



Fort Massey

Saint Matthew's

Saint Andrew's

Becoming the Stories We Tell

Grief, Loss, and
the Spirit that Unites us



Presented by:
Rev. Matthew Fillier





We Will Learn to:



Recognize and respond to experiences of loss



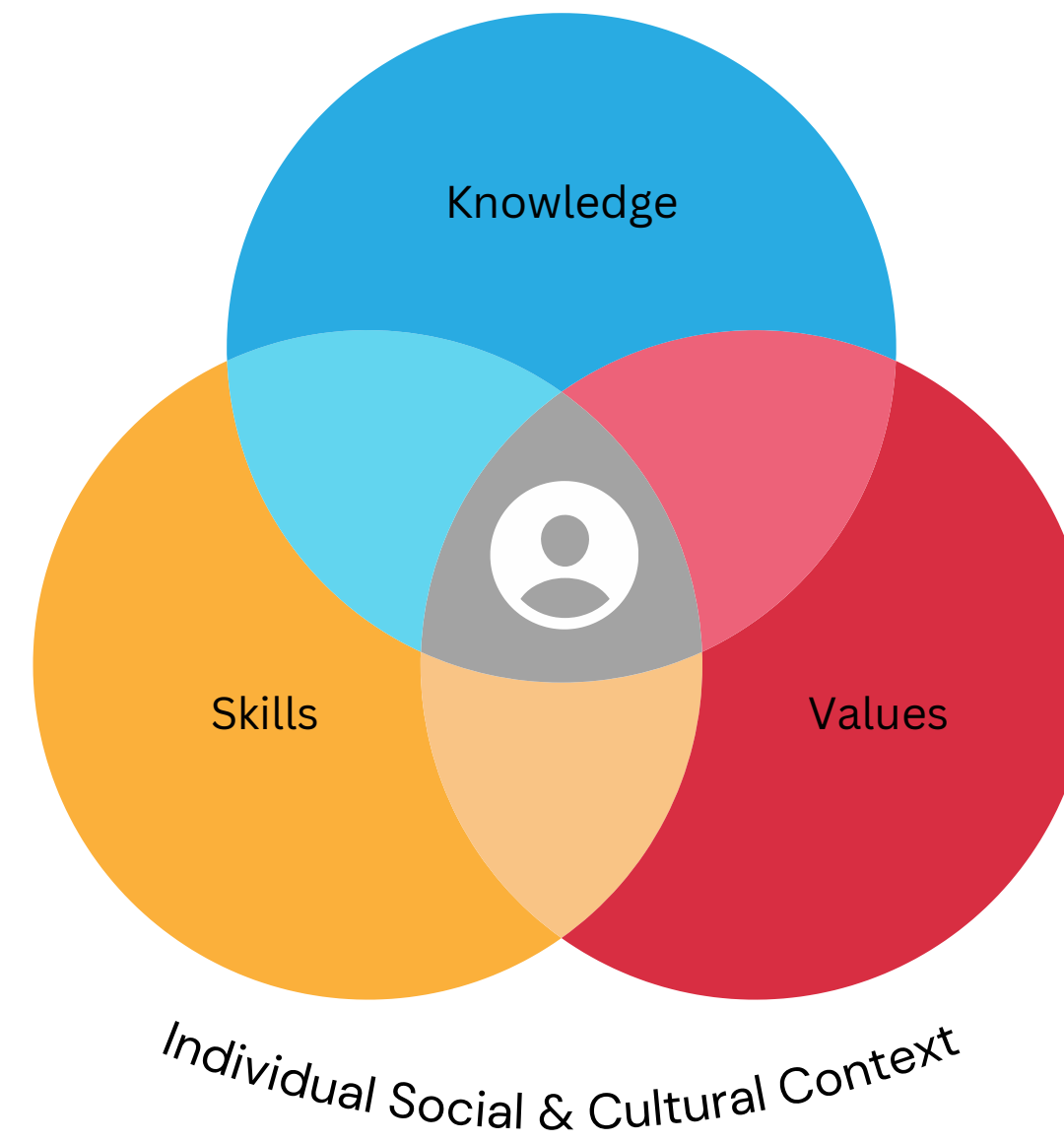
Understand grief as a human and spiritual experience rather than a problem or illness



Support yourself, others and your community as you adjust, make meaning, and repair as a griever

What is Grief Literacy?

Grief Literacy means cultivating the capacity to access, process, and use knowledge regarding the experience of loss.



Breen, I. J., Kawashima, D., Joy, K., Cadell, S., Roth, D., Chow, A., & Macdonald, M. E. (2022).

Grief literacy: A call to action for compassionate communities. *Death studies*, 46(2), 425–433. *paraphrase for accessible language

Grief Is Not A Stage.

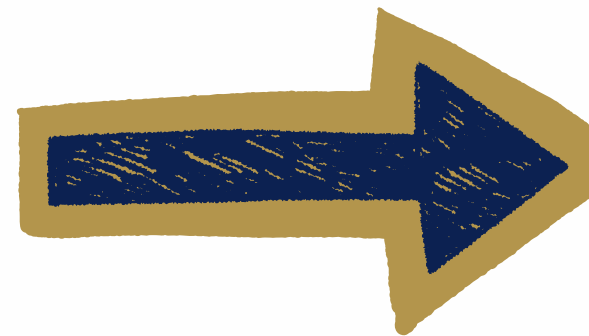
Stages of Grief:

- 1) Grief has no stages
- 2) Grief has no stages
- 3) Grief has no stages
- 4) Grief has no stages
- 5) Grief has no stages

