



Responses to Grief in Families: Diversity, Difference, and Understanding

**Dr. Peggy P. Whiting, Professor
Department of Counselor Education
North Carolina Central University**

Three stylized human figures are depicted in a circular arrangement, holding hands. The figure on the left is wearing a red long-sleeved top and orange pants. The figure in the center is wearing a yellow short-sleeved top and brown pants. The figure on the right is wearing a green short-sleeved top with yellow 'X' patterns and red pants. All figures have their arms raised, holding hands in a circle. The background is a solid blue color.

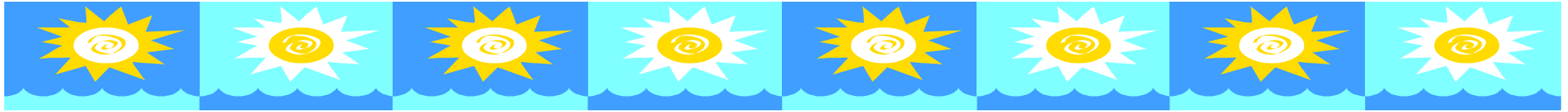
"We know precious little about how families construct meanings. Most of what we do know is from an individual perspective, but individuals do not grieve in a vacuum. They make sense of their experience by interacting with others."

Janice Winchester Nadeau, 2001

Family Construction of Meaning

In Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss, pg. 96

