individuals adapt within a world that has been dramatically altered by the death of their loved ones.

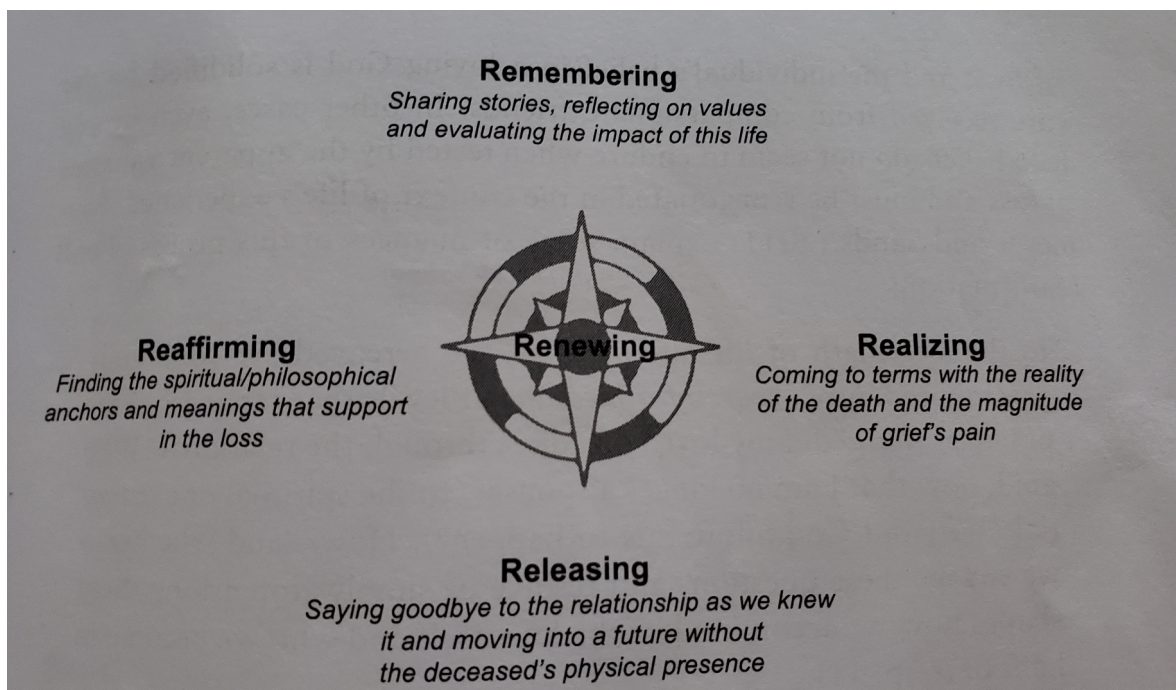


Figure 1 (Hoy, 2016b, p. 27)

Worden's (2018) text features four different tasks that the bereaved can undergo after they experience loss. This model, like, Hoy's (2016) is not linear and these tasks can be experienced in any order and revisited many times. The first of these four tasks is to accept the reality of their loss. This task calls the bereaved to understand that their loved one has died and their physical return to this earth is not possible. The second task is to experience the pain of grief. The bereaved must grapple with their loss and acknowledge their pain during this step. By indulging themselves in their pain and sorrow, the bereaved may find meaning in their loss. The third task calls the bereaved to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. The roles the deceased played in the life of the bereaved are empty in the wake of their death. One must adapt and fulfill these empty niches vacated by the deceased if they are to grow in a world where their loved one is no longer present. The fourth and final task calls the bereaved to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. One must redefine their relationship with the dead while also growing and becoming comfortable without the physical presence of the deceased.

Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) meaning-making and reconstruction model describes the grieving process as a journey of meaning-making through the loss and bereavement process. In this model, Gillies and Neimeyer propose that when a loved one dies, their death will either be consistent or inconsistent with the pre-loss meaning structures of the bereaved. These meaning structures include "view of the world", "faith,

spirituality”, “self-perceptions”, “interpersonal relationships”, “daily activities and priorities”, and “view of the future”. When the death of a loved one is understandable and the circumstances surrounding their death make sense, one’s grief will be distressing but will generally be less disruptive than losses where the bereaved are forced to reexamine and reevaluate their pre-loss meaning structures because the death is inconsistent with their pre-loss meaning structures. A model created by Gillies and Neimeyer proposes that when the death of a loved one forces the bereaved to reexamine their pre-loss meaning structures, they may engage in three different processes to reconstruct meaning in response to loss: sense-making, benefit-finding, and identity change. This model can be seen in figure two

The process of sense-making entails searching for reasons why the loved one has died. The bereaved may find themselves wondering how they died, why they are experiencing their grief, and what their loss means about the life they once knew. This can take the form of understanding the illness that took the loved one’s life or understanding the suicidal intent when the loved one takes their own life. Asking and searching for answers to these questions can offer security, order, and restore predictability to the lives of the bereaved.

Benefit finding is a process by which bereaved individuals search for ways to derive meaning from their loss. They use the pain and anguish from their experience to build new understandings about themselves and the world around them. The process of finding meaning through the loss may not occur until months or even years after the loss, however.

For the bereaved to reconstruct their understanding of the world and find meaning through their loss, they must also reconstruct themselves. Gillies and Neimeyer's identity change process suggests that once bereaved individuals have grown through their loss, they develop a new sense of self and may feel more confident, resilient, and independent. The bereaved may also experience spiritual or existential growth and form new and stronger relationships with others.

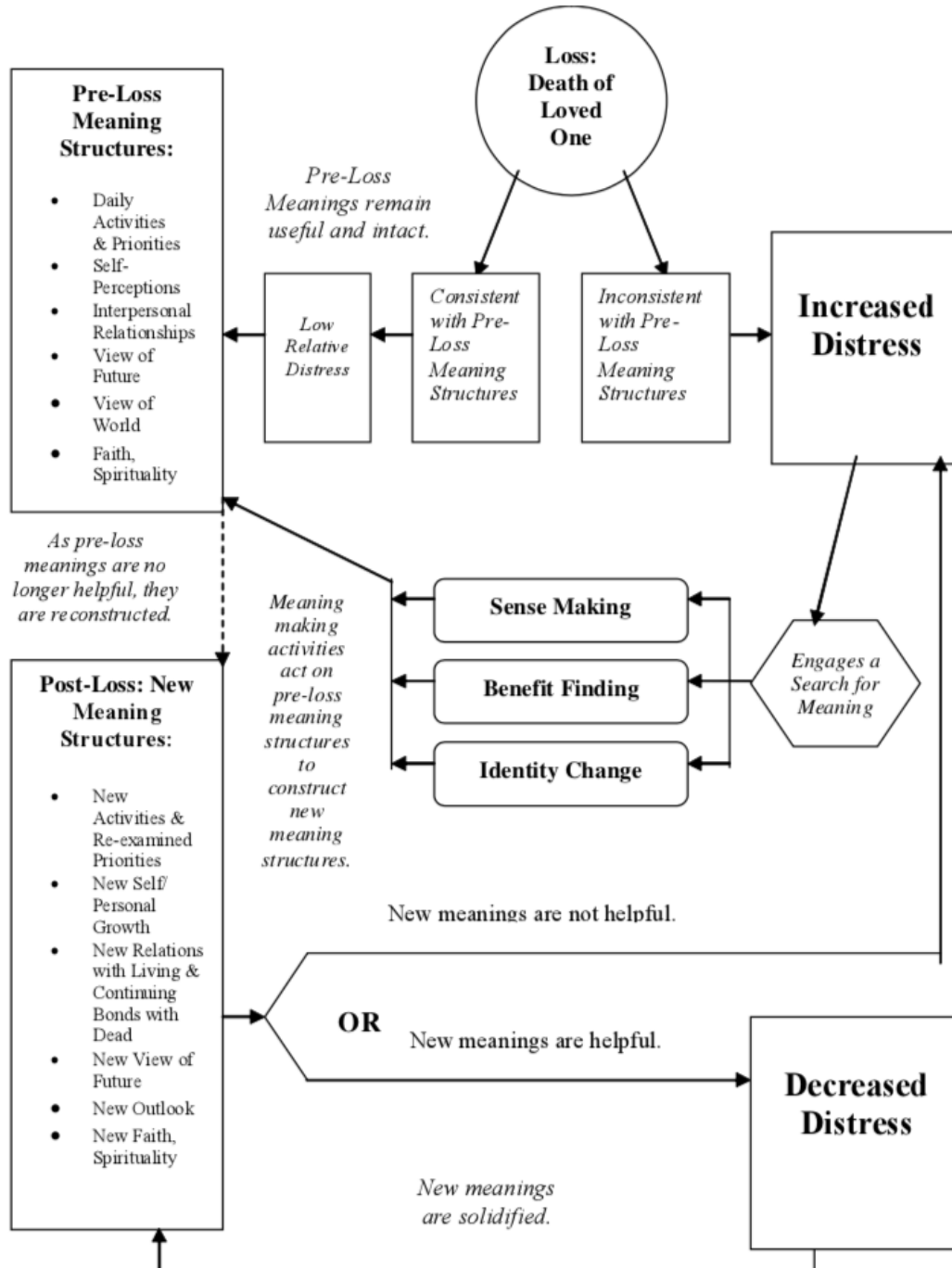


Figure 2 (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006b, p. 55)

As stated earlier, Sufjan's perceptions of his relationship with Carrie was that it was non-existent and as a result, he constructed "the mythology of Carrie" (Sufajn) and had many ideas about who she might have been. His upbringing and his understanding of the world around him had been shaped by his conceptualization of his mother. Yet while he was beside Carrie on her death bed, Sufjan was finally able to connect with and feel close with. In these moments, his understanding of her shifted and he was able to experience and see the love she had for him. Shortly after this, however, Carrie died and had once again left him. Just as he began to grow close with her, Carrie had slipped through his fingers once more.