Grief does not obey arbitrary timelines

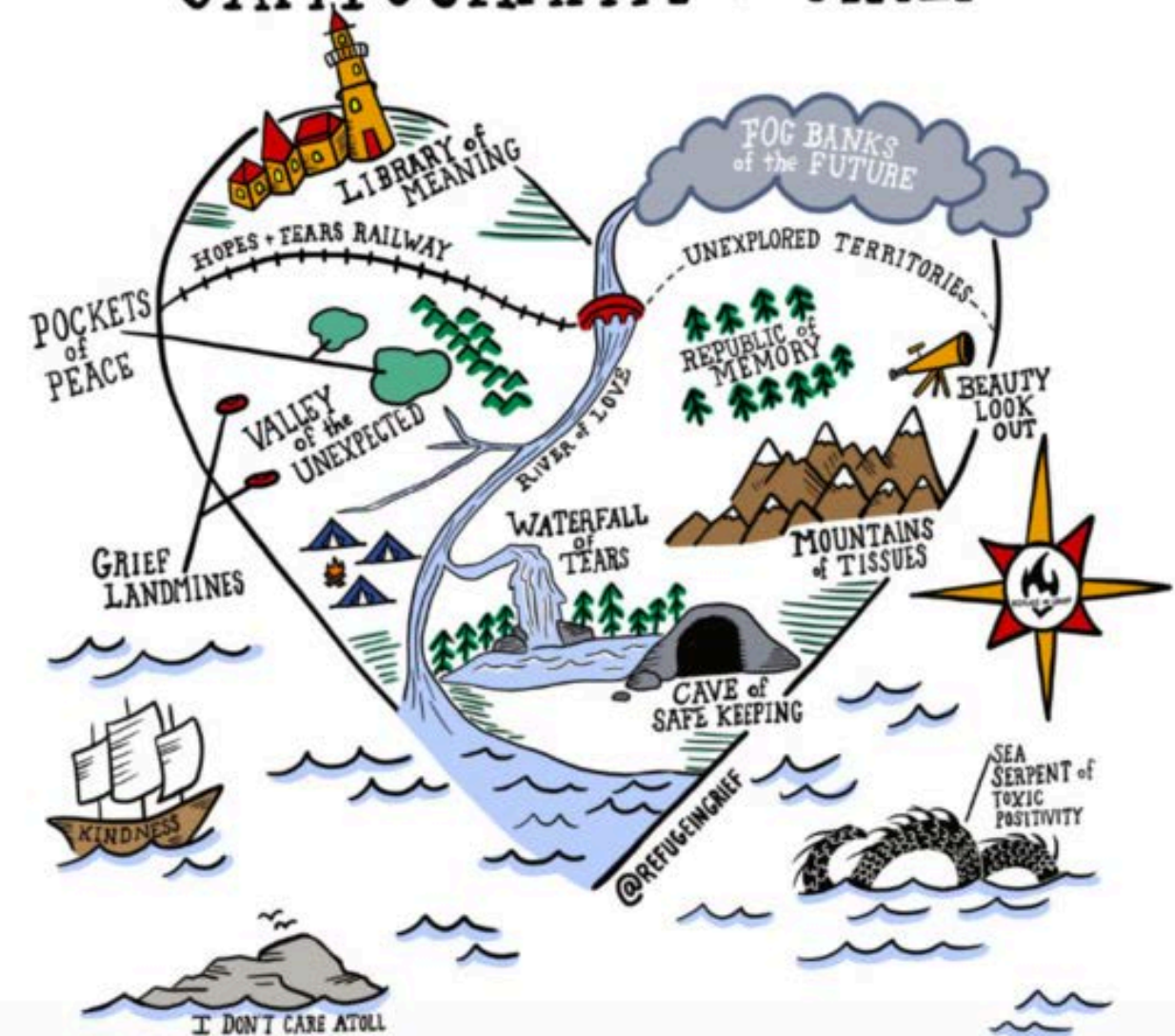
Cautioning Health-Care Professionals: Bereaved Persons Are Misguided Through the Stages of Grief

Margaret Stroebe^{1,2}, Henk Schut¹, and Kathrin Boerner³



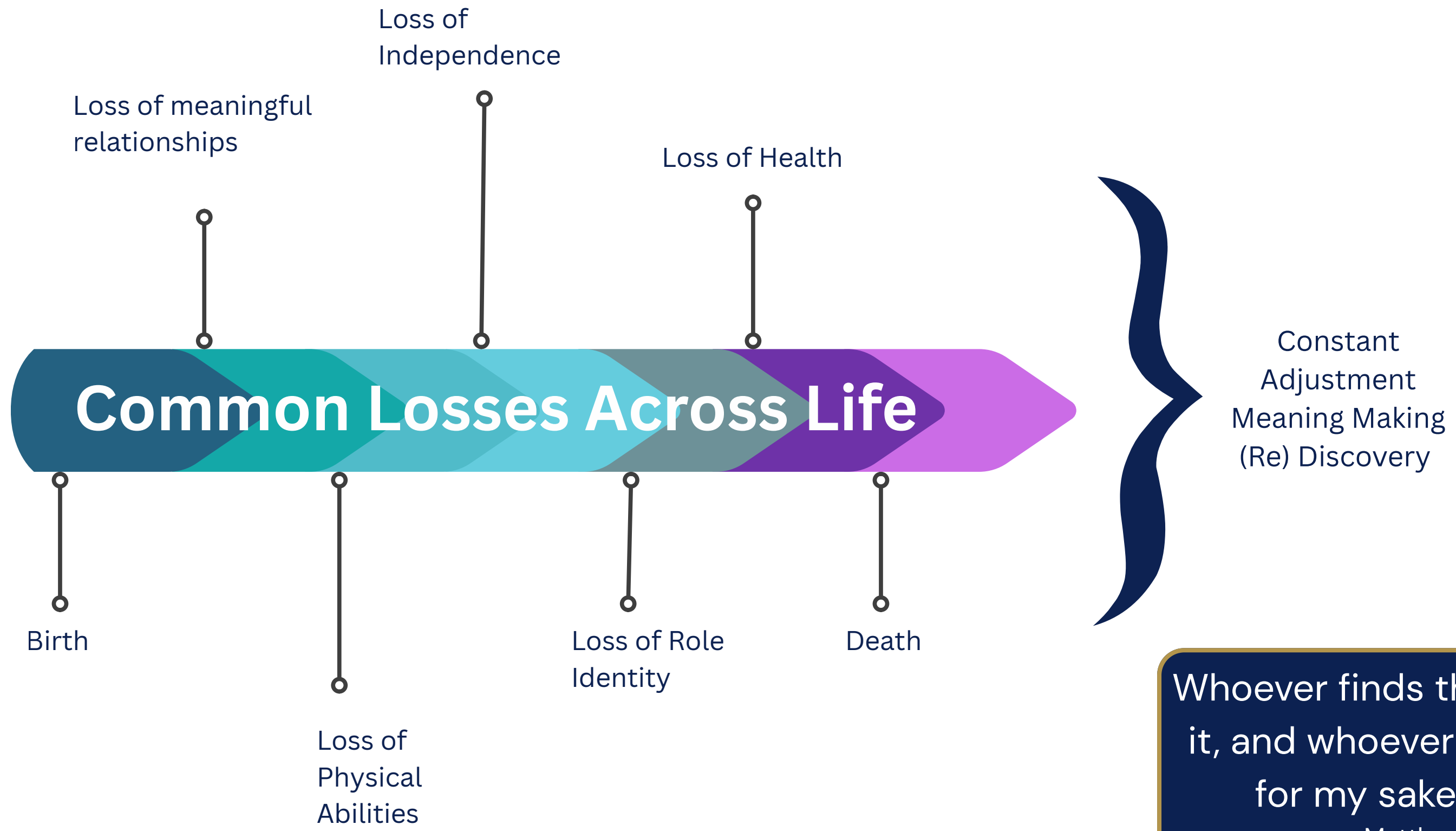
Grief is Human.

