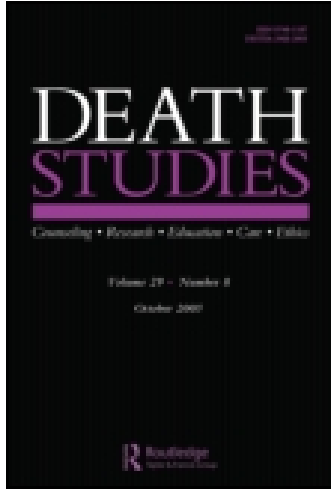


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Assessing a Buddhist Treatment for Bereavement and Loss: The Mustard Seed Project

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Assessing a Buddhist Treatment for Bereavement and Loss: The Mustard Seed Project

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From a Buddhist perspective, grief becomes complicated because mourners have trouble accommodating the reality of impermanence in the face of deep and unwelcome change, as they struggle to make sense of the “event story” of their loss and to revise their life story and identity accordingly. Joining this perspective with a constructivist emphasis on grieving as meaning reconstruction, we developed a distinctive group intervention to help people reflect on the natural conditions of impermanence and limitation in a compassionate environment in which they were encouraged to cultivate a new self-narrative in the wake of loss. Integrating meditative interludes, dyadic sharing, dharma lessons, and informal didactics on the human quest for meaning, we used expressive arts exercises to engage the existential dilemmas of loss from a self-distancing perspective. Evidence from an open trial on 41 participants in 2 groups documents that the intervention is both feasible and acceptable to clients, and that they display significant decreases in grief related suffering, and corresponding increases in meaning making and personal growth, across the brief course of the workshop experience.

Although human beings clearly possess the capacity to respond resiliently to bereavement and other difficult life transitions (Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2011), such losses are associated with profound and prolonged suffering for many (Prigerson et al., 2009; Shear et al., 2011). In addition to the immediate emotional anguish of loss or adversity, those who have lost a loved one, or have encountered another serious loss in their life context, often struggle to reaffirm or reconstruct a new world of meaning (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011), a quest that for many entails a painful sense of spiritual disorientation and disconnection (Burke & Neimeyer, 2011; Neimeyer & Burke, 2014). Our goal in the present article is to describe and illustrate a new approach to encountering

loss, one that rests primarily on a Buddhist framework of inherent limitation and impermanence in life. We discuss the workshop format used to offer this different perspective, with its emphasis on mindfulness, storytelling, poetry, and expressive writing, and we present the results of an open trial of two such workshops. We will begin by providing a philosophic scaffold for the workshop structure, and then turn to its concrete procedures and evidence for its effectiveness in changing participants’ points of view and relieving their pain and suffering.

THE MUSTARD SEED PROJECT: HELPING PEOPLE TRANSFORM UNWELCOME CHANGE

In keeping with evidence that mindfulness and teachings from Buddhism have been shown to alleviate a wide range of emotionally distressing conditions (Hözel et al., 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2011), a number of authors have proposed

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that Buddhist principles and practices carry clear relevance for treating bereavement (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Thompson, 2012) and other potentially traumatic life transitions (Ogden, 2010). Our purpose in the present project is to flesh out a new model in teaching and counseling people who are currently troubled by simple or complicated negative life experiences that have been traditionally called “loss” or “grief,” which we would alternatively describe as “unwelcome change.” From our experiences in counseling the bereaved and working through both tragic and transformative change in clinical and educational environments, we believe that the prevailing psychological model of grief unintentionally creates unnecessary obstacles and confusion in attempting to move people through stages or levels of unfortunate life events (Neimeyer, 2013). Many current models of grief emphasize loss and its acceptance (Hedtke, 2012), whereas our model highlights change and the wisdom of impermanence. We believe that a deep awareness of the universal (and nonpersonal or transpersonal) nature of the impermanence of life and its imperfections will open a new perspective on what human life is about in its challenge to create meaning in the midst of change.

When grief and loss move forward in an adaptive way, the survivor gradually integrates both the event story (what happened and its nature) into his or her overall life story and creates a new narrative and personal identity that carry beneficial new meaning, development, and relationships into the changed life context (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Because our present-moment awareness springs from, and is organized by, micronarratives (the small stories we use to frame our arising experience) (Stern, 2004), and our bigger meanings and moods are affected by macronarratives (the underlying storyline we bring to our experiences) (Neimeyer, 2004), the Mustard Seed Project focuses especially on meaning, metaphor, and storytelling as agents of change. Changing our minds and our meanings are linked with practices of concentration, equanimity, and awareness that permit us to focus our perceptions, and see what our minds are doing in the present moment.