Faced with finally beginning to connect with Carrie soon before she died, Sufjan realized that her death was inconsistent with his pre-loss meaning structures. His view of the world, founded upon his "mythology of Carrie" has shifted as a result of his brief connection with her. The potential for a future where he would have been able to build a relationship with her has disappeared. In an attempt to derive meaning through his loss and to both reevaluate and reconstruct his pre-loss meaning structures, Sufjan engages in the sense-making, benefit finding, and identity change process outlined in Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) model for bereavement. Sufjan's journey through these three processes can be observed in his lyrics and will be analyzed in the subsequent chapter. Stroebe and Schut's (2010) dual-process model can be seen in figure three and it presented the bereaved with two different types of stressors following the death of a loved one. The first of these two stressors is the loss orientation. This orientation calls the bereaved to focus on the loss experience itself and as such, incorporates grief work. An

important aspect of this orientation is ruminating on the deceased and reminiscing about their life. This orientation predominates during times of painful grieving. The restoration orientation is the second stressor presented in this model and calls the bereaved to focus on adjusting to life without the physical presence of their loved one and coping with the problems generated as a result of their loss. This model also proposes two types of cognitive appraisal processes, positive and negative effects, that influence how the bereaved understand the world around them. The bereaved can oscillate between these two orientations and fluctuate between positive and negative affect/(re)appraisal throughout their lifelong bereavement process. Additionally, this model proposes that the bereaved will engage in an adaptive coping process where they will both oscillate between avoiding and engaging in these tasks for grieving and taking respite from them.

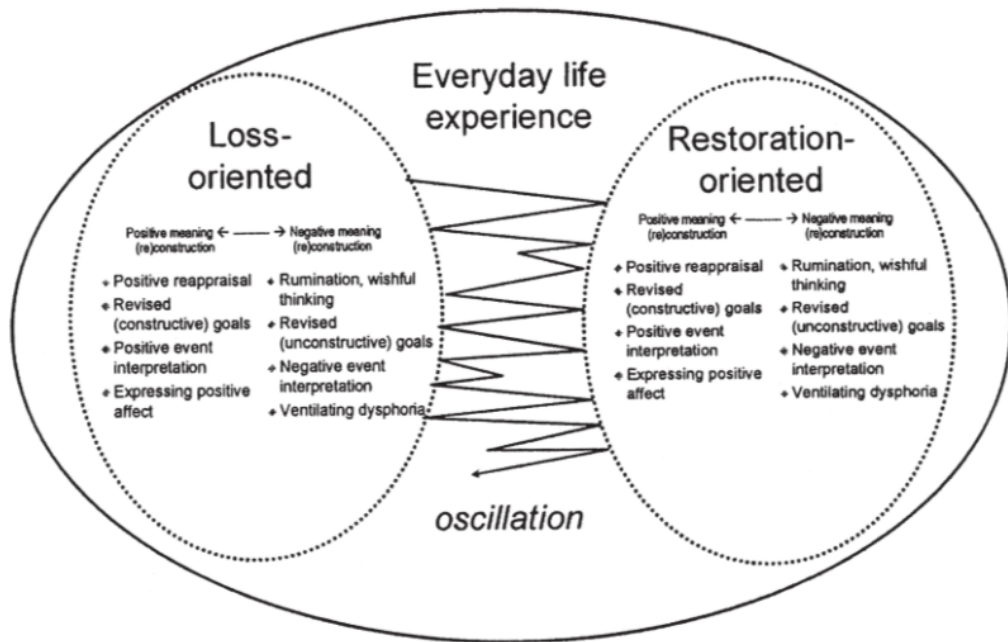


Figure 3 (Stroebe & Schut, 2010b, p. 280)

CHAPTER THREE

Analysis of the Album

Having discussed the bereavement models conceptualized by these four authors, Sufjan's lyrics can now be analyzed through the lens of each model. This chapter is an analysis of every song on Sufjan's seventh studio album, *Carrie and Lowell*, as understood by the bereavement processes outlined by Hoy, Worden, Gillies, Neimeyer, Stroebe, and Schut. Each of these mechanisms for bereavement is used to conceptualize the grief Sufjan sings about in each song. It should be noted that not every verse is analyzed in this album as some cannot be addressed through any of these mechanisms. Additionally, not every verse can be analyzed with all four mechanisms.

Death With Dignity

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 1

*Spirit of my silence, I can hear you
But I'm afraid to be near you
And I don't know where to begin
And I don't know where to begin*

In this verse, the "Spirit of my silence" may be Carrie, Sufjan's mother, and he seems to be struggling to undergo the grief work that is necessary to derive meaning from

her death by saying that he is “afraid to be near [her]”. Carrie’s death was very difficult for Sufjan so he likely pushed off this grief work for a long time. Utilizing Hoy’s (2016) compass point of releasing, one can argue that Sufjan is working on growing closer to his mother in this song so he can work to perceive her as a physiological memory rather than as a physical entity.

Worden’s (2018) first task of accepting the reality of the loss is illustrated in Sufjan’s concerns on how to start his bereavement process. After Carrie’s passing, he does not “know where to begin”. The lyrics suggest that Sufjan wants to accept the reality of his loss but does not know how to begin this painful process. He seems to be searching for the right way to come to terms with Carrie’s death.

Gillies and Neimeyer’s (2006) process of sense-making can also be visualized in this verse as Sufjan appears to be struggling to understand Carrie’s death and how to make sense of his loss. Sufjan stated in an interview that he could not make sense of her death for several months, yet in writing about it on this album, he was in pursuit of meaning and yearning to understand Carrie’s death (Dombal, 2015). After delaying his grief work for an extended period, Sufjan’s lyrics suggest that he is finally willing to experience the pain of his grief and admits that he does not “know where to begin” in making sense of his loss. By ruminating on his emotions and his inability to make sense of Carrie’s death, he is growing more vulnerable and may soon be able to accept his loss and understand her death.

Somewhere in the desert, there’s a forest

*And an acre before us
But I don't know where to begin
But I don't know where to begin
Again, I've lost my strength completely, oh be near me
Tired, old mare with the wind in your hair*

This verse may be interpreted as Sufjan singing about his mother's life. A mare is a female horse and is also a homophone for the French word "mère" meaning "mother". Mares often become ill-tempered and aggressive when they are in heat. This behavior may symbolize Carrie's inability and unwillingness to be with Sufjan throughout most of his life. By comparing Carrie to an old mare, Sufjan remembers the person she was and how this memory of her will continue to shape his mourning process and is thus enacting Dr. Hoy's compass point of "Remembering".

Similar to the first verse, Worden's first task of accepting the reality of the loss can also be utilized here to conceptualize Sufjan's difficulties in coming to terms with Carrie's death. Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he does not "know where to begin" with his bereavement process. He finds himself lost in a metaphorical empty desert where there is nothing around him except a forest in the distance. Sufjan knows that the forest is full of vitality and it may represent a future where he has been able to accept the reality of his mother's death. Yet he does not know how to work through his grief and begin his journey to accepting his loss.

Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) process of sense-making can be utilized to conceptualize Sufjan's desire to make sense of his loss as he searches through the metaphorical desert in search of closure. Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he understands that

somewhere amidst the dunes of his pain and grief, there is “a forest”, a lush and vibrant place where he has finally made sense of Carrie’s death. Similar to the first verse, Sufjan does not “know where to begin” in this process, however. Yet by continuing to express his emotions through these lyrics, he is slowly approaching a state where he can make sense of his bereavement.

*Amethyst and flowers on the table (On the table),
is it real or a fable? (Is it real or a fable?)
Well, I suppose a friend is a friend
And we all know how this will end*

Gillies and Neimeyer’s (2006) process of sense-making can be used to conceptualize Sufjan’s grief experience in this verse as well. After admitting that he does not know how to make sense of Carrie’s death, Sufjan begins to sing about the circumstances surrounding her passing. Well aware of Carrie’s struggles with mental illness and illicit substance use at the time of her death, Sufjan claims that “She really suffered, for whatever reason” in an interview with Pitchfork (Dombal, 2015). In this verse, Sufjan’s lyrics suggest his benevolence towards the cancer that ended her life, going so far as to say that Carrie’s cause of death was “a friend”. Sufjan continues by singing, “And we all know how this will end”. He implies that this cancer freed Carrie from her lifelong struggles with schizophrenia and other mental health problems. Carrie’s death and the understanding that he will never have a relationship with her devastated Sufjan. Despite this, his verse suggests that he is grateful that her suffering has ended. By

singing about his benevolence towards Carrie's passing, and by understanding that her suffering is over, Sufjan is finally able to make sense of her death and find peace.

*Chimney swift that finds me, be my keeper (Be my keeper)
Silhouette of the cedar (Silhouette of the cedar)
What is that song you sing for the dead?
What is that song you sing for the dead?
I see the signal searchlight strike me in the window of my room
Well, I got nothing to prove
Well, I got nothing to prove*

Accepting the reality of the loss, Worden's first task of bereavement is illustrated as Sufjan sings about his progression to accepting the finality of Carrie's death. From the desert of his emptiness, Sufjan is approaching the forest and finally steps into the "silhouette of the cedar". These lines suggest that Sufjan is gradually coming to terms with Carrie's death. While he continues closer to the forest, Sufjan wonders how to begin his mourning process. Is there a song he should sing to her? Is there some way to prove his love for her? These may be some of the questions that Sufjan asks himself while coming to accept the reality of his loss.

*I forgive you, mother, I can hear you (I can hear you)
And I long to be near you (And I long to be near you)
But every road leads to an end
Yes, every road leads to an end
Your apparition passes through me in the willows
Five red hens – you'll never see us again
You'll never see us again*

Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he is forgiving his mother for leaving him and his siblings and is working on moving forward and beyond his prior inability to reconcile her death. He is addressing her absence by saying that he "can hear [her]" and by recognizing that "every road comes to an end", he may be coming to terms with Carrie's death. In doing so, Sufjan is almost able to move into a future where his mother is no longer physically present. He is no longer conceptualizing Carrie as a physical person and he is working on envisioning her as a psychological memory. This embodies Dr. Hoy's process of releasing.