CARTOGRAPHY of GRIEF





The Dance Between Loss & Found



Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.
Matthew 10:39

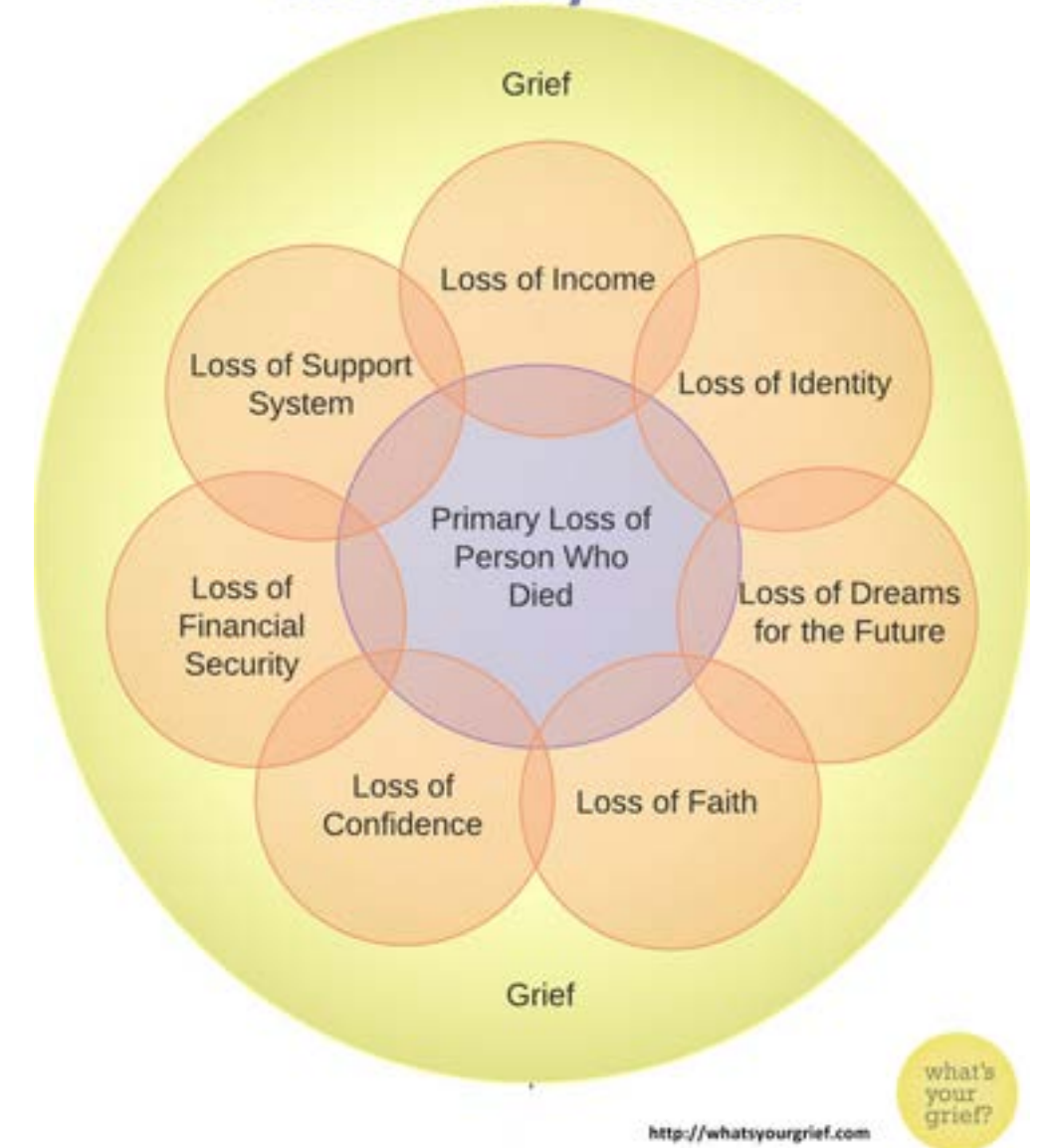


What is Loss?

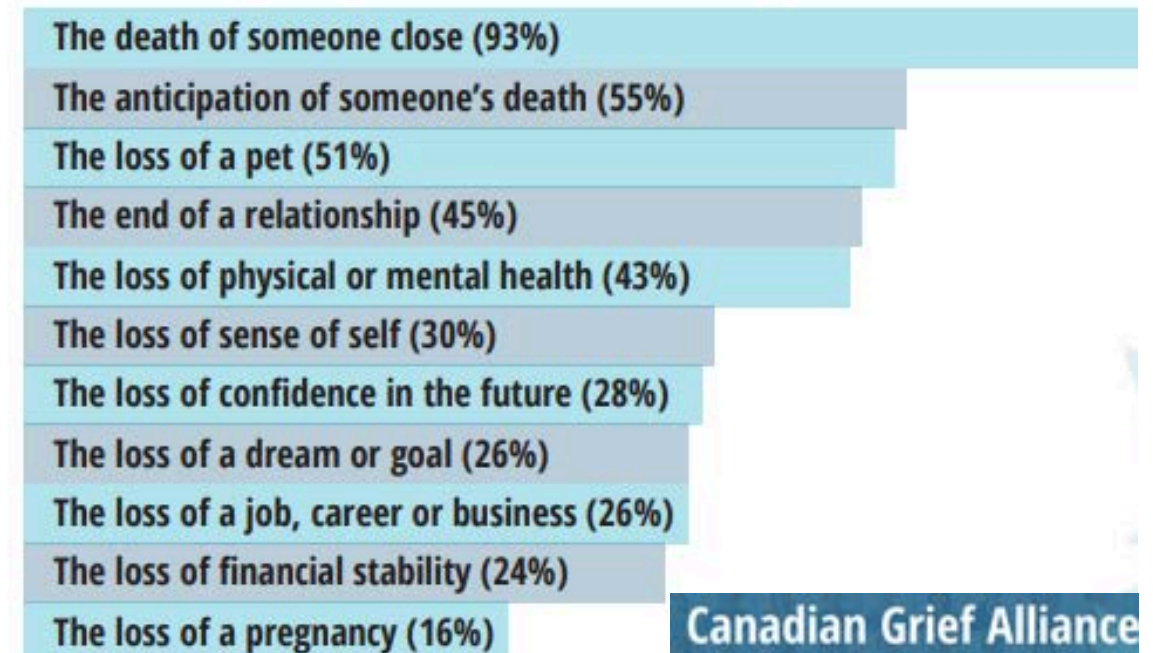
The “severing” of someone or something to whom we have held great attachment (survive/thrive)

Rachelle Bensoussan: HUMAN(e): A Radical Reimagining of Grief, Loss and Learning to Live Without (2024)