Pairing interventions from Buddhist teachings with constructivist and narrative methods of meaning-making, we are working to design, apply, and assess a program that could be replicated in different settings, from hospices to clinics to disaster relief, and used broadly with grieving populations. Our long-term goal would be to develop a training manual that could be used by counselors—both professional and non-professional—who seek to alleviate human suffering. Our goal in the present article is to sketch the outline of this intervention and to evaluate its feasibility and acceptability, as well as participants’ reports of change.

Drawing on secularized Buddhist methods (Young-Eisendrath, 1996, 2008, 2013) and constructivist psychology (Neimeyer, 2009), we intermingle exercises in mindfulness, narrative, dialogue, and meaning reconstruction with simple didactic materials, to introduce a new way of seeing and experiencing unwelcome change. Because the term *mindfulness* is used in a variety of ways, we define it as a practice of awareness that cultivates both concentration and relaxation to increase clarity in the perception and acceptance of reality. Recognizing the powerful effects of sense-making, benefit-finding, and identity reconstruction (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), we emphasize these aspects of constructivist psychology in the midst of secularized Buddhist teachings.

Establishing a valid training manual that can be used to intervene with large and small groups, and determining appropriate sites and populations for our methods, the Mustard Seed Project can be understood as an outgrowth of positive psychology in attempting to develop optimism, confidence, compassion, and wisdom under adverse circumstances (Neimeyer & Young-Eisendrath, 2014).

UNWELCOME CHANGE

Problematic unwelcome change disrupts the fabric of our lives and changes our deep context (the context in which our ordinary identity arises), leaving us feeling out of control. Human consciousness is always rooted in a context or fabric of shared meaning. When change—such as grave illness, financial loss, divorce, death of a loved one, or natural catastrophe—disrupts our lives in a profound way, we must change our identity or we will become alienated, confused, withdrawn, and/or ashamed. Complicated and nonadaptive grief responses such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), preoccupation with the event story, social withdrawal, self-blame, persistent and debilitating separation distress, rumination or “compulsory” grief, and/or a frozen story of loss are the typical outgrowths of an inability or refusal to revise our identity after our lives have changed. In place of remaining engaged in what is still possible, we become immobilized, afraid, and caught up in an anguished response to our altered circumstances.

American ideals of independence have tended to persuade us to view our “security” as a personal accomplishment (e.g., Young-Eisendrath, 2008). When the circumstances of life snatch away a significant foundation of love, finances, health, home, or hope, people often feel personally ashamed or bitterly blame others, God, or the universe and feel resentful of others’ apparent continuing resources. The teachings of all branches

of Buddhism encourage us to recognize and embrace the reality of changing contingencies and circumstances beyond our control, making stability and security illusory goals.

The Buddha taught that three fundamental spiritual laws underlay our everyday existence: (a) the universality of stress and adversity (i.e., bad things happen to everyone); (b) the condition of constant change that is the nature of our life and world; and (c) the fact of our complete interdependence, that we are always embedded in a context that lies largely out of our control. (Traditionally these are called “the marks of existence”; see discussion of them in Young-Eisendrath, 2013). Acquaintance with these universal laws of stress, impermanence, and embeddedness relieves our shame, blame, and alienation when we deeply acknowledge that no one is exempt from them. And then, these necessary conditions of life can become our natural teachers for remaining engaged in our lives, especially in times of yearning and anguish.

This project draws on these fundamental laws to design psychoeducational interventions to assist people in both personal and spiritual meaning reconstruction in times of unwelcome change.

INTERVENTIONS FOR A WEEKEND WORKSHOP FORMAT

First Evening (3 Hr)

In preparation for the workshop, everyone receives handouts on the marks of existence, impermanence and human ideals, the quest for meaning, virtual dream stories, and all poetry used in workshop. Everyone also receives a small journal to be used for writing throughout the weekend.

Opening

The opening 3-hr session of the workshop begins on the first evening with a brief welcome by workshop leaders, who in our initial groups have included two clinical psychologists and a Zen monk.¹ Participants are asked to form a circle, and then are ushered into 2 min of silence to “arrive” in the room together—an especially useful practice as workshops have begun following a busy workday for many of the participants. Although the majority of participants, to date, have been bereaved, we have also included those who are contending with various forms of “nonfinite” loss (Harris, 2011), such as serious personal illness, loss of

an intimate relationship, or termination of an identity affirming career (see description of participants in Methods section below). No assumption is made that group members have familiarity with the tenets of Buddhist psychology, and in fact they have included a wide range of secular and spiritual orientations, as well as ethnicities. In keeping with the hybrid focus on education and group process, groups to date have included between 15 and 25 persons—large enough to permit those who wish to construe the experience as a class, but small enough to encourage group and subgroup interaction.

