

## Article

# Silence and Sounds: An Autoethnography of Searching for Spirituality during Suicide Bereavement in Life and Research

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**Abstract:** In this article, I used autoethnography to describe and analyze my experience of being bereaved by suicide and researching spirituality during suicide bereavement. The culture silenced my grief, and this is congruent with the experiences of my research participants. The religious community, in my case, did not help me and added to my spiritual and psychological pain. The silenced parts of my loss started to make sounds, such as psychological disturbances, but also as unconscious and conscious choices, which led to immersing myself in the research of spirituality during suicide bereavement. Research on the topic goes hand in hand with my search for spirituality during suicide bereavement and reviewing my loss. My story suggests that despite the negative experiences with Catholic priests, spirituality during suicide bereavement can become a vital resource to find meaning for the loss and the pain of grief and can take many different and even unexpected forms.

**Keywords:** spirituality; suicide bereavement; silent grief; trauma; autoethnography



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## 1. Introduction

*‘Please give me the operationalization of the construct of spirituality,’—the professor says during the Ph.D. entrance exam.*

*I feel annoyed by that kind of question. I have already given a definition provided by K. Pargament (2007) in the book about spirituality and psychotherapy. Spirituality is ‘A search for the Sacred.’ However, the professor wants more. He wants that everything would be measurable, even spirituality. He seems to disagree with my idea of talking widely about spirituality during suicide bereavement. He is not the only one.*

Despite my slightly rebellious attitude towards the atmosphere of my university, I got in. Today I am at the end of the third year of my Ph.D. journey (Stanley 2014). My Ph.D. research topic involves spirituality, religiosity, and suicide bereavement themes. I have already conducted a systematic review, interviewed 11 women who lost their life partners due to suicide, and analyzed the data. My Ph.D. journey is like canyoning through a variety of rivers. Some rivers are easy, calm, and enjoyable—for example, I like lecturing and working with students, reading, and writing. Other rivers are burdensome, dangerous, and exhausting. For example, the personal involvement in my research, ‘digesting’ traumatic material from the interviews, meeting unsupportive academics who ask me to defend my topic as scientific constantly, and re-living my trauma of my best friend’s suicide while conducting the research. Despite my efforts to place strict boundaries between my work and life, my research about spirituality during suicide bereavement proceeds in my work and personal life.

During my search for spirituality during suicide bereavement, I often experience the thick cover of silence surrounding the topics. When I defend my Ph.D. research topic, I am questioned about definitions and operationalizations and not about the meaning of the research. When I talk about spirituality and grief with my friends, they usually change the topic. When I remember my loss due to suicide, I remember my loneliness and shutting my

feelings down as much as I could. When I talk to my research participants about their grief, they usually explain that coming to participate is helpful for them more than for me because research is a rare chance to talk about their experience and be listened to. When I search for literature about spirituality during suicide bereavement, I find a severe knowledge gap (Čepulienė et al. 2021; Colucci and Martin 2008). Although grief after suicide is a more researched phenomenon (Young et al. 2012), the role of spirituality and religiosity during suicide bereavement is not well understood.

I lost my best friend due to suicide when I was 16 and was left alone with no help afterwards. My parents, friends, teachers, and priests did not acknowledge my grief. The grief after suicide is usually silent grief (Lukas and Seiden 2007). Grief is usually culturally defined—how much time it is appropriate to grieve, how the funeral should look like, and with whom one is ‘allowed’ to cry about their pain (Doka and Aber 2002). If the cause of the death is a suicide, the grief process can become incredibly complicated and painful (Jordan 2001, 2017). A loved one’s suicide usually provokes intense feelings of guilt, shame, anger, sadness, longing, and the haunting question of “why”—why did they do it, what are the reasons, and what could have been done differently (Jordan 2001, 2017; Jordan and McGann 2017). Since suicide is not a topic that is often and freely talked about, there is a tendency for a person who lost someone due to suicide to experience shame, isolate oneself from others, and even get stigmatized or perceive others’ behavior as stigmatizing (Hanschmidt et al. 2016; Pompili et al. 2013; Sheehan et al. 2018). A bereaved person might find themselves alone with all the painful grief or even not allowing themselves to grieve, which can provoke disturbing psychological consequences such as dissociation, complicated grief, or posttraumatic stress disorder (Bellini et al. 2018; Linde et al. 2017). Therefore, the culturally defined grief in the case of a loss by suicide can function as an obstacle to grieving authentically and freely with support from other people.

After my loss, I indirectly tried to reach out to two of my school priests but did not get any comforting reactions. I experienced a spiritual crisis, which I noticed years later. My connection to my catholic religion was broken, and my beliefs in God, goodness, and purposeful life were shattered. I felt a strong sense of the presence of my lost friend, dreamed of her a lot, and was not able to comprehend what was happening to me. Spiritual questions usually are evoked when death takes our loved ones. Spiritual questions could become even more complicated if the death of a loved one were because of a loved one’s suicide (Lynn Gall et al. 2015; Castelli Dransart 2018; Čepulienė et al. 2021). Suicide raises questions, such as the Higher Power’s role in the world if suicides can happen? What happens to the loved one in the afterlife? Why do I dream about my loved one and experience their presence if I am unsure about the afterlife? Where do I find the explanations for my experiences? Does my religion or culture have any methods to help me? (Čepulienė et al. 2021). Moreover, here we, the scientists, the grievers, people, are met with a difficult task—we need to find ways to capture the silence of transcendence (Love 2011; Šliogeris 2011) and the silence of grief to contemplate, understand, relate to others, and help for people who suffer.