Sufjan has finally entered into the forest of acceptance and these lyrics suggest that Sufjan has come to terms with the reality of his loss. He can see the apparition of his mother "[pass] through [him] in the willows" of the forest. He suggests that he has come to accept his mother's death and understand that Shee will "never see us again". Many of the verses in this song have displayed Sufjan's journey to accepting the reality of his loss and as a result, the grief Sufjan sings about in this verse can be conceptualized with Dr. Worden's first task of mourning, accepting the reality of the loss.

In the opening verses of this song, Sufjan's lyrics suggest his struggle to make sense of Carrie's death because it was inconsistent with the pre-loss meaning structures outlined by Gillies and Neimeyer. By the end of the song, however, Sufjan's verses display his journey through his grief, his understanding of what has happened to Carrie, how she died and has begun to understand that Carrie's new existence is purely a psychological conceptualization. Sufjan's lyrics convey his effort to redefine his pre-loss meaning structures and rebuilt them into new post-loss structures that have allowed him

to make sense of his mother's death. Since Sufjan has found meaning through his loss and reconstructed his meaning structures, he has necessarily reconstructed his own identity according to the meaning-making model outlined by Gillies and Neimeyer.

Should Have Known Better

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 2

*I should have known better
To see what I could see
My black shroud
Holding down my feelings
A pillar for my enemies*

In the first song, "Death with Dignity", Sufjan's lyrics suggested his struggle to come to terms with the death of his mother but was finally able to by the end of the song. Now having accepted the reality of her death, Sufjan is fully aware of the grief his loss generates. Akin to the shrouds coiled around the deceased, Sufjan is bound in a "black shroud [which is] holding down [his] feelings" and is numbing him from the sorrow of his grief. Hoy's (2016) compass point of realizing can be used to conceptualize the pain and grief Sufjan sings about in this verse.

Worden's (2018) second task for mourning, processing the pain of grief, is illustrated in Sufjan's now struggle to allow himself to experience the full pain of Carrie's death. Instead of feeling his pain, Sufjan has wrapped himself in a "black shroud" that prevents him from performing his grief work. As a result of his inability to process the

pain of his grief, Sufjan is “holding down [his] feelings” and has developed a flat affect. These lyrics suggest that Sufjan understands that repressing his pain is unhealthy and prolongs his grief process. His inability to work through has built “a pillar for [his] enemies”. These enemies could be the negative repercussions of failing to process his grief that will continue to plague him so long as he avoids his grief work. Worden writes that, “If it is necessary for the bereaved person to go through the pain of grief in order to get the grief work down, then anything that continually allows the person to avoid or suppress this pain can be expected to prolong the course of mourning” (Worden, 2018, pg 44). According to Worden, if Sufjan continues to suppress his emotion and pain, he will only prolong the length of his bereavement process.

Depression takes the form of a “black shroud” that has overwhelmed Sufjan and is preventing him from feeling the pain of his loss. Since he experienced an involuntary repression of his grief’s gruesome sing, he has avoided Stroebe and Schut’s (2010) loss orientation. If Sufjan were to confront the loss orientation, he would allow himself to feel the ache and heartbreak from his loss.

*I should have wrote a letter
And grieve what I happen to grieve
My black shroud
I never trust my feelings
I waited for the remedy*

Sufjan’s lyrics here may be interpreted as his regret in not undergoing the grief work and organizing his thoughts and feelings towards his mother soon after she died.

Within Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief, he writes that "it is necessary to acknowledge and work through this pain or it can manifest itself through physical symptoms or some form of aberrant behavior" (Worden). Continuing to exist in his dark and dreary state, Sufjan sings about how he is restrained in a "black shroud" and is unable to "trust [his] feelings" in the wake of his mother's death. Instead of actively working through his grief and pain, Sufjan "waited for the remedy" to his grief and his pain. By failing to do the grief work, Sufjan will likely continue to prolong his mourning process.

These lyrics can also be interpreted as Sufjan singing about his regrets involuntarily suppressing his grief. He may have wished that he gave himself space to feel the pain associated with his loss. Since Sufjan isolated himself from the wound left by Carrie's death, he has avoided Stroebe and Schut's (2010) loss-orientation. Stroebe and Schut argue that it may be "impossible to avoid grieving unremittingly without severe costs to mental and physical well-being." (Stroebe and Schut). Sufjan's difficult bereavement process may be accounted for by his refrainment from grieving soon after Carrie died. Perhaps his grief would not have been as complicated if he confronted the loss orientation instead of avoiding it for as long as he did.

*When I was three, three, maybe four
She left us at that video store
Oh, be my rest, be my fantasy
Oh, be my rest, be my fantasy*

Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering illustrates Sufjan's recounts of his mother leaving him and his siblings in a video store when he was young. This verse further elucidates how his mother was prone to leaving her children while they were young. His inability to remember exactly how old he was when this event occurred may reveal how difficult his grieving process is. It can be hard to grieve the death of someone one does not really know--especially if that person is one's mother. Even though Carrie left Sufjan, his lyrics suggest that he longs for the comfort provided by a mother when he asks her to "be [his] rest, be [his] fantasy". Sufjan may have struggled with Carrie's death because he never had a strong relationship with her, and as a result, this yearning to be close with her is heightened.

*I'm light as a feather
I'm bright as the Oregon breeze
My black shroud
Frightened by my feelings
I only wanna be a relief*

Sufjan is returning to the metaphor of depression in the "black shroud" seen throughout this song. This trope of depression is contrasted with the positivity of the first two lines of this verse. This comparison highlights the conflict he may be feeling within himself as a result of Carrie's death and thus this verse can be conceptualized with Hoy's (2016) compass point of realizing.

*No, I'm not a go-getter
The demon had a spell on me*

*My black shroud
Captain of my feelings
The only thing I wanna believe*

One interpretation of this verse is that Sufjan is attributing his lack of ambition and resourcefulness to a demon who has cursed him with the “black shroud” of depression. After avoiding the pain of his grief for so long, the lyrics suggest that Sufjan has begun to break down into a deep and dark depression. Having lost control of his emotions, Sufjan yearns to become the “Captain of [his] feelings” and be in control of his dejected emotions. Yet to accomplish this, Sufjan must embrace the pain of his grief and begin to process it. Thus the grief Sufjan experiences in this verse can be conceptualized by Worden’s (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

According to another interpretation of this verse, Sufjan believes that he was possessed by his mother’s spirit soon after her death and that the spirit of her possession has cursed him. This interpretation would lead to Carrie being the “Captain of [his] feelings”. Desperate for a meaningful emotional connection with his mother, Sufjan wants to believe that his mother is guiding him on his journey through his grief. Sufjan is engaging in Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering when he feels this possession by her spirit because he begins to take on Carrie’s mannerisms and destructive habits during these bouts of possession.

Continuing with the interpretation where a demon cursed Sufjan with a shroud of depression, he yearns to be the captain of his feelings and as a result, desires to confront the emotions associated with his grief. Sufjan is beginning to shift from avoiding Stroebe

and Schut's (2010) loss orientation to confronting it and even though he may not currently be in control, his lyrics suggest his desire to be at the helm of his bereavement experience reveals his desire to confront the loss orientation.

*When I was three, and free to explore
I saw her face on the back of the door
Oh, be my rest, be my fantasy
Oh, be my rest, be my fantasy*

This is another verse where Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he is remembering his childhood when he saw his mother. Similar to the verse where Sufjan recounts his mother leaving him and his siblings at a video store, Sufjan is again unable to remember exactly how old he was when this event occurred. This may unveil how challenging his grieving process is. Sufjan may once more be asking Carrie to "be [his] rest, be [his] fantasy". These verses may be in reference to the mythos Sufjan created about his mother when he was younger. By recalling these childhood fantasies revolving around Carrie, Sufjan is once again engaging in Dr. Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering.

*I should have known better
Nothing can be changed
The past is still the past
The bridge to nowhere
I should have wrote a letter
Explaining what I feel, that empty feeling*

After expressing his inability to control his grief and his depressed affect, Sufjan is beginning to come to terms with his lack of control in his grief process. He understands

that “nothing can be changed” about the past and that he cannot change the relationship he had with his mother while she was alive. He is no longer ruminating about this relationship he had with her while she was alive. The bridge he sings about in this verse is likely the Astoria–Megler Bridge located over a river between Oregon and Washington. This bridge was given the nickname, “the bridge to nowhere” due to how expensive its construction was and how some believe that it was a waste of taxpayer money (Boyd, 2017). Sufjan uses this metaphor to describe how trying to make sense of his relationship with Carrie was a waste of his emotional energy as he cannot change the past. By reflecting on his memories of Carrie and Oregon, Sufjan is enacting Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering.

In the last two lines of this stanza, Sufjan expresses his regret for not staying in touch with Carrie when she was still alive. He regrets that he did not reach out to her and try to establish a fruitful relationship before she died in 2012. By admitting his regrets and feeling the pain this emotion brings, Sufjan is engaging in Worden’s second task of mourning of processing the pain of grief.

*Don't back down, concentrate on seeing
The breakers in the bar, the neighbor's greeting
My brother had a daughter
The beauty that she brings, illumination*

Sufjan is attempting to find inner strength in his grief as he continues to

mourn his mother. His lyrics point towards the encouragement he is providing to himself to “concentrate on seeing” the beautiful things in life. Sufjan may be searching for anchors and meaningful events that can support him in his loss. Sufjan first concentrates on, “The breakers in the bar” which may be a reference to the Columbia River Bar, a group of sand bars that fall between the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Oregon. These sand bars are known for their unpredictable, yet gorgeous waves that have been named “breakers” by the locals (Genius). Sufjan may have seen these breakers when he spent three summers in Oregon and admired their beauty. Sufjan may also be finding beauty in both “the neighbor’s greeting” and in his niece whose beauty Sufjan finds illuminating. By anchoring himself onto these meaningful anchors that provide support throughout his mourning process, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy’s (2016) process of reaffirming.

