Research Project Title:
Meaning Making After Sudden Violent Loss

Statement of the End Products:

- We anticipate publishing the results of this research project in one or more of the following peer-reviewed journals:
    - Death Studies Journal
    - Journal of Pastoral Counseling
    - Journal of Traumatic Stress
    - Journal of Psychological Trauma
    - Journal of Violence and Victims
    - Clinical Social Work Journal
    - NACSW's Christianity and Social Work

- We anticipate presenting the findings of this research project in one or more of the following conferences and/or trainings:
    - Association of Death, Education, and Counseling
    - Virginia Mason Separation and Grief Services Conference, Seattle, WA
    - American Association of Suicidality
    - VOCA Conference (Office of Criminal Justice, Victim Services)
    - TN DA's Conference of Victim Advocates
    - TN Department of Probation and Parole, Office of Victim Services

Explanation of the Scholarly Activity

Statement of the Scholarly Activity. The purpose of this research project is to:

1. Examine the lived experiences of persons who have suffered sudden, violent loss from homicide, suicide, or violent accident;

2. The meaning such persons make of their loss;

3. The ecological contexts in which the loss occurred;

4. The impact the loss may have had on the person and their family. Following the example of Armour's (2010) study on holocaust survivors and meaning making, the primary purpose of our study is to discover what sense violent loss survivors make of losing their loved ones to homicide, suicide, or tragic accident.

Significance of the Research Project. Death is an inescapable part of life. Although every loss is unique, sudden violent loss tests human bounds of psychological, physical, and spiritual coping (Mehr, 2015). Death from violent acts, such as homicide or suicide, exposes individual victims and surviving family members to a much broader audience as the loss event is

publicized through the media and criminal justice systems (Monkkonen, 2006; Peelo, 2006; Rynearson, 2012). Homicide loss is a prime example of how coping can be stretched to breaking points as a human life is purposefully and criminally taken (Armour, 2002a; Baliko & Tuck, 2008, Blakley, 2007a, Frankl, 1984; Young, 1999).

According to the FBI (2015), 15,696 persons died from murder or nonnegligent manslaughter nationwide; this is an increase of 10.8% from the prior year. Researchers (Rynearson & Salloum, 2011) have suggested that at least four to five significant others related to the loss may be impacted. Beyond this estimate of over 78,000 homicide-impacted persons, the exponential psychological impact for such survivors may include depression, complicated grief, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Armour, 2003). In comparison, the nationwide suicide rate in 2014 was 42,773 persons (USA Suicide, 2014). Similarly, other researchers noted a devastating impact on at least 750,000 suicide-related survivors annually (Cerel, McIntosh, Neimeyer, Maple, & Marshall, 2014).

The biopsychosocial and spiritual well-being of violent loss survivors is critical as life assumptions, once considered normal, are shattered by the violent event. As adverse consequences of loss ripple out from individual survivors to broader society, those without supportive networks may feel lost and alone (Baliko & Tuck, 2008; Monkkonen, 2006; Morrall, 2011; Peelo, 2006; Zinzow, Rheingold, Hawkins, Saunders, & Kilpatrick, 2009). This feeling of "lostness" from everything that is known inspires a quest for trying to make sense out of that which is senseless. This study will add to the growing literature on how survivors make meaning (e.g. practically, psychologically, or existentially) in the aftermath of sudden, violent loss.

Description of the Activity: An Overview of the Research Project

This project proposes research on meaning making in 25-50 adults who have experienced sudden, violent loss of a loved one. Research inquiry will focus on survivors' lived experiences of such loss, and the meaning that they may attribute to it. Study volunteers will be invited for face-to-face interviews (to capture primary qualitative data) and to complete reliable and validated measures (to capture supportive quantitative data).

The study design presents a semi-structured interview that allows the qualitative process to unfold as narrative. Participants will be asked to briefly tell the story of the loss of their loved one, what happened subsequently and consequently in their lives, and the meaning they have made (if any) of those events and experiences. Interviews will be recorded with participants' written consent.