The silence surrounding the bereavement after suicide hides many sounds. The sounds are heard in dreams, sometimes representing neglected parts of the psyche, in conscious and unconscious choices, leading to the meaningful directions and allowing to make sense of the traumatic loss, and in spiritual experiences, which help to find connections with the more significant meaning of life. Becoming a peer counselor after losing a loved one due to suicide is a way to break the silence (Oulanova et al. 2014). In my case, my Ph.D. research is a clear expression of these sounds, breaking the silence. Intending to explore how searching for spirituality during suicide bereavement parallels life and research, how the silence surrounds the topic from a cultural perspective, and what sounds are hidden in this silence, I used autoethnography as a lens to analyze these themes. In the following sections, I will shortly describe autoethnography as a method and explain how this autoethnography was written. In the following sections, I will tell my story of loss, grief, and search for spirituality, and analyze it within the cultural and scientific context.

## 2. Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an intriguing qualitative method that combines the techniques of autobiography and ethnography (Adams et al. 2017; Ellis et al. 2011; Wall 2008). Autoethnography is based on the underlying assumption of qualitative research that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Méndez 2013; Wall 2008). The method's goal is to describe and analyze the personal experience and the cultural experience to better understand the culture (Ellis et al. 2011) and the experience. Autoethnography serves the purpose of offering accounts of personal experience to fill gaps in existing research, describing moments of everyday experience that cannot be captured through more traditional research methods, and creating texts that are accessible to larger audiences, primarily audiences outside of academic settings (Adams et al. 2017; Holman Jones et al. 2016). Therefore, it is an excellent method to break the silence, one which can be covered when the experience is not comfortable enough to be discussed loudly.

The autoethnographies differ from evocative to strictly analytical studies (Anderson 2006). The current autoethnography stands in the middle between evocative (focused mainly on my own experience) and analytical (which aims to formulate theoretical understandings) to create understanding beyond the data itself (Stanley 2014).

Autoethnography is written by retrospectively and selectively analyzing and describing a researcher's experiences with a connection to the culture to which the researcher belongs. The personal experience can be compared with existing research or interviews with other participants (Ellis et al. 2011). The current study method involved submersion into my memories, which were accompanied by rewatching photos of my deceased friend and me, reading her emails, going through my dream journal and notes about dreams and feelings, painting mind maps, writing and re-writing the text. Since I am on my way to becoming a Jungian analyst, the interpretations of my experience are influenced by scientific literature and analytic psychology ideas.

Ethical considerations about writing the autoethnography involve questions about revealing too much about other people in the narrative (Ellis 2007). I mention other people in the current narrative, but their identities cannot be identified from the text. I also declare that the story is written from my subjective and emotional perspective. Therefore, no generalized or objective conclusions about the others and their behavior in my story should be made. I invite the readers to interpret the others in my account as my inner parts or memories. I also revealed some confidential material about myself, and here the question comes to mind—is it ethical for my clients and my research participants if they would read this article? Although I am careful about pretending to know the answer, I decided to risk it, to be honest with myself and others. Finally, in the narrative, I use such relatively unethical words as “mad” when I write about my fear of having a psychosis or other psychological disorders. I use these words because they represent my inner stigma of having psychological problems, and this is important for my story, which in part is about denying the troubles I had.

## 3. The Dreams before the Ph.D. Entrance Exam

*I am sitting in a library in a group therapy session. Suddenly, I start hearing a voice from behind. I turn around and see a book with the face of my long-dead friend on the cover. The face talks and is the source of the voice. I get scared because I think that I have a psychosis. I start to shout to other people that they should get me to the hospital and lock me down. The tension and fear grow fast.*

I wake up. Tonight, is the night before my Ph.D. entrance exam. It was only a dream, I do not have a psychosis, but I am afraid. I manage to fall asleep again.

*I am now at my Ph.D. entrance exam. The teacher of analytical psychology studies, where I am a candidate to become a Jungian analyst, secretly invites me to come to her. She shows me her journal or a notebook and says, ‘Have you read these books—“The Idiot” by F. Dostoyevsky, “Narcissus and Goldmund”, and “Demian” by H. Hesse?’*

*“Yes, I have,”—I answer. “But I do not remember a lot”.*

*“Then come, I will show you my summaries. They will help you to pass the entrance exam”.—says my beloved teacher and smiles with wisdom. I am happy and calm. I feel deeply supported.*

*Suddenly, I find myself in my bed playing with a small doll, like a voodoo doll, throwing her into the air and catching her. I am laughing madly and saying aloud: “you see how easily destiny throws a person up and down”. Although I am the one who is saying that, I feel terrified.*

Once again, I wake up. My feelings are mixed. I am afraid that my Ph.D. studies will make me mad. My research topic will be the role of spirituality during suicide bereavement. Since the face and the voice on the book cover in the first dream were of my friend who died by suicide, I am thinking, what if this research theme is too hard for me, that it can re-traumatize me? Is it worth it to risk coming so near my pain, so near to the source of my biggest fears and doubts about the meaning of life, friendship, relationships, and the existence of God? And how will the strict and reductionistic academia take me in—firstly with my research topic, secondly, with my emotionality and personal involvement in the topic?