After Carrie’s death, Sufjan’s lyrics suggest that was left heartbroken, empty, and alone. He struggled with depression and substance use throughout his grieving process. Yet after ruminating and dwelling in his grief, Sufjan’s lyrics suggest that he began investing himself into his relationship with his niece and was able to build new meaning structures around her. In an interview with Pitchfork, Sufjan describes his niece as “very social and outgoing and beautiful. She has lots of spirits and... [s]he’s surrounded by people who love her. There’s just so much intimacy” (Dombal, 2015). By investing himself into his new relationship with his niece, Sufjan is constructing new meaning structures and is engaging in the benefit-finding aspect of Gillies and Neimeyer’s (2010) model for meaning-making.

In this verse, Sufjan may be singing about finding beauty amidst his bereavement process. At the beginning of this song, Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he was wallowing in his depression-induced isolation, yet now he has pivoted and may be finding joy in the world around him. Concentrating on finding meaning in the breakers, his neighbor's greeting, and his niece, Sufjan has distracted himself from his grief and is no longer dwelling in the sadness spurred by Carrie's death. By allowing himself to engage in activities other than ruminating on Carrie's death, Sufjan is necessarily confronting Stroebe and Schut's (2010) restoration orientation.

*Don't back down, there is nothing left
The breakers in the bar, no reason to live
I'm a fool in the fetter (fool in the fetter)
Rose of Aaron's beard, where you can reach me*

Sufjan may be singing about his relapses back into his suicidal and depressive episodes in this verse. Grief is not a linear process and Sufjan's mourning process is rife with both reaffirming meaning-making and stumbles back into depression. In this verse, "The breakers in the bar" have a more sinister connotation as they are just as dangerous as they are beautiful. Many ships have been destroyed by these waves and many have aptly named these waters "the graveyard of the Pacific" (Scott, 1970). Sufjan may be calling himself a "fool in the fetter" as he has made himself a prisoner to his destructive behavior. He realizes that his unhealthy habits and destructive behavior have been a physical manifestation of his prolonged grief and thus his grief here can be

conceptualized by Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

In the last line of this stanza, Sufjan sings about the "Rose of Aaron's beard". This is a biblical allusion to Psalm 133 which is about finding joy and pleasure when in the company of one's family and living with them in unity. This line ties into the stanza before this where Sufjan sings about finding joy while with his brother and niece. Sufjan finds comfort in spending time with his family while he mourns; his family supports him through his loss. As a result, these lyrics embody Hoy's (2016) reaffirming compass point.

From his engagement in Stroebe and Schut's (2010) restoration orientation in the previous verse, Sufjan's lyrics suggest a shift back into the loss orientation, and is once more feeling the pain of his grief. He sings that "there is nothing left... No reason to live". By concentrating on his loss and the pain he feels, Sufjan is confronting and engaging in the loss-orientation.

*Don't back down: nothing can be changed
Cantilever bridge, the drunken sailor
My brother had a daughter (brother had a daughter)
The beauty that she brings, illumination (illumination)
Illumination*

Sufjan continues to sing about his brother and niece, two people who bring him joy and who support him throughout his grief process. By finding beauty in the world

around him while he is grieving, Sufjan is enacting Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

This verse may reveal Sufjan's efforts to form new relationships in light of his mother's death. His lyrics suggest an understanding that even though "nothing can be changed" in regards to his relationship with his mother, he is still able to have an enduring connection with her. Additionally, Sufjan can spend time with his niece and enjoy all the "beauty that she brings". By fostering new relationships while finding an enduring connection with his late mother, Sufjan is undergoing Worden's (2018) fourth task of mourning, finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life.

In "Should have known better", Sufjan laments his loss and embraces the darkness of his despair. Yet through his process, he has been able to find comfort in his niece and grow close to her. Sufjan may be using the raw materials of his grief to build new meaning structures around his brother's daughter and is now able to see "the beauty that she brings". Sufjan's relationship with his niece may alleviate his distress and allows him to view the world in a new way. By constructing new post-loss meaning structures during his bereavement process, Sufjan is necessarily also reconstructing his identity according to Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) model for meaning-making.

Sufjan is continuing to oscillate from Stroebe and Schut's (2010) loss orientation to restoration orientation and back again throughout this song. In this verse, Sufjan sings of the new relationship he has been able to concentrate on soon after Carrie's death. By

positively reappraising his relationships and focusing on constructing a new friendship, Sufjan is confronting the restoration orientation.

All of Me Wants All of You

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 3

*Shall we beat this or celebrate it?
You're not the one to talk things through
You checked your texts while I masturbated
Manelich, I feel so used*

Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief, illustrates Sufjan's pain in wondering whether he and his family should have actively fought against Carrie's cancer or whether they should have celebrated this cancer that ultimately put an end to a difficult life that was rife with mental illness and suffering. Sufjan could be mourning the relationship he never got to have with his mother. He says that Carrie was, "not the one to talk things through". His lyrics evoke the confusion he faced while navigating his relationship with Carrie before she died. Sufjan may have realized that he cannot continue building a relationship with his mother now that she has died.

*Found myself on Spencer's Butte
Traced your shadow with my shoe
Empty outline changed my view
Now all of me thinks less of you*

Sufjan may be singing about a memory of his mother while they were both upon Spencer's Butte, the highest point in Eugene Oregon. While perched atop the mountain, Sufjan drew a picture of Carrie into the dirt with his shoe, yet his drawing was empty and void of detail. This empty outline of Carrie is symbolic as Sufjan did not know his mother. She was not continually present in his life and, as a result, he never knew what kind of person she was. As Sufjan began to understand the significance of his drawing, his feelings towards his mother may have changed. From this point on, Sufjan thoughtless of his mother. He saw her for who she was—a mother who left her family. This shift of view followed him throughout his adult life. This verse evokes Hoy's (2016) remembering compass point as Sufjan is evaluating the effects Carrie had on his life.

*On the sheet, I see your horizon
All of me pressed onto you
But in this light, you look like Poseidon
I'm just a ghost you walk right through*

Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief, illustrates the hardships Sufjan describes in this verse. There seems to be a double meaning to this verse as Sufjan is both describing his mother's death and his engagement in unhealthy and toxic relationships in the wake of her death. In one interpretation, Sufjan may be with Carrie at her death bed and he could see death looming over her when he says that he can, "see your horizon"; the sun setting over her as her life fades away. According to this interpretation, Sufjan is hugging Carrie as she dies and sings that he is "just a ghost you walk right through". Sufjan, now knowing that his mother is dead, will have to wrestle

with his grief in light of his loss. Alternatively, the subject of this verse can be the lover Sufjan described in the first verse of the song. The scenario described in this verse may be indicative of an abusive relationship as Sufjan's partner could have made him feel irrelevant and worthless. Sufjan describes him as Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea while describing himself as a ghost that is walked right through. Sufjan is hurting and he feels broken in the wake of his mother's death. A man battered and defeated by broken love, Sufjan's relationship with his mother was a continual cycle of being together for a short time and then being apart for an extended period--very similar to how he may be engaging in unhealthy relationships after her death. Sufjan's engagement in these toxic relationships may reflect the pain he feels in regards to his mother's continual abandonment of him.

Since Carrie's death was inconsistent with Sufjan's pre-loss meaning structures according to Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) meaning reconstruction model, he attempted to reconstruct these frameworks so that her death would be consistent with his understanding of the world around him. In one of his attempts to find meaning during his bereavement process, Sufjan engaged in an unhealthy relationship according to one of the interpretations of this song. By investing himself in a new relationship he may be attempting to find benefits through his grief and build new meaning structures to alleviate the distress caused by his mother's passing. Thus Sufjan may be engaging in Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) process of benefit finding. Yet this relationship was toxic and further caused Sufjan's heartache. Since the meaning structures built through his relationship did not alleviate the distress caused by Carrie's death, Sufjan eventually discontinued his

engagements with his partner and invested his energy into constructing other meaning structures that would help alleviate his distress.

Saw myself on Spencer's Butte (All of me wants all of you)
Landscape changed my point of view (All of me wants all of you)
Revelation may come true (All of me wants all of you)
Now all of me thinks less of you (All of me wants all of you)

Compared to the last line of the first chorus where Sufjan sings that he thinks less of his mother, this second chorus culminates with Sufjan admitting to wanting his mother despite the many occasions where she left him and his family. Even though he may not have known his mother while he was with her in Oregon, “All of [him] wants all of [her]”. Even though he realized that he was never able to have a strong relationship with Carrie, “All of [him] wants all of [her]”. Despite Sufjan’s negative feelings towards his mother, the lyrics suggest his desire to be with her and to know her. These feelings of painful desire to be with the dead are reminiscent of Hoy’s (2016) compass point of realizing.

(All of me wants all of you)
(All of me wants all of you)
(All of me wants all of you)
(All of me wants all of you)

The outro to this song is a continuation of the second chorus. He admits several times that he longs to be with his mother, despite the many occasions where she left her

family. Sufjan's desire to be close with the deceased represents Hoy's (2016) compass point of realizing.

Drawn to The Blood

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 4

*I'm drawn to the blood
The flight of a one-winged dove
How? How did this happen?
How? How did this happen?*

In "All of Me Wants All of You", Sufjan actively pursued relationships he knew were unhealthy for him. Yet in "Drawn to the Blood", Sufjan has pulled himself away from these destructive tendencies and sees the damage that they have caused. Even though he may be disgusted by his self-destructive actions, as suggested by the lyrics, he continues to enter into unhealthy relationships like a "one-winged dove" flying in circles. Sufjan continues to reengage in actions he knows are unhealthy for him. By attempting to fill his life with unhealthy relationships instead of allowing himself to feel the pain of his grief, Sufjan is prolonging his mourning process and he is engaging with Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

In search of meaning, Sufjan continues to engage in unhealthy relationships while he is grieving. In every relationship he enters into, he works to build new meaning structures in an attempt to alleviate the distress caused by Carrie's death. Yet Sufjan's

anguish continues to grow through these toxic relationships. Gillies and Neimeyer argue that when newly founded meaning structures do not alleviate the distress caused by the loss of a loved one, the bereaved will continue to search for meanings that ease their grief. For Sufjan, this involves breaking off his relationships with toxic partners. Yet “like a one-winged dove”, Sufjan is “drawn to the blood” and continues to engage in these toxic relationships in search of meaning as demonstrated by Gillies and Neimeyer’s (2010) process of benefit finding.

