Cultural Expressions of Grief Through Art

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Précis

My father died suddenly in October, 2003, when I was twelve years old. I was faced with the problem of how to express my grief. I grew up in the American Protestant church. My father was in heaven, and I knew I should be joyful. I felt I could not express my grief in forms of anger, confusion, or bitterness. I ended up mitigating my grief by holding it in. When I suffered a breakdown in May, 2010, I began the journey of learning how to grieve in a way that was beneficial and that also involved the support of my Christian community. I have always expressed myself through art. My senior thesis exhibition documents the expression of my grief since 2003.

In this thesis project, I explored how other artists have expressed their grief. I wondered whether there would be similarities in grief art across cultures. Utilizing web and print sources, I found three artists from differing cultures who experienced significant loss of loved ones. I investigated Marc Chagall, Frida Kahlo, and Motoi Yamamoto as case studies. I then researched each of the artists’ cultures to find their understanding of death based on traditions, folk, or religious beliefs. My analysis interprets each artist’s visual expression of grief within its cultural context.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was a Russian Jew who created art expressing grief over the loss of his wife, Bella. Chagall’s paintings reflect a love for Bella and for his Jewish culture, a longing for his home in Vitebsk, and the hope for a future reunion with Bella in heaven. Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a Mexican nationalist who confronted her own mortality and also experienced the loss of her mother, father, and children during miscarriages. Kahlo utilized bloody Aztec-inspired imagery, the personification of death, and the colorful expression of the
Day of the Dead to illustrate her physical and emotional pain. Born in 1966, Motoi Yamamoto is a contemporary artist who lost his sister to brain cancer in 1994. Yamamoto makes large-scale salt installations in a meditative process that reflects his Japanese Buddhist culture. I also researched bereavement in the American Protestant culture to find its influence in my work.

Each artist expressed their grief in a way that was congruent with their cultural understanding of death and societal conventions for the expression of grief. I found that art provides a visual manifestation of grief within a cultural framework.
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Introduction to Four Case Studies of Grief Art

I recreated the memory of the night my father died in *Clocks*, 2012 (figure 1). I painted an existential place where time stopped, and then flew away into the clouds. In *Clocks*, I lay curled on a couch beneath a harsh, artificial light. A feeling of helplessness governs the scene as it floats on a stormy sea. The sea is my vision of the changed and turbulent future wrought by my father’s passing. It also represents the depth, power and unpredictability of my grief since 2003.

Grief is a collection of various cognitive, physical, and emotive responses common to the experience of the bereaved. Webster University professor Dennis Klass cautions that any strict definition of grief is extremely subjective. Klass writes that the definition of grief comes from a limited perspective, in light of the American culture which “prizes and cultivates individual experience of grief.” In other cultures, such as in Japan, “the concept of emotions that are only in the individual seems foreign”. The Japanese do not have a word that can describe the individual’s experience of “grief.” Instead, they use the word, *mo*, to describe both the gamut of emotion and the ritual response that follows the death of a loved one (Klass, “Grief and Mourning”).

Most contemporary Americans understand the grief response according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ theory of the five stages of grief. The five stages of grief were first introduced to the American audience in Kübler-Ross’ 1969 book, *On Death and Dying* (Konigsberg 18). Ruth Davis Konigsberg reports that the book was a “surprise bestseller,” and its widespread popularity created a plethora of similar research and publications, and increased the scientific study of death and dying (18). Kübler-Ross’ five stages of grief ushered in a popular, secular, and psychological understanding of grief as a symptomatic experience (4). Self-help books for grief became popular in the self-improvement culture of the 1970s (30). The general population began to
understand that grief is “long, hard, and requires help” from professionals (39). Konigsberg estimates that up to 100,000 American professionals specialize in “bereavement support” (108). These professionals work in a variety of fields, including nursing, social work, psychology, and religion (108). Grief support may be offered by churches, community organizations, non-profits, and businesses such as funeral homes and retreat centers (107-108). The United Kingdom and Australia offer grief counseling, but their programs are smaller, centralized, government-sponsored, and run mostly by volunteers (20). The loss of a loved one is not an experience unique to the West, but according to Konigsberg, grief counseling is mostly a Western phenomena (20).

Jewish mourning traditions prescribe periods of loud weeping, alternating with times of communal prayer. By contrast, many Mexicans personify and even celebrate death. Writer Octavio Paz (1914-1998) describes a Mexican culture that is “familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.” In Japanese Buddhism, the knowledge of impermanence is gained through the practice of serious, quiet meditation. American Protestants mourn in a way that differs from the practices of secular American culture. An American Protestant expresses grief according to their faith and understanding of God’s role in life and death, based in their practiced interpretation of faith and Biblical doctrine.

As Klass observed, the expression of grief varies according to cultural context. Beliefs about life, death, and afterlife influence the cultural understanding of death and its significance. Each society has its ideas about the appropriate expression of grief. Yet, these cultural ideas are not always beneficial to the bereaved, nor always sufficient for emotional expression.
Although the experience of death is universal, how a society conceives of death inevitably influences its manner of expression. Both art and grief are culturally defined. The expression of grief is different based not only on the circumstances of the loved one’s death, but also as a result of a society’s structure for social relationships, its beliefs about death and the afterlife, and its rules for the expression of emotion. Therefore, the “normal” expression of grief is different in each society. Since art is just one facet of cultural expression, there are likewise many variations in how death is portrayed and expressed through the visual arts. Art can provide a visual manifestation of grief within a cultural framework.

Case Study:
Marc Chagall and a Russian Jewish Framework

Marc Chagall was born to a Jewish family in Vitebsk, Russia in 1887. In June, 1941, Chagall and his wife, Bella, fled to New York to escape the German occupation during World War II (Venturi 71). Bella was infected with an acute case of streptococcus while living in New York. Since penicillin was in short supply during the war, Bella suffered only a few days before she died on September 2, 1944, at the age of forty-nine (Wilson 148). Author and Tufts University Professor Jonathon Wilson reports that Chagall reacted to Bella’s death with an outpouring of turbulent emotion. Chagall cried freely at the funeral and evocatively turned all of his paintings around to face the wall (148). He told his friends that “Everything has become a shadow” and he would not paint for months (152). When he finally did pick up his brush, it was to express his grief. While Bella was living, Chagall made every painting into a love poem for
his wife (149). He continued to paint his love for Bella after her death, but these artworks were
darker both in color and in emotional tone (Wilson 149). *The Wedding*, 1944, (figure 2) was
painted shortly after Bella’s death. It is sad. The wedding couple stands in a blue, somber
embrace. *The Wedding Lights*, 1945, (figure 3) expresses the same wedding theme yet with an
even bluer, darker tone, and with more ghost-like figures. A year after Bella’s death, the central
figure of bride and groom faded into the background beneath a sunset and a candelabra-
chandelier.

Wilson reports that Chagall and Bella had been constant companions for almost thirty-
five years (149). Bella was Chagall’s primary muse, as well as one of his only models (148).
Though Bella and Chagall both spoke fluent Russian, Bella wrote her memoirs of their life
together in Yiddish. For Bella, “the world she and Marc had known in their youth could only be
authentically represented in that language” of their shared heritage (148). Chagall’s love for his
Jewish wife ran parallel to his love for Jewish culture. According to Wilson, symbols of love are
combined with symbols of Jewish identity in *To My Wife*, 1944 (figure 4). The symbols of love,
including a wedding, a nude, and flowers, are added to the *shtetl* “wedding canopy” and the
background village scene (149). Images of village life permeate the artist’s work after Bella’s
death. Chagall expresses a deep yearning for his Russian Jewish home in *The House With the
Green Eye*, 1944, (figure 5), and *Listening to the Cock*, 1944 (figure 6). In *Between Darkness
and Light*, 1943 (figure 7), Bella’s vibrant face contrasts with a Russian landscape, merging with
Chagall’s face to give light to his melancholy figure (86). The painting suggests that Chagall had
made his home in Bella, and so the artist’s grief was blended with homesickness.