At the same time, I am very confident that I can get through the entrance exam because the inner figure with my teacher’s face, an authority figure, and a figure of wisdom shows me how—I need to remember the meaning of those books. These books, for me, are about finding connections between feelings and thinking, between experiencing and analyzing, and between authentic personal choices and the outer world’s requirements. I need to trust in the purpose of my research—not only to get the degree but to work on the understanding of the spirituality and religiosity during suicide bereavement, to promote the importance of talking about the theme, to raise awareness, to form practical guidelines, to break the silence. Maybe the wise older woman in my dream represents a part of the archetype of the Self, which can be defined as a hidden regulating or directing tendency, an organizing center (Von Franz 1988), and shows me the right way?

The last episode of the dream is the most confusing. Am I the voodoo doll or a person who is thrown around and who cannot consciously decide what she is doing with her professional and personal life? Or is it a lesson that all my choices are not only mine? The fear of getting poisoned by other people’s painful experiences and hopelessness grows again.

#### 4. My Silent Loss

My best friend, a lifelong neighbor from upstairs, died in 2009. She was 16 years old. I was 16 years old, too. She ended her own life by jumping from the balcony of her family’s apartment on the 8th floor.

It was a dark evening, 8 December, one week until her 17th birthday. I was at home, doing my math homework. I heard somebody screaming (later I found out it was her mother). I felt stressed out and very disturbed. As fast as I could, I wrote a phone message to my friend: “Is everything ok? I am scared.” she did not respond. The silence began. My father went out to check the situation. I heard a phone call, my mother answered. It was my father, telling my mother what had happened. Struggling, my mother asked me to the living room and introduced me to the news. “It was your friend,”—she told me. My initial reaction was bodily—my thighs started shaking and burning (which repeats now as an echo during my worst nights of insomnia when I am fighting my fear of death and disappearance). In my thoughts, I just could not believe that. Until then, I have never comprehended that there was such a thing as suicide. I had never thought about it. Nobody had ever talked to me about it—not in the family, not in school. Somehow, I also missed that in movies and literature. Nobody spoke to me, a 16-year-old teenager, about suicide also after this disaster. The silence proceeded.

My best friend’s suicide was a huge loss for me. I lost my friend, who was more like a sister to me. I lost my childhood naivety and carelessness. I lost the deep teenage

conversations about happy events and problems, love life, and school difficulties. I lost the belief in a good and purposeful life. I lost trust in my ability to understand people's feelings and help them. I lost faith in my parents' ability to soothe me. I lost two parts of myself for a time—first, the childish and curious one. Secondly, the part, which was angry, depressed, and mutilated, therefore repressed into the deeper parts of my psyche.

I live in Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, a European Union country. Lithuania has less than 3 million inhabitants, and every year around 650 people here die by suicide ([World Population Review 2022](#)). This leaves around 6500 people who become bereaved by suicide every year and must deal with grief ([Cerel et al. 2014](#)). There is no proactive help for the bereaved in my country, which is essential in suicide postvention ([Jordan and McGann 2017](#)). Many people bereaved by suicide at the rare opportunities to talk reveal that they find themselves in silence ([Hanschmidt et al. 2016](#); [Klimaitė and Geleželytė 2015](#)). Sometimes, they do not want to talk about what happened. Other times, others do not want to talk about what happened.

Not naming the feelings and not talking about grief is not giving any structure to the experience ([Lukas and Seiden 2007](#)). The unnamed and unworked parts tend to be dissociated or repressed and later can become autonomous sub-personalities ([Jung 1989](#); [Kalshed 1996](#)), finding their ways to show up in most uncomfortable timings and forms.

My best friend's suicide was missed as a critical, emotional, and challenging experience for me. A theory about disenfranchised grief explains that some losses are looked at differently than others ([Corr 1999](#); [Doka and Aber 2002](#)). Suicide as a reason for death is related to the stigmatization of the bereaved and those who died by suicide ([Hanschmidt et al. 2016](#); [Pompili et al. 2013](#); [Sheehan et al. 2018](#)). Therefore, this kind of loss has a higher risk of becoming disenfranchised. Being only a friend, not a member of a nuclear family, also makes the potential of disenfranchised grief bigger. Moreover, being a teenager can also add to the risk of not being noticed as a grieving person ([Doka 2002](#)). At last, not allowing oneself to grieve, not adding oneself to people who are culturally 'allowed' to grief, provokes self-disenfranchised grief ([Kauffman 2002](#)). The disenfranchised grief is now an explanation for why I was so afraid and ashamed of everything that happened to me after my friend died and why no one paid attention to me after my loss.