*The strength of his arm
My lover caught me off guard
How? Head of a rabbit
How? Head of a rabbit*

This song is rife with biblical allusions. The first, introduced here and continued later in the song, may be about Samson and Delilah, two characters from the Old Testament. Samson, as described by the Bible, was a Nazirite who was blessed with incredible strength as long as his hair remained uncut. Delilah betrayed him and “caught [him] off guard” by cutting off his hair and turned Samson over to his enemies. Sufjan is setting up a parallel between his relationship with his mother and the relationship between Samson and Delilah. By comparing his experiences to teachings and stories found in the Bible, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy’s (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

Sufjan recognizes the damage caused by his relapses back into the arms of his abusive lover. Yet he continues to return to them in an attempt to build new relationships in light of Carrie’s death. By recognizing the pain he has inflicted upon himself during

this process, Sufjan is experiencing a negative appraisal while confronting Stroebe and Schut's (2010) restoration-orientation.

*For my prayer has always been love
What did I do to deserve this?*

The lyrics suggest that Sufjan only wanted to be loved by his mother, yet she continued to hurt him by leaving him and his family. Sufjan prayed that God may bless Carrie and him with a healthy relationship. Yet he does not understand why his mother never stayed and loved him. Sufjan may have felt like she has “caught [him] off guard” with her continual abandonment. By expressing the pain he feels within him, Sufjan is engaging in Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

*With blood on my sleeve
Delilah, avenge my grief
How? God of Elijah
How? God of Elijah*

Sufjan completes the allusion to Samson and Delilah in this verse by asking “Delilah [to] avenge [his] grief.” Just as Delilah cut Samson's hair and turned him over to his enemies, Carrie betrayed Sufjan's love by remaining distant from him. Possibly Feeling forsaken, Sufjan then calls out to God--not knowing why He would take Carrie away from him. By continuing to compare the pain of his grief to religious imagery, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

*As fire to the sun
Tell me what I have done
How? Heart of a dragon?
How? Heart of a dragon?*

Sufjan's lyrics once again suggest that he is wondering what he did to deserve to be abandoned by his mother. Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief, illustrates Sufjan's willingness to feel the pain of his grief as he reconciles the actions of his mother.

*For my prayer has always been love
What did I do to deserve this now?
How did this happen?*

Sufjan ends this song by reiterating that he only wanted to find love in his relationship with his mother. Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he is woefully unknowing of why his mother continued to leave him and what he did to deserve such treatment. By grieving and ruminating on how his mother treated him, Sufjan is enacting Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

Eugene

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 5

Light struck from the lemon tree

*What if I'd never seen hysterical light from Eugene?
Lemon yogurt
Remember I pulled at your shirt
I dropped the ashtray on the floor
I just wanted to be near you*

Sufjan is embodying Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering as he recalls the three summers he spent in Eugene, Oregon with his mother, stepfather, and siblings in this song. He may be comparing these memories to a light that suddenly struck a lemon tree, a tree with fruit that is both sour and sweet. His mind is occasionally filled with bitter-sweet memories of his mother. The memories may not be inherently painful but they hurt Sufjan whenever he recalls them. Sufjan may find nostalgia in remembering the part of his childhood where his mother was present, yet he also found pain in knowing that he would never get to spend more time with her. Sufjan is recalling a time when he had pulled on his mother's shirt and knocked over her ashtray in an attempt to get her attention. He remembers that he longed to be with her and to captivate her attention even when he was a small child.

*Emerald Park, wonders never cease
The man who taught me to swim
He couldn't quite say my first name
Like a Father, he led community water on my head
And he called me "Subaru"
And now, I want to be near you*

Sufjan is continuing to remember the three summers he spent in Oregon with his family. Sufjan recalls his stepfather teaching him to swim in a community pool in Emerald Park, Oregon. While these memories may not be inherently about Carrie, Sufjan associates these summers with a time when he was much closer to her. As a result of this association, Sufjan “wants to be near [her]” after recalling them. Thus the grief Sufjan experiences in this verse can be conceptualized by Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering.

*Since I was old enough to speak
I've said it with alarm
Some part of me was lost in your sleeve
Where you hid your cigarettes
No, I'll never forget
I just want to be near you*

Sufjan is admitting that a part of himself was lost in the sleeve of his mother. This may have been a place where she kept things, like her cigarettes, hidden away. Sufjan’s lyrics suggest that Carrie cared about him but she kept her feelings from him while they were together in Oregon. Additionally, Sufjan is remembering how Carrie, despite her dependency on illicit substances and mental health issues, kept all of her problems locked away so that she could be with her family. Sufjan’s verse may reveal his deep appreciation for the sacrifices Carrie made to be with him. He will “never forget” the three summers where he was able to be with his mother. Sufjan ends this verse by reiterating how he longs to be emotionally near his mother in light of recalling these treasured memories of her. By reflecting on his memories of Carrie and by singing about

how her actions affected his life, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering. In explaining this point, Hoy notes that remembering may include happy memories as well as regrets around aspects of the relationship that may have been missing, especially in relationships plagued by ambivalence, addiction, and abuse.

*Still, I pray to what I cannot see
In the sprinkler, I mark
The evidence known from the start
From the bed near your death
And all the machines that made a mess
Far away, the falcon flew
Now I want to be near you*

Sufjan is holding onto his faith in God throughout his grief as he “pray[s] to what [he] cannot see”. Additionally, Sufjan may have seen a rainbow in the sprinkler water and was reminded of “the evidence known from the start”. This could be the rainbow that represents God's Covenant with Noah and his family to never again flood the Earth (Genesis 9:8-17). While his faith may waver at times, Sufjan's trust in God remains solid throughout his bereavement process and thus the grief Sufjan sings about in this verse can be conceptualized by Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

Sufjan is ruminating on his childhood memories of Carrie and the time he spent with Lowell in Eugene. By basking in the metaphorical light of these memories and by finding beauty in them, Sufjan may be continuing to appreciate the time he was able to spend with his family. Dwelling in his recollections of his mother, Sufjan is finding reverence in those three short summers. As a result, Sufjan has acquired a new

perspective on his relationship with Carrie. He has found meaning in singing about his childhood memories and has found benefits through his bereavement. Thus, Sufjan is engaging in Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) benefit finding process.

*What's left is only bittersweet
For the rest of my life
Admitting the best is behind me
Now I'm drunk and afraid
Wishing the world would go away
What's the point of singing songs
If they'll never even hear you?*

In this verse, Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he is acknowledging that his ability to spend time with his mother has come to an end and that he will never see her again. As he laments her death, he admits that those summers with Carrie were among the best moments of his life. Knowing that his relationship with his mother was complex and that he rarely got to see her after those summers, Sufjan's lyrics suggest a downwards spirals into depression and despair in these final lines. In response to his depression, Sufjan may have turned to alcohol and other substances to cope with his inner pain. He wishes that "the world would go away" so he would not have to continue to feel the pain brought on by his mother's death. In doing so, Sufjan's grief can be conceptualized by Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

Throughout the majority of this song, Sufjan is avoiding the painful sting of his grief by reminiscing on his childhood memories in Eugene with Carrie and Lowell. Yet by the end of the song, Sufjan recognizes that he will never be able to form new

memories with Carrie. Understanding this, Sufjan turns and confronts Stroebe and Schut's (2010) loss-orientation and bears the full weight of his anguish.

Fourth of July

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 6

*The evil, it spread like a fever ahead
It was night when you died, my firefly
What could I have said to raise you from the dead?
Oh, could I be the sky on the Fourth of July?*

Worden's (2018) first task of mourning, accepting the reality of the loss, illustrates Sufjan's struggles in accepting the idea that death is a natural part of life within this verse. This song is centered upon Sufjan's final conversation with Carrie while she is on her deathbed. The verses alternate between Sufjan's perspective and Carrie's point of view. Sufjan may have been in denial of his mother's death--thinking that he could bring her back to life through a miracle. Yet by asking, "What could I have said to raise you from the dead?", Sufjan may have come to terms with her death and understands that there is nothing that he can do to bring her back to life.

*"Well, you do enough talk
My little hawk, why do you cry?
Tell me, what did you learn from the Tillamook burn?
Or the Fourth of July?
We're all gonna die"*

In this chorus, Sufjan has begun to sing from Carrie's perspective. Sufjan does not clarify if Carrie actually spoke these words, thus it can be assumed that these lyrics are what Sufjan wished Carrie would have said to him. Carrie cares for Sufjan and comforts him. She tries to show Sufjan that her death is an inevitable event. Just as the raging Tillamook fire was eventually put out and how all firework shows come to an end, Carrie's death was inescapable and expected. Carrie wants Sufjan to understand that everyone will eventually die and that he must come to terms with her death, thus the grief displayed in this verse can be conceptualized by Worden's (2018) first task of mourning, accepting the reality of the loss.

*Sitting at the bed with the halo at your head
Was it all a disguise, like junior high?
Where everything was fiction, future, and prediction
Now, where am I? My fading supply*

With Carrie at her deathbed, Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he begins to see all the good and beauty inside of her as he notices the "halo at [her] head". Now that Carrie is dying, the goodness inside of her is coming into perspective, and Sufjan may be

wondering if he was too critical in his judgments of her. As a result, Sufjan is unsure if his negative opinions about his distant mother were simply a disguise that hid the real Carrie from him. Since he lived most of his life without his mother, Sufjan constructed “the mythology of Carrie” as a way to know her (Dombal, 2015). Yet this was not the same Carrie that lay before him in the ICU. He does not know which of his conceptualizations of her were “fiction, future, and prediction”. Sufjan is struggling to see where the mythology of Carrie ends and where she begins. By recalling the constructed memories that detailed whom he believed Carrie was, Sufjan is engaging with Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering.