Secondary Losses



Commonly reported causes of grief



*Bar graph not to scale

Canadian Grief Alliance
National Public Consultation on Grief
Executive Summary

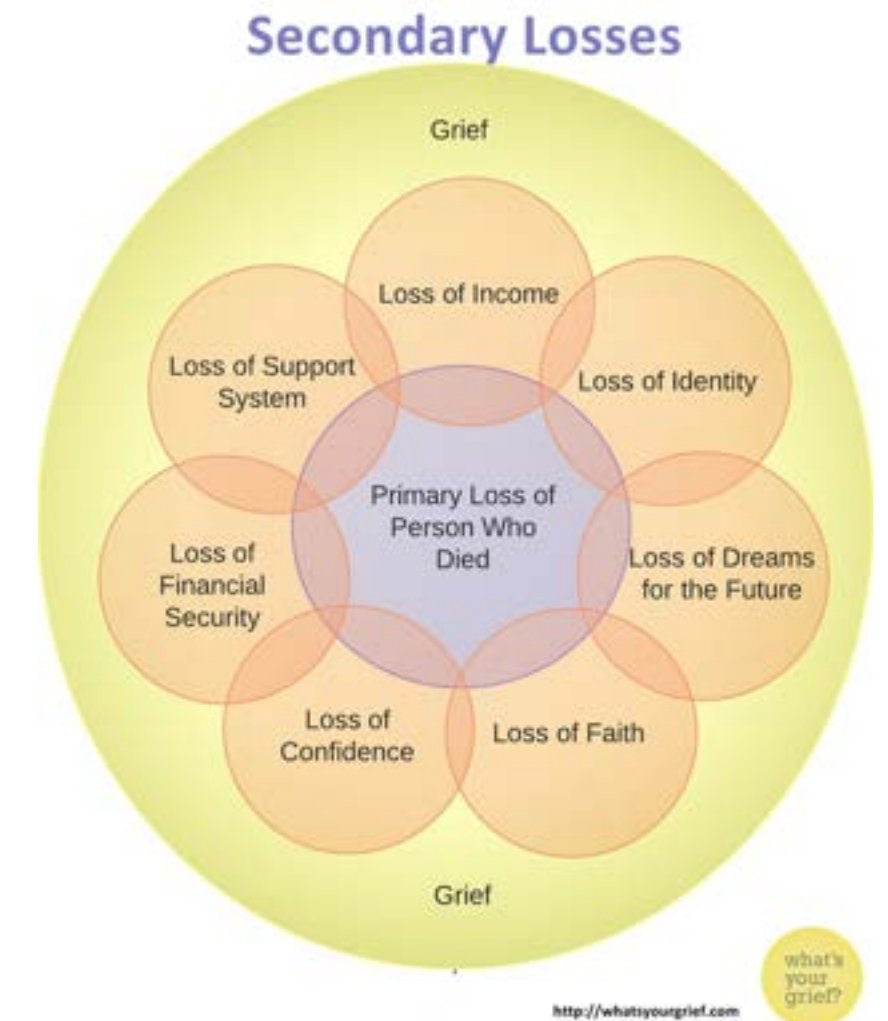


***Loss:** The “severing” of someone or something to whom we have held great attachment (survive/thrive)

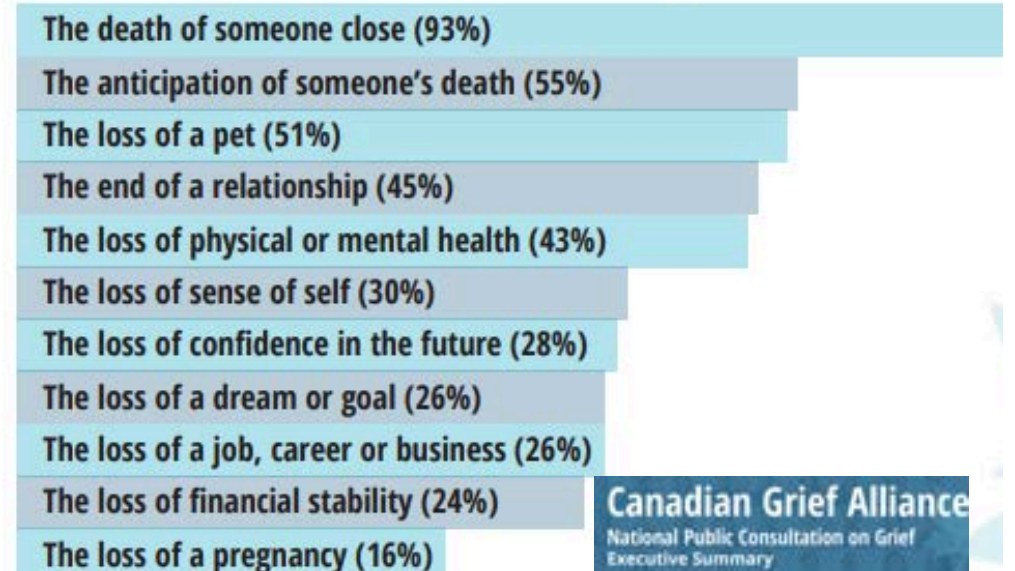
Grief is a human response to the experience of loss of any kind that is meaningful to a person.

- Grief is always valid by the person experiencing it.
- It happens to everyone.
- Attachment does not have to = love.
- You can grieve people and things you don’t “love” too.

Rachelle Bensoussan: HUMAN(e): A Radical Reimagining of Grief, Loss and Learning to Live Without (2024)



Commonly reported causes of grief



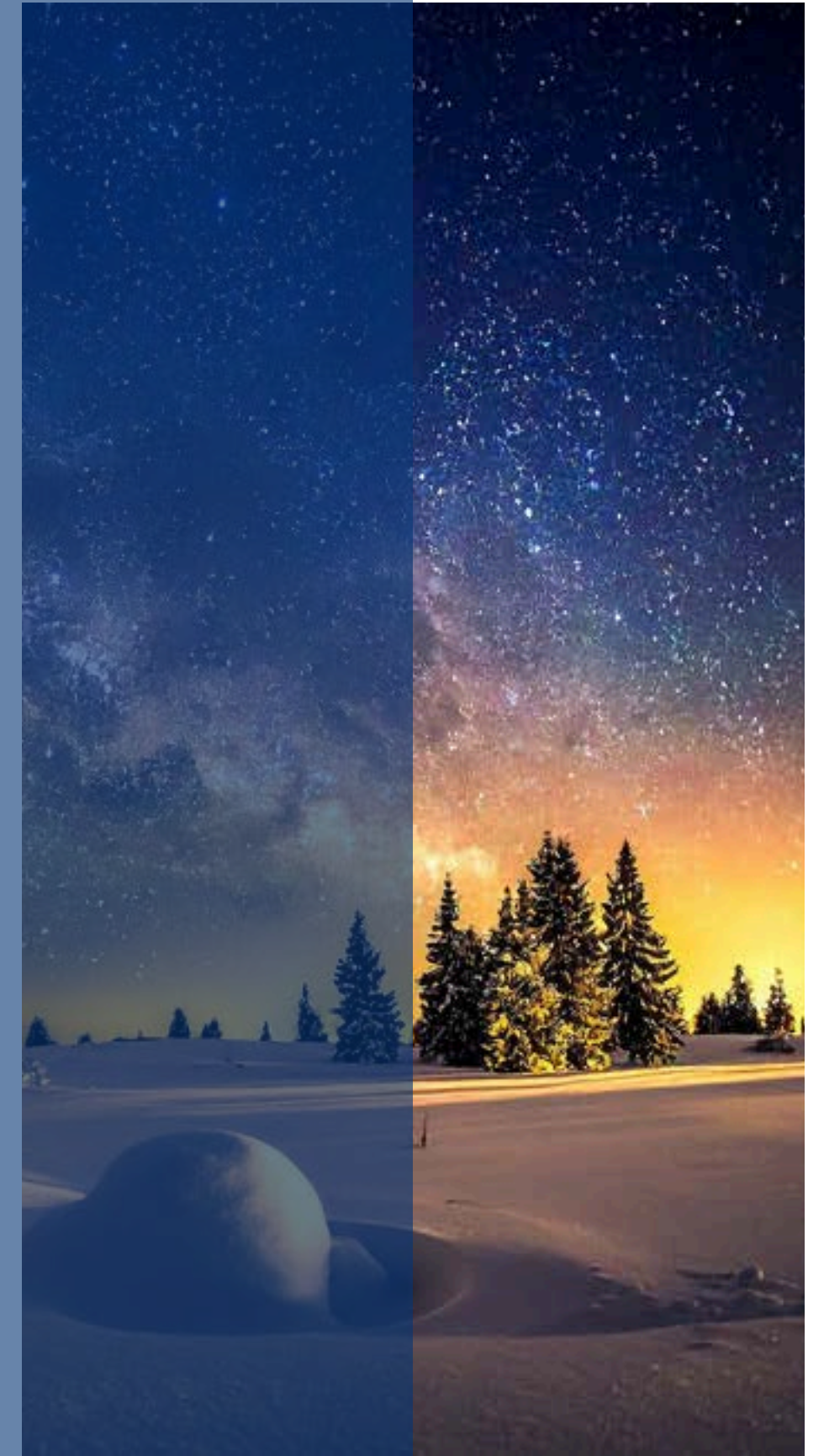
*Bar graph not to scale



Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief is the grief that begins before a loss actually happens.

It shows up when people can see the loss coming and begin mourning what will change or disappear.