### 5. Silence Is Strongness?

"I needed to be strong, not show my weaknesses during the funeral"—tells one of my research participants about the funeral of her husband, who died by suicide. Feelings and tears for her were weaknesses and had to be left for her alone time. Something similar happened to me during my best friend's funeral. My parents were quite strict with me when I refused to go to the funeral. They said to me that I must say goodbye. It was maybe the only short break from the silence because my parents did not talk to me about the loss besides the fact of the funeral. So, I went. In Lithuania, at funerals, we usually still have open caskets. Therefore, I could see my friend's body for the last time. She was lying there in this white dress and white shoes. I looked at her face, and it was hard to take the fact of her death in. She was buried Catholically by a priest who mentioned that it is regrettable that she had to die in this way (he did not say the word "suicide"). I consciously locked my experience for as long as possible on that day. I thought one should do that. It is the way to cope. I held myself very tight, so I would not cry during the funeral—it would be a sign of weakness.

Moreover, on the same evening, I went to the theater with a friend I did not tell about my loss. The theater piece, ironically or synchronically ([Etter 2020](#)), was about a man made from pillows who finds sad adult people, goes to their past when they were children, and tells them to kill themselves because their lives will be miserable. I 'strongly' and silently watched the show.

What is with all those silent, firm faces? This tendency to remain silent and isolated with one's thoughts and feelings and accurate or perceived stigmatization are common among people bereaved by suicide ([Jordan and McGann 2017](#)). In my case, it is not only



the outside stigma but also so deep inside that it came to me as “common sense.” Being silent seemed like a method to forget what happened. Silence also seemed like a heroic, solid, and mature way to live through this crisis, show others how strong I am, and not show others my weaknesses—distress, depression, sadness, anger, guilt, and inability to integrate the loss at all. This silence and strongness potentially have roots in my family’s and nation’s history.

The Soviet Union occupied Lithuania for 50 years, which led to 50 years of total ignorance of mental health and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, during the Soviet times, there were many cases of political repression. Mostly, for people who did not silence their opinions and virtues, which were not congruent with the Soviet ideology and occupation. For example, my great grandfather was captured in a Siberian lager because he owned a small smithy and talked against the Soviet occupation. His wife, with two children, was deported to Siberia and worked there in a harsh environment for eight years. My grandmother hid in a bigger city called Kaunas and was left alone with no money or belongings. She was 16 years old. Afterward, NKVD (later KGB) haunted her for a long time. There were times when they caught her and investigated if she knew something about political resistance.

Political repressions traumatized people (Gailienė 2019), and, of course, there was no financial or psychological help. Therefore, the traumas were left to heal themselves or leaven rotten inside people’s hearts. Untreated traumas can go through generations (Gailienė 2019). Thus, the terms cultural trauma and posttraumatic society are a part of my country’s (Gailienė 2019) and my family’s mentality. The high suicide rates in Lithuania are sometimes explained by this phenomenon (Gailienė 2015, 2018). Not seeking help or not being able to get help after a loved one’s suicide can also be interpreted as a wish to stay silent, therefore strong (Klimaitė et al. 2017) and as a weak political will to raise awareness and actions towards such uncomfortable topics (Geleželytė et al. 2020; Skruibis et al. 2010).

I would explain it as a vicious circle of trauma, no treatment, dissociation of traumatized parts, anger, and a lack of empathy issues. Furthermore, this circle works in a person, family, and society. One must be silent about one’s opinions. Otherwise, you will be deported to the Siberian lager. One must be silent about one’s feelings. Otherwise, you will get smashed by other angry people. They will use it, torture you, and use it as your weakness. One must hide one’s deep feelings. The others are not trustworthy and can hurt you. Furthermore, maybe, if we do not talk about our traumas and feelings, they will go away.

Lithuania got its independence back in 1990 and, step by step, culturally became nearer to western Europe and farther from eastern Europe. When I travel to Germany, France, Portugal, or Spain, I feel like the people I see and meet there. Nevertheless, Lithuania still has much space to develop, especially in psychological well-being. The high rates of suicides, as an index of low psychological well-being (Gailienė 2021), slowly go down, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. Changing the ability to trust other people, help each other, develop empathy for others and patience for oneself, and start believing that silence is not always good is hard work. In 2009 I was not met with understanding. I did not meet my feelings welcomingly as well. I believed that silencing the pain was the only appropriate way.

## 6. Silence from Priests

When my friend died, I went to a Catholic school and was very religious. The next day after my friend’s suicide, I went to a mass before lessons. I thought it was a good idea to ask the school priest to say a prayer for my friend’s soul. As I was asking that, I could not hold my tears back. The priest looked at me (did not say anything) emphatically and mentioned not the friend but her parents during the mass. He talked a little about her parents’ suffering and prayed for their strength. The content of the prayer validated my belief that I am not allowed to be the sufferer. Only the closest people can legally be in crisis—parents, maybe her brother, but not me. The prayer meant that it was not good to talk about my friend or raise questions about her soul. It somehow confirmed that suicide

is a different kind of death. It is inappropriate if the priest cannot talk about her soul. As I now understand, it also disappointed me. That is why my relationship with the church started to get weaker afterward.

We had to write an essay about anything philosophical in a philosophy class at school. I chose the topic of grief. I wrote, ‘I still hear the sound of *kanklės* (a Lithuanian folk instrument, like a small harp), coming from upstairs where my dead friend rehearsed’ and philosophically contemplated the topic. However, the teacher, a Jesuit monk and now a priest, did not respond. He only gave me a grade for the homework.