American rabbi Barry D. Cytron describes a Jewish burial as a homecoming “to the life-
giving earth from which all human beings initially sprang” (Wilson 118). The idea of a
homecoming comes from Genesis 3:19: “for dust you are, and to dust you will return” (*Complete Jewish Bible*). Lam adds that while “the body returns to the earth, dust to dust, the soul returns to God who gave it” (238). The corpse is kept intact for burial, rather than cremated, based on the belief that the body will one day be resurrected (Lamm 240). Cytron explains that the human corpse may only be handled by a volunteer group called the *chevra kadisha* “holy society” who wash the body, cloth it in linen and lay it in a simple wooden coffin (117). Often, the dying person wishes to be buried in the ground of the Holy Lands¹, but a jar of dust or other item brought from the Holy Land may be buried with the corpse that is to be placed in a foreign land (118). Mourners cut a garment (or a black ribbon), which they wear as a symbol of the broken heart (119). The burial is concluded with the recitation of a homecoming prayer called the *kaddish* (118). After the gravesite ceremony, the bereaved family is served a meal of consolation, consisting of traditional Jewish foods (120).

Lionello Venturi, an art historian who was also Chagall’s contemporary, reports that Chagall was well-versed in Jewish scripture and custom, especially in regards to mourning practice (13). The artist grew up in a Russian-Jewish community and his grandfather was a religious teacher (13). American rabbi Milton Steinberg summarizes the Jewish observances of mourning. He said that the Jewish people are commanded to hold life closely, but to hold it with a loose hand (qtd. in Cytron 115). According to American rabbi Maurice Lamm, Judaism asserts that life on earth is a brief interlude between the existence of the unborn soul and the soul’s eternal rest in the afterlife (1). Each period of existence is separated by a black veil that “human understanding cannot pierce,” which is why the death of a loved one is so startling and disorienting to those who are living (1). Lamm cautions that the bereaved must be careful to not

¹ The “Holy Lands” refer to the traditional homeland of the Jewish people.
fall prey to “vindictiveness and self-pity” on account of their grief (3). According to Judaism, the human heart must be taught how to express pain and grief in a way that is loving and respectful towards the community (3). A series of regulations in the Jewish Bible, the Talmud\(^2\), and the Midrash\(^3\) direct the appropriate expression of grief (Lamm, “Jewish Way”). Descriptions of appropriate behavior, rituals and expressions of emotion are regulated by five stages of mourning. Lamm explains that these five stages are set according to the amount of time that has elapsed following death (75).

The first stage of mourning is the *aninut*, the time between death and burial (Lamm 75). During *aninut*, mourners are exempt from all religious, social, and labor obligations so that they may engage in the fullest expression of their grief and despair (Lamm 75). The first three days following burial are the second stage of mourning in the Jewish tradition. Lamm describes these days as being “devoted to weeping and lamentation” (75). Mourners retreat to the home and visitors are discouraged from entering (75). The following four days mark a week after burial in the third stage of mourning, called *shiva* (Cytron 119). During *shiva*, mourners are expected to remain at home and refrain from all unnecessary work. The mourner outwardly displays his or her grief by wearing the torn mourner’s clothes, “sitting on a low stool, wearing slippers, refraining from grooming or shaving, [and] reciting the Kaddish” (75). At the end of *shiva*, the family recites prayers together and then rises to take a walk outside the home (Cytron 119). According to Cytron, this tradition signals the end of the deepest mourning period and the family’s re-entrance into society (119).

\(^2\) The Talmud is a collection of Jewish law and thought (Lamm, “Jewish Way”).

\(^3\) The Midrash is a collection of teachings on the Torah according to the Jewish sages (Lamm, “Jewish Way”).
The fourth stage of mourning is the month following the burial, *sheloshim*. According to Lamm, *sheloshim* mourners are still expected to express grief by wearing the torn mourner’s clothing, abstaining from extraneous entertainment, and by continuing to refrain from grooming or shaving (76). However, the mourner is expected to slowly return to normal routines in society within the course of a year following the burial of the loved one (142). After that year, the fifth and final stage of mourning is finished. *Yizkor* is a special memorial time in honor of the completed year, when mourners reminisce and pray for the dead person’s soul in relation to God. *Yizkor* prayers are based on the idea that the living survivors can redeem the dead person’s spirit and atone for their sins “by acts of piety, decency, and generosity” (196). The living thus have an obligation to the dead to continue to be faithful to God and to Jewish teaching, and to seek the atonement of all Jewish people through right living and prayer (196).

Along with *yizkor*, the *kaddish* homecoming prayer is another important part of Jewish mourning ritual. The living recite the *kaddish* to atone for their own sin and also to redeem the deceased from “possible perdition,” in case they died with unforgiven sins that could be counted against them. According to Lamm, the *kaddish* is meant to be said “from the depths of catastrophe, exalting [God’s] name and praising Him, despite the realization that he has just wrenched a human being from life” (144). Lamm compares the prayer to Job’s brave declaration of faith in the midst of his suffering: “Though [God] slay me, yet will I trust in Him” 4 (144). Although it is said during a mourning ritual, the text of the *kaddish* makes no mention of death (Lamm 144). Instead, Cytron relates that the *kaddish* praises God as the author of all life and expresses complete trust in God’s sovereignty (118).

4 Text is from Job 13:15 in *The Complete Jewish Bible.*
Judaism thus mediates the expression of grief through the five stages of mourning and through set, ritual prayer. Lamm writes that:

Judaism, with its long history of dealing with the soul of man, its intimate knowledge of man’s strengths and foibles, his grandeur and his weakness, has wisely devised graduated periods during which the mourner may express his grief and release with calculated regularity the built-up tensions caused by bereavement (74).

In accordance with Jewish teaching, the year of mourning is to be observed fully, no more and no less. In fact, an individual who mourns for “more than the prescribed period” may be rebuked (76). Jews living in contemporary society tend to mourn for less than the prescribed year. Cytron explains that many American Jews today “engage in what may be labeled ‘fast grief’” when they are unable or unwilling to carry out the full observances of mourning (122). The secularization of Americans of all faiths leads many modern adherents to see Jewish mourning practice as unhelpful or unnecessary for their expression of grief (121).

My research indicates that though Chagall was well aware of Jewish mourning observances, the artist did not adhere to many of them. Wilson identifies Chagall as a “secular Jew” who didn’t attend synagogue at all until some friends took him to observe the Yizkor one-year anniversary of Bella’s death (153). Before Yizkor, Chagall became involved with a young friend of the family. Virginia Hagard was Chagall’s “first Gentile lover” (151). She was still married and she became pregnant with Chagall’s son before one year had passed after Bella’s death (151). Chagall and his family kept his relationship with Hagard secret, in fear of reprimand from the Jewish community (153). If she wanted to be with Chagall, Hagard had to be content to be his “hidden companion” (Wilson 154). Wilson writes that, “Virginia was well aware that she
lived in the shadow of Bella, and Chagall would occasionally let her know that in her own life she needed to be ‘worthy’ of Bella’s inviolate memory” (156). Like Bella, Hagard also left a memoir about her life with Chagall. She wrote that Chagall was happiest when he found someone who could converse with him in Yiddish, and he felt “most Jewish” when he was strolling the streets of the Jewish community of New York’s Lower East Side (Wilson 153). Hagard often endured joking and disdain for her non-Jewish beliefs when she was around Chagall’s family, and Chagall sometimes suggested that she convert to Judaism (Wilson 154). Wilson reports that Hagard eventually left Chagall for a Belgian photographer, who was a friend of theirs (158).

Apart from Hagard, his Jewish wife, Bella, and his hometown, Chagall found himself grieving, alone and homesick. “I’m not fixed anyplace. I have no place of my own,” said Chagall in an interview in the 1950s (qtd. in Wilson 160). Wilson suggests that Chagall’s sense of unrest led him to illustrate himself as the “man in the air,” never fixed to the ground in the colorful, imaginative world of his paintings (160).