Researchers will then transcribe the recorded interviews and utilize a computerized research software program (Scientific Software, 2009, ATLAS-ti7) to analyze data for meaning making from survivors' experiences of sudden, violent loss. While the total data set will reveal the final story, researchers anticipate themes common to the retelling of such loss, yielding data rich in meaning-making in the following areas:

- The loss of the loved one (e.g. the sudden, violent way in which the loved one died, yearning and separation distress, disbelief, shock and horror; acute and chronic symptoms of stress) (Boelen & van den Bout, 2012; Fleming, 2012; Roos, 2012; Rynearson, 2001)

- Effects of violent loss on self and the family (e.g. traumatic grief, loss, and stress symptoms, financial stress, loss of homeostasis, social stigma, loss of privacy or control) (Blakley, 2007a; 2007b; Mehr, 2015; Mehr & Blakley, 2012; Neimeyer, 2001)

- Any unusual experiences the participant may have had before, during, or after the death of their loved one (e.g. a meaningful visit before the death, special feelings or perceptions, dreams, or spiritual experiences) (Blakley, 2007b; Glazier, Beck, & Simmonds-Moore, 2015; Klass, 2001; Mehr, 2015; Wray & Price, 2005)

- Evidence and nature of continuing bonds with the deceased (Cacciatore, 2012; Glazier et al., 2015; Klass, 2001; Rynearson, 2001; Shear, 2016)

- The quality of survivor's support system (e.g. family, friends, pastor/church, community groups) (Blakley & Mehr, 2008; Doka & Neimeyer, 2012; Mehr, 2015)

- Experiences with the media surrounding the death (e.g. correct information regarding the life and death of the deceased versus incorrect information,

respect and dignity for the deceased and the family (Armour, 2002b; Blakley, 2007a; Mehr, 2015; Rynearson, 2001)

- Experiences with the criminal justice system surrounding the death (e.g. a sense of fairness and advocacy for the victim and family from law enforcement, the DA's Office, victim advocates, the trial experience, the judge, Dept. of Corrections, Board of Pardon & Parole, and TN's Victim Compensation Fund) (Armour, 2002b; Mehr, 2015)

- What helped/hindered (or was hurtful) most in the aftermath of the death (e.g. what significant others said/did not say to them, or did/did not do for them) (Mehr, 2015; Rynearson, 2001)

- What coping mechanisms have been utilized, positive or negative (e.g. family support, prayer, calling on the presence of God, honoring how survivors believes the deceased loved one would want them to go on; substance use/abuse, avoidance and denial, or risky behaviors) (Becker, 2009; Blakley, 2007a; Cacciatore, 2012; Mehr, 2015; Meichenbaum & Myers, 2016)

- Looking back, what advice would survivors have given themselves in the aftermath of the death? Advice to others who have just lost loved ones to sudden, violent death? What ultimate words of wisdom or meaning-making that survivors currently have for themselves at this point in their journey (Armour 2010; Frankl, 1984; Mehr, 2015)

Quantitative data will be collected prior to the qualitative interview. Demographic data will be collected along with measures that have been deemed valid and reliable (Rynearson, Correa, & Tackas, 2015) for our specific population of research participants as follows:

- VOCA Assessment (Rynearson, Correa, & Tackas, 2015) - a self-report measure which helps researchers and clinicians understand individual exposure to the death and relationship with the deceased [with the added question from Armour (2010): "Have you been able to make any sense of losing your loved one(s)?"]

- Death Imagery Scale (DIS-R) (Williams, Rheingold, & Rynearson, 2015) - a self-report measure of death related imagery (reenactment, rescue, revenge, reunion, and remorse)

- Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) - a self-report measure to assess depression

- Complicated Grief Assessment (CGA) (Prigerson et al., 1995) - a self-related measure of death related trauma and separation distress

- The PROMIS-29 Profile V2.0 (PROMIS Health Organization & PROMIS Cooperative Group, 2008-2012) - a self-report measure to assess health-related quality of life

- PCL-5 (Weathers et al., 2013) - A self-report that measures post-traumatic stress disorder

Major Goals of the Study Project are:

- To add to the growing body of literature on meaning making specific to survivors of traumatic loss