Four months after the loss, I participated in school’s recollections, called “Kairos” (the appointed time in the purpose of God). For four days, my classmates and I prayed, did various activities, and contemplated God in silence and conversations at a school camp in nature. One evening we had an opportunity to make a confession with a priest. I went for it, and my confession was about not being able to forgive my friend who died by suicide and feeling guilty about it. Once again, the priest reacted with silence and gave me the absolution. It was my last try to talk about my loss and feelings until years later.

At first, it is astonishing that the silent culture spreads even to the spaces where the matters of the soul should be discussed. My research participants told me many stories about priests they met. There were good stories where the priests talked to the women and helped them spiritually and psychologically. However, there are also stories about priests who told that the woman should not cry because her tears could drown the dead husband’s soul. Others watched the crying women silently but did not come to talk.

These reactions of priests make the grief even more silent. Moreover, they reflect how inappropriate is shared grief and emotion. Although the catholic church looks at suicide as an unacceptable way of dying, it does not condemn the souls of the suicided people anymore (Gearing and Alonzo 2018; Solano et al. 2018). Catholicism allows the person’s burial catholically, and the priests are even supposed to offer spiritual help to the bereaved (Saulaitis 2001). However, the long history of prejudices regarding suicide and the view of suicide as a mortal sin (Gearing and Alonzo 2018; Solano et al. 2018) still has its echoes in real life.

I speculate that the silence from priests comes not only from prejudices and history but also from fear of challenging themes and distressing emotions. This fear is about not connecting to one’s own shadow, the dark side of the psyche, and the repressed and uncomfortable parts of one own (Johnson 1986). Denying the reality of death, temporality, even in the religious communities, can be so intense that facing it with bravery is impossible. The terror management theoretics and researchers explain that the whole culture, as well as religions, is created to manage the fear of death, to give life purpose, and to offer ideas about the soul’s immortality, therefore, to forget about death as much as one can (Darrell and Pyszczynski 2016). Nevertheless, the paradox is that religion is very concentrated on death and the preparations for the afterlife, so at least in this domain, the priests should be able to help. Research suggests that the priests might be aware of how important they can be in suicide postvention (Crenshaw 2015; Saulaitis 2001), but they have not trained appropriately (Crenshaw 2015). The preparation would require specific knowledge about suicide and grief and the inner work with one’s attitudes and fear.

## 7. The Silence of Spirituality

My father had two books put near the kitchen table to read during breakfast at my childhood home. One was a Bible, and another was ‘The silence of transcendence’, written by a Lithuanian philosopher Arvydas Šliogeris (2011). The current book is about interpretations of the history of philosophy and philosophy of religion. The book’s main idea is that transcendence is experienced in silence because there is no way to name its specifics. When we are nearer to the essence of things, the essence retreats away. There is no way to touch it by words. The subtitle of the book reminds me of the movie by Martin Scorsese, “Silence”, based on the S. Endo book. The Jesuit missionaries face troubles bringing Christianity to Japan and searching for a connection to God in the most challenging

circumstances. Only in the most painful silence does a priest experience Christ's existence. Of course, there can be many interpretations of the film. However, it reflects that the experiential part of spirituality or religiosity might be possible only in a silent and precise mind state. Furthermore, this spiritual experience cannot be easily described in words.

Therefore, the silence surrounding the religion can seem spiritual and a proper way to cope with the loss. In Christianity tradition, silence is viewed as a way to connect to transcendence. In silence, you can make space for God's voice (Love 2011). It is usually very silent in churches, and this silence somehow automatically relates to sacrality. The problem for me was that my mind could not remain silent. I could not talk to anyone, but my thoughts were occupied for a long time. Inside my head and heart, there was little space left for anything. My mind was filled with grief, sadness, anger, and despair until the traumatic experience became a piece of carrion stuck in my chest and neck for a long time.

Did I need to be left in silence after my loss to hear God's voice? However, a person deals with both the heavenly and the hell during grief (Kast 1993). The opposite world (translated from the Lithuanian word *anapusinis*—the opposite side of the world, the world of the dead) is nearby. One can see death everywhere. One feels death anxiety. One contemplates what happens after death? Are the sounds in the dreams the proof of the afterlife, or are they the signs of madness? I was left with all of that being a 16-year-old teenager. Maybe I could not talk about my experience because the adults had to have the words. Perhaps not the essence of words, but at least some kind of words.

## 8. The Silenced Parts Start Making Sounds

C. G. Jung once wrote: "Whenever we give up, leave behind, and forget too much, there is always the danger that the things we have neglected will return with added force." (Jung 1989).

I thought that I was going mad when I started automatically talking to her in my mind after her death. I asked her why did she kill herself? I shouted at her that I was furious at her. I explained why she should not have done this and how sad I am about that. I told her about my guilt and that I did not notice anything about her emotional well-being. I remember waiting at the bus stop the next day after the suicide and unable to stop this conversation with her. A theory states that transforming, not ending a relationship with the deceased, is the goal of the grief process (Stroebe et al. 2010). It is normal and helpful to talk to the dead, dream of them, and feel their presence (Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2014, 2018). This phenomenon, called 'sense of presence', does not necessarily need to be but sometimes is related to one's religiosity and beliefs about the afterlife and the soul (Čepulienė et al. 2021; Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2014, 2018). As I can see in my example, talking to my dead friend came to me automatically. It was a transcendental experience for me because the presence of my friend felt so real that it was and still is hard to attribute it to my psyche. It could have helped me if I had let it last as long as possible. However, I felt that it was dangerous to get into it deeper.