Cytron describes the Jewish afterlife as a “Triple Hope” for personal survival after death, for the survival of the Jewish community, and for the future “rebirth of the cosmos” into a new world envisioned in Messianic prophecy (123). Jews believe that the immortal soul will one day be reunited with the body when God resurrects all of the dead (238). Those who ask for God’s mercy will live eternally in the world to come (238, 232). Chagall’s hope was founded in his heavenly reunion with Bella. The Apparition of the Family, begun in 1935 and finished after Bella’s death in 1947, shows a heavenly reunion with the artist’s entire family (figure 8). Venturi identifies the figures in the work as Bella, their daughter Ida, Chagall’s late parents, and his siblings (85). All of these characters gather around Chagall’s easel as a “rather wistful tenderness
pervades this reunion of the living and the remembered dead” (85). While Chagall did not always express his grief according to the Jewish conventions of mourning, Chagall had a deep longing for heaven. The artist’s colorful, imaginative work depicts the artist’s idea of what heaven will be like: a beautiful place where he and his Jewish bride, Bella, could be together again.

Case Study: Frida Kahlo and a Mexican Nationalist Framework

Frida Kahlo was born in 1907 in Coyaocán, a small town outside of Mexico City. Kahlo was just eighteen years old when a bus she was riding in collided with a tram in a tragic accident (Burrus 122). *The Accident*, 1926, (figure 9), captures the artist’s memory of the scene. Following an extended stay in the hospital, Kahlo was immobilized at home in a plaster cast for nine months. Author Christina Burrus reports that, in an attempt to console her, the budding artist’s parents gave Kahlo a set of paints and a special easel to fit her bed. After this, they fixed a mirror to the bed canopy so that she could use her reflection as a model for her figure drawing (28). Recovering beneath the mirror, the artist was forced to confront her self-image, identity and her mortality on a daily basis (Burrus 29, Helland 8). Kahlo once wrote in a poetic letter, “death is dancing over my bed all night long” (qtd. in Burrus 77). Kahlo illustrates a literal proximity to death in *The Dream*, 1940 (figure 10). In the work, a skeleton lies parallel above a sleeping Kahlo, wrapped in explosives and clutching a bouquet of flowers. The work reflects both a fear and an expectation of death’s continual presence in the artist’s life. Kahlo had to cope with the long-term pain resulting from the accident, as well as the emotional pain of losing several close
family members during her short lifetime. Kahlo addresses the theme of death in a variety of ways through her art. In fact, Kahlo’s entire oeuvre may be read in the context of her physical, psychological, and emotional suffering. The artist herself observed: “My painting carries within it the message of pain . . . painting completed by life” (qtd. in Burrus 120).

Frida Kahlo was married to artist Diego Rivera on August 21, 1929. Twenty years her senior, he was a Mexican nationalist and an established muralist who worked across Mexico and the United States (Burrus 36). Rivera and Kahlo moved to Detroit in April, 1932, so that Rivera could work on a mural for the Detroit Institute of the Arts. Kahlo suffered a miscarriage in July of that same year. She recorded the heart-breaking experience in *Henry Ford Hospital/ Miscarriage in Detroit*, 1932 (figure 11). Kahlo painted herself, lying on a hospital bed in a pool of blood. The bed floats in the Detroit skyline, evoking Kahlo’s sense of isolation apart from her home and family in Mexico. Red lines resembling umbilical cords run from her figure to other surrounding figures, including female anatomy, a fetus, a snail, Kahlo’s broken pelvis, an orchid, and a machine. Rivera was sympathetic towards her grief, and he encouraged Kahlo to express what she was feeling in her art. Painting soon became an antidote to Kahlo’s emotional pain (Burrus 120). Kahlo later insisted that despite her losses, her “Paintings substituted for all this” (qtd. in Burrus 120).

*Henry Ford Hospital/ Miscarriage in Detroit* was Kahlo’s first piece inspired by the Mexican *ex-voto* “miracle paintings,” traditionally made to thank a Catholic saint for divine intervention in a tragedy. The *ex-voto* style concentrates the drama of a scene onto a tiny space, usually on a piece of tin (Burrus 49). According to Burrus, the technique results in a “level of violence so direct as to be almost unbearable” (49). *My Birth*, 1932, (figure 12) is another example of Kahlo’s use of the *ex-voto* style, made after Kahlo’s mother, Matilde, passed away.
from breast cancer (49). Burrus interprets the piece as the story of “Matilde giving birth to Frida, but also Frida giving birth to herself, following the double loss of first her child and then her mother” in the same year (50). As seen in *My Birth*, a nude female figure lies on a bed as Frida’s iconic face emerges from the womb. The mother’s head is covered with a white sheet to indicate Matilde’s passing, while the face of the Mother-Virgin of Sorrows appears weeping in a portrait above the bed. An unfurled scroll appears at the bottom of the painting. In the ex-voto tradition, the scroll is usually filled with a written prayer of thanksgiving for the saint’s miraculous intervention. However, in *My Birth*, Kahlo purposely leaves the scroll blank (Brooks). Similarly, although *Henry Ford Hospital/ Miscarriage in Detroit* is also considered an ex-voto painting, Kahlo substituted the miracle theme for a tragedy that is seemingly devoid of the divine.

Kahlo’s father passed away in 1941. Kahlo writes that the death was “horrible,” and she blamed the event for another sharp decline in her body weight and in her health (Burrus 85, 88). Her health continued to deteriorate and she endured more surgeries on her weakened body. Burrus relates that the artist filled the pages of her diary with watercolors of broken body parts, wings, and messages such as “Broken Wings” and “I am disintegration” (109). Kahlo wrote the last words in her diary a few days before her death on July 13, 1954: "I hope the exit is joyful - and I hope never to return" (qtd. in Burrus 110). Kahlo died at age forty-seven.

The imagery of Kahlo’s work was closely related to her physical, emotional, and psychological states. Despite her Surrealist style, Kahlo insisted that what she painted was “only her own reality” (qtd. in Burrus 121). Kahlo’s graphic depictions of death and grief stem from a cultural background that, according to author Claudio Lomnitz, also embraces death as its “truest reality” (73). Writers, intellectuals, and artists from Mexico often personify death in order to express familiarity with its presence. This common personification of death probably prompted
Kahlo’s visual use of the technique in *The Dream*, 1940 (figure 10). Her husband, Diego Rivera, also portrayed a personified skeleton in *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, 1948 (figure 13). As seen in the detail reproduction (figure 14), Death takes Rivera’s hand, while Kahlo peers over their shoulders. Author Barbara Younoszai explains in “Mexican American Perspectives Related to Death” that the mural’s intended purpose was to illustrate the history of Mexico, from the 1521 Spanish Conquest to the Revolution of 1910. However, Younoszai argues there there is another message behind the painting. Rivera and Death are purposefully positioned in the center of the mural in an effort to show how Death is the nearest companion and most intimate lover of Mexico (76). Death’s elaborate dress and her prominent position in the piece indicate that Death is not only present in the history of Mexico, she is the star.

Kahlo’s childhood was greatly influenced by the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and ended when general Álvaro Obregón assumed the presidency in 1920. Mexico was in shambles after the revolution and required a new identity that would carry the country forward into the modern age. Burrus reports that Mexico’s Minister of Public Education, as well as several contemporaries, saw a “return to indigenous culture [as] a means of restoring Mexico’s roots” (21). They began a nation-wide literacy campaign and enacted programs to interest Mexico’s people in its rich history and culture (20). Intellectuals and artists like Kahlo and Rivera embraced the pre-Columbian Aztec empire as a powerful and united Mexico (Helland 8). Lomnitz writes that, for the “artistic vanguards of the 1920s, pre-Columbian sculpture was Mexico’s classical art” (414). According to Helland, bloody Aztec imagery embodied the powerful convictions of the revolutionary generation (8). The aesthetic of the Aztec culture
evoked a plethora of political and personal metaphors having to do with “light from darkness” and “life from death” (8).