- To increase awareness and use what is learned to better inform mental health professionals, pastors, victim advocates, and other professional helpers in service to victims of sudden, violent death

- To increase awareness and use what is learned to better inform victim-specific and criminal justice organizations in the State of Tennessee by empowering their collective advocacy with state legislators in strengthening victims' rights and services. Such stakeholders include:
    - Tennessee Voices for Victims
    - Tennessee Conference of DA's
    - Governor's Office, State of Tennessee
    - Statewide law enforcement officials
    - TN Department of Probation and Parole (Office of Victim Services)
    - Tennessee Department of Corrections (Office of Victim Services)
    - Independent victim advocate groups
    - Tennessee Public Safety Network
    - Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network

Brief Literature Review and Theoretical Framework Undergirding the Research Project

A beloved son, a toddler, is killed under the blades of a riding lawn mower. A daughter is kidnapped, raped, and murdered; her body is not found until months later. A depressed veteran hangs himself high up on the staircase for his wife to discover when she arrives home from work.

Violent accident, murder, suicide: these deaths carve deep into the souls of surviving loved ones. Such traumatic marks forever bifurcate lives into the innocent *before*, and the dreadful knowing *everafter*, that life is fleeting, precious (Blakley, 2007a; Sittser, 2004). Sudden violent death is different than any other. There is no time for farewells, last wishes, or for making

end-of-life plans (Blakley, 2007a; Lord, 2006; Sittser, 2004). There is breath, then none. Following on, there is shock and disbelief, leaving the bereaved globally upended and bewildered. Human suffering doubles down, as grievers from traumatic loss become alien sojourners in a world that once felt safe and made sense. There are no words or primal expressions of rage to assuage the need to understand that which is incomprehensible.

Frankl (1984) quoted the German philosopher Nietzche who pointed out the human bent to make meaning out of rock-hard suffering, saying "He who has a *why* to live for, can bear with almost any *how*" (p. 84). This is the heart of meaning making for survivors of sudden, traumatic, loss. Finding meaning creates the *why* and the *how* one goes on in life in the face of such deep loss. Four theorists especially inform this research project on meaning making and sudden, violent loss. Rynearson, Neimeyer, and Frankl provide theoretical underpinnings of traumatic loss and the human experience that cannot be overestimated; Bronfenbrenner provides the rich contextual lens through which to view such loss. Together, their body of work is transformative in helping clinicians and researchers in the field of traumatic death loss to better understand this vulnerable and underserved population.

Rynearson: Restorative retelling. Rynearson's (2001, 2015) significant work in sudden, traumatic loss gives us a strong theoretical foundation from which to understand and clinically address the angst of such grievers. His theory purports that bereft survivors of sudden violent death experience twin agonies: separation distress and traumatic distress. Rynearson underscores the preeminence of traumatic distress as that which causes the greatest suffering and clinical challenge.

Separation distress is a common experience for persons grieving the loss of a loved one by natural or expected death. Yearning for the deceased loved one is painful and is a natural part

of mourning, but the distress tends to lessen with time. The causes of natural and expected death can be logically understood, and there is usually time to accommodate the loss, even if the time is short. The person may move past acute mourning, focusing on life memories of the deceased as they get back to the business of their lives.

In sudden, violent death, however, trauma distress is an added component that compounds the grief, threatening to overwhelm the survivor. Horror accompanies the loss that is untimely and unnatural. The death is experienced as a sudden, physical ripping away of the loved one which cannot be believed or accepted, leaving survivors psychologically stuck in the dying story.

Part of survivors' difficulty in accommodating traumatic death is the fact that 95% of family members do not witness the violent deaths (Rynearson, 2001). Rynearson (2001, 2005) examined the lack of integration of self in the death and dying story in his research with survivors who suffer with the disturbing imagery of the dying story. Preoccupation with fantasies of rescue, revenge, and reunion dominate the cognitive life of the traumatically bereaved, whether asleep or awake (Blakley, 2009). Subsequently, regular patterns of life are highly disrupted post-loss, a major marker of significant mental distress.