Worden’s (2018) third task of mourning, adjusting to a world without the deceased, is illustrated as Sufjan is struggling to understand how to integrate his new understanding of Carrie into his old conceptualizations of her and what this all means for his sense of self. Sufjan asks, “where am I? My fading supply” after reconciling the discrepancies in his perception of her. Even though Sufjan rarely saw his mother throughout most of his life, a part of his identity may have been founded in his understanding of his mother. Yet now that his understanding of his mother may have been a lie for almost forty years, he must discover what his new perception of his mother will mean for his sense of self.

*“Did you get enough love, my little dove?
Why do you cry?
And I’m sorry I left, but it was for the best
Though it never felt right
My little Versailles”*

Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering is utilized in this verse as Sufjan once again sings from Carrie's perspective in this chorus. Sufjan likely wanted Carrie to comfort him while he was with her in the ICU and to make him believe that she regretted leaving him. Ultimately, Sufjan's lyrics suggest his understanding of why Carrie left his family. He has expressed his gratitude for her actions in an interview with Pitchfork. In that same interview, Sufjan shares that he and his mother expressed a "reciprocal deep love and care for each other at that moment" (Dombal, 2015). By channeling the love he and his mother expressed towards one another in those tender moments, Sufjan was able to craft the conversation seen throughout this song.

The hospital asked, 'Should the body be cast?'
Before I say goodbye, my star in the sky
Such a funny thought to wrap you up in cloth
Do you find it all right, my dragonfly?
'Shall we look at the moon, my little loon?
Why do you cry?
Make the most of your life, while it is rife
While it is light
Well, you do enough talk
My little hawk, why do you cry?
Tell me, what did you learn from the Tillamook burn?

*Or the Fourth of July?
We're all gonna die"*

In this verse, Sufjan continues to sing from Carrie's perspective. Carrie urges Sufjan to "make the most of [his] life" while he is still youthful. Carrie is continuing to comfort Sufjan through her words. By transforming his relationship with Carrie into a conversation through the medium of song, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of release. Additionally, by singing from Carrie's perspective, Sufjan is evaluating who Carrie was as an individual and how her actions have impacted him. As a result, Sufjan is also engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering.

In this verse, Carrie is compelling Sufjan to continue to live well and to find meaning in the world around him while he is still youthful. She may also be reminding Sufjan of his mortality by telling him that "we're all gonna die". Carrie implores Sufjan to derive meaning through his bereavement process while he still has time on Earth. Writing from Carrie's perspective, Sufjan believes that Carrie's spirit is imploring him to construct new meaning structures and to find benefit through his grief. Thus Sufjan is engaging in Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) process of benefit finding.

*We're all gonna die
We're all gonna die
We're all gonna die
We're all gonna die
We're all gonna die
We're all gonna die
We're all gonna die*

Carrie first told Sufjan that “We’re all gonna die” as a way of reminding him that dying is a natural part of life. Yet when he repeats the line over and over again, there is a connotation of terror and fixation. Sufjan does not find any comfort in this phrase, instead, Sufjan may be finding horror in the inevitability of death. By repeating this line many times, Sufjan may be emphasizing how much he lost when his mother died. Sufjan has become pessimistic and hollow in her absence. This pessimistic outlook is further emphasized in the next song, “The Only Thing”. As Sufjan is grieving Carrie’s death in this verse, he is undergoing Hoy’s (2016) compass point of realizing.

The Only Thing

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 7

*The only thing that keeps me from driving this car
Half-light, jack knife into the canyon at night
Signs and wonders: Perseus aligned with the skull
Slain Medusa, Pegasus alight from us all*

Struggling to cope with his mother's death and potentially contemplating suicide, Sufjan searches for meaningful anchors to support him in his loss. The lyrics suggest that the beautiful stars in the heavens above prevented him from steering his car off of a cliff. He may have been captivated by the constellation of Persius and find hope in the mythology. According to myth, Perseus killed the Gorgon Medusa by decapitating her. Pegasus was foaled from her blood and flew up to the heavens to be raised by the Muses (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Sufjan is quite similar to Pegasus in that both of them were born to a mother who could not take care of them. Pegasus was able to ascend to the heavens and live a fantastical life and Sufjan may hope that he will be able to grow through his grief and live well. By finding this mythological anchor that supports him throughout his mourning process, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

Sufjan places meaning in the constellation of Pegasus. He sees himself as this winged horse, unbound and free and he longs to share the sky with him. By relating to the story of Pegasus and identifying with him, Sufjan is reconstructing his perceptions of himself in an attempt to find meaning in his bereavement process. Thus Sufjan is engaging with Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) process of identity change.

*Do I care if I survive this?
Bury the dead where they're found
In a veil of great surprises;
I wonder, did you love me at all?*

Sufjan may be singing about the pain he is experiencing as he grieves Carrie's death. He wonders if Carrie ever "lov[ed him] at all". By allowing himself to fully experience the pain of his grief, Sufjan is partaking in Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

This song is rife with the pain and misery Sufjan bears as he broods upon the suicidal ideations he wrestled with in the wake of Carrie's death. Equipt with a negative effect, Sufjan may be feeling nihilistic and may not care if he survives this torturous bereavement process. Yet by allowing himself to feel these emotions instead of avoiding them and distracting himself, Sufjan is confronting Stroebe and Schut's (2010) loss-orientation.

*The only thing that keeps me from cutting my arm
Cross hatch, warm bath, Holiday Inn after dark
Signs and wonders: water stain riding the wall
Daniel's message: blood of the moon on us all*

Similar to the first verse in this song, Sufjan begins with a plan to end his life that is ultimately foiled by the "water stain riding the wall" in the hotel, he may have been staying at. This water stain reminds Sufjan of an apocalyptic prophecy found in the Old

Testament book of Daniel. Chapter five of this book tells of a strange message that was etched into the wall of Belshazzar's palace, and Daniel was summoned to interpret the message. Daniel read out the words upon the wall and foretold the destruction of Belshazzar's kingdom (Daniel 5:5-31 KJV). Sufjan is referencing this prophecy and applying it to his own life. His lyrics suggest that these suicidal ideations have filled him with nihilistic dread and have led him to interpret Daniel's message as a prophecy for his destruction. Even though these thoughts are self-destructive in nature, by holding onto his religious beliefs, Sufjan can stave off his suicidal ideations. As a result, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

The pain Sufjan is experiencing is so potent and his lyrics suggest that he is on the verge of committing suicide. While there are anchors that bolster his strength and prevent him from hurting himself, he is still working through his grief and feeling the pain that his grief brings on. By undergoing his grief work, Sufjan is engaging in Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

*Do I care if I despise this? Nothing else matters, I know
In a veil of great disguises; how do I live with your ghost?*

In this verse, Sufjan may be embracing his grief and allowing the pain he feels to wash over himself. He repeatedly recognizes his brokenness in the wake of Carrie's death. There is "Nothing else [that] matters" to Sufjan other than grieving for his mother and reconciling the complicated relationship that they shared. Sufjan is engaging in

Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief due to his expression of grief during this verse

Additionally, Sufjan may be searching for a way to incorporate Carrie's many "great disguises" into his newly-found understanding of her. By accomplishing this, Sufjan may find a way to continue living with Carrie's ghost. He yearns to find a way to coexist with her. In light of Carrie's death, Sufjan may be actively building a reformed understanding of her. In doing so, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of releasing.

*Should I tear my eyes out now?
Everything I see returns to you, somehow
Should I tear my heart out now?
Everything I feel returns to you, somehow
I want to save you from your sorrow*

Sufjan continues to sit with his grief and he may be wondering if the only way to keep himself from ruminating is to both "tear [his] eyes out" and to "tear [his] heart out". Everything Sufjan saw and felt seems to have reminded him of his mother and these continual thoughts tormented him. Yet this bridge has a hopeful ending as Sufjan appears to be expressing his desire to "save [Carrie] from [her] sorrow". Even though the constant reminders of Carrie pain him, Sufjan loves his mother and wishes that he could ease the suffering she experienced while she was alive. By experiencing the pain of grief, Sufjan is enacting Hoy's (2016) compass point of realizing.

The only reason why I continue at all

*Faith in reason, I wasted my life playing dumb
Signs and wonders: sea lion caves in the dark
Blind faith, God's grace, nothing else left to impart*

Contrasting with the dark themes found elsewhere in this song, this verse is full of hope as Sufjan sings about the aspects of his life that have kept him alive amidst his grief. The sea lion caves Sufjan sings about is a location on the Oregon coast where people can observe the sea lions in the wild (*Sea Lion Caves*, 2020). Sufjan uses the beauty and value that he sees in this location as a mechanism to work through his grief. Rather than ruminating upon his mother every time he is reminded of her, Sufjan now sees the beauty of the natural world. By finding meaningful anchors that support him through his bereavement process, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

*"Do I care if I survive this? Bury the dead where they're found
In a veil of great surprises; hold to my head till I drown
Should I tear my eyes out now, before I see too much?
Should I tear my arms out now? I wanna feel your touch"*

Sufjan's lyrics once more suggests his inner debates over whether or not he cares about outliving his grief. Even though Carrie's remains were laid to rest, Sufjan may have yet to bury her mentally. He continues to ruminate through these lyrics and they suggest

that he has yet to come to terms with her death. Riddled with grief, Sufjan once more contemplated tearing out his eyes and his arms either metaphorically or physically, because everything he sees and feels reminds him of his late mother. Continuing to embrace the pain of his grief, Sufjan is engaging in Worden's second task of mourning.

Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he is continuing to question his ability to survive his bereavement process as he harbors thoughts of mutilation and self-destruction. Sufjan appears to be spending a great deal of time Stroebe and Schut's (2010) loss-orientation without oscillating to the restoration-orientation given as these past two songs have focused primarily on the loss-orientation. Stroebe and Schut (2010) describe a form of grief termed "chronic grief" whereby the bereaved remains focused on the loss-orientation throughout much of their bereavement process. This is an extreme form of grief that may lead to complications and poor adaption during the bereavement process. Sufjan's lyrics suggest that his chronic grief may have given rise to these suicidal ideations that indicate his poor ability to adapt to Carrie's death.