Archeological remains of ancient pyramids and temples in the central region of Mexico reveal the vital role that death played in the pre-Columbian Aztec culture (Younoszai 71). Human sacrifices were an integral part of Aztec religion. According to Lomnitz, the Aztecs believed that human flesh, bones, blood, and especially the human heart, nourished and appeased their gods (161). Skulls represented the fact that the gods were pleased, which would secure prosperity and fertility for the Aztec fields and people (166). The interrelation of death and life continues to appear in the Aztec religion. According to the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, the Aztecs believed that those who have died return to the womb of the Earth-goddess Tlaltecuhtli. During an Aztec burial, the corpse was often laid in a fetal position (“Greenstone”). A vase of water, symbolic of amniotic fluid, was poured over the body (“Greenstone”).

Kahlo was enchanted by the graphic Aztec conception of life and death, illustrating it in Love Embrace of the Universe: the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me, and Señor Xlotl, 1949 (figure 15). In the painting, Kahlo paints herself wearing Aztec style of dress, which the artist wore in real life. Burrus reports that the artist’s daily outfits often included traditional hairdos that imitated the earth-goddess Tlaltecuhtli (135). Kahlo was so fascinated by Aztec afterlife stories that she named her pet dog, Señor Xlotl, after the guard dog of the underworld (Helland 10).

Mexican culture of the past and the present is replete with art that explicitly addresses the theme of death. Art critic Luis Cerdona y Aragon once said that the skeleton could be considered “Mexico’s national totem”, implying not just a modern identity but an ancestry founded in death and passed down from generation to generation (qtd. in Lomnitz 73). Far from rejecting death,
Lomnitz argues that many Mexicans consider a “playful intimacy with death as a peculiarly Mexican sign,” (24-25). As such, Jyoti Srivastava writes that Mexicans tend to apply humor to the memory of the deceased. Mexican grief art is characterized by a balance between portraying death as bloody and solemn, and yet also playful and humorous. Srivastava cites the Mexican *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) as an example.

According to Srivastava, the Day of the Dead was first documented as a celebration of death in the 1740s. Celebrated on the Catholic All Souls’ Day (November 2), the Day of the Dead combines Mexico’s native, Spanish Catholic, and modern popular culture into a colorful festival complete with dancing skeletons, candy skulls, mini coffin replicas, and paper decorations that line the streets (Younoszai 73; Srivastava). Mexicans believe that marigolds, and a special bread called *pan de muerto*, attract dead spirits to the decorated gravesides, where family members hold vigil in expectation of the spirits’ return (Srivastava). Younoszai describes the abundance of *zempasuchitl* “marigolds” that decorate cemeteries, homes, and altars to the dead (71). Altars to the dead are filled with photographs, crucifixes, pictures of the Virgin Mary, toiletries, and treats for the visiting spirits, including tequila, cigarettes, toys, and sugar skulls (Srivastava). Feasts are an important part of the festivities as families gather together to eat, share memories and tell stories (Srivastava). Younoszai reports that in some villages, the feast actually takes place in the cemetery (75).

The Day of the Dead celebration shares many similarities with Mexican mourning traditions. According to Younoszai, families use marigolds to decorate the graves of loved ones who have just passed away. Flowers are used to write the name of the dead or to lay a path from the family home to the cemetery (72). Following Catholic tradition, the corpse is kept intact and is often displayed atop a table in the home of the deceased (76). The extended family makes
every possible effort to gather to comfort the most bereaved and to eat and drink in the presence of the corpse (77). Conversation is informal. The family remembers the dead and reconnects with one another (77). The Mexican idea of the family extends to include both the living and the dead (75).

As a Mexican nationalist, Kahlo was fascinated by the peculiarities and imagery of her heritage. Helland reports that in addition to the collection of traditional dresses and contemporary ex-voto paintings, Kahlo also collected ancient Aztec idols to adorn hers and Rivera’s home in Coyoacán (9). Kahlo’s work was inspired by the art of her Mexican heritage, guided by her personal experience of death and loss.

Case Study:
Motoi Yamamoto and a Japanese Buddhist Framework

Motoi Yamamoto was born in Onomichi, Hiroshima in 1966. After losing his sister to brain cancer in 1994, Yamamoto said, “I wanted to make something to recall the memories of my sister” (Reynolds). In the decades since his sister’s death, Yamamoto has created salt installations to memorialize his sister and to embody his mourning. “Saltworks: Return the Sea” is Yamamoto’s most recent exhibition, shown at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art in Charleston, South Carolina from May 24, 2012, to July 7, 2012. The show contains examples of Yamamoto’s past work, which complement a masterpiece installation (figure 16) that fills the floor of the gallery space. Mark Sloan is the director and senior curator of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art. Sloan writes in a curatorial statement that he aimed to “chart the artist’s
journey of healing” through the exhibition of Yamamoto’s past and new work. A 2012 film
directed and produced by John Reynolds provides an informative context for the American
public viewing of “Saltworks: Return to the Sea.” The film narrates both Yamamoto’s artistic
process and the cultural significance of salt since he adopted it as his primary medium in 2000
(Sloan).

Sloan reports that Yamamoto became fascinated by salt when the artist stopped one day
to examine the grains closely. Yamamoto was drawn to the fact that each individual particle of
salt is clear, but that the compilation of the grains makes them white⁵ (Reynolds). The artist uses
a tiny squeeze bottle full of loose grains to deposit up to seven tons of salt for each of his
installations (Mercer). Yamamoto explains in the Reynolds film that each of the tiny circles
drawn in the Halsey Institute installation signify a small and distinct memory of his sister (see
detail, figure 17). Not all of the memories are serious or honorable. Some memories are quite
trivial, such as a memory Yamamoto has of his sister cheating at a card game. Like the grains of
salt, each memory of Yamamoto’s sister accumulates to preserve the recollection of the whole
person.

Sloan writes that salt is a “material at once literal and poetic,” and as such, it is “loaded
with associational possibilities.” Reynolds’ film narrates the use of salt for a variety of symbolic
purposes in Japanese cultural tradition. Salt may be used to purify the ground during Shinto
building dedication ceremonies, or it may be offered to shrines in Buddhist temples. It may be
piled at the entrance to businesses to welcome visitors and to shun evil spirits, or it may be
tossed in the air to signal the start of a sumo-wrestling match. However, Yamamoto’s use of salt
is most closely tied to Japanese mourning traditions, where he compares salt to ashes (Truitner

⁵ White is the color of both purity and grief in Japanese culture (Sloan, Truitner and Truitner 133).
and Truitner 133, Sloan). Ashes are extremely important and symbolic to the bereaved family. In Japan, 99% of families choose to use cremation, a ceremonial Buddhist procedure (Sitar).

The Japanese culture is a complex mix of cultural and religious beliefs which play an integral role in how death is understood and expressed through grief and mourning. Neal Krause, Liang Jersey, Benjamin A. Shaw, Hidehiro Sugisawa, and Hye-Kyung Kim report that a “majority of Japanese practice a mixture of Shinto and Buddhism” (99). Most people claim affiliation to more than one religion, since each religion has its own sphere of influence and function in Japanese daily life (97). In Japan, it is common for both homes and temples to have two altars: the kamidana Shinto altar, dedicated to the veneration of Shinto gods, and the butsudan Buddhist altar, dedicated to the veneration of deceased ancestors (99). While Shintoism acknowledges birth and death, Buddhism more specifically addresses human suffering, offering ideas for its cause, control and resolution (99). Ken Truitner and Nga Truitner quote a Chinese saying that confirms Buddhism’s priorities: “If you want to know about death and dying, study Buddhism” (132). Truitner and Truitner report that Buddhist monks were often taught to ponder a decaying corpse until they felt at peace towards the inevitable end to this life (129, 130).