In Rynearson's restorative retelling model (2001), a reworking of the violent dying story is clinically facilitated to include the survivor's thoughts and feelings, thus prompting meaning making and resilience. The when, what, where, and how of the death is microscopically examined, with the survivor setting the pace for this process. The new focus aids the survivor in finally mastering the chaotic, dying story; the process helps to pivot the survivor's preoccupation *from* the loved one's horror-filled dying moments *to* the restored memories of the loved one's life story. As cognitive preoccupation moves from death memories to life memories, the griever

is able to proceed more naturally through human grieving, and eventually return to the business of their lives.

Neimeyer: Meaning reconstruction. Neimeyer's (2001) theory of meaning reconstruction suggests that creating a personal narrative is a necessary step in making sense of the horrific loss. Reconstructing the story of the loss invites the traumatically bereaved person to conduct cognitive tasks of organizing and synthesizing facts surrounding the loss. This process brings order to the chaotic story of the trauma; it is assigned a beginning, middle, and end. Conclusions can now be drawn, clearing a cognitive path for survivors to reconstruct the traumatic dying event to make meaning from it all. Through this process, that which was an unspeakable affront to the body, mind, and soul, becomes tentatively thinkable and speakable, allowing the griever to reach for significant meaning from loss (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006).

Frankl: Meaning from suffering. Frankl (1984) developed a type of therapy (logotherapy) that focused on making meaning from suffering. A psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, Frankl theorized that man's search for meaning is a primary drive after traumatic loss. He described global distress from trauma and loss as an "existential vacuum, a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness" (Frankl, 1984, p. 143). This existential emptiness, borne from traumatic loss, overwhelms the sufferer, inspiring a quest to make sense out of the senseless.

The search for meaning making was clear to Frankl (1984) who theorized on the despair of a life devoid of meaning. Even within the boundaries of prison, he recognized his fellow captives' quest for survival and meaning in the midst of suffering. A similar quest for meaning may hold true for sudden, violent loss survivors. Much of the literature points to meaning making as a prevalent phenomenon as researchers have noted the therapeutic and restorative

value of narratives, retelling the dying story, and making sense of horrific death (Armour, 2003; Rynearson, 2005; Rynearson et al., 2006; Rynearson, Johnson, & Correa, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner: Ecological theory. Symptoms of traumatic distress can last for a season or a lifetime in the aftermath of an unexpected death in which there was violence. Consequences of such loss intersect unique environmental, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and social factors. The reciprocal relationship between the experience of violent loss and the socio-ecological context in which isolation, alienation, stigma, and traumatic grief unfold is not well understood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bucholz, 2000; Hertz, Prothrow-Stith, & Chery, 2005; Wortman & Pearlman, 2016; Zinzow et al., 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory provides a lens through which each person can be viewed within different levels or systems as they develop (i.e. micro, meso, macro, exo, and chrono). Each level notes the relationships between the whole person, environment, and broader society. Bronfenbrenner's systems model takes into account the interrelatedness of people within varying systems and provides a more complete view of the impact of social and environmental factors (Hong, Cho, & Lee, 2010). A person-in-environment focus on interrelationships will help to deepen understanding of how violent loss survivors are affected and influenced at different levels. Viewing survivors through the contextual lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory will offer enriched perspective as personal experiences of post-violent loss are shared.

The Integration of Faith and Profession/Discipline

As veteran social workers who are now teaching students aspiring to enter the profession, we commonly hear them describe their motivation to enter the field in terms of a calling (e.g. *I feel God calling me into hospice work; I have a calling on my life to help the homeless*). When a

true calling of faith becomes career, it is this deep sense of divine *calling* that empowers the student-cum-professional to strive towards excellence in social work with disenfranchised and hurting people. Social work, then, becomes a vehicle to live out the calling of God to love others through the healing arts of their profession.

Within a broad framework of compassionate and socially just service towards all individuals, families, communities, and groups, the profession of social work and the Christian faith intersect. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) asserts, in the preamble of the profession's code of ethics, that its primary mission is "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (p. 1).