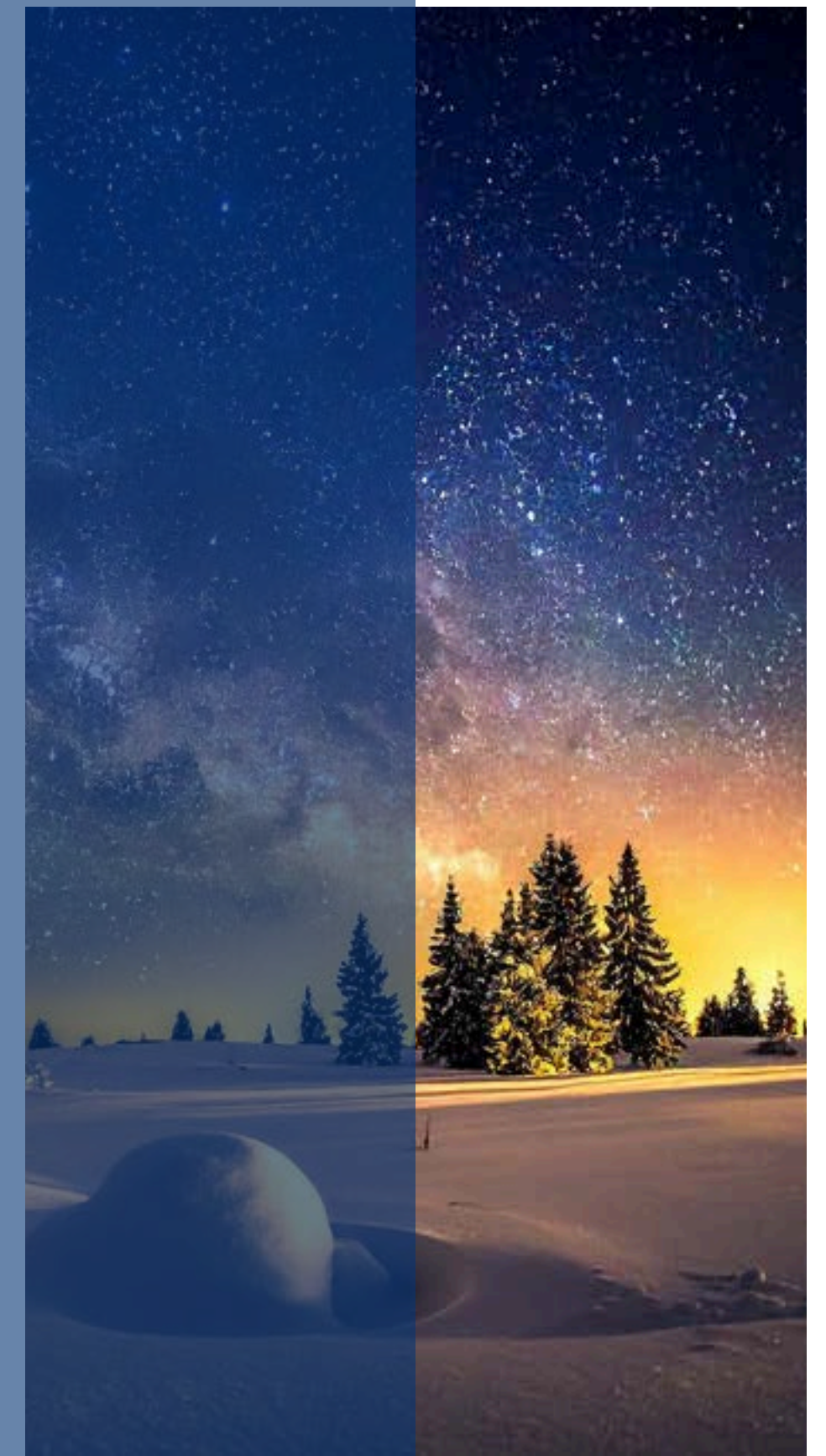




Anticipatory Grief

- Members feel grief while the church is still open
- Worry about losing identity, roles, friends, routines, worship traditions
- Anxiety about the unknown: “Where will I belong?”
- Sense of helplessness as decisions are made by others
- Feeling like they’re watching their community fade away in slow motion

In non-death loss, anticipatory grief often includes mourning the past, the present, and the *future imagined story that now won't happen.

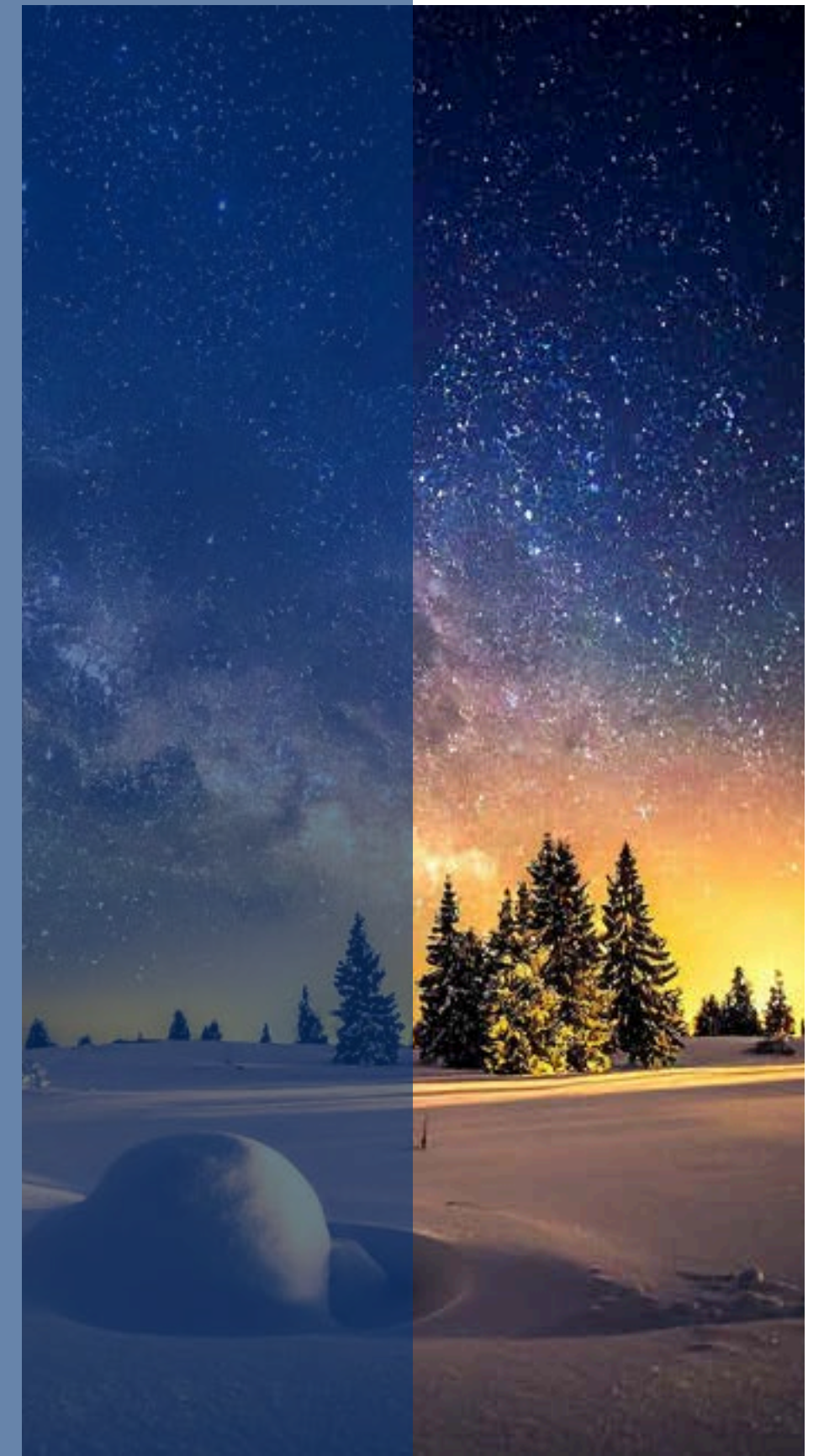


(Adapted from Rando, 2000; Doka, 2016)