Buddhism began in the sixth-century B.C. in India with the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, who later became the Buddha (Truitner and Truitner 128). Gautama was a man born into the Indian ruling caste, but Truitner and Truitner report that Gautama rejected the privileged life when he first witnessed the realities of “aging, sickness and death” among the common people (128). In traditional Buddhism, the ultimate goal of the individual is to be liberated from the cycle of rebirth to find freedom in the mystic “other shore,” a state of enlightenment called

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\(^{6}\)Krause et al. cite two studies done in 1990 and in 2000, reporting that 93% of the Japanese population sample identified themselves as Shinto (from Shintoism) and 74% of the sample also claimed to practice Buddhism (99).
nirvana (127). Rather than the Western idea of heaven, which has a geographical connotation, nirvana is an abstract state of heightened consciousness where the individual identity is surrendered (127). Nirvana may be achieved by practicing the Eightfold Path7 as detailed in the Pali sutras of Buddhist scripture (128). According to Klass and Goss in “Asian Ways of Grief,” anxieties, suffering, harmful behavior, and grief over loss are ideally resolved “by becoming one with the universe” through mindfulness, the practice of heightened consciousness (14). Truitner and Truitner conclude that in Japanese Buddhism, controlling the mind naturally results in controlled behavior, thus truth and right-living are achieved first and foremost through mindfulness (128).

Buddhism teaches that mindfulness is gained primarily through the knowledge of impermanence (Truitner and Truitner 129). In a passage from the Dhammapada,8 the Buddha rebukes a bereaved mother for not having understood the impermanence of human existence, causing her to mourn improperly for her son:

Kisa Gotami lost her only infant and she went in search of a remedy for her dead son. She carried the corpse of her son; she approached the Buddha and asked for a remedy.

"Well, sister, can you bring some mustard seeds?"

"Certainly, lord!"

"But, sister, it should be from a house where no one had died."

Mustard seeds she found, but not a place where death had not visited. She understood the nature of life. (qtd. in Truitner and Truitner 129)

7 The Eightfold Path is Buddha’s teaching on compassion and mindfulness (Truitner and Truitner 128).
8 The Dhammapada is a summary of the Buddha’s teachings from the Rahula, 1974.
The knowledge of impermanence drove the mother towards a certain kind of peace, despite the fact that she was mourning the loss of her son. An earlier Japanese artist named Izumi Sukeyuki evokes the practice of observing and confronting death in his sculpture, *Curious Snake exploring a Skull*, 1910 (figure 18). Sukeyuki uses a snake to symbolize rebirth, since it sheds its skin but continues to live (“Death and the Eastern Tradition”). The snake is juxtaposed with a skull, a symbol for the transitory nature of life (“Death and the Eastern Tradition”). The snake winds in and out of the skull’s form, exploring every detail in a circular motion without finding a conclusion or an end.

Yamamoto may use his artistic process to facilitate meditation on the knowledge of impermanence. The artist begins each installation in contemplative silence. Cross-legged on his yoga mat, he starts from the center of the design and works outwards until it is completed (Mercer). Yamamoto says that the process of creating the designs is like forging a path through his grief process, or tracing the mental map of a memory (Sitar, Sloan). He illustrates his technique in Reynolds’ film: “First, I place the idea of a memorial for my sister in the front of my mind. Then I, wishing that I would be able to reconnect with that place, I start drawing a maze-like path.” Memories took shape as Yamamoto piped lines of salt onto the Halsey Institute floor over the course of his two-week residency. Observing the artist at work, curator Mark Sloan commented that the process of creating saltworks may have seemed futile, but that it may also be “necessary to his healing.”

Another cultural practice may have inspired Yamamoto’s work as he continues to explore the memory of his sister, eighteen years after her death. In addition to meditation, many Buddhist laypeople also seek “good karma” in an effort to gain merit toward a better rebirth in the next life (Truitner and Truitner 128). According to Truitner and Truitner, the primary way to receive
“good karma,” is to faithfully venerate deceased ancestors for the rest of one’s lifetime.

According to Klass and Goss, a family’s mourning observances can take place for up to fifty years following the death of a loved one. Japanese believe that the spirit of the deceased is slowly elevated in status over the course of various mourning rituals and ceremonies. This slow evolution is reflected in the progression of Japanese names for the spirit. The spirit of the deceased begins as a *shirei* “spirit of the newly dead,” then, with time, becomes a *ni-hotoke* “new Buddha,” then a *hotoke* “Buddha,” then a *senzo* “ancestor” and finally, a *kami* “god” (15, 16). It takes between 33 and 50 years for the ancestral “spirit [to be] ritually purified and elevated” as a *kami* (15).

One of the most poignant periods of Japanese mourning takes place during the first forty-nine days following the death of the loved one. *Shirei* spirits of the newly dead are still closely associated with the corpse, and Japanese believe that *shirei* need the help of the living to be able to leave the body and find rest (16). The living must constantly tell the spirit of the deceased, “you are dead now. You must go away. I am sorry,” during these first forty-nine days (17). In turn, funeral attendees must repeatedly tell the bereaved family, “You are now experiencing what the end of life is” (17). Klass and Goss describe the immediate experience of the bereaved as a stark orientation to the reality of the death (17). Truitner and Truitner agree, finding that “Buddhist teachings on death...reject all cosmetic masks for the realities of death and decay” (128). Indeed, after the Buddhist cremation ceremony, two family members use chopsticks to transfer the bones from the ash heap into the family urn (17). The practice is brutal in its reality, but it is also symbolic. Klass and Goss relate how the symbolism of the spirits of

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9 Japanese use the literal word, “burned” (Truitner and Truitner 17).
the “recently deceased joining the other dead of the family” mimics the bones accumulating in the family urn (17).

As mentioned in the introduction, there is no Japanese word to describe the individual’s experience of grief (Klass, “Grief and Mourning”). Krause et al. postulate that the loss of a loved one may be especially difficult because of the “tightly integrated culture” that makes up Japan’s collectivist society (97). Therefore, the main focus of mourning is to restructure the relationship between living family members and the dead (Klass and Goss 15). According to Klass and Goss, a domestic Buddhist altar extends the relationship with the deceased, as “bonds which existed in life” are simply continued in a different form (19). Ancestors may be summoned to the altar by ringing a bell, lighting incense, and then speaking directly to the memorial tablet as if the deceased person were in front of them (15, 19). Klass and Goss wrote of a woman who celebrated her wedding anniversary with her deceased husband. The woman hosted a celebration with close family members in honor of the occasion, just as she would do if her husband were still living (19). She made chocolate cake, her husband’s favorite desert, and served the first slice to the husband’s picture on the altar (19). After paying her respects, she then served the cake to the rest of the guests (19). According to Krause et al., “regularly occurring ritual behaviors” in front of the domestic Buddhist altar provide “a temporary respite from troubling thoughts and concerns” and also help to mitigate the sense of loneliness following loss (98).

Hiromi Kurosawa is the Senior Curator at the Twenty-First Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. Kurosawa supposes that in the course of Yamamoto’s artistic process, he is creating a “kind of conversation” with his sister, her memory, and the collective family memory (Reynolds). An article in the Charleston City Paper quoted Yamamoto saying, “I dream about her while I’m working” (Mercer). Yamamoto explains that his main intent
is to “capture a frozen moment that cannot be attained through pictures or writing. What I look for at the end of the act of drawing could be a feeling of touching a precious memory” (qtd. in Sloan).

Yamamoto has made a variety of salt work designs as a way to embody strong and deep memories of his sister. According to the Reynolds film, Yamamoto’s designs vary from location to location as the artist adapts each installation to the specific space, to the qualities of the particular brands of salt, and to environmental factors such as humidity and wind. His salt works include salt stairs, labyrinths, and most recently, typhoons. One design, *Utusemi*, was exhibited between 1998 and 2005 in Toyama and Fukuoka, Japan, as well as in a gallery in New York City. In *Utusemi*, bricks of salt formed a staircase, intentionally crumbling in the middle as a powerful symbol of disruption (figure 19). In 2010, Yamamoto drew a circle-style labyrinth on the floor of Kunst-Station in St. Peter Cologne, Germany, stretching almost forty feet in diameter (figure 20). Another labyrinth that ended in a mountainous salt landscape graced the floor of the Bellevue Arts Museum in Bellevue, Washington from March until May, 2012 (figure 21). It was Yamamoto’s search for an Asian symbol of death and rebirth that led him to discover the typhoon motif which constitutes Yamamoto’s most recent installation in “Saltworks: Return to the Sea.”