This mandate to see to the well-being of others, especially vulnerable others, is a common refrain threaded throughout Holy Scripture. Micah 6:8 is one such scripture beloved by social workers of faith who recount its mandate to enact justice and mercy while walking in humble relationship with God. Likewise, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12) speaks to the heart of Christ-following social workers to be merciful peacemakers in this broken world to the glory of God. The living Word of God, therefore, empowers and guides the social worker whose faith rests in Christ.

The profession necessitates knowledge of social work theory, technique, values, law, and ethics; trained social workers are expected to operationalize this knowledge and skill with dignity and unconditional regard for persons they help, no matter the circumstance (NASW, 2008). This social work mandate taps into familiar Christian themes (Poe, 2007) of loving one's neighbor as one's self (Mark 12:31) and the sanctity of human life. The whole story of God

drawing mankind to Himself through Christ's work on the cross is the ultimate demonstration of unconditional love, proving the worth of all persons without regard to station or circumstance of life.

It is through this Gospel-driven ethos, borne on double tenterhooks of personal violent loss and academic study that each of us (the applicants) have committed to using our social work skills and lived experiences to help persons who have suffered criminal homicide and other violent losses. We have partnered to provide pro-bono individual and group counseling to families of homicide-loss over the last ten years. We co-founded the *Remember Me Commemorative Event for Families of Homicide-loss*, an annual event where hundreds of families and law enforcement officers join together for dinner, an inspirational speaker, and a walk of remembrance around Union University's bell tower. We have published articles on homicide-loss, and presented at national and international academic conferences on sudden violent loss and the work we do with families. We have also testified before a Tennessee Senate Committee (Mehr & Blakley, 2014) to advocate for crime victim rights legislation. We argued for surviving families of homicide to have the right to show photos of their loved ones, as they were in life, to juries at trial; before this legislation, juries could only see photos of victims at death (e.g. at autopsy or deceased at the crime scene). The Victim Life Photo Bill was passed into law in 2015.

Informed by this body of academic and practical work with families of violent loss, we are compelled to launch this research project for which we are now applying for Pew Grant funding. In service to such families and professionals who work with them, our aim is to give voice to the lived experiences and meaning making of those who suffer in the shadows following unspeakable trauma. We intend to share what is learned by this research through publications

and presentations to stakeholders of victim services in Tennessee and elsewhere at conferences around the country (e.g. Academy of Death Education & Counseling; National Office of Victims of Crime Conference). By conducting this research, and continuing to advocate for families of sudden, violent loss, we believe we are fulfilling the call of God to stand alongside those who are suffering, armed with the assurance that "the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18, NIV).

In our lived experiences, the integration of faith and social work is tightly woven. We strive to teach the art of faith and practice to our students in the classroom, as well as in the work we do as they join us in such events as *Remember Me*. We hope they see in us, their professors, how the calling of God can stoke the fires of compassion, empowering the person of faith to do works of healing and good, to the glory of God, across the span of one's whole life.

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Projected Timeline for Project Completion

Phase 1	Finalize the research plan	December 15, 2016
Phase 2	Complete the research plan & submit to UU IRB	December 30, 2016
Phase 3	Secure IRB approval	January 15, 2017
Phase 4	Send out letters to potential volunteers with information and invitation to participate in research project	February 1, 2017
Phase 5	Process and conduct informed consents on survivor research volunteers	February-March, 2017
Phase 6	Schedule and conduct individual interviews	April-June, 2017
Phase 7	Begin the translation of the qualitative and quantitative data	Late July-September, 2017
Phase 8	Analyze data and report initial data analysis to Pew Committee	October-November, 2017
Phase 9	Begin writing research papers on the completed project for dissemination and submit proposals for state and national presentations	November, 2017

Projected Budget Considerations:

	Estimated expenses	
1	25-50 study volunteers @ $50 per volunteer (gift vouchers to help with travel)	$ 2,500
2	Stipend for statistician	$ 500
3	Stipend for transcriptionist	$ 500
3	Stamps, stationary, printing for research materials	$ 500
4	Atlas-ti7 and other research expenses	$ 500
		Total estimated cost for project $4500

Curricula Vitae
See Addendums A & B