

# POV Community Engagement & Education

TOOLS FOR FACILITATION



## LOVE & STUFF

a film by Judith Helfand

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## LOVE & STUFF

“How do you live without your mother?” Filmmaker Judith Helfand asks this unbearable question twice: once as a daughter caring for her terminally ill mother, and again as an “old new mom” single-parenting her much-longed-for adopted baby girl. With footage from 25 years of first-person filmmaking, shiva babka, and 63 boxes of dead parents’ “stuff,” the film asks: What do we really need to leave our children?

*Love & Stuff* is a nonlinear documentary that follows Helfand as she cares for her dying mother and sorts through the emotional and literal “stuff” left behind. The film invites thoughtful examination of parenting and caregiving, end-of-life care, grief and loss, the difficulty of letting go, and the deep and abiding love that goes on beyond death.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue, reflection, and collective care. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Love & Stuff* to engage family friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. Conversations that center grief, loss, and identity can be difficult to begin and facilitate, but this guide is meant to support you in sustaining transformative discussion. This document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people listen actively and share with care and respect. We hope it will inspire people with varying degrees of knowledge about these topics to enter the conversation and to stay in the conversation even if it gets uncomfortable or a little scary. If uncomfortable feelings do arise, try to notice them and see if you can accept them without trying to change or control them; the feelings might be a sign that change is happening—in real time.

Filmmaker Judith Helfand wants to use her experience as a cautionary tale: “I couldn’t bring myself to go through my mom’s stuff when she was alive. It was only afterward that I realized how much fun we could have had, if I’d just listened to her and gone through all her stuff with her! I found her wedding invite list, the packing list from her honeymoon, photos of her favorite tantes (Yiddish for aunts), her mother’s favorite cooking utensils. We actually could have had a great time. It would have been fun. I just know it. It would have generated stories—practical, spiritual, and grounded in family lore and my mother’s uncanny wisdom, wit, and language. We could have organized the stuff by theme, era, her side of the family, my dad’s side of the family, secrets, gifts from my father she loved or loathed but never told him, and all her unspoken cooking tricks that I never stopped to learn—using the pots and pans I would inevitably keep.”

We’ve intentionally crafted the discussion prompts to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the topics in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, we encourage you—as a facilitator, family, peer group, or professional—to choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. *And please be sure to leave time to consider taking action.* Even in instances when conversations are difficult or uncomfortable, planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized, optimistic, and willing to take emotional risks.





## PARTICIPANTS

- Judith Helfand: filmmaker, daughter, mother

## KEY ISSUES

- Grief and bereavement
- Loss and anticipatory loss
- Motherhood, nurturance, caretaking
- Family responsibility
- The role of community in healing

Dear Viewers:

Thank you for watching *LOVE & STUFF*.

I don't take the love, the very good death, or the "good grief" I had the privilege to experience and explore in *LOVE & STUFF* for granted. This is why I am so honored to share not only the film with you, but also a vision for how it can be used.

I know that observing familial love up close can be as much of a trigger as death, grief, birth and life-cycle celebrations – especially deeply loving relationships between parents and children, and mothers and daughters. Especially when there is no chance for a reprieve, a reconciliation, or it's just too darn late. Any of those things would be enough to make someone want to pick up the remote and hit STOP.

That said, I hope you'll watch this film. I hope you experience it as an invitation to join me as I process inconsolable grief in community with a lot of babka; navigate late-in-life parenting; and, with equal parts agony and humor, sort through the last and most "precious" of my dead mother's stuff. With time, I've been able to turn these painful experiences into lessons. Of course, not immediately, but the lessons always come. The best of them are wrapped up in the life, legacy, and love of my mother Florence/Feyge Zorfass Helfand (may she rest in peace).

### **Lesson 1: Accept the invitation.**

At the start of my mothers' diagnosis with metastatic colon cancer she asked me to do one thing (which she knew would be a gift to both of us) and I kept putting it off. She wanted me to come home on weekends and start going through all "the stuff" with her. This gracious invite came with a warning: "If you don't go through the stuff with me, you'll be left with a "hegdesh" (Yiddish for pile of stuff or a pigpen) of meaningless, storyless stuff, which you won't be able to give up and will be too depressed to face, and there it will stay – stacked in your small NYC apartment haunting you."