Poetry Reading

Following the interval of silence, we invite participants to take out their copy of a selected page-long poem that addresses themes of love and loss, as in Derek Walcott’s *Oddjob, A Bull Terrier*,² or Katha Pollit’s *Two Cats*.³ As in creative writing workshops, we then read the work aloud, usually in the voices of one group leader and at least one member. Listeners are invited to “just listen” and not read along (although they have copies to take with them). Group members are invited to journal about the poem for 10 min, recording their impressions and associations in any way they choose. Discussion of the work then follows, reflecting on the human penchant for connection and attachment, themes of love and loss, and imagining alternative ways that life might be experienced differently from the standpoint of a change in consciousness. At this early point in the workshop approximately 15 min are given to this activity, encouraging a wide-ranging conversation in which group members begin to get acquainted with one another through the nonthreatening medium of the poem.

Mustard Seed Story and Dyads

Moving on from this emotionally engaging but safe sharing of perspectives, two of the group leaders (one psychologist and the monk) offer a brief impromptu telling of “The Mustard Seed Story,” a traditional Buddhist story that has been told in many forms. Inevitably, each teller of the story gives it a slightly different slant. Below is one version of the story, available on the Internet in several versions.

Once upon a time, there was a virtuous young woman named Kisa Gotami. When she was quite young, she got married and went to live with her husband’s family

¹In addition to the authors, we have been joined by Robert Chodo Campbell or Koshin Paley Ellison of the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care associated with Beth Israel Hospital.

²<http://cabinetcuriosities.wordpress.com/2010/01/11/oddjob-a-bull-terrier-derek-walcott/>

³<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2009/10/06>

in a town called Kapilavattu. When she first moved in with them, things were difficult. She missed her village, her family and her friends. She felt that no one liked her and that everything she did was wrong. Then, when her son was born, everyone was very pleased and her life improved. But when the baby was still tiny, her husband died. Kisa was very distressed. "At least I still have my little son," she thought.

One sad day, the baby also became very ill and died. Kisa was so unhappy that she just couldn't believe that her baby was dead. She thought he must be asleep. She wanted to find some special medicine that would make him better and began asking everyone. First she asked her neighbor. "Please, can you help me?" she asked. "I need some special medicine for my baby." "I'm sorry, Kisa," said the woman, "I'm too busy to stop now. Why don't you ask the shopkeeper?" Sadly, Kisa thanked her and went to find the shopkeeper. But the shopkeeper only told her to ask the doctor.

"Please, can you help me?" Kisa asked the doctor. "I need some special medicine for my baby." The doctor looked at the baby in Kisa's arms. He could see that it was dead. "I'm sorry, Kisa," he said. "I haven't got the medicine you need." Was there anyone who could help Kisa, he wondered? Then he remembered that the Buddha was staying nearby. He was wise and very kind. Maybe he would know how to help. "Kisa," he suggested, "why don't you go and ask the Buddha?"

The Buddha was sitting in the shade of a tree talking to his friends when Kisa ran up to him. He could see straight away that she was very upset. "How can I help you?" he asked. "My name is Kisa," she replied. "I have been looking everywhere for medicine for my son." The Buddha looked at the little bundle in Kisa's arms. How could Kisa be helped to accept the truth that her little boy had really died? "Kisa, if you want to make some medicine, you must have some mustard seeds," said the Buddha. "Go into town and ask at each house, but you must only accept seeds from a house in which no one has died."

Quickly, Kisa set off into town to get the mustard seeds. At the first house a young woman answered the door. "Could I have some mustard seeds to make some medicine?" Kisa asked. The woman went back inside and soon returned with some seeds. "Here you are," said the woman, smiling. Kisa was just about to take the seeds when she remembered the Buddha's words. "Oh, I nearly forgot," said Kisa. "Has anyone died in this house?" "Ah, yes," replied the young woman. "A few months ago my grandmother died, very peacefully. She was a lovely old lady and we remember her very fondly. But why do you ask?" "Thank you for getting me the seeds," said Kisa, "but I can only take them from a house in which no one has died."

Kisa said goodbye and went on to the next house. An old man was sitting outside. "Please, have you got some mustard seeds to spare?" she asked him. Slowly, the old man got up and went into the house. Soon he emerged with some seeds. "Here you are," he said, holding out his hand. Again, just as Kisa was about to take the

seeds, she remembered what the Buddha had said. "Has anyone died in this house recently?" she asked. "Ah," replied the old man sadly, "just last year the lady of the house, my daughter, passed on. We all still miss her." "I am sorry to hear your sad news," said Kisa. "Thank you for getting me the seeds, but I'm afraid I can't take them after all." At the next house she came to, a young boy answered the door. "Please, have you got some mustard seeds to spare?" she asked. "I'm sure we have," said the boy. "Wait there and I'll ask my mum." Soon the boy came back with the seeds. "Here you are." This time, Kisa remembered! "Can you tell me please if anyone has ever died in this house?" she asked. "Yes," replied the boy quietly. "When I was still a little baby, my dad died. I can't even remember him." "I'm sorry about your dad," said Kisa, "and thank you for getting me the seeds, but I can't use them after all."

As Kisa went from door to door, the answer was the same. Everyone had lost a loved one; if not last year, then a long time ago. Kisa had no mustard seeds but now she understood why she would not be able to find any. She looked at the little bundle in her arms. "I am sorry, my little one, you have gone to another life and I did not want to let you go. Let us find a resting place for you."

In the evening, she returned to the Buddha. She was no longer carrying the little bundle. Her face was now much calmer. "Have you been able to find the mustard seeds, Kisa?" he asked. "No," she replied, "but now I understand that everyone loses people they love. I have laid my baby to rest, and am now at peace. Thank you." "You have done well, Kisa," said the Buddha, "for there is nothing stronger in all the world than a mother's love. Would you like to stay with me for a while?"

As the sun went down over Kapilavattu, Kisa and the Buddha talked. She told him about her life and her baby. He listened kindly. The Buddha reminded Kisa that plants grow in the spring, flower in the summer, and die in the winter—and that new plants grow the following year. Similarly, people are born and eventually die. Kisa now understood that was just how things are. Talking to the Buddha and listening to his kind words helped Kisa a lot. That very evening she decided to become one of his followers.

After hearing the story told twice, participants are asked to pair off and meet with a partner, ideally someone previously unknown, if possible. A group leader gives instruction for dyadic sharing of the "event story" of their own loss or unwelcome change. Each partner in the dyad has 10 min to tell her or his story while the other partner writes notes and records the story. A simple listening and recording of the event story is what is instructed. An atmosphere of gratitude and kindness is encouraged in listening to the story. After this timed exercise is finished, the dyads return to small groups (if more than 20 members are present) or to the plenary

circle (if there are 20 or fewer). Two dyads then introduce one another to the group on the first evening and are asked to “tell the partner’s story.” The person whose story is told is asked for additions or corrections and a few clarifying questions might be asked by listeners in the group or a group leader. No story is told first-person, but instead by the partner, to encourage three states: (a) an “empathic objectivity” and impersonal kind interest that increases a “spacious” mind; (b) a “self-distanced” position, to foster greater perspective and less entrapment in negative emotion (Kross & Ayduk, 2010); and (c) “containment” of the story in a synoptic form, avoiding the risk of an early outpouring of emotional details or experiences that would challenge the group structure and invite immersion or vulnerability before trust in the group has been established. Other dyads introduce their stories at the invitation of group leaders throughout workshop, rather than being clustered at the beginning. This allows each dyad to be encountered freshly and individually.

First Virtual Dream Story

Group members are then introduced to virtual dreaming (Neimeyer, Torres, & Smith, 2011; Neimeyer & Young-Eisendrath, 2014): short, imaginative narratives that are written in a brief period of 8 to 10 min to mitigate self-critique and to facilitate spontaneous and intuitive process. The stories are termed *virtual dreams* because of their invitation to nonrational exploration through the inclusion of imaginative counterfactual or archetypal figures and symbols, encouraging the author to write in a storybook or magical realist style that transcends literal reportage (although the latter is not precluded). The writing is prompted by asking participants to write quickly (time limit of 8 min), uncritically, and in any manner they want, in response to certain cues.

In the present context, we asked group members to harvest six to eight words or phrases from the initial poem, combined with the phrase, “a door closes.” An example of one such virtual dream (with words harvested from the poem underlined) from the opening of the group follows, contributed by a 67-year-old woman named Jill:

In Our Flannel Pajamas

My sister and I sat on the sun porch on a cold January day—an odd concept made possible by the brilliance and heat of the sun shining in a clear blue sky. The beauty of the calm day followed days of tempestuous weather that had shredded any remaining dry leaves that had clung to the trees surrounding the house, so that new bare branches lifted up to the sky, the sleeping trees giving no indication of the spring that was to come.

We laughed and reveled in the warmth, ate chocolate and whatever else remained of our food supply and waited for what was sure to happen—the restoration of telephone service, the snowplow that would break through the drifts, ending our time of enforced solitude and the return to our separate lives, changed by our brush with death; the fear of freezing if we could not keep the fire going or ran out of wood for the stove.

We were changed by our souls’ shared terrors and the truths we had told each other to keep ourselves awake. Our dreams were sure to contain memories of these days.

The snowplow came. We packed and said goodbye, packed our cars and closed the door to our mother’s house for the last time.

Following the 8-min period of silent writing, group members are asked to form triads, in which at least two participants are willing to read their story to the others and respond to curious questions about it, with the proviso that the author not be pressed for autobiographical details pertaining to the story (i.e., that it be treated as “make believe,” unless the author wishes to note its relevance to her or his life). Discussion is nearly always animated and appreciative, and occasionally surprisingly emotional. After 10 min is devoted to this sharing, the triads again rejoin the plenary group, and a few stories volunteered by the subgroups are read to the group as a whole to stimulate wider discussion, and to allow one of the psychologists to share observations about the alternative modes of consciousness in which the stories are written (e.g., omniscient narration vs. first person or stream of consciousness perspective), the way in which they feature different emotional themes (e.g., hope, despair, equanimity) and portray various sorts of relationships between protagonists (e.g., compassionate vs. conflicted). Although at a manifest level most of the narratives cast imaginary characters in a fantasized plot (or occasionally poem), members commonly recognize that at thematic (and sometimes at concrete plot) levels the writing expresses something of importance about their own losses and transitions, the latter being cued up by the assigned phrase, “a door closes.”

Following this sharing, the session draws to a close with a brief discussion of what is to follow the next day, concluding with a two-minute period of silence to foster a mindful transition to members’ personal lives.

Second Day (6–7 Hr)

Deepening the group’s engagement with mindfulness, the next morning opens with 10 min of silent meditation, with a focus on rest states as taught by Shinzen Young⁴

⁴<http://www.shinzen.org/RetreatReading/FiveWays.pdf>

to increase equanimity. Following a brief greeting, two more dyadic introductions are invited, and others follow periodically throughout the day.

Poetry Reading

Paralleling the opening session, a second poem that speaks to the vitality and preciousness of life is read aloud by one of the facilitators, along with a second reading by a group member. Journaling about this work (e.g., Mary Oliver's *When Death Comes*⁵ or Nazim Hikmet's *On Living*⁶) then ensues for 10 min, followed by 10 min of conversation about the poem.

Dharma Lessons and Teaching Unwelcome Change

The group leaders introduce a brief Dharma lesson through handouts and examples. This lesson covers what is called “the marks of existence” taught by the Buddha. These are three universal spiritual laws that govern life in our world:

1. *Dukkha*: Life is limited, stressful, and unsatisfactory. This condition is no one's fault, either personally or as a result of one's family. No one is without difficulty, mistakes, and loss. This condition joins us together as human beings.
2. *Anicca*: We are all subject to ceaseless change and impermanence at all levels of our existence, which we sense principally in the passage of time and our aging, although nothing remains the same moment to moment.
3. *Anatta*: All of our experience, moment by moment, is embedded in a context on which we depend; we and all other beings happen together and all-at-once and the separation of ourselves out from this inter-being is an illusion. We are always embedded and interdependent.

After a brief discussion of these conditions, the leaders talk about life transitions in the wake of profound loss or adversity. Drawing on constructivist (Kelly, 1955; Neimeyer, 2009) and meaning-based perspectives (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014; Park, 2010), we describe how human beings attempt to phrase and punctuate the ceaseless flow of their experience into recognizable patterns and themes, ultimately imposing a narrative structure on the events of their lives in an effort to make them more intelligible and predictable. However, the

complexity and fluidity of life constantly challenge these constructions. In the case of deeply unwelcome change, such as that arising from the death of a loved one, the following principles frequently apply:

1. The tension between the world as we imagine it and the world as we experience it can shatter our life story, revealing it to be a fragile illusion. This commonly prompts a profoundly emotional review of those world assumptions (e.g., of predictability, control, justice, self-efficacy) that we previously took to be true and stable, and the need to rewrite our life stories in the wake of such transition.
2. We typically engage in such meaning reconstruction by attempting to process the “event story” of the loss or transition, as well as—in the case of the death of loved ones—to access and bring forward in some way the “back story” of our continuing relationship with them, but in a new and sustainable fashion.
3. We accommodate the loss or change as we find ways to restore a life story that includes both our previous story and the event story that disrupted it within a larger context that acknowledges change and impermanence. This characteristically involves:
 - a. *Sense making*. Framing the unwelcome event in terms of spiritual or life meaning that endorses a larger context of compassion and love (e.g., that a death was the expression of some transcendent meaning or that there is solace at the end of life because that person's suffering has come to a close), and affirms the (changed) meaning of our own life in the aftermath of the transition.
 - b. *Benefit-finding*. The unwelcome change has brought the possibility of new meaning, new relationships, and other life changes in its wake (e.g., experiencing greater clarity or perspective, starting a creative or compassionate project out of the experience of loss, adversity, destruction).
 - c. *Identity reconstruction*. This entails continuing a life story as a changed individual whose world has been re-ordered through unwelcome change—a process that can be facilitated by a wide variety of expressive and reflective methods (Neimeyer, 2012; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

As these themes are explored interactively with participants, spirited discussion ensues, sometimes drawing upon examples provided by the earlier and ongoing dyadic sharing of personal stories. Group

⁵<http://darvish.wordpress.com/2011/03/18/when-death-comes-a-poem-by-mary-oliver/>

⁶<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-living/>

leaders and many members typically participate in this conversation, which lasts approximately 1 hr, after which members adjourn for lunch on their own.

Second Virtual Dream Story

As was done the previous evening, group leaders invite members to return to the poem they had read and discussed earlier in the day, and harvest six to eight words or images of their choice (see underlined words) to scaffold the brief 8–10 min period of story-writing, adding the phrase, “a door opens.” For example, Jill, the same participant who drafted the story cited above, wrote *The Bucket List*:

“You want to do what?!” she said, laughing so hard that tears ran down her face. “You can’t even walk and you want to . . . *what?*” Her laughter was curiously filled with anger as she incredulously took in—or not—the final item on my bucket list. “I can do this” I insisted, “I can. I am still alive and I will, I will live every moment of my life until it is done. No one can say I spent my life dying. I can do this and you have to help me.”

“No I don’t. I won’t. I won’t help you do this ludicrous thing. I will not help you waste the last days of your life . . .” “Living?” I interjected. She sighed and made the calls while I conserved what little strength I had.

It took weeks—but as I waited in the space shuttle’s air lock for my walk in empty space—no, not empty, anticipating stars in profusion—my heart leaped in joy.

And the door opened.

Laughter greeted the surprise ending of the story, energizing a discussion that validated the essence of each participant’s experience, affirmed hope, and deepened the group’s appreciation of both the beauty and tragedy of life in light of its impermanence. Alternatively, further work with virtual dream stories can make use of a variety of imaginative re-writes, role-plays, and imaginal conversations, as discussed elsewhere (Neimeyer et al., 2011).

Mindfulness Practice and Journaling

To clear a space for more reflective processing of the didactic and the virtual dream stories, we then usher the group into a 10-min practice of guided meditation or conscious slow physical movement. We follow this by spontaneous journaling for an additional 10 min, and a further 20 min of group processing. This segment concludes with the invitation to the remaining dyads to introduce their partners.

Dyadic Repeated Question Exercise

Group leaders again organize members into dyads and ask partners to arrange their chairs to face one

another, establish a meditative mood through a brief interval of silence, and then have one partner meet the other’s eyes and ask simply, “How would you like to change?” Upon receiving an answer, the questioner listens intently, and then says “Thank you,” and asks the question again. The question is repeated until 5 min have elapsed. Partners then switch the roles of questioner and answerer, and the sequence is repeated. A discussion of the dyadic experience takes place among group members.

Closing Exercise

Leaders review the importance of entering into life with a sense of vitality and invite a few more people to give their virtual dreaming on the recent poem. If any dyads have not told their stories, they are invited to do so. The event closes with gratitude to all and 2 min of silence.

AN OPEN TRIAL

As a preliminary step to evaluate the feasibility, acceptability, and potential effectiveness of the Mustard Seed group structure, we conducted an open trial of the first two iterations of the workshop, both of which were offered in partnership with the Zen Center for Contemplative Care affiliated with New York’s Beth Israel Hospital. Although Phase 1 trials of this sort cannot definitively establish the efficacy of a treatment in the absence of a control group, they can evaluate the workability of the intervention, its acceptability to participants, and whether additional controlled research is promising to pursue. In our case, we sought to test one hypothesis concerning the acceptability of the intervention by tracking the number of participants who completed each of the three segments (the first evening, the next morning, and the afternoon of the second day, which followed lunch on their own). In this case, attrition served as an inverse behavioral index of acceptability of the workshop in the eyes of participants. We also sought to test three general hypotheses regarding the impact of the intervention, predicting that participants would report (1) a decrease in grief related distress and suffering, (2) enhancement of meaning-making about the unwelcome life event or loss, and (3) personal growth following the workshop.

METHOD

Participants

Following institutional review board review and approval of the project, 41 fee-paying participants were

recruited to join the group through media announcements of the project through the Zen Center for Contemplative Care. Twenty percent were men, and 80% women, with 84% reporting Caucasian ethnicity, and the others being equally divided between African American and Hispanic group members. Ages ranged from 30 to 75, with a mean of 55 years old. Most participants were single (36%), divorced (25%), or married (14%), with 11% being widowed. On average, they were well educated (11% completing some college, 16% a college degree, and 66% postgraduate training), though they varied greatly in their religious or spiritual orientation (36% Buddhist; 18% Christian; 16% secular, agnostic, or atheist; 14% Jewish; 2% Taoist; and the remaining not reporting their belief system).

In terms of their bereavement experiences, 35 participants had lost a loved one who they had known for a period ranging from three to 63 years, with a mean of 32.46 years of relationship. The character of the lost relationships was notably diverse, with 32% reporting the death of a son or daughter, 24% the death of a spouse or partner, 7% the death of a friend, 5% the death of a sibling, and the remainder the death of a variety of significant others (e.g., nephew, cousin). The remaining six participants reported other forms of unwelcome change, including loss of career, health, and key attachment relationships. For both groups of participants, nearly all were within two years of their loss.

Measures

Hogan Grief Reactions Checklist

The Hogan Grief Reactions Checklist (HGRC; Hogan, Greenfield, & Schmidt, 2001) is an empirically derived 61-item self-report checklist of reactions to grief. Factor analysis confirmed six content factors: (a) Despair, (b) Panic Behavior, (c) Blame and Anger, (d) Detachment, (e) Disorganization, and (f) Personal Growth (Hogan et al., 2001). The internal consistency of these factors ranged from Cronbach's alpha of .79 to .90, whereas test-retest reliability ranged from $r = .56$ to $.85$. Its items are presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 5 (*describes me very well*).

Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale

The Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (ISLES) is an assessment of meaning made of stressful life transitions, and in the present study participants were instructed to respond to this measure with regard to the loss of their loved one, except in the case of the small number of participants seeking the group to help

with other unwelcome changes (e.g., loss of career or health), in which case these were rated as the index events. The ISLES yields two subscales. Comprehensibility gauges one's ability to make sense of a stressor (e.g., "I have made sense of this event"), and Footing in the World assesses the extent to which one's grounding in one's worldviews (e.g., goals, sense of purpose/direction, values, belongingness) have (or have not) been disturbed (e.g., "My beliefs and values are less clear since this event"). Higher scores indicate more adaptive meaning made of a loss. The overall measure and both subscales have good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent validity with scales of psychiatric and bereavement distress, and the scale shows incremental validity in predicting mental and physical health outcomes even after the nature of the loss, the nature of the relationship lost, and complicated grief symptomatology are considered (Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2014). Additional psychometric details on the ISLES have been provided elsewhere (Holland, Currier, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2010).

Procedure

After giving informed consent, participants completed all measures immediately prior to the start of the first evening of the Mustard Seed workshop, and again following its conclusion on the evening of the second day. Attendance was tracked across all sessions.

RESULTS

In support of the hypothesis regarding the acceptability of the group to participants, attendance at all three sessions was 100%.

Mean scores for key outcome variables (HGRC and ISLES) appear in Table 1. Hypotheses regarding a reduction in grief-related suffering and enhancement in meaning-making and growth over the course of the workshop were tested by a series of matched pairs *t*-tests to evaluate the direction and significance of pre- to post-intervention changes observed. As predicted, significant reductions were observed in grief-related Despair and Panic Behavior on the HGRC, although Blame and Anger, Detachment, and Disorganization (all of which occurred at lower levels from the outset) were unchanged. Also as predicted, participants reported significant personal growth and meaning making on the ISLES across the course of their participation in the 2-day workshop.

Finally, to explore the relation between meaning making on the one hand and grief-related distress and personal growth on the other, a series of Pearson correlations was computed between preintervention scores on

TABLE 1
Mean Scores for Grief-Related Suffering, Personal Growth, and Meaning Making Before and After a Weekend Workshop on Accommodating Unwelcome Change

	<i>Preworkshop</i>	<i>Postworkshop</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p value</i>
HGRC Despair	26.40 (9.95)	24.34 (8.71)	2.07	.05
HGRC Panic Behavior	29.38 (11.04)	27.50 (9.94)	2.36	.03
HGRC Blame & Anger	12.50 (5.41)	12.34 (5.84)	0.35	<i>ns</i>
HGRC Detachment	17.16 (8.10)	16.91 (6.97)	0.34	<i>ns</i>
HGRC Disorganization	16.63 (7.72)	15.81 (7.67)	1.52	<i>ns</i>
HGRC Personal Growth	37.47 (9.66)	39.78 (10.71)	-2.10	.04
ISLES Meaning Integration	49.81 (15.79)	54.53 (14.63)	-2.42	.02

Note: HGRC=Hogan Grief Reactions Checklist; ISLES=Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

TABLE 2
Pearson Correlations Between ISLES Meaning Integration and Various Dimensions of Grief-Related Suffering and Personal Growth

	<i>ISLES total</i>	<i>ISLES comprehensibility</i>	<i>ISLES footing in the world</i>
HGRC Despair	-.60**	-.64**	-.61**
HGRC Panic Behavior	-.33*	-.39*	-.28
HGRC Blame and Anger	-.51**	-.50**	-.58**
HGRC Detachment	-.55**	-.59**	-.51**
HGRC Disorganization	-.30	-.35*	-.27
HGRC Personal Growth	.62**	.59**	0.53**

Note: HGRC=Hogan Grief Reactions Checklist; ISLES=Inventory of Stressful Life Experiences Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

the ISLES, and the various subscales of the HGRC. As reflected in Table 2, and in keeping with meaning reconstruction theory, participants who were better able to integrate their loss or unwelcome change into their system of beliefs reported substantially less Despair, Panic Behavior, Blame and Anger, and Detachment, as well as substantially more Personal Growth in the wake of the experience.

DISCUSSION

As both Buddhism and grief theory remind us, human beings are wired for attachment in a world of impermanence (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). In view of this condition, it is unsurprising that profoundly disruptive change is accompanied by great suffering and protest,

and in the worst of cases by risk for pervasive and protracted complications that interfere with emotional, social, and occupational functioning (Prigerson et al., 2009). Our intent in the present article has been to view this condition through the twin lenses of Buddhist psychology and meaning reconstruction theory and to describe and evaluate a pilot protocol for addressing unwelcome change in a workshop intervention.

Our experience in offering this 10-hr workshop, distributed across 2 days, suggests that the intervention, grounded equally in secular Buddhist lessons and narrative constructivist theories of meaning, is feasible to deliver efficiently and with high acceptability on the part of participants. Significantly, the 41 group members studied were diverse with respect to their spiritual or philosophic frameworks—with participation of Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and secular, agnostic, or atheist adults—suggesting that this intervention for grief and spiritual struggle (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014; Neimeyer & Burke, 2014) appears to fit comfortably within rather different “religious meaning systems” (Park & Paloutzian, 2013) in which people negotiate the vicissitudes of meaning. In the present context, the diverse spiritual and philosophical frameworks of our participants easily accommodated group work on the meaning of suffering, impermanence, and the nature of self-in-context, as well as reflection upon strands of stability and fluidity in our self-narratives in the wake of loss. In part, this might have been facilitated by the frequent use of meditative pauses to enhance reflective processing and mute emotional reactivity (Hözel et al., 2011), as well as our consistent use of expressive writing and poetry to encourage novel perspective taking without direct challenge to anyone’s deeply held beliefs (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). The third-person telling of event stories (by one’s partner in the dyad), and the systematic encouragement to reflect on one’s willingness to change, seemed to contribute to a contemplative, but honest, group climate characterized by compassionate exploration of members’ evolving life stories.

That such an intervention can be effective in prompting important self-change was suggested by a comparison of pre- and postworkshop scores on several carefully validated measures. Relative to their own preintervention ratings, participants reported significant reduction in grief-related suffering (debilitating anxiety and despair), as well as statistically reliable personal growth and meaning making over the short course of the workshop. Although an uncontrolled open trial of the present sort cannot rule out the possibility that these shifts reflect factors other than the treatment (such as the passage of time), in fact such an explanation seems unlikely in view of the brevity of the interval (less than two days) and the strong reliability and test-retest stability of the measures

administered. Nonetheless, further research using a control group would be necessary to establish clearly that the apparent benefits reported by group members were in fact the result of the intervention. Similarly, study designs involving follow up of participants would be required to ensure that the changes observed were of a lasting sort. The results of the present open trial argue that such research is worth pursuing.

Finally, the association between the integration of unwelcome losses and stressors as measured by the ISLES and salutary accommodation of grief on the HGRC is also compatible with a meaning reconstruction model, in which an agonized search for meaning predicts poorer outcomes in bereavement, and the ability to find sense or life lessons in the experience forecasts more favorable adjustment in prospective studies (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). In light of this, it is encouraging that the Mustard Seed workshop, like other narrative interventions (Lichtenthal & Cruess, 2010), seems able to foster meaning making, and with it, better adaptation to perturbing life changes.

In summary, we are optimistic that further extension and evaluation of the Mustard Seed workshop format in various hospice, retreat, clinic, and community contexts might offer something of genuine value to people whose lives have been challenged by profound and unwelcome change. We hope that others will join us in pursuing this possibility.

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