As I denied and could not deal with my feelings about my loss, things returned with destructive power. I got periods of insomnia and anxiety, fear of death and sadness, and panic attacks after the deaths of my grandmother and grandfather came to my family. My relationships with other people started to break. I lost many friends during my teenage years because I was unconsciously angry and projected the anger on them. It seemed that they did not appreciate me enough and that to relate is not worth the effort. The voice of my trauma, once silenced, started to shout louder and louder. It needed to be seen and accepted with all the pain.

Some other more constructive sounds still were not recognized consciously. I decided to study psychology, then clinical psychology, then analytical psychology. I also volunteered at a suicide helpline for three years. The feeling of curiosity led me. The themes I researched at university were death, suicide, spirituality, and religiosity. I was very interested and passionate about these phenomena. The interest got me nearer and nearer to my trauma and my search for spirituality. I started to review my loss in therapy. I began to care about



the dreams I had. With time, I unlocked the pain, fear, anger, guilt, the feeling of injustice, the need to be heard, to be held, and the shame about my weakness. Before my Ph.D., I thought—it was enough. I dealt with it. However, now it looks more like it was just the beginning.

In the first dream, in the first section of my narrative, the voice of my lost friend was shouting, and I immediately denied it. I thought I was having a psychotic episode and wanted to be locked down. At the time, I did not believe that the dream's meaning could also show the direction in which I was (and I am still) going. Somehow, I did not think about my Ph.D. theme being that sensitive to me. However, the dream and what came after it represented that, firstly, my trauma is alive, potentially not ever to be solved, and to get silent. Secondly, I need to listen to what this inner figure of mine with my friend's face wants to say to me. Thirdly, my experience is closely connected to my Ph.D. research, the choice, and interest in the theme. Fourthly, this means that doing my research is very painful. It affects me in many ways, emotionally and bodily, but, hopefully, there might be a deeper meaning in researching the topic in which the researcher is immersed by herself.

### 9. Sitting in Silence with the Dead: Spiritual Intoxication with the Research Data

*I am on an excursion with my Ph.D. supervisor and other colleagues. We go through dungeons in a church filled with crypts in which important people are buried. We go into one of the crypts, and I understand that this is the place where I must write my dissertation. In this crypt lies a suicided man who is a saint. I must sit near the open casket and get inspiration from him. He has a shiny blue shield which is the proof of his saintliness. I got scared and went out. My supervisor, who looks very tired, says: "If you do not look by yourself, you cannot tell others". I interpret it as the only way to write my dissertation—to be immersed with the dead. "But I do not want to"—I tell and go out. At that time, I comprehended that the shiny blue shield of the sainted man is not that shiny anymore, and it might be radioactive and not a proof of saintliness.*

When this dream came to me, I was experiencing a burn-out at the time. The dream came to me as a visual expression of how bad I felt dealing with all the interviews I collected from my research participants. The material felt toxic, dangerous, like an infectious disease. For example, one woman during the interview told me how she saw hanged men in the forest near her house after her loss. I experienced the same while walking my dog. Another woman told me she could not eat anything for two weeks after her fiancé died. I could not eat anything for a few days when my insomnia got worse. Firstly, I believed it was my problem: my depression, anxiety, PTSD, or something else. Now I interpret this dark episode as being infected by the research material, similar to how therapists become 'intoxicated' by their clients. The sensitive parts of the participant's experiences found their ways to hook up in my own sensitive and similarly traumatized psyche (Sedgwick 2016). Later, I found out that studies also explain this phenomenon as vicarious trauma (Chen et al. 2019). Moreover, the paradox is that this is the way to get in early, relate, and see, as the supervisor says in my dream, but this can be toxic as a radioactive shield. Moreover, it is not as spiritual as I first saw it.

I have a strong virtue of going to work 100 percent. Read as much as you can, do as much as you can, go to conferences, write many articles, says the academy. Be sincere. Put your heart into the things you do. It is the purpose of earthly life, says my catholic background. However, nobody talks about being kind to oneself, getting help, and learning how to rest. My work became a spiritual quest for me, and it was too much. Academy is a great place to nurture the virtue of going 100 percent. Research suggests that grad students suffer more from depression and anxiety because of their perfectionism than people who do not climb the stairs of the academy (Bogardus et al. 2022). The Ph.D. supervisor in my dream represents academia as inviting me to connect with my academic work in the most profound ways. When my 100 percent work became a purpose of life, a spiritual quest, it woke up my silenced trauma 100 percent. I got intoxicated in spiritual and psychological

ways with my data. The research on spirituality during suicide bereavement became 100 percent personal.