*Should I tear my eyes out now?
Everything I see returns to you, somehow
Should I tear my heart out now?
Everything I feel returns to you, somehow*

The outro is a continuation of lyrics found elsewhere throughout this song. Sufjan's lyrics point towards his difficulties in coming to terms with Carrie's death as everything around him may be a reminder of her absence. By ruminating and

experiencing his grief, Sufjan is engaging in Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

Carrie and Lowell

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 8

*Carrie and Lowell
Such a long time ago
Like a dead horse
Meadowlark, drive your arrow*

Through his song, Sufjan may be reflecting upon his childhood memories of Carrie and Lowell. He calls upon the Oregon state bird, the Meadowlark, to return these memories to him. The symbolism of the Meadowlark "driv[ing] your arrow" indicates that Sufjan knows that these childhood memories may be painful yet he wants to experience them anyway. His lyrics suggest that understands that his constant ruminations on the broken relationship he and Carrie shared are akin to beating "a dead horse" yet he surrounds himself in her memory. In doing so, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering.

*Season of hope (after the flood)
Valentine, spurn my sorrow
Head on the floorboards (covered in blood)
Drunk as a horsefly
Climb on the mattress pad
Twist my arm*

Sufjan begins this verse by singing about the promise God made to Abraham and his family after the biblical flood receded to never flood the world again. This promise of peace provides hope to Sufjan while he remembers his painful memories of his mother. Just as he invoked Oregon's state bird to assist him in the recall of his past, Sufjan also calls to St. Valentine to "spurn [his] sorrow". The state of Oregon was founded on Valentine's day in 1859 (*Oregon and Arizona Become U.S. States*, 2021). By invoking St. Valentine, Sufjan may be calling out to Oregon, and his memories of those summers there by association so that they can protect him from the sorrow he finds in his painful recollections. As Sufjan is recalling these memories, he may be describing this pain he experiences as hitting his "head on the floorboards [and being] covered in blood". Reflecting upon his experiences, Sufjan may be tortured by the memories of his mother that "twist [his] arm". By recalling and reflecting upon his memories of Carrie, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering.

*Under the pear tree
Shadows and light conspiring
Covered bridge, I scream
Cottage Grove shade, invite me*

Now that Sufjan has been protected by the state of Oregon, he can recall his journey through Oregon with Carrie and Lowell. He first sings of the pears grown in Medford, a city Sufjan may have traveled through on his way to Eugene, Oregon. There

are fifty-four covered bridges all around Oregon and he may have passed through some while he visited his mother and stepfather (Boyd, 2017). Finally, Sufjan recalls resting in the shade of “Cottage Grove”, a town south of Eugene. Additionally, he asks all of these locations to “invite [him]” so that he may find peace in these memories. As he recalls these locations from his summers in Oregon and finds comfort in them as he grieves, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering.

I will bow down (Dido's Lament)
Lord of the ancient waters
From the backyard (as far as she went)
Carrie surprised me
Erebus on my back
My lucky charm

Sufjan may be recalling a time when Carrie surprised him from afar while she was in the backyard. By saying that Carrie was far away from him when she surprised him, Sufjan may be remembering how distant their relationship was, even when they were together. By recalling and reflecting upon his memories of Carrie, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering.

Carried by stones
Fairyland all around us
Like a dead horse
Sign of your children's fever
Carrie, come home (Thorazine's friend)
Holding your hands with opal
Like a dead horse (Shall we ascend?)
Flight of the mayfly
Ephemeria on my back
She breaks my arm

Sufjan opens this verse by calling out to Carrie, asking her to return to him. His lyrics suggest that after reflecting upon his memories of Oregon, he wants nothing more than to be with his mother. He may also be reflecting upon the mental illnesses she struggled with when he calls Carrie “Thorazine’s friend”, a prescription drug commonly used to treat schizophrenia (Cuncha). Sufjan concludes this song by singing that Carrie “breaks [his] arm”. The musician has been asked about this lyric in a 2015 interview with Uncut yet he refuses to answer (Snapes). Thus the meaning of this lyric can only be speculated. Perhaps this is a continuation of the line “Twist my arm” from earlier in the song. It is as if the ghost of Carrie’s memory is continuing to hurt Sufjan as he recalls his past. As he continues to remember her, the pain in his arm grows so great that it eventually breaks. By reflecting upon his memories of his mother and how those memories impacted his life, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy’s (2016) compass point of remembering.

Beloved of John

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 8

*Are we to speak, first day of the week
Stumbling words at the bar
Beauty blue eyes, my order of fries
Long Island kindness and wine*

*Beloved of John, I get it all wrong
I read you for some kind of poem
Covered in lines, the fossils I find
Have they no life of their own?*

The lyrics suggest that Sufjan reacts to his grief by visiting bars and becoming intoxicated. He mingles with someone at the bar, and his interactions with this individual can be found later in this song. While he tries to understand his past through the few memories, he possesses of his mother, Sufjan may be reassessing his understanding of the Gospel--specifically the Gospel of John. Sufjan believes that his understanding of John's Gospel was "all wrong" as he initially "read [the Gospel] for some kind of poem". Yet as his worldview was altered by the death of his mother and he may have begun to re-think Jesus's teachings. Sufjan wonders if the words contained within this Gospel are full of life, instead of mere symbols and the hidden meanings that may be found by someone reading a poem. By reflecting on his faith and religion during his time of grief, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

Sufjan's lyrics suggest that after Carrie's death, he realized that his understanding of the bible may have been incorrect. Before Carrie's death, Sufjan read the Gospel of John like a poem, full of symbols and hidden meanings. After her death, he may have begun to reassess his interpretation of this Gospel, and he may be wondering if this work can be read as a true and lived experience. Instead of viewing this Gospel as a symbolic work, he begins to perceive the reality of Jesus's life and his profound suffering. Perhaps Sufjan finds comfort in recognizing Jesus's suffering and finds solace in knowing that just as he is suffering, so too did Jesus suffer. By reconstructing his spiritual beliefs, he is

redefining his meaning structures and is engaging in the benefit-finding process outlined by Gillies and Neimeyer (2006).

*So can we pretend, sweetly
Before the mystery ends?
I am a man with a heart that offends
With its lonely and greedy demands
There's only a shadow of me; in a matter of speaking, I'm dead*

In this verse, Sufjan sings about the individual he met at the bar in the first verse. Since he rarely received any form of affection from his mother, Sufjan may be desperately pursuing affection from others. He finds momentary comfort in being with this person yet the lyrics suggest that he knows the relationship is unhealthy and unsustainable. Regardless, Sufjan asks his partner if they can “pretend, sweetly before the mystery ends”. Even though he may deeply desire this affection, he believes that he is “a man with a heart that offends with its lonely and greedy demands”. Sufjan may be feeling selfish for desiring this comfort and for using others to obtain a sense of security. Additionally, Sufjan feels that there is only a “shadow of [himself], in a matter of speaking [he is] dead”. Without any hope that Carrie would return to his life, Sufjan appears to be lost and broken inside. As a result of his dwelling in his grief and pain, Sufjan is undergoing Worden’s (2018) second task for mourning, processing the pain of grief.

*Such a waste, your beautiful face
Stumbling carpet arise
Go follow your gem, your white feathered friend*

*Icarus, point to the sun
If history speaks of two baby teeth
I'm painting the hills blue and red
They said beware, Lord, hear my prayer
I've wasted my throes on your head
So can we be friends, sweetly
Before the mystery ends?
I love you more than the world can contain
In its lonely and ramshackle head
There's only a shadow of me; in a matter of speaking, I'm dead*

The individual Sufjan sings about earlier in this song makes an appearance in this verse. In the wake of his mother's death, Sufjan has invested himself in a relationship with this individual as he "love[s them] more than the world can contain in its lonely and ramshackle head" and yearns for his partner to be his friend and to love him the same way that he loves them. Whether or not this relationship lasted for an extended period, Sufjan appears to have found meaning in his interactions with them and as a result, found benefits during his bereavement process and attempted to reconstruct his pre-loss meaning structures into new post-loss meaning structures as understood by Gillies and Neimeyer (2006).

*I'm holding my breath
My tongue on your chest
What can be said of my heart?
If history speaks, the kiss on my cheek
Where there remains but a mark
Beloved, my John, so I'll carry on
Counting my cards down to one
And when I am dead, come visit my bed
My fossil is bright in the sun*

Freeing himself from the social loneliness created by his depression-induced emotional isolation, Sufjan continues to engage in a relationship with this unknown individual. His relationship with them is convoluted and undefined. At times, this relationship becomes sexual as Sufjan places his “tongue on [their] chest”, and at other times, he asks them if they can just “be friends?”. Yet this relationship appears to have been short-lived; all that remains of his partner is a mark on his cheek from a potential kiss farewell. Recalling his relationship with this individual, Sufjan thinks fondly of their “beautiful face” and admits that it was “such a waste” to attempt to build a relationship with them when he was emotionally unstable and unable to build a lasting partnership. Even though his relationship ended, Sufjan will “carry on” and continue to move forward through his bereavement process. By avoiding isolation and attempting to build a new relationship with this individual after Carrie’s death, Sufjan is confronting Stroebe and Schut’s (2010) restoration-orientation.