Anticipatory Grief & Amalgamation

- People are already grieving long before the building closes or it ceases to be come the spiritual home of its community of origin
- This grief can look like resistance, anger, or disengagement — but it's grief trying to protect what matters

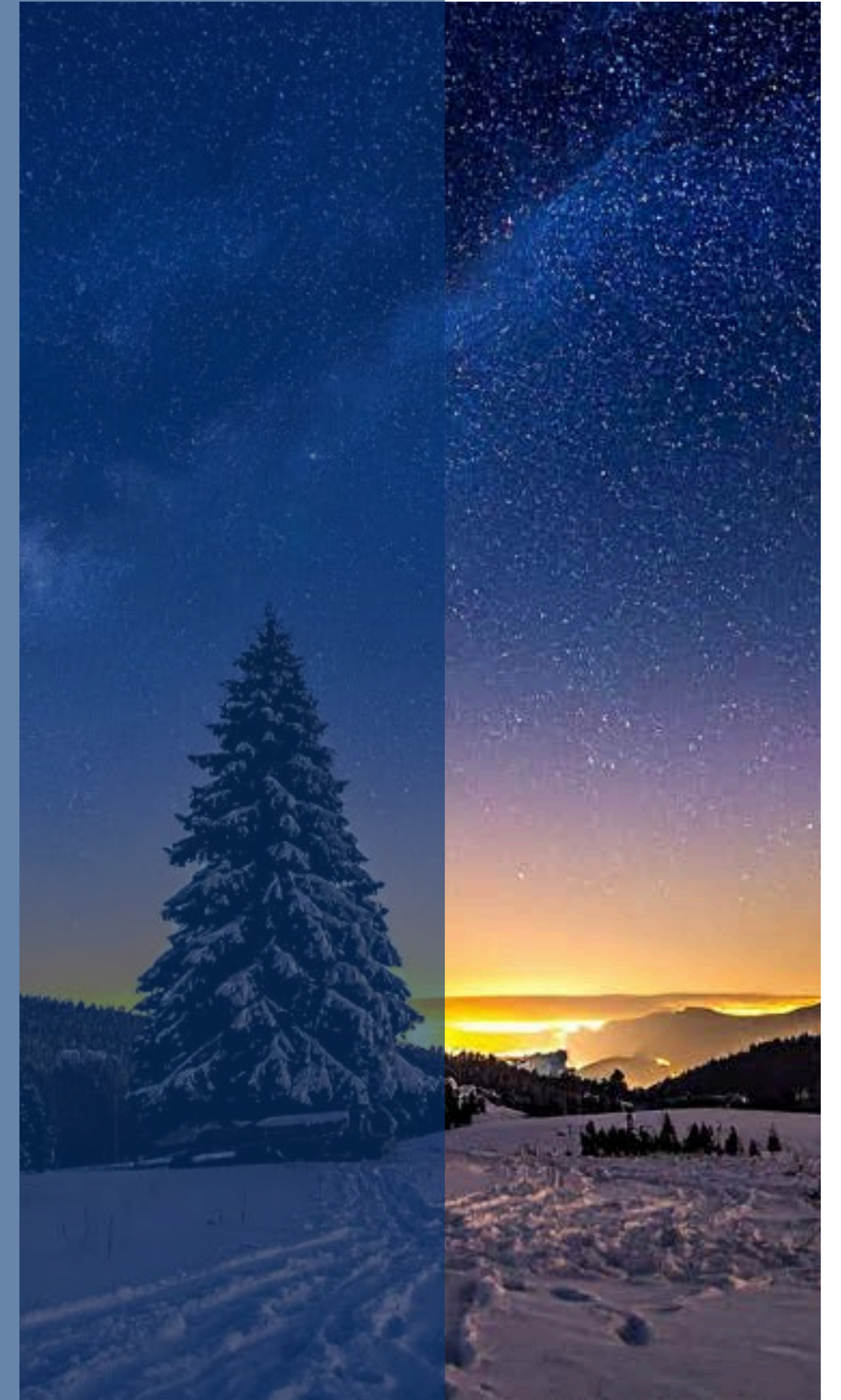


(Adapted from Rando, 2000; Doka, 2016)



Cumulative Grief

Cumulative grief happens when multiple losses stack on top of each other, often within a short period of time — leaving little space or energy to process any one loss fully.





Cumulative Grief

Someone isn't just losing:

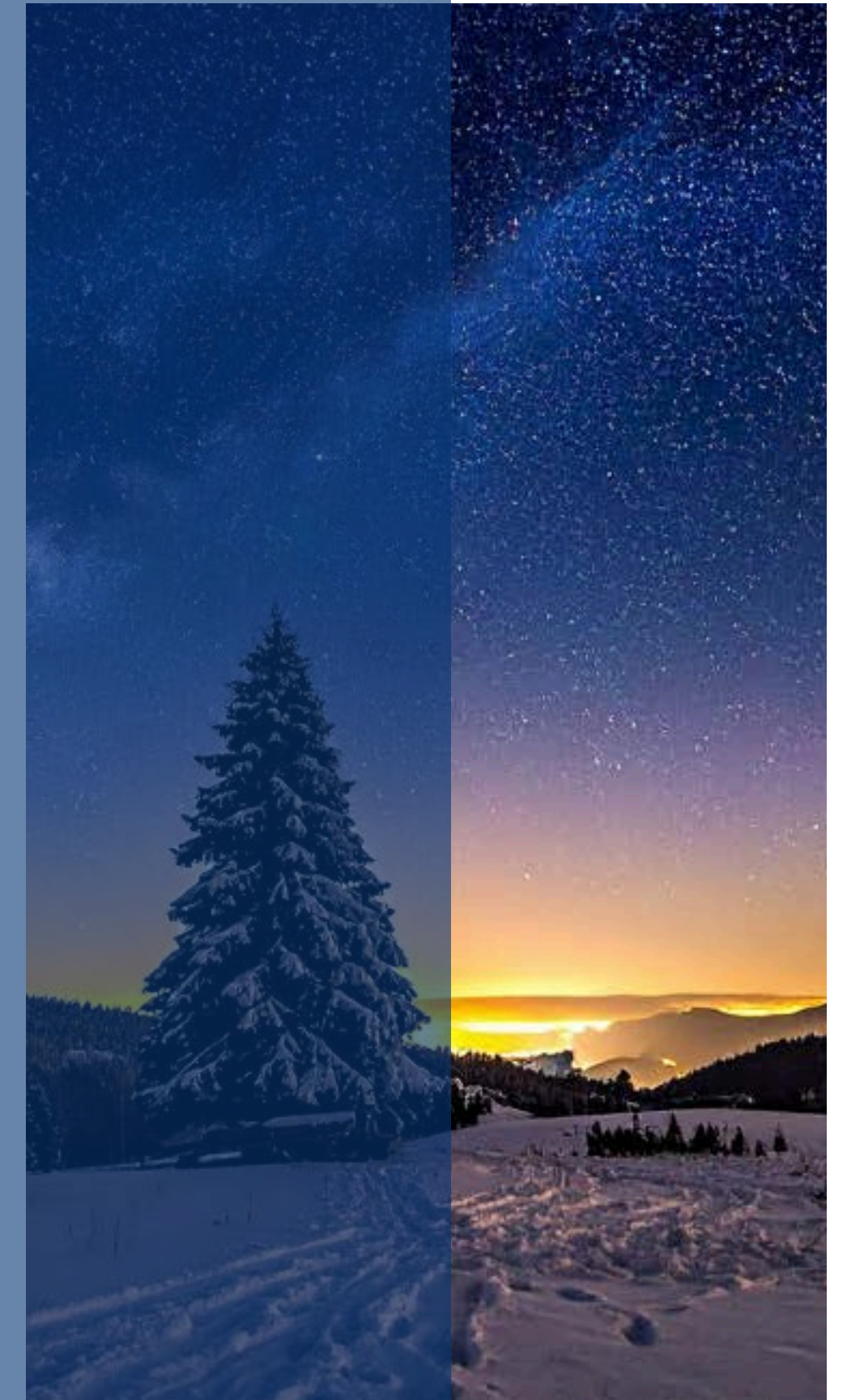
- A building
- A congregation
- A spiritual "home"
- Leadership they trust
- Social networks / "church family"
- Volunteer roles that give purpose
- Familiar worship styles and cultural practices
- Rituals, ministries, shared memories





Cumulative Grief They May Also Be Carrying

- Aging / deaths in community
- Changes in health
- Declining attendance / shrinking resources
- Loss of hope for the church's future
- These losses accumulate, making grief feel heavier, more exhausting, and harder to talk about.

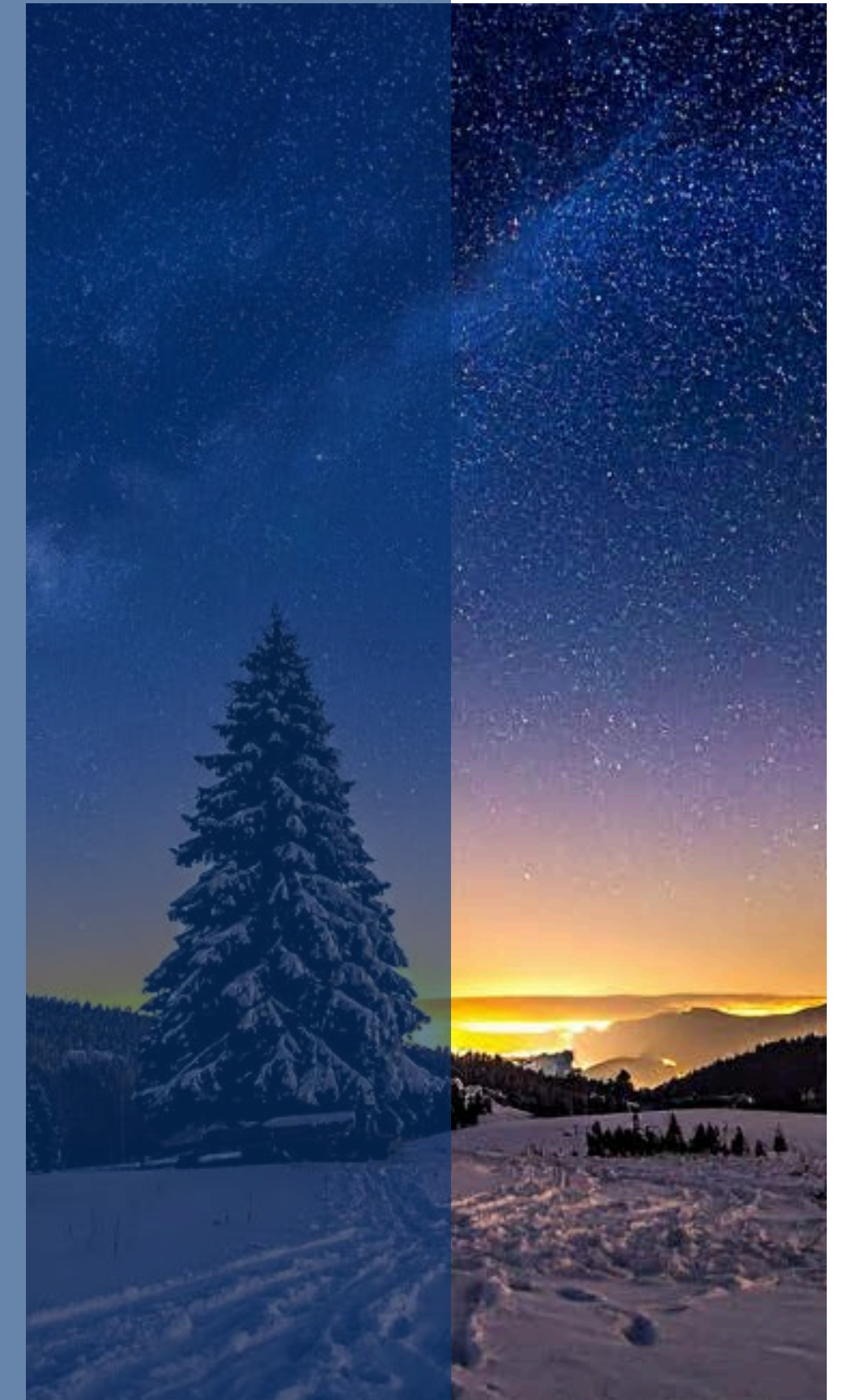


(Adapted from Doka, 2016; Neimeyer, 2019)



Cumulative Grief They May Also Be Carrying

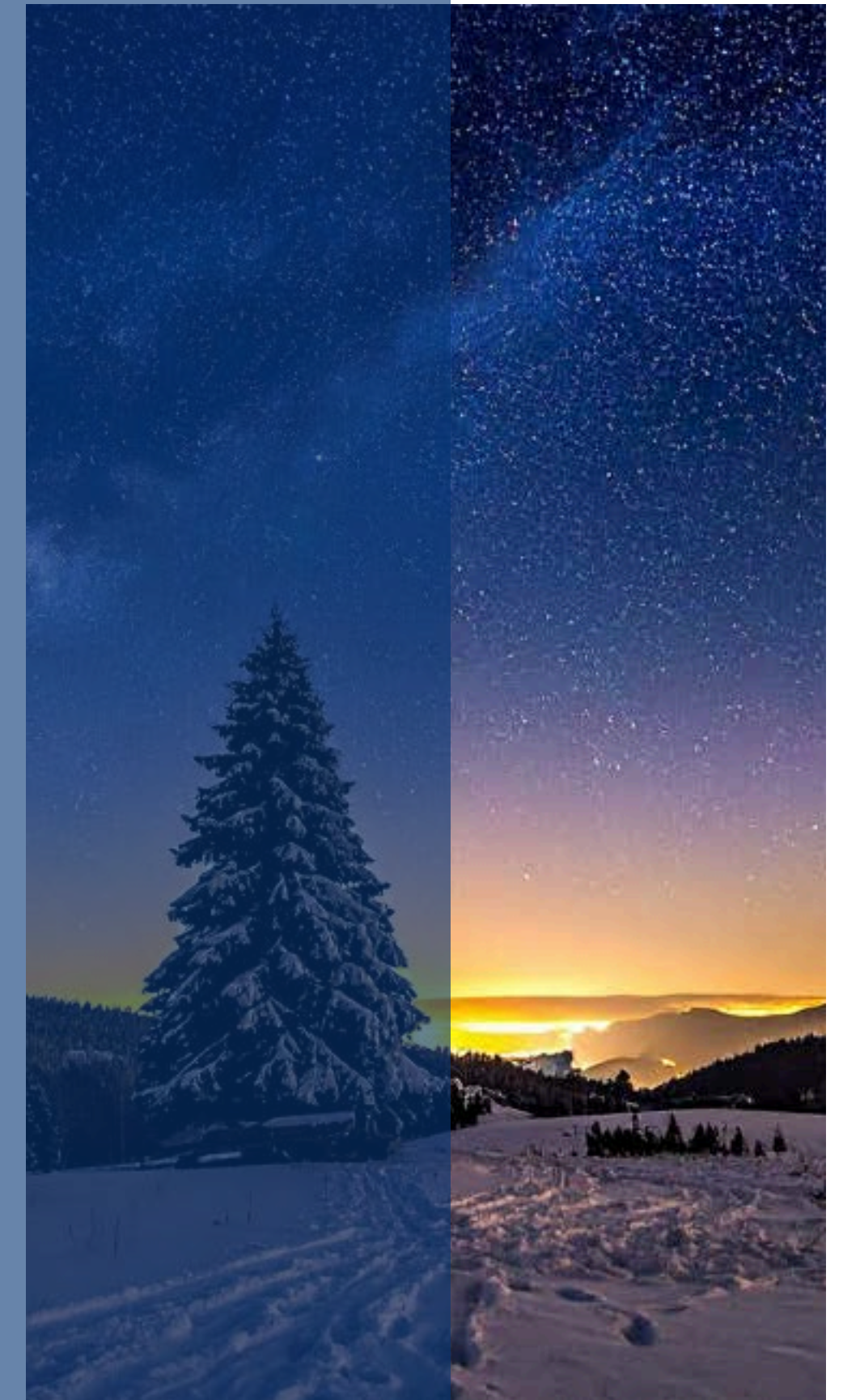
- People may react strongly because this closure is the final straw
- They may feel a loss of self: “Who am I without this place?”
- Chronic grief can lead to withdrawal, distrust, or identity confusion





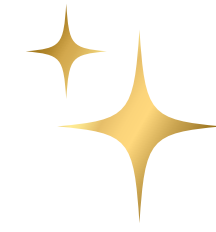
With and Without A Grief Literate Community

Without Grief Literacy...	With Grief Literacy...
Reactions get misread as “stubbornness,” “resistance to change,” or “decline mindsets”	Reactions are recognized as normal responses to loss
People feel unheard, judged, and spiritually displaced	People feel seen, valued, and invited into a new story at their own pace
Loss becomes disenfranchised	Loss is named, honored, and supported





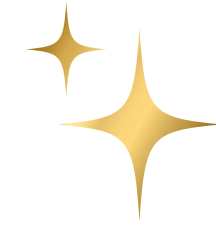
Grief Literacy: Why It Matters



- Losing a church isn't just losing a building — it's losing a spiritual home, shared identity, collective history, social network, ministry purpose. That kind of loss often goes unrecognized/is disenfranchised.
- There's often little shared language or ritual to mark the loss: many closures merge into euphemistic terms ("amalgamation", "merger," "relocation," "replanting," "restructuring", "coming together"). Those smooth, hopeful terms can feel like denial of real loss.
- Many people may grind on, thinking they "should be over it.", "get on board" "be a team player" But grief can linger — and if unacknowledged, lead to alienation, bitterness, disengagement.



Grief Literacy: Why It Matters



- Honoring the grief gives dignity to those who served, worshipped, prayed, sang — all the people, relationships, ministries that made the church what it was and opens possibility for what can grow.
- It validates history, commitment, and faith story.
- Thoughtful grief care fosters meaningful and less harmful transitions — whether people choose to integrate into a new/emerging community, drift away, or find faith in a different expression.
- Both “loss and found” can exist at the same time.



Common “Comforting” Phrase	Why It Hurts
“It’s just a transition / you’ll be joining a new community. One door closes but another opens!”	Minimizes the deep loss of history, relationships, identity — treats closure like a change of address, not a death of a spiritual home.
“God is doing something new (plan) / This is the Spirit moving.”	Spiritualizes the pain too quickly; can feel like a theological override of real grief, ignoring the real sadness, confusion, or disorientation people feel.
“Your church wasn’t sustainable anyway / at least your legacy continues here.”	Feels like judgment or a value-check: reframes the life of the church as a “failure” or “inevitable,” which can generate shame or bitterness, even guilt.
“You can always join us — you’re still welcome.”	Well-intended, but can come off as transactional: as if the loss is “fixed” by absorption into another congregation, without acknowledging what’s been lost.



Common “Comforting” Phrase	Why It Hurts
“Don’t be sad / Don’t grieve too long / Time will heal this.”	Imposes an unspoken timeline on grief. Congregational loss doesn’t follow a neat schedule; suppressing grief can lead to lingering pain, disconnection, or resentment.
“Look at the bright side — new opportunities, new ministries, new community.”	Focuses on future potential at the expense of valid mourning — can feel dismissive of pain in favor of optimism too soon.
“Celebrate the legacy / Be grateful for what you had.”	Pressures people to move quickly to nostalgia or closure, grief bypassing. It can feel like grief is unwelcome, or that mourning is a sign of ingratitude.



Helpful Language - What to Say Instead	Compassionate Actions & Practices
"How's it been for you?"	Avoid assumption and allows someone to be seen and heard without judgement or advice giving. Just let the Spirit speak!
"I can't imagine how hard this feels. If you feel able to tell me about (name of church), I'd love to listen."	Host story-sharing sessions / memory cafés where people can talk about services, relationships, baptisms, choirs, ministries, and important moments.
"This is hard. I hope you can treat yourself kindly – take all the time you need to grieve. There isn't a deadline for this."	Create ongoing spaces (small groups, pastoral visits, drop-in coffee hours) where grief and transition can continue to be processed after amalgamation.
"I'd like to learn about what made your church special."	Display historical photos, artifacts, hymnals, memorial plaques in the new building to preserve identity and memory.
"If you feel lost or unsure here sometimes, that's okay – you're not alone/so do I."	Pair former members with elders/listeners to introduce people, explain traditions, and offer connection.



Helpful Language - What to Say Instead	Compassionate Actions & Practices
“Let’s make room for both grief and hope — instead of moving on, maybe we can grow together.”	Include moments of lament in worship: prayers for what is lost, silence, candle-lighting, acknowledging disruption alongside hope.
“You don’t need to decide right away whether this will feel like home. I’d like to walk alongside you as we all find our way.”	Offer choice and autonomy: involvement without pressure; invitations, not expectations.
“Can I offer you a ride, a coffee, sit with you in worship (etc)?”	Provide practical support during integration (rides, seating with others, personal invitations to events).
“Your grief is valid. It’s human. What you built together mattered and still matters.”	Hold a celebration of legacy — <i>after</i> acknowledging grief — with stories, gratitude, and recognition of ministries that shaped lives.



Talking with Grievers

365 Edition



Listen:

Can you tell me more about how it's been for you? I may not have the right words, and I'm here to listen.

Normalize:

I want you to know that as overwhelming as grief can be, everyone grieves, and everyone grieves in their own way.

Validate:

There's no wrong way to grieve. This might not be how you expected to feel but it's not wrong.

Offer Trusted Resources:

I can hear how much you're carrying right now, and it's understandable to need support. Would it be helpful for me to share some community programs and groups for grievers with you?