Both the creation and the dismantling of “Saltworks: Return to the Sea” facilitated Yamamoto’s expression of grief. The Charleston City Paper reports that visitors to the closing exhibition were invited to scoop the salt from the floor into containers, and then deposit the salt into the nearby Cooper River (figure 22). Truitner and Truitner clarify that depositing the ashes of a loved one into a body of water is a common Japanese tradition (132). “It is always interesting to me, to see my work disappear,” said Yamamoto, as he observed the deposition (Reynolds). Yamamoto points out that the salt from his installation will dissolve into the seawater.
to support the renewal of marine life (“Motoi”). He grins at the thought that one day, community participants may eat the fish that was fed by the salt (Reynolds). Both Yamamoto’s artistic process and his product reflect his cultural understanding of the continual cycle of death and rebirth.

Case Study:
My Art and an American Protestant Framework

I was confronted with my first experience of loss when I was twelve years old. My father, David Hamilton Wixom, had a massive heart attack and passed away in his sleep on October 20, 2003. My mother was left with three children, ages seven, eight, and twelve. We had been the classic American family: well-educated, middle class, and active members in the local Vancouver First Church of God. I was privileged to attend a private Christian school from preschool until fifth grade. At home, my family and I prayed around the dinner table and every night before bed. As American Christians, we celebrated both the commercial and the Christian components of holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. I began reading the Bible on my own around the age of ten, was baptized at age eleven, and participated in several extra-curricular Bible studies. I learned Christian devotion from my family. My father loved God, possessed a strong Christian faith, and lived a moral life of service to others. Since both my father and my mother were artistic, I also grew up creating art. I continued to create as I experienced grief. A majority of my oeuvre from 2003 to the present either dealt with the theme of life and death or
was inspired by grieving. My grief art may be read in the context of American Protestantism and the Christian perspective of death, grief and mourning.

During the first year or two following my father’s death, my art was often made as an attempt to preserve my father’s memory, or the memories I had of our family all together. For example, Salamander Cove, 2005, (figure 23) a seemingly normal landscape, is loaded with emotions of my grief and memories of the time my family and I spent there. I was also fascinated by objects that had symbolic representation of our family and our beliefs, objects my dad had touched or admired, and photographs of cherished memories. I asked family members and close friends to record their impressions and memories of my father, David Hamilton. I collected these documents and objects into my 2004 scrapbook, which will be part of my 2012 senior thesis art exhibition. As the years passed, my grief deepened. Grief became increasingly complicated as I moved towards a more adult understanding of life and death. As evidenced in the chronological thesis exhibition of my work, my artwork became tied to an exploration of death, identity, and faith.

The night my father passed away, a pastor rushed over to our home to assist my family. My grandparents came to the house. The family was already talking about my father being in heaven. I was given the opportunity to see my father’s body before the paramedics removed it from the house, but I declined saying, “no, that’s not Dad. Dad is in heaven.” At twelve, I understood death from the American Protestant perspective. When everyone had left, I laid down on the couch and tried to sleep, but every fiber of my being was praying and pleading with God.

My immediate appeal to God was a common reaction. In Living Beyond Loss, author Froma Walsh summarizes that a “vast majority of families adopt some form of spiritual expression for solace, strength, inspiration, and connection in the face of death and loss” (182).
Six decades of Gallup surveys measured the number of adherents to religious beliefs and their significance in daily life, finding that Americans are one of the most religious peoples in the world (Walsh 188). A United States Religious Landscape Survey, published in February, 2008, questioned 35,000 Americans ages 18 or older and found that Americans were overwhelmingly Christian. According to the data, 78.4% of all American adults claimed affiliation with some form of Christianity and 51% of those Americans claimed affiliation with the American Protestant denominations\(^\text{10}\). Protestant Reverend Stephen D. McConnell argues that many aspects of American culture, including secular literature, music, and art, as well as “cultural ceremonies, rituals, weddings, and funerals have their roots in Christian doctrine” (39).

Traditional bedtime prayers recited in American homes reflect a concern for the innocent souls of children: “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take” (Walsh 199). A Christian world view inevitably shapes the American understanding of death, as well as the American practice of mourning.

According to Walsh, people “who believe their lives belong to God” rather than to “themselves, their families, [or] their communities” are less likely to fret over the circumstances of their death or the opportunity to say goodbye (195). Those who believe in God are most concerned with whether or not they are forgiven by God at the time of their death (195). Christians believe that heaven is not guaranteed for the deceased, but that entrance into heaven is conditional, based on whether or not the deceased believed in Jesus Christ. McConnell writes that grief is prolonged or complicated if the mourner believes the loved one died without having

\(^{10}\) Walsh’s data on American Protestants include the Evangelical, Mainline, and Black Protestant denominations.
received God’s forgiveness (44). For this reason, Christians take great care to ensure that the
dying are in “good standing” with God.

The Protestant Christian conception of heaven is described by apocalyptic prophecies in
the book of Revelation. Heaven is described as a renewed and perfected version of earth,
sustained by God’s luminous presence. According to Revelation 21:4, “There will be no more
death or mourning or crying or pain” in heaven (*The New International Version*). McConnell
describes the idea of heaven as “the ultimate hope of the suffering or grieving Christian” (40). A
mourner’s greatest comfort is in the fact that “one’s loved one has not merely departed but has, in
fact, arrived elsewhere, a better place, the ultimate destination” (40). Grieving Christians
experience both the “deep pain of losing a loved one and the joy of believing that he or she is in
a wonderful place” (41). The balance between Christian joy and grief was modeled at my
father’s funeral, which took place in our family church about a week after he passed away. The
memorial, or celebration, service was comprised of joyful singing, tearful personal testimonies,
and a sermon that preached the Gospel story and the importance of asking for God’s forgiveness
for sins. The service demonstrated that a Christian’s grief over the loss of a loved one is
supposed to be kept in perspective.

The balance between a mourner’s joy and grief is taught, observed and often evaluated by
members of the church. At first, most of my mourning was practiced either at church or with
members of the church who came to visit our home. As my family and I experienced, it is
common for members of the Christian church to visit the family of the deceased, and to bring
them condolence cards and food (42). McConnell asserts that American Protestants do a good
job comforting the bereaved during the moments of crisis and the immediate grief following
death (42). However, the modern American church “is often not prepared to walk with the bereaved down the long path” of the grief process (42). The problem is in the church’s tendency to critique the mourner’s ability to balance Christian joy and grief. Members of the church may question the authenticity of the mourner’s faith if the grief process lasts longer than expected (41). According to McConnell, many “bereaved individuals are not given the permission to feel and express the deep pain that may remain in spite of the assurance of eternal life for their loved one” (41). As a result, “those who find themselves in deep pain or depression often feel guilty or selfish because they are unable to be joyful in their loved one’s new life in heaven” (41). Church members often tell the bereaved, “at least they [the deceased] are in a better place,” in an effort to avoid uncomfortable situations or to evade dealing with the underlying pain and questioning (41). While church members may mean well, many do not feel equipped to address the religious problems and questions that arise in the event of death. In Grief and Mourning In Cross-Cultural Perspective, Paul C. Rosenblatt, R. Patricia Walsh, and Douglas A. Jackson find that for many Americans, “it is a sign of maturity to control emotions. And in many religious congregations, suggestions are made about the relation between religious faith and bereavement behavior” (115).