## 10. The Sounds of Spirituality

*I am at the gathering of Ph.D. students. We are having a workshop about getting into the Erasmus projects. Afterwards, we drank wine and had a good time together. Suddenly, I feel the urge to go home, but I cannot get a cab or go by bus since I have my dog with me. I call my husband to ask for help, but he says he will not come. I remember I parked my car nearby, so I went to it and got in. I start driving. I feel drunk. Then I noticed that the chair was not regulated, and I could not reach the brake. I also do not have my seatbelt on. The speed is faster and faster. Somehow, I manage to reach the brake and stop the car on the coast near the sea. Here comes a child who steals something from my car's back seats. I checked my things and saw that the girl had taken my candies. However, she did not take a small cross made from amber. I am relieved—candies I can buy, and the cross is with me.*

The work in the academy sometimes feels like being drunk to me. I get so immersed in my data, writing, and reading. I get very emotional about my research, which makes me feel not grounded. I forget I need to have a seatbelt on—something for my safety. The dream came to me as a warning that I needed to stop my car—to stop my immersion in my journey. I do not understand what the child is doing, taking my candies. This I will leave for my later contemplations. However, the fact that I find the amber cross, which is so important to me, shows me the direction I should look.

I grew up in a catholic family and was very religious during my childhood. I remember praying every night before bed, talking to Jesus about my day, and asking him for forgiveness and help. Every Saturday, I went to the “Opus Dei” club for young girls. It was fun—we prayed, talked about God, then played, learned how to cook, dance and sing. Every Sunday, my family and I went to church. It was less fun because the church was boring. In 5th grade, I got into a Jesuit school. Every year, my class had so-called “recollections” at a school camp that were always exciting and interesting and awakened the sleepy religiosity I had during schoolyears.

After school, step by step, I went away from religious activities. I noticed that the catholic church is conservative, speaks poorly about LGBTQ+ communities, and is aggressive about abortions. Where is their love which they are supposed to grow inside and outside themselves? I started to feel angry about the hypocrisy of the church and the religious communities.

Studying psychology strengthened my opinions about protecting human rights, accepting the differences between us, and the importance of working with one's attitudes and shadow. Moreover, these were not congruent with the catholic church I knew. Later, I found some exceptions (e.g., Jesuits who accept LGBTQ+ community members to their prayer groups), but they seem rare. Despite the anger about church politics, the need to search for the Sacred (Pargament 2007) grew stronger and stronger during my university years. I searched for spiritual experiences in books, Jungian psychology, yoga practice, music, events, and research.

Catholicism in Lithuania is a widespread religion. More than 74 percent of inhabitants ascribe to Roman Catholicism (The Official Statistics Portal 2022). However, the sociologists find the paradox that ascribing oneself to religion does not mean practicing and believing in the dogmas of the religion and even believing in Higher Power or God (Senvaitytė 2011). Many catholic Lithuanians have not internalized their faith and beliefs (Ališauskienė and Samuilova 2011). It could be explained by the atheization politics of Soviet times (Žiliukaitė 2007) and by the church's long-lasting role as a base for political resistance (Gailienė 2015), but not as an organization that helps to search for the Sacred. Although my religious experience in my childhood and teenage years was primarily positive and alive, my religious community did not help me with the first real spiritual crisis I had. My research participants also noticed the vast differences between the ‘official’ Catholicism

and its rules, dogmas, rituals, and prejudices, and the real connections they embraced after the loss with priests or religious people. The positive experiences when the priest became a friend helped the women overcome the guilt about the suicide and find relief in praying and connection to God. The negative experiences when the priest forbids crying, chooses an inappropriate sermon, or acts arrogantly add up to a shattered spirituality and overall distrust.

Another widespread, not internalized religion problem is the absence of faith-given methods to fulfill spiritual needs. If the community lets the person down or the catholic rituals do not do a thing to a person, it becomes harder and harder to search for the Sacred (Tacey 2004). Now I understand that my spirituality must be found and nurtured by myself. At first, it could have been given as a gift by my parents. However, my best friend's suicide shattered my spirituality and potentially changed its course. It activated my doubts and disappointment in the church. It also induced the need to believe in something.

The amber cross in the dream mentioned above symbolizes what spirituality could be for me. The cross represents the catholic traditions and beliefs about virtues, especially the virtue of love and compassion to others, reflecting the love and wholeness of the Higher power. It also symbolizes the painfulness of life's experiences, such as my grief and loneliness. The amber brings another dimension, which is not as silent to me as a catholic church's sacred silence. The amber in Lithuania is called Lithuanian gold. One fairy tale says that amber is part of a shattered fancy amber palace of a goddess named Jūratė. She fell in love with a mortal man, and the primary God, *Perkūnas* (Thunder), smashed her home to pieces. The amber cross from the dream was made of these pieces. This symbol connects me to my Lithuanian roots and its forgotten (as mentioned before—not enough written sources) spirituality. Lithuania was the last country in Europe to be Christianized, and until the XIX century, there were people in villages who prayed for pagan gods (Trinkūnas 2006). Lithuanian Catholicism now is very much mixed with the old beliefs. For example, at Easter, we bring painted eggs (an ancient symbol of fertility) to church, and the priest blesses the eggs with water. At Christmas, we leave the empty plate during the night for the souls of the dead to eat. On the evening before All Saints Day, we have a traditional event called *Vėlinės*—a day for the dead souls. We go to the cemeteries and put many candles and flowers on the graves. Sometimes, these traditions look livelier than the usual Catholic traditions and rites.