*“So can we contend, peacefully
Before my history ends?
Jesus, I need you, be near me, come shield me
From fossils that fall on my head
There’s only a shadow of me;
in a matter of speaking, I’m dead”*

Sufjan may be asking Jesus to “be near [him and to] shield [him]” from his painful memories of Carrie. These “fossils that fall on [his] head” may be the burdensome memories Sufjan sings about. He is using his faith as an anchor to support

him in his bereavement process. Thus, Sufjan is experiencing Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

Shadow of the Cross

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 10

*Now that I fell into your arms
My only lover
Give out to give in
I search for the capsule I lost*

These lyrics point to Sufjan relapsing back into the avoidance of his grief by using illicit substances. He may have “fall[en] into [the] arms” of illicit drug dependency, alcoholism, and sex as these have become his only comfort and his “only lover”. Sufjan appears to have completely “give[n] in” to his dependencies in these practices. By using these drugs and engaging in these self-destructive behaviors, Sufjan is preventing himself from engaging with his grief and the pain that it induces. As a result, he is hindering himself from performing Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

Sufjan may have used drugs and consumed various amounts of alcohol before but now the lyrics suggest that he has become dependent upon them and that has shut himself away from everyone he once knew. These substances have become his “only lover”. Fleeing from experiencing the pain of his loss, Sufjan may be drowning out his sorrows

through self-medication and isolation. In previous songs, Sufjan allowed himself to feel his anguish and engage with it. Yet by neglecting to confront the pain stirred by his loss in this song, Sufjan has oscillated to avoiding Stroebe and Schut's (2010) loss-orientation.

*Drag me to hell in the valley of The Dalles
Like my mother
Give wings to a stone
It's only the shadow of a cross*

Downcast, the musician may now be singing about how he is following in his mother's footsteps in regards to his dependencies on illicit substances. Sufjan sings that he, "like [his] mother", uses these substances to feel some sense of freedom and peace. These substances give Sufjan wings to fly upon. He understands that his actions are only worsening his pain yet he does not make an attempt to free himself from his newfound dependencies, as suggested by the lyrics. Even though Sufjan is suffering through his grief, he recognizes that the pain he is feeling is only a "shadow of [Carrie's] cross". Sufjan believes that Carrie truly suffered through her life and even while he is wrapped within his inner turmoil, he believes that the pain he is experiencing is still not as great as the cross Carrie bore throughout her life. By participating in the same self-destructive activities as his mother, Sufjan is participating in Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering.

*I slept on my back in the shade of the meadowlark
Like a champion
Get drunk to get laid
I take one more hit when you depart*

Sufjan is continuing to engage in dangerous activities to be emotionally close to his mother. Sufjan's lyrics suggest his descent into alcoholism, engagement in risky sex, and the use of illicit substances in an attempt to be intimate with Carrie. By engaging in the same self-destructive practices that his mother engaged in, Sufjan may be able to be emotionally close to her. As he reflects upon Carrie's past actions and partaking in them himself, Sufjan is enacting Hoy's (2016) compass point of remembering.

*I'll drive that stake through the center of my heart
Lonely vampire
Inhaling its fire
I'm chasing the dragon too far*

These lyrics suggest that Sufjan is contemplating whether or not he should take his own life and permanently rid himself of his pain. He may be diving deeper into his drug dependencies and has "chas[ed] the dragon too far", continuing to lose himself in his dependencies. The imagery of a stake being driven through the center of his heart is similar to injecting a drug into his body through a hypodermic needle. By continuing to use illicit substances and avoiding the pain of his mourning process, Sufjan is preventing himself from experiencing Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

*There's blood on that blade
Fuck me, I'm falling apart
My assassin
Like Casper the ghost*

There's no shade in the shadow of the cross

Sufjan's lyrics suggest that he recognizes how far his grief has driven him and what he has allowed himself to do as a result of his pain. Unlike "The Only Thing" where there was something that kept him from cutting himself, now there is nothing to hold him back. Sufjan may have lost hope in anything that can save him. Not even his faith can save him at this point. There is no solace for him in "the shadow of the cross". Due to Sufjan allowing himself to experience the full weight of his loss, he is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of realizing.

My Blue Bucket of Gold

Carrie and Lowell (2015),

Track 11

*My blue bucket of gold
Friend, why don't you love me?
Once the myth has been told
The lens deforms it as lightning*

Sufjan's last song of the album evokes feelings of isolation and abandonment. In a soft and shallow voice, Sufjan may be asking his mother, "Friend, why dont you love me?". His tender and defeated voice lingers for a moment after he poses the question. The blue bucket of gold Sufjan mentions in this verse alludes to the Blue Bucket Mine, a fabled treasure site somewhere in Oregon's wilderness (*The Lost Blue Bucket Mine in Oregon – Legends of America*, n.d.). By using this metaphor, Sufjan may be singing about finding the only treasure more valuable to him than gold, love from his mother. The lyrics suggest that Sufjan longs for any semblance of compassion from his mother and he grieves that he will never be able to receive that love from her. By feeling the pain of his grief, Sufjan is evoking Hoy's (2016) compass point of realizing.

*Raise your right hand
Tell me you want me in your life
Or raise your red flag
Just when I want you in my life*

Desperate to feel his mother's love, Sufjan asks Carrie to "raise [her] right hand] and tell him if she truthfully "want[s him] in [her] life". Yet Sufjan knows that she is just as likely to decline his offer and "raise [her] red flag", signifying that she does not want him in her life. Burdened by Carrie's lack of response, Sufjan may be grieving the

relationship he was never able to build with his mother. By feeling the pain of his grief, Sufjan is engaging in Worden's (2018) second task of mourning, processing the pain of grief.

*Search for things to extol
Friend, the fables delight me
My blue bucket of gold
Lord, touch me with lightning*

In the face of his grief, Sufjan searches for "things to extol". He wants to fill his life with beauty and objects that bring him peace. Sufjan thoroughly enjoys fables and other such mythologies and many of his other albums are filled with such stories. These stories act as an anchor that supports Sufjan in his grieving process. He relates to these tales and shares his personal experiences through metaphors rooted in myth. By engaging in anchors that allow Sufjan to find meaning throughout his loss, Sufjan is engaging in Hoy's (2016) compass point of reaffirming.

*"Raise your right hand
Tell me you want me in your life
Or raise your red flag
Just when I want you in my life*

CHAPTER FOUR

Personal Implications For this Thesis

Having completed our conceptual analysis of Sufjan's grief as seen within *Carrie* and *Lowell* through the lenses of several contemporary models for grief and bereavement, we can now turn to our fourth and final chapter. Within this section, I will discuss why I

decided to write this thesis, how this experience will allow me to be a more competent health care provider in the future, the clinical significance of this project, and the psychological limitations of this study.

During the fall semester of 2019, I studied under Dr. Hoy in his medical humanities course titled End-of-Life Care & Bereavement. Within this class, I learned about the role of healthcare professionals in the dying experience with patients, families, and their communities. Additionally, our class discussed grief, bereavement, and palliative care at the end of life (Coursicle). Throughout my studies, I found myself drawn to topics about grief and complicated bereavement. Already familiar with Sufjan's work, I began to envision his bereavement experience while I read through class material and participated in lectures.

With a new understanding of grief and bereavement, I developed a stronger appreciation for the lyrics within this album and desired to learn more about Sufjan's loss experience. I approached Dr. Hoy during the spring 2020 semester and asked him if he would aid me in my pursuit to conceptualize Sufjan's bereavement process through this album. He agreed and provided me with reading material to learn about several mechanisms for bereavement. After several weeks of reading and research, I was ready to conceptualize Sufjan's lyrics through these mechanisms and thus I embarked upon my thesis writing journey.

While I initially learned about the bereavement mechanisms written by Worden, Hoy, Gillies, Neimeyer, Stroebe, and Schut to discover more about Sufjan's bereavement process, there are many other applications for this knowledge outside of my studies.

Having become comfortable applying several mechanisms of grief and bereavement to Sufjan's work, I am better prepared to assist in the bereavement processes of families and communities who have experienced loss as a practicing healthcare provider.

Death is an inescapable event that everyone will encounter during their time upon this Earth. Although the number of Americans dying in the hospital setting has been declining in recent years, according to a 2018 report by the CDC, up to 35.1% of deaths in the United States occur in the hospital setting (*QuickStats: Percentage of Deaths, by Place of Death* . . . , 2020). As an aspiring physician myself, I will likely encounter people in the process of dying and their grieving families throughout my career. Thus I must not only be prepared to have discussions about death with those in the processes of dying, but I must also be comfortable having hard conversations with those whom the deceased leave behind. While my knowledge of these mechanisms for bereavement may not directly aid me in consoling and comforting the bereaved, it has provided me a strong understanding of what their bereavement process may look like. Additionally, I can guide them through their bereavement journey and I can reassure them when they feel pain and despair.

When my future patients are experiencing loss, I can educate them about the complexities of grief and can help them to unlearn misinformed understandings of grief. Misinformed notions such as the idea that grief is a linear process and that reentering previously encountered stages of grief is abnormal or that everyone's bereavement process is identical. By informing the bereaved about the complexities of grief and the

individuality of their experience, I hope to increase their ability to pursue a healthy bereavement process.

As I have spent this past year learning about the different mechanisms for bereavement, I have become more comfortable engaging in conversations about grief and loss. While I will never fully understand the personalized pain generated by loss and the emotions one feels as a result of their loss, I recognize that grief is a complex experience that requires patience and a willingness to feel one's emotions.

While I was able to conceptualize Sufjan's grief through the aforementioned mechanisms for bereavement, there were several psychological limitations to this study. I cannot truly understand what Sufjan's bereavement process was like because each loss experience is deeply personal and tailored to the bereaved. Sufjan's bereavement process was unique to him due to his complicated relationship with Carrie, his past loss experiences, and the myriad of personal details that influenced his bereavement process. The only information I have about his loss experience is through the lyrics on the album and the handful of interviews published online where Sufjan explains his bereavement experiences. As a result, my understanding of Sufjan's bereavement process is quite narrow in scope. Yet to accurately conceptualize the grief within each song, I had to make assumptions about what his lyrics said about his bereavement experience. It would have been inappropriate for me to have assumed that all of Sufjan's lyrics were to be taken literally. Thus, my analyses of each lyric were hesitant and speculative in nature. Despite this shortcoming, I was still able to conceptualize the grief Sufjan displays within each song.

A project that started as a desire to grow closer to Sufjan and his music has turned into a learning experience that has prepared me to assist the bereaved in the healthcare setting. Learning several bereavement mechanisms to conceptualize Sufjan's grief has provided me with a sturdy foundation upon which I can continue to grow and become comfortable leading conversations about grief with future patients and families.

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