McConnell explains that for Christians entering the longer-term stages of grief, grief is further complicated when the bereaved feel unable to emotionally and spiritually “connect” with God as they once did (45). C.S. Lewis’ memoir, A Grief Observed (1961), is a Christian perspective of Lewis’ grief over the death of his wife in 1960. Although he was known for a persevering faith, Lewis recorded experiencing a period of time when he felt that God was silent (qtd. in McConnell 43). In the book, Lewis questioned God’s goodness and even God’s existence (qtd. in McConnell 43). Lewis’ struggle to understand God’s role in the death of his wife
illustrates the “ever-present issue of God’s participation in suffering” that every suffering or grieving Christian must face (McConnell 42).

My grandmother, Joanne Houser, was diagnosed with a rare form of lymphoma in 2004, just a year after my father passed away. Though I was quick to pray for her health, I was puzzled as I watched her grow increasingly weak and sick. As Christmas approached, my concern for her was concentrated on the fact that she was not a Christian. I began a prayer project. I sent out a mass email to people all over the country, asking for their written prayers so I could give them to my grandmother. In December of 2004, my grandmother had a dream which she interpreted as a vision from God. Our pastor at the time talked and prayed with her, and converted her to Christianity. Hunched in a wheelchair, my grandmother clutched a microphone to her chest during the Christmas Eve service and told the congregation that she was not afraid to die. Two months of hospice care followed. My grandmother passed away on February 11, 2005.

In Resurrection, 2009 (figure 25), I painted a sick, earthly body, dying and at the same time passing into a new existence in heaven. The first sketch (figure 26) had such powerful associations with the death of my grandmother that I cried after I finished drawing it. I was deeply affected by the slowness of my grandmother’s death. Whereas my father died suddenly, my grandmother and I had time for conversation. This gave me more time to question the nature of death and suffering in light of God’s sovereignty. When she died, my family was relieved that my grandmother was not suffering anymore; however, I remained both traumatized and angry at her passing. In February of 2006, my family lost Aunt Mary James, an elderly lady who lived next door to my grandparents, who was like my second grandmother to me. But I had no tears

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11 I later wrote and illustrated a children’s book that was inspired by the prayer project, called Abuelita te ama, Ben/ Grandma Loves You, Ben, 2009. Two illustrations are pictured in figure 24.
left to cry for her; this time I felt numb. Well-meaning friends, family and church members assured me that I would eventually recover from my grief, and that being mad at God was a normal reaction that would not last forever. Even Walsh writes that “It is common to doubt the existence of God or be angry at God for the injustice” after experiencing a death (195). Walsh also writes that after experiencing death, some people draw closer to God and some turn away, although such responses are not necessarily permanent (195).

After the passing of my father, grandmother, and Aunt Mary, I continued in high school, feeling that none of my peers could understand me. I immersed myself in my schoolwork and my art. I preferred to be alone. In 2008, I became depressed and began to have suicidal thoughts. Some of my darkest hours that year were spent while I was alone painting a giant mural, How Do U C the World?, in the youth room of our church (figure 27). Christian symbols now permeated my art, but it was only to cover up a deep disappointment and fear that everything inside of me was dark and sinful. I clung to Christianity so that family and church members would think that I was alright and would leave me alone.

I spent the last two years of high school committed to my academic and artistic success. In fulfillment of a requirement for a studio art class, I began a twelve-piece series of acrylic paintings that explored the interaction between lightness and darkness, which for me represented the relationship between God as light and humankind as darkness. I began to use jet-black backgrounds with a single source of light, as seen in Light Pollution, 2008 (figure 28). The series also utilized a large number of self-portraits. I simultaneously grieved and asked the “who am I?” question of identity, as in Mirror Image, 2009 (figure 29). I connected to the darkest parts of my paintings, but I always painted a “light of hope” into them. The element of Christian hope kept viewers from questioning the state of my grief. Painting an indication of hope told the viewer
that I, too, was hopeful and resilient. I often incorporated the texts of Bible verses so that these works seemed overtly Christian, as in *Lift My Hands to Repentance and Freedom*, 2009 (figure 30). I did not entirely believe the Bible verses and Christian concepts embedded in my paintings. Rather, as I hid my grief from the world, I forced myself to believe and to hope.

My life and my grief changed when I suffered a breakdown in May, 2010. I began an intense regimen of secular counseling and I also began to confess my sins and my grief to other Christians that I knew. I confessed my sins to God and for the first time, I felt like he was there listening. It was my complete surrender. I told God everything; I told him that if he wanted me, then he had to bring me out of this hole that I had dug for myself. I found that once I started crying, I couldn’t stop. The art I made during this time became darker and darker. My mother was extremely concerned. I would often retreat into my art studio in our family’s garage to alternate painting, praying, and crying. Literally unable to control my emotions, it seemed that I was experiencing seven years of grief in the course of one summer. I was compelled to express my grief both emotionally and artistically. In *More Than Watchmen Wait for the Morning*, 2010, (figure 31), skeleton hands play a piano keyboard on one side of the piece, while a plant sprouts out of a grave on the other side. Blood and water spring from Jesus’ hands to feed the plant and to make it grow. *This is Where the Healing Begins*, 2010, (figure 32) was completed in August, 2010. A wall crumbles down to reveal my self-portrait, signifying a renewed passion to bear my heart to the world. I created a self-portrait before and another after the May, 2010 breakdown in the series, *Grace Meets Gomer* and *Call Me Lily*, 2010 (figure 33). I intended to show that, after finally expressing my grief, I felt like a different person.

After that summer passed, I felt exceedingly lighter. I began to see evidence of my healing in the art that I created. Art flowed freely from me as I felt enabled to express both my
light and my darkness. The more that I expressed myself, the more I found an identity apart from my years of grief and emotional pain. In *Dear Nicodemus*, 2012, (figure 34), I illustrated a soul reborn. I started to explore themes of life, beauty, grace and redemption. Some of the works were simply playful. I felt less inclined to tell the viewer what to think, and so I also strayed from the heavy use of text. I did not have to justify my faith with overtly religious art. When I did express my faith, the expression felt deep and true, as in *Story of the Blue Dot*, 2012 (figure 35).

Backgrounds lightened and my color palette became more varied. A new fascination with watercolors brought the freedom to abandon my heavy reliance on reference photographs. I began to paint from my creativity and memory, and to spontaneously illustrate prayers and sermons. In 2011, I became fascinated with eclectic mixed media collages. I started to travel and found inspiration outside of myself in other people’s culture and history.

As I acquired the confidence to authentically express myself, I began to re-address the themes of death and grief in retrospect of the actual events. *Clocks*, 2012, (figure 1) is one of these reinterpretations of the night that my father died. The girl on the couch is me at age twenty-one, rather than age twelve. Cognitive and visceral memories began to re-surface as I painted *Clocks*. I only continued to paint because I had wanted to externalize this difficult memory for a long time. When I was done, I stepped back to look at the work from a distance. I was stunned to realize that the painful feelings of grief were gone, and I finally felt distance between myself and the girl in the painting.

Grief no longer controls me. I feel that my life changed after I surrendered my grief and my life to God. While I am overjoyed to leave that painful time of life behind, I learned much about myself, God, and the nature of life and death. I will always remember the loved ones that I
lost. As an American Protestant, I look forward to heaven’s promise of no more death, crying, or pain. I now seek to express this hope and a renewed, authentic sense of joy through my art.

Conclusion: Grief Expression Within a Cultural Framework

Artists live, mourn, and create within their societal constructs. Grief is a universal experience following the death of a loved one, but grief and mourning do not manifest the same across all cultures. A culture’s beliefs, traditions, and norms influence the perception of death, the possibility of an afterlife, the experience of grief, and the observances of mourning. Grief is externalized and visually captured through a cultural lens. Marc Chagall’s grief over the loss of Bella reflected his love for his Jewish culture, a longing for the Jewish community of Vitebsk, and a hope for his and Bella’s future reunion in an afterlife. Frida Kahlo utilized bloody Aztec imagery, the personification of death, and the colorful expressions of the Day of the Dead festival to illustrate her physical and emotional pain. Contemporary artist Motoi Yamamoto makes salt installations in a meditative process that reflects his grief within the framework of his Japanese Buddhist culture.