In my teenage years, I joined a folklore group in my school. Later I bought the same instrument (but the more primitive version of it) my deceased friend played and learned to play it and sing Lithuanian folk songs. I collected many folksong books, joined more folklore groups and bands, and later created my neofolk band. Maybe a couple of years after my friend's suicide, I was sitting on the couch in my room and singing a folk song about girls who die too early because they are too tired to live (an archetypal explanation of my friend's death?). Suddenly I burst into tears. Listening to my voice, the melody and the song's lyrics combined into hearing many other voices, which I comprehended as the voices of my ancestors, who created the song adding to it something from themselves—a note, a word, a rhythm. I sang and listened to how they sang together with me. I felt supported and connected to something much bigger than me. I felt a part of the many generations as if my body's cells were remembering everything for a short time. It was a spiritual experience, which was woken up by music. This experience reassured my connection to folk music as being profound and spiritual.

Now, I experience my spirituality primarily through Lithuanian folk songs and music. I sing a lot and learn folk songs from my collection of folksong books. I interpret the texts as fairy tales, myths, and archetypal stories, which remind me of my relationship to nature, the earth, and the body. Research suggests that music can have the capacity to activate spiritual experiences (Atkins and Schubert 2014; Marom 2004). They come unexpectedly and can be experienced as emotional or intuitive insight into something bigger. There is not much research about Lithuanian folk music and its spirituality. However, some scientists suggest that the songs are the inspiration for the movement of Lithuanian Neopaganism,

which tries to resurrect the old Baltic paganism, worship Gods and Goddesses, celebrate ancient pagan festivities, such as *Saulėgrīža* (the coming back of the Sun) instead of Christmas, Rasos (the saint Jones Day—the shortest night of the year) (Senvaitytė 2018; Strmiska 2005). Although I do not ascribe myself to Lithuanian Neopaganism, as a member of folklore society, I celebrate these festivities, sing particular songs, and even conduct some of the rituals connected to these events according to the stories collected by ethnographers. This specific spiritual experience I have written about was very subjective and intimate. For me, it was a proof, a sign, a direction where my spirituality could be searched for.

Since I grew up in a city, I do not have a connection to the nature and village culture my ancestors came from. However, folk music, especially folk songs, which mostly are about archetypes and their reflections on nature and human lives, inspired me to search for my connection to nature or so-called the material world. I go for long hikes in Lithuanian forests and nurture myself by breathing in the natural perfumes of pines, oaks, and lindens. I listen to my body through movement, doing yoga (which I also interpret as embodying the archetypes with each pose), and breathing exercises. Christianity traditionally emphasizes the difference between the immortal soul and the mortal body. However, now this dichotomy is changing to a more integrated approach because science and human experience show that spiritual experiences can be very bodily (Götz 2001; Giordan 2009). For now, I do not find any right for me Christian way to connect to my body or nature. Therefore, folk music became my gateway to searching for spirituality in nature. The more “New age” methods like Western cultures’ adjusted yoga and meditation (Tacey 2004) are the gateways to my connection to my own body as a part of nature.

To sum up, my methods to search for the Sacred are far from the silence I was left in. I like to listen to sounds of nature and music, and I like to make sounds by myself by singing and talking to other people. I also agree that I need silence to listen more deeply to myself and others. However, silence is only a part of my spirituality.

From my research participants, I heard a lot of similar themes, methods, and beliefs which I find for myself. They tell how grief is lonely, and one must find authentic ways to cope, which can be traveling, reading, painting, praying, or going to church. Moreover, all those different activities connect to the domain of spirituality because they become a way of finding the relationship to something bigger and higher, what surrounds all the experiences, and what sometimes has no name. One research participant talked about the need to turn her face away from death to the light. She managed to do that while physically going to church every day and sitting there for a couple of hours. Grief looks like a silent and lonely process, but the silence cannot be statical. It must have some sounds of hope, some rare easiness, and happiness.

As a person, I crave not only experiences but also explanations and theories. Academic literature helps me interpret the phenomenon of spirituality and understand its manifestations during suicide bereavement. The qualitative research methods help me find some ways to structure the experiences of my research participants and my own. Although my research about spirituality during suicide bereavement is near the finish line, the personal search is far away from it.

## 11. Conclusions

In the current article, I analyzed my search for spirituality during suicide bereavement in research and life through an autoethnographic lens. My story suggests that losing a loved one due to suicide can provoke a psychological and spiritual crisis. The silence about suicide, grief, and painful experiences seems to be rooted in sociocultural religion, society, and family history. It also affects the inner experiences—the silence of suicide bereavement, broken by some sounds. The sounds involve a personal search for spirituality in Christianity and the old Lithuanian culture, which connect me to something bigger through bodily spiritual experiences. Another way to make a sound is my work in academia, in which I am researching spirituality during suicide bereavement. Academia, although not always approving, gives tools and structure to understand the experiences of spirituality during

suicide bereavement. Conducting my research also helps me to understand and compare my experience of my best friend's suicide.

My story also raises questions for further research. There is a need to study the experiences of other people bereaved by suicide, how the trauma of a loved one's suicide affects lives, and how can the pain be eased? What could be done on an individual and cultural level to prevent silent bereavement? What should change in Catholic communities and in the education of priests so that they would be able to give more support in the case of suicide bereavement? How could religion in Lithuania or broader come back to its original purpose—to help search for the Sacred in different life situations? I hope that my story can inspire such studies and provoke new thoughts and, potentially, changes in the context of suicide bereavement and spirituality.

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