It was only after she was dead, and I had no choice, that I started sifting through generations of stuff and realized that going through "stuff" with your elder – especially if they narrate with specific stories, details, and memories – might turn banal objects into portals that dynamically move between the past and present. As I write this, I can hear the chagrin in my mother's voice, her droll asides, and her laughter mix with mine as we go through photos of "unzer alteren" (Yiddish for our elders). My grandmother's brass Sabbath candlesticks from Russia (of which my mom always whispered, "One day these will be yours, Judy"), her favorite pots and pans, and her mother's Passover meat

## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

grinder, could have – if I was lucky – become “the perfect brisket” lesson. What if I had let this process of “going through the stuff” become the blessing she was trying, again and again, to offer me? What if I had accepted this very intentional and possibly unintentional transference of specific family knowledge and history? I didn’t – but you can. And it can be fun. I am certain of it.

**Lesson 2: Good mourning is possible and it’s never too late.**

What I had originally thought was the worst possible and utterly unthinkable scenario – *helping my mother die* (or as I learned to say “helping my mother live a good death”) by being there for her last breath – was not the worst. Perhaps, it was the best case scenario and the world’s biggest blessing (that keeps blessing). When she was gone, and I was bereft, exhausted, and terrified of having to actually learn “how to live without my mother” – I got to witness a *full house* for my mom’s funeral; a beautiful graveside burial with cousins as pallbearers; and have loved ones hold us as her coffin was lowered into the Earth. I was able to fall into the warm embrace of the ‘shiva ritual’ (seven days of Jewish ritual communal mourning where you are literally taken care of by loved ones). These are rituals in my family and community and the way it has always happened. So much so, that in the first few months of Covid, I caught myself whispering to myself, “Thank G-d my mother is already dead. I just couldn’t bear that additional loss, the loss of “good mourning.”

At this moment in time there are more than a million people, just in the U.S., who have either lost someone to Covid, or lost someone during Covid. Either way, chances are they were made to say goodbye through a screen and were kept at an agonizing distance from their beloved family member as they took their last breaths. In the wake of that unfathomable trauma, they were then denied the embrace, support, and primordial comfort that comes with face to face communal mourning rituals – something we know is absolutely essential for a heartbroken mourner to ultimately move from grieving to living, and from bereft isolation to living with community.

I learned the isolating impacts of unresolved grief first-hand. My father’s sister, Ethel, (whom he never met and was not even told of until he was a teenager) died in the 1918 Flu Epidemic when she was 12. The threat of the contagion prevented my grandparents from going to Ethel’s funeral, from “sitting shiva” for her in their apartment, from getting any face to face support from their community for a very long time. Instead, they were left to grieve in isolation, in the same house their daughter had just died, and with two toddlers. My grandmother never stopped grieving. By the time I was around and conscious, 50 years later, her grief had evolved into what I remember as a wistfully tender bitterness. It manifested as a dread that something would happen to her family, and so her family

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protected and insulated her from anything sad, sick, or ill, including going to funerals, visiting relatives in the hospital, or paying shiva calls. Afraid of triggering her grief, no one turned to her for support, and she passed this silent pain to her sons, who passed it to their children. Another pandemic and 100 years later, on my very first Zoom Shiva in Covid lockdown with my daughter, I realized that my Bubby was not “mishuge” (Yiddish for crazy) - she was stuck in deep grief for more than half a century.

I’ve learned it’s never too late to ask for, or offer, a ritual do-over. “A good mourning” that recognizes the loss and the life of a loved one, or to truly recognize and embrace the sorrow of the bereaved, be they very much alive or (in the case of my beloved Bubby and Grandpa), long dead.

My hope is to turn the painful (and very belated) realization of the long-term, transgenerational impact and trauma of unresolved grief into a ritual do-over. To offer it as a healing option (if they are into it, of course) to my cousins and brothers, or to anyone who needs a reminder that loss of someone we love is not something we “get over.” There is no such thing as too late! We need to make creative space to care for those in our lives and communities who never got the chance to kiss someone goodbye. Those who never got the chance to be held in communal rituals we all need, have others comfort them and witness their loss, or share respect and recognition for their loved ones’ life will also need to grieve in community. We have to find creative ways to show up.

For those of you who are living and lucky enough to still have your beloveds alive, I hope you’ll be inspired to pick up the phone and call your mothers and fathers (or the family equivalents in your life) and strive to spend time with them and their “stuff.” I hope you’ll focus on hanging out with them in the here and now without worrying about how much time you may have left. That said, I encourage you to make time and go through some of their stuff with them, record the details and the specifics, their stories and roamings, the when, why, and who of their things. Ask if they really “like” it or if they just display it when the relatives come to visit. Give them the time, space and license to detach or celebrate their attachments - they just might want to use it.

My mom found a way to help me transform the most agonizing moments of my life into life-long blessings and “stuff” worth holding on to. This film shares the stuff of my mom, her mom, and my dad’s mom with all of you. Daily, weekly, and once a year at Passover, I share these gifts with my daughter, Theo. *LOVE & STUFF* is my attempt to lovingly share these sacred lessons with all anyone who might find them useful.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND FRAMING

## What Gets Left Behind

### *Your Clothes*

*Of course they are empty shells, without hope of animation.  
Of course they are artifacts.*

*Even if my sister and I should wear some,  
or if we give others away,*

*they will always be your clothes without you,  
as we will always be your daughters without you.*

—Judith Kroll

Figuring out what to do with a loved one’s belongings is a challenge beyond the logistical. In one scene of the film, Judith Helfand holds up a skirt of her mother’s and says, “I know that she wore this to some weddings or bar mitzvahs, and, you know, I’m not going to wear this, and I don’t want to give it to anybody, and I want to keep it, and it’s so ridiculous. I have no room! I have no room! I don’t know if I should laugh or cry. It’s like, she’s not in the skirt.” On some primal level, death doesn’t make sense. Before our first birthdays, we learn to rely on object permanence; just because we can’t see someone doesn’t mean they don’t exist. But suddenly, that’s just what it means. Where did our loved one go, we wonder, and why did they leave behind their things?

In the memoir *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*, writer Elizabeth McCracken says, “I want a book that acknowledges that life goes on, but death goes on too, that a person who is dead is a long, long story.” In *Love & Stuff*, we have a film that acknowledges just that: our relationships with our loved ones do not end with their deaths. Though we miss them, long for them—as Judith says of her mother, “I miss her, and the house. I miss her voice, her looks, her skinless chicken, her long pregnant pauses, and her uncanny intuition”—in certain ways they stay with us. For instance, they don’t take their belongings—their *stuff*—with them. Nor do they cease to occupy our minds and hearts, our daily thoughts.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND FRAMING

### A Loved One's Final Days

Since early 2020, COVID-19 has kept many of us apart from our loved ones in their final days. Millions of people have lost close family members and loved ones to the coronavirus. By August 2022, there were 1,023,445 documented deaths due to COVID-19 in the United States alone, and nearly 6.5 million globally. Many others have lost loved ones who were unable to get necessary treatment for other illnesses because hospitals were overburdened and under-resourced. Necessary safety precautions meant family and friends weren't able to sit vigil by bedsides, offer water or medication, share stories or sing lullabies. And after the deaths of loved ones, it often wasn't possible to hold memorials, sit shiva, or ritualize grief in community with others.

Love & Stuff exhibits how time spent caring for a loved one who is dying can be a time of profound togetherness, humor, and even joy. Helfand suggests viewers might benefit from starting conversations about death and dying with their loved ones. What are their wishes and fears? Important rituals, family stories, treasured objects? These uncomfortable conversations have the potential to bring us closer together, to foster intimacy while we still have time, and to prepare us—though we can never fully be prepared—for the most reliable fact of life: that we will die.

*All week I felt the energy that comes with being present and unabashedly supportive, entrusted with loving, mothering, daughtering, parenting, listening loud and speaking softly—translating “pain” from 0 to 5 and taking in the love from 0 to infinity . . . “soooooo much.” I have reveled in my good fortune to be able to embrace the now, the day, those interstitial little subtle moments that define life and make all the difference in the end . . . but today I am just sad, and baffled about how we will really do this when. . . . it gets really hard. The hospital bed was really hard . . . and then it wasn't. It was just really comfortable and useful and a blessing. As is morphine and steroids . . . and kisses, and hugs, and sleepovers.*

—Judith Helfand's Facebook page, August 23, 2013

A mutual caregiving begins, as Judith cares for her mother, lifting the foot of her hospital bed, administering medications. Judith notes, “Taking care of my mom had become an unexpected parenting 101 class.” Still, even in hospice, her mother is mothering her—thinking about Judith's health and future. In those last months, Judith asks her mother, “How do you live without your mother?” And her mother says, “You do. You learn to.”

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND FRAMING

**Motherhood and Adoption**

*oh antic God  
return to me  
my mother in her thirties  
leaned across the front porch  
the huge pillow of her breasts  
pressing against the rail  
summoning me in for bed.*

*I am almost the dead woman's age times two.*

*I can barely recall her song  
the scent of her hands  
though her wild hair scratches my dreams at night. return to me, oh Lord of then and now, my  
mother's calling,  
her young voice humming my name.*

—Lucille Clifton

Helfand had long wanted to be a mother herself, a desire complicated by an emergency radical hysterectomy at twenty-five, following a diagnosis of cervical cancer. *Love & Stuff* is in many ways a continuation of Helfand's first personal documentary, *A Healthy Baby Girl*, which tells the story of Judith's cancer and hysterectomy, caused by exposure to DES—diethylstilbestrol—once believed to reduce the risk of miscarriage and now known to be carcinogenic. Judith's mother was given DES while pregnant. DES was administered to pregnant women in the United States from 1940 until 1971, despite the fact that early testing revealed that the drug caused problems in animals' reproductive organs. Helfand created *A Healthy Baby Girl* as a way of shedding light on “the emotional cost of what the pharmaceutical company had done. Because the drug companies had known that DES was carcinogenic and kept it on the market for years.”

*Love & Stuff* weaves footage of Judith's late parents with her own journey of adopting a child and early motherhood, emblematic of the ways memory and grief and love go on long after loss. Judith's mother remains a part of her life in many ways, through documentation—film footage of their conversations, shared jokes, close-ups of her mother's face—but also through her deep wish for Judith to have the child she's longed for. That wish reverberates throughout the film and comes to feel like a kind of beautiful prophecy.

As Judith goes through the adoption process, her mother's voice echoes, “You're still going to have children, and they'll be my grandchildren.” The dream of adoption is a dream they share. We feel Judith's mother's love extending from Judith to Theodora.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND FRAMING****Creation and Connection**

*Love & Stuff* also emphasizes the balm of art-making. Creation as an antidote to isolation, a way to process, share, document, and advocate. Be it pastel drawings done late at night after a traumatic and life-altering medical procedure, recording the sound of a particular door opening and closing, extemporaneous jokes told with a dying mother, candid Facebook posts written in the narrow minutes between caregiving, or close-up shots of a loved one's nail clippers and toothbrush. Judith says, "In the early 1990s the camera helped us stay connected. It kept us talking during times that were hard to navigate." She shows us the importance of connection when moving through the most painful moments in a life—connection that is enriched and amplified by being documented and shared.

First and last, this is a film about love—the lineage of love, the ways love is transformed by loss, although never diminished. As poet and novelist Ocean Vuong said, "Grief is perhaps the last and final translation of love. And I think, you know, this is the last act of loving someone. And you realize that it will never end. You get to do this, to translate this last act of love for the rest of your life."

*and i just have some snaps and my  
memories  
and the music of course  
and my mom in my heart—nestled,  
lodged, wedged, leveraged GLUED.*

—Judith Helfand's Facebook page, September 18, 2013

A person is seen from behind, standing in a closet and holding up a dark-colored dress with a light-colored floral pattern. The closet contains various items of clothing on hangers, including a polka-dot dress and a red dress. The lighting is soft and focused on the person and the dress they are holding.

## STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

**NOTE TO FACILITATORS:** You may choose to transition from screening to discussion by selecting the following activity, questions, or a combination of both. We encourage you to select the questions and activities you'd like to use during your facilitation ahead of time.



### Quick-Write Activity

1. After the film has ended, let everyone know you'll take 5 to 10 minutes to prepare for the discussion and/or activities that are ahead.
2. Set a timer and play soft music for the transition time and invite participants to do the following:
  - a. Think of an object that reminds them of a loved one
  - b. Draw a picture (does not have to be perfect!) of that object or write a poem (or haiku) about that object
  - c. Save for later!

### Questions

- Which moments in the film impacted you most deeply? Take a moment to sit quietly and close your eyes. Which image from the film has returned to you after watching?
- Of the many themes explored in this film, which did you connect with most? Can you identify why or how that theme was most impactful to you?
- Is there anyone in your life that you'd like to share this film with? What would you want to talk about with them after watching?
- Judith goes through many, many of her mother's belongings (at one point she references "63 boxes of stuff like this"). What object do you remember best? Why do you think it stuck with you?

### The Physical Fact of Loss

- Think of some of the other "stuff"—objects from the film. What associations do you have with them? How do they illuminate who Judith's mom was? If you were to choose a few belongings that are important to you, what would they be? Gathered together, what would they say about who you are and/or the life you've lived? Do the same imaginative exercise with a parent's, a partner's, or a friend's belongings. Which objects stand out as being illustrative of who the person is, or who they were to you?
- Judith and her brothers have just a few weeks to go through their mother's three-bedroom apartment, and Alex, David, and Judith each deal with the physical "stuff" their mother has left behind differently. What do you remember about their various approaches to clearing out their mother's belongings? Do you relate to one of the methods more than the others?
- Cleaning out her mother's apartment, Judith finds her mother's takeout menus. "This is, like, this amazing time capsule. So, do I take it apart, or do I keep it?" she wonders. If you've known the reality of a permanent loss, were you able to go through your loved one's belongings after their death? If so, what was that like for you? Are there tactile things you remember? Were there things you found yourself unexpectedly drawn or attached to?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When Judith’s parents move out of her childhood home, a shed is taken down. Judith’s mother calls it “a hunk of junk,” whereas Judith asks for a piece to be cut off for her to save and remember the shed. What has your relationship been to losing objects, houses, buildings—the physical “stuff” from your life?
- After Judith’s mother has died, we continue to see footage of her (and Judith’s father) throughout the film. In fact, the film’s final words are spoken by Judith’s mother. What is the effect of their continued presence throughout the film?
- Judith sees a connection between her weight-loss and her struggle to go through her mother’s things. In what way do these things seem connected? What is the work involved in each of these processes?
- How does the problem with stuff evolve as Theodora is growing up?

### Caregiving and Parenting

- In the film, we see the ways that parenting and caregiving interact and intersect, and how caregiving dynamics between parents and children can change over time. What are some of the ways Judith and her mother care for one another in her mother’s final days? Did you see any examples in the footage of the time before her mother is dying? How does Judith care for her mother when she is dying? In what ways do we witness her mother caring for her?
- Judith decides to hold off on adoption while caring for her mother in her final months. Judith’s maternal grandmother died the day Judith’s brother was born. In what ways were Judith’s and her mother’s experiences of grief different?
- Relationships with family members aren’t simplified or rendered two-dimensional by their illnesses and deaths. This is a film about love and all its facets, including its joys and complications. How do we see Judith’s mother remain a full and multifaceted person through her illness and after she’s gone?
- Just as many adults are beginning their own families and caring for their own children, they will find that their parents require care. Judith’s mother reminds her, “The timing’s never right.” What is it like to be a caregiver and parent? To parent and grieve? Do you have experience with this?
- Judith decides to hold off on adoption while caring for her mother in her final months. Judith’s maternal grandmother died the day Judith’s brother was born. In what ways were Judith’s and her mother’s experiences of grief different?
- Relationships with family members aren’t simplified or rendered two-dimensional by their illnesses and deaths. This is a film about love and all its facets, including its joys and complications. How do we see Judith’s mother remain a full and multifaceted person through her illness and after she’s gone?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Just as many adults are beginning their own families and caring for their own children, they will find that their parents require care. Judith’s mother reminds her, “The timing’s never right.” What is it like to be a caregiver and parent? To parent and grieve? Do you have experience with this?
- The film also shows how we show up for each other in community in times of crisis and joy. It can be difficult to know what to say or do when someone we love has experienced a profound loss. Do you have things you like to do or say? Ways you feel you can show up for others in times of need? Have people shown up for you in ways that have helped? In ways that haven’t?
- How do friends and family offer Judith care and comfort in the weeks following her mother’s death?
- After Judith adopts baby Theodora, once again, her friends and family are there for her, assuring her that she isn’t doing this on her own. What are some of the ways they care for and show up for Judith in her early days of motherhood?

*Yesterday I cooked for her . . . new rituals in an old kitchen—the one she has left to us to work in and clean and organize and reorganize—the one that is making her into a Buddhist—the one she has left and is no longer attached to—or so she says. I felt like a mom . . . (and for real I am in training) and cooking for her like she was my baby . . . cooking for her and thinking—this must be what it’s like to show your child how to eat . . . to offer them their “firsts,” to put into the pot love—literally. I took pains with her oatmeal and the strawberries she wanted in them . . . I took pains with her fish . . . and seasoned it like she was a rock star who wanted to taste the salt, pepper, olive oil, lemon and oregano.*

—Judith Helfand’s Facebook page, September 10, 2013

### Rituals and Transitions

- What are some of the rituals—both formal and informal—observed after Judith’s mother’s death?
- Judith reflects on the kind of home she grew up in, and the kind of home she wants to make for Theodora. What are some of the characteristics of home she wants to recreate? What kind of home and traditions do you want to cultivate in your own family? Is any part of that vision inspired by your own upbringing? Are there things you want to emulate and things you want to change?
- Judith says the year after her surgery was “full of new freedoms and lots of firsts.” What are some of those firsts and freedoms? Has there been an event in your own life that has felt like a new beginning?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Toward the end of the film, Judith says, “Transitions and goodbyes are notoriously difficult, for all of us. I guess it’s a good thing we get so much practice.” Think of some of the transitions and goodbyes in your own life. Are there ways you’ve found of softening or honoring these periods in your own life? Rituals or traditions you have in times of change?
- Judith was able to be with her mother in her mother’s last months of life. During that time they joked, watched virtual Rosh Hashanah services together, and had conversations about what they feared would happen after her mother’s death. Her mother worried about Judith’s health, and that she would be alone without a partner. Judith worried about how she’d live without her mother, what she’d do when she wanted to call to tell her something. In some cases, the feeling that time is running out pushes us to have honest and intimate conversations and address difficult subjects we wouldn’t otherwise broach. Were you able to have conversations with a loved one before their death? Did you sing or joke? What are some of the things you talked about? Are there things you wish you’d been able to say, but didn’t?
  - If you haven’t yet lost a parent or loved one, make a list of questions you’d like to ask and things you’d like to discuss while you still have time together.
- Suffering the loss of someone close to us often pushes us to confront our own mortality. Judith’s choices are one example, a model for us to consider how we want to live beyond loss. While you have the opportunity to be in dialogue with others, perhaps you could discuss the ways this film invited you to grapple with your own mortality by considering these questions:
  - Are there resonant feelings, questions, or discomforts in terms of your own mortality that this film invited you to consider?
  - How might the film and specific moments in it be used to help people consider their own mortality, and the ways in which they want to live well in the face of death?
- On the day of Theodora’s legal adoption, Judith mentions that it’s the one-year anniversary of the last day her mother was conscious. The judge says, “They’re just letting us know, ‘I’m still here, I’m still watching you, and I’m still present.’” Have there been signs, symbols, or serendipitous events that have made you feel connected to a loved one after their death?
- Judith decides to wait to adopt a child until after she’s seen her mother through her last days, confessing, “It was hard to accept that my mother would never get to see me as a mother, but I had to.” Are there things that were difficult to accept about the death of a loved one for you? Are there particular parts of your life you wish they’d been alive for?
- In what ways has this film invited you to contemplate what you might want done around your own death or dying? What conversations would you want to have before the event of your death? What decisions, choices, planning would you like to have established before it’s too late?
  - What would this require of you and of those who love you, and how might witnessing another person’s loss motivate you to contemplate what is important in your life?



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you have mourning rituals or traditions connected to your faith, community, or culture? Were you able to observe these rituals after the loss of a loved one?
  - If you are not part of a faith or community with specific established rituals for mourning, did you create your own rituals around grieving? Were there tasks, activities, or observances that brought you comfort in the days and weeks following the death of a loved one?

**POST SCREENING ACTIVITIES FOR HEALING AND CONNECTION***NOTE TO FACILITATORS:*

*We encourage you, ahead of screening, to thoughtfully prepare any space you are going to be inviting people into for healing activities. Ideas can include burning a comforting incense or candle, having soft music playing in the background, or hosting this portion of the post-screening dialogue outside in nature. All of these activities are designed to be done with participants in a circle facing one another.*

*Show and Tell Activity*

Ask participants to return to the poem they wrote or picture of an object they sketched during the transition from screening to discussion and invite participants to volunteer to share their creations. Ask that they show what they created and share a little of the significance of the object and the person it reflects.

*The “Do Over” Activity*

This activity is for those who have known the reality of permanent loss and experienced the sting of wishing they’d done just one thing, or perhaps many things, differently before or after the loss of a loved one.

Provide all participants with something to write on and write with as you all sit in a circle facing one another after the screening. Begin the activity by asking who, if anyone, this film has invited individuals to think about and then go around the circle and invite participants to simply say the person’s name out loud.

Thank everyone for sharing, then let them know that for the next 10 minutes you will have quiet time to reflect on those people and experiences of loss with the idea of a “do over” in mind. Take care to remind everyone of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on people’s ability to be with loved ones as they were dying, and remind them that too often, COVID caused people to be separated from those they love before, during, and after death.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

With that said, invite each participant to recall their experience of loss and imagine they had an opportunity to do it again. What, if anything, would they do differently? Would they want it to be exactly the same? Invite them to imagine and write a description of this new experience that includes everything they would wish for if they could do it over. Offer the opportunity for them to leave the circle if they would rather be alone while doing this.

After 10 minutes, invite people to return to the circle if they have gone somewhere else to be alone and reflect and then invite people to share. After each person shares, encourage everyone in the group to say, “Thank you for sharing.”

### *Reimagining Rituals Activity*

This activity is meant to invite people to consider if there were things they wanted to do—or had vowed to do—after the death of a loved one that weren’t possible and to explore other feelings tied up in a web of grief that might surprise them.

*STEP ONE:* Offer all participants an index card or a sticky note and a pen or pencil and read the following to them all:

After her mother’s death, Judith feels guilt and grief braided together. She is unable, in her mourning, to do the daily things she’d promised her mother. She says, “I wasn’t exactly power-walking to shul every morning like I had promised my mom. It was hard enough to get out of bed and leave the house, much less get up the small hills in my neighborhood. I kept thinking, ‘I have to call her,’ only to remember she wasn’t there.” While rituals can moor us during difficult times, it’s also possible to feel overwhelmed and ashamed for not grieving in the “right” way.

Remind everyone of the important truth that there is no right way to grieve and that rituals often serve to offer structure in some people’s lives.

Then, ask everyone to take a few minutes to write an answer to the question:

*What is a ritual? or What does ritual mean?*

After people have written responses, ask them to share with the goal of reminding everyone that a ritual can have a long communal, religious, or familial tradition—or can be something as simple as writing a birthday card to your loved one every year on their birthday, watching their favorite movie, baking their favorite pie, or playing their favorite song at an intentional time.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STEP TWO: Ask participants to consider what rituals they have lost, or created, in the wake of loss and let them know this activity is designed to help each of them develop a personal grief ritual, make a plan, and share that plan with others.

If anyone is feeling like they are not able to access the idea of a ritual, you can consider asking them the following questions:

- What is a song that reminds you of your loved one?
- What is a movie that reminds you of your loved one?
- What is a meal that reminds you of your loved one?
- Do you have any voicemails from your loved one that you saved?
- What was an important social cause or charity that was important to your loved one?
- Do you have a piece of jewelry, a photo, or an artifact that reminds you of your loved one?
- Are there any poems or prayers that remind you of your loved one?

Share these examples of possible rituals with participants and be sure to remind them that they are simply suggestions:

- Write a letter to your loved one.
- Take flowers to their favorite river (or other place in nature) and throw the petals from the flower, while with each petal you say something to your loved one.
- Light a candle at a special time of day or week to remind you of your loved one.
- Plant a tree or flowers in your loved one's memory.
- Volunteer or make a donation to the loved one's favorite charity.
- Visit your loved one's burial site, sit down, and have a conversation with them.
- Prepare and eat a special meal in honor of your loved one.
- Say a prayer, recite a chant, or find a way to "talk" to that person in a way that feels comforting to you.

STEP THREE: Playing soft, comforting music, offer time (10 to 15 minutes) for everyone to consider a new ritual they might integrate, or to reflect on a ritual they already have integrated into their life after loss. In the independent writing and reflection time, ask that people make a plan for what they will do, how they will do it, what is necessary to carry out this activity, and when and how often they will do this.

Have them describe what they will do, a plan, and then write the reason(s) why they are doing it. How do they anticipate it will allow them to feel connected to their lost loved one? How might it, eventually, bring them comfort?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STEP FOUR: Have participants share with the group what they are planning to do and when they are planning to begin integrating this new ritual. Have them share what they hope this ritual will offer them.

*Letters to Loved Ones*

Write a letter to your loved one. If you could talk to them, what would you say? What would you ask? If you want, imagine or write down their response. What do you wish they could say to you? You could also try writing this as a poem or a song.

**SOURCES**

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"Poet Ocean Vuong sifts through the aftershock of grief in 'Time Is a Mother.'" *Fresh Air*. National Public Radio, April 5, 2022. <https://covid19.who.int/>



## RESOURCES

[Adoptive Families Magazine](#): An online publication for prospective adoptive parents and families raising children through adoption, providing information about all stages of the adoption process.

[Because I Said I Would](#): Support for families who have lost one or more loved ones to COVID-19.

[DES Action](#): Medical research and resources for parents, children, and grandchildren exposed to diethylstilbestrol.

[The Dinner Party](#): A peer community for grieving people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s.

[Grief Anonymous](#): A support organization for those grieving the loss of a loved one.

[Grief Share](#): Support groups and other events for those grieving loved ones.

[My Grief Angels](#): Grief Support for COVID-19 losses.

[NAMI \(National Alliance on Mental Health\) COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide](#): Resources on grieving in general and COVID-19 losses in particular.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: A resource for those in crisis.

[The Noah Z. M. Goetz Foundation](#): Education, resources, and financial assistance for infertile people pursuing domestic adoption.

[Peaceful Exit](#): Guided explorations and retreats on “the art of dying.”

[Red Cross Virtual Family Assistance Center](#): An online source for grieving families.

## CREDITS &amp; ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Mary Terrier** is a writer from Austin, Texas. Her fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere. Her stories are concerned with loss, the ongoing relationships the living have with the dead, and the experience of inhabiting a body while grieving. She's taught creative writing at Johns Hopkins, the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and the Library Foundation in Austin.

**Discussion Guide Producer, POV**

Courtney Cook, PhD | Education Manager

***Thanks to those who reviewed this resource:***

Javier Rivera DeBruin  
Lily Donnell  
Judith Helfand, *filmmaker*  
Melanie Levav  
Natalie Danford, *copyeditor*