I was young when my father passed, but I, too, was aware of my cultural audience as I created art. I often made art that would be well-received by my mother, my teachers, friends, and elders of my church. I felt pressure to show those who cared about me that I was “recovered enough” to not need grief counseling intervention. Ultimately, I did need intervention, but this was because of how I had restrained my grief response according to what I felt was an appropriate expression of grief.
In learning about other cultures’ contexts for grief expression, I became more aware of the cultural lenses that influenced my perception of death and expression of grief. I found that I expressed my grief in conformity to the American Protestant perspective and with my interpretation of Biblical doctrine. I found true freedom of expression through art when I finally let my grief out.

There are universal truths about the experience of loss, but there are also cultural norms that influence grief expression. The cultural framework for grief varies from culture to culture and it is not always beneficial to the bereaved. I find myself longing to understand what is universal about grief. I believe that grief art can connect us to what is essentially human about the experience of loss.

This project has been a lot of work, in terms of research, writing, and artistic output. I have learned a great deal about grief from a general, cross-cultural perspective. I have also gained insight into the patterns and choices I made during my individual experience of grief. I do not know how it happened, but in the course of my slow recovery from grief, I became more separated from it. Instead of finding myself in the midst of grief, I now feel that the bulk of it is behind me. I view this project as a goodbye, or a celebration, of this chapter of my life where grief played an exceedingly formative role. Though I painted myself in many of the works, I hope that my art will reach beyond my individual experience and culture.

In the vein of future work, I would like to publish Abuelita te ama, Ben/ Grandma Loves You, Ben, 2009, to provide a cross-cultural resource and forum for bilingual children to discuss loss. I have already applied what I learned about Kahlo and the Day of the Dead festival to curate
and display the current exhibit in the CUB Gallery. I enjoyed putting together the exhibit and am interested in someday working in a gallery or museum that specializes in art from other cultures. I also desire to travel to view art from other cultures, face-to-face in their cultural context. I want to converse and create with artists in other countries.

I am a life-long artist and will always express myself through art. However, my interest in grief art has waned as my personal grief has lightened. Since I feel I have completed my personal series of grief artwork, I am ready to market these pieces to make room on the walls for new ones. I will find new inspiration, likely creating new artworks that will express both Christian and universally human themes.

12 "Hector Hernandez: This World Is Not My Home, I’m Just Passing Through” is exhibited in the Compton Union Building Gallery from October 9 to November 5, 2012.
References Cited


Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1. Wixom, Danica. *Clocks*. 2012. Owned by the artist.


Figure 23. Wixom, Danica. *Salamander Cove*. 2005. Owned by the artist.


Figure 27. Wixom, Danica. *How Do U C the World?* 2008. Vancouver First Church of God, Vancouver, WA

Figure 29. Wixom, Danica. *Mirror Image*. 2009. Owned by the artist.

Figure 30. Wixom, Danica. *Lift My Hands to Repentance and Freedom*. 2009. Owned by the artist.
Figure 31. Wixom, Danica. *More Than Watchmen Wait for the Morning*. 2010. Owned by the artist.

Figure 32. Wixom, Danica. *This Is Where the Healing Begins*. 2010. Owned by the artist.
Figure 33. Wixom, Danica. *Grace Meets GOMER* and *Call Me Lily*. 2010. Owned by the artist.

Figure 34. Wixom, Danica. *Dear Nicodemus*. 2012. Collection of Steve Barke.
Figure 35. Wixom, Danica. *The Story of the Blue Dot*. 2012. Owned by the artist.
### Appendix B: Gallery Exhibition List

**Works by: Danica Wixom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Dad and McKayla</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>pencil</td>
<td>13.5x16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad Ornament</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>5x5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buschart Gardens</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>9x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad Scrapbook</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>8x10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad Video</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>sharpie drawing on VHS case</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti Mural</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>print</td>
<td>9.25x7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Reflected</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>print (oil pastel)</td>
<td>11.5x8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salamander Cove</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>oil pastel</td>
<td>17x15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Is Running Out</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>print (silk screen)</td>
<td>11x15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me in shades of gray</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>print (charcoal)</td>
<td>9.75x11.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 2</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>spray paint and tempa on wooden board</td>
<td>12x30.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom’s mural</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>print</td>
<td>6.25x8.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and White Daisy</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>print (acrylic)</td>
<td>11x14.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower: Reality</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara (Cancer)</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>pencil</td>
<td>8x10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coogan Boys</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print</td>
<td>8.25x6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of Four</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>20x16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian Angel</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print, sharpie, white-out</td>
<td>9x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Seatbelt That is My Faith Will Keep Me From Falling</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>24x30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSAA Plein Air</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print (acrylic)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under the Chicken</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print (watercolor)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory in Pastel</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print (oil pastel)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Howling At the Moon</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print (mural)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dad and his siblings</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dad Portrait</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>pencil</td>
<td>11x13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divine Romance</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (charcoal)</td>
<td>9x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postures of Worship</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>23.25x25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Portrait</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>oil pastel</td>
<td>22x28</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Way: John 14:6</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>16x20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audience of One</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (acrylic)</td>
<td>5.5x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do UC the World?</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (media media)</td>
<td>5.5x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart of Darkness</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (watercolor)</td>
<td>11x15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Time</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (acrylic)</td>
<td>8x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Are the Light of the World Matt. 5:14</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (oil pastel)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>glory! GLORY!</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
<td>7.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>print (encaustic)</td>
<td>6.75x10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abuelita te ama, Ben</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>printed book</td>
<td>11x8.75</td>
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<td>Forget Me Not</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>markers and sharpie</td>
<td>5.5x9.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grandma (Abuela)’s Flowers</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>marker and colored pencil</td>
<td>12.5x15.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>He Knows My Name</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>20x16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lift my Hands to Repentance and Freedom</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>acrylic and mixed media</td>
<td>50x50.25</td>
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<td>Mirror Image</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>acrylic on mirror</td>
<td>8 diameter</td>
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<td>Resurrection</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>31.25x25.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resurrection Sketch</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kelsey R. Mourning</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Dimensions</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>print (oil pastel)</td>
<td>8.5x10.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spirit Fall</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>print (acrylic)</td>
<td>5.5x8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror Image: Who Am I?</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>16x20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>print (watercolor)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call Me Lily</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>colored pencil</td>
<td>12.5x15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Meets Gomer</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>colored pencil and pen</td>
<td>13x16</td>
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<tr>
<td>More Than Watchmen Wait for the Morning</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>32x20</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Sacrificial Door</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Word and Two Sparrow</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>21.25x16.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>This is Where the Healing Begins</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>8x24</td>
</tr>
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<td>Timshel (Running)</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>print (mixed media)</td>
<td>8.5x8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Turners</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>print (mixed media)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blessed Are Those Who Mourn</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>print (mixed media)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<td>Lovely</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acts 2 Church</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>print (mixed media)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>God, Show Yourself Among Us</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>oil pastel</td>
<td>25.25x19.5</td>
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<td>Stone Heart</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>plaster</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 20, 2003</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>print (sketch)</td>
<td>8.5x11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clocks</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>acrylic, clock parts</td>
<td>24x18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dear Nicodemus</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>acrylic</td>
<td>18x24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Light of My Mortality</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>12x12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romans 1:19-20</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>24x8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story of the Blue Dot</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>16x20</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Wait of Glory</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>13.5x16.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>This Too Shall Pass</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letting God be God</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2006 journal pages, 2011 mirror painting</td>
<td>16x20</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Grass of the Field (Psalm 103:15)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>acrylic, butterflies, leaves, plastic</td>
<td>36x36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Gallery Exhibition Sketches

Figure 1. Exhibit sketch

Figure 2. Exhibit sketch
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Thesis Title  Cultural Expressions of Grief Through Art

Thesis Presented  Fall 2012

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Student Name Telephone Email

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Student Signature Date 12/5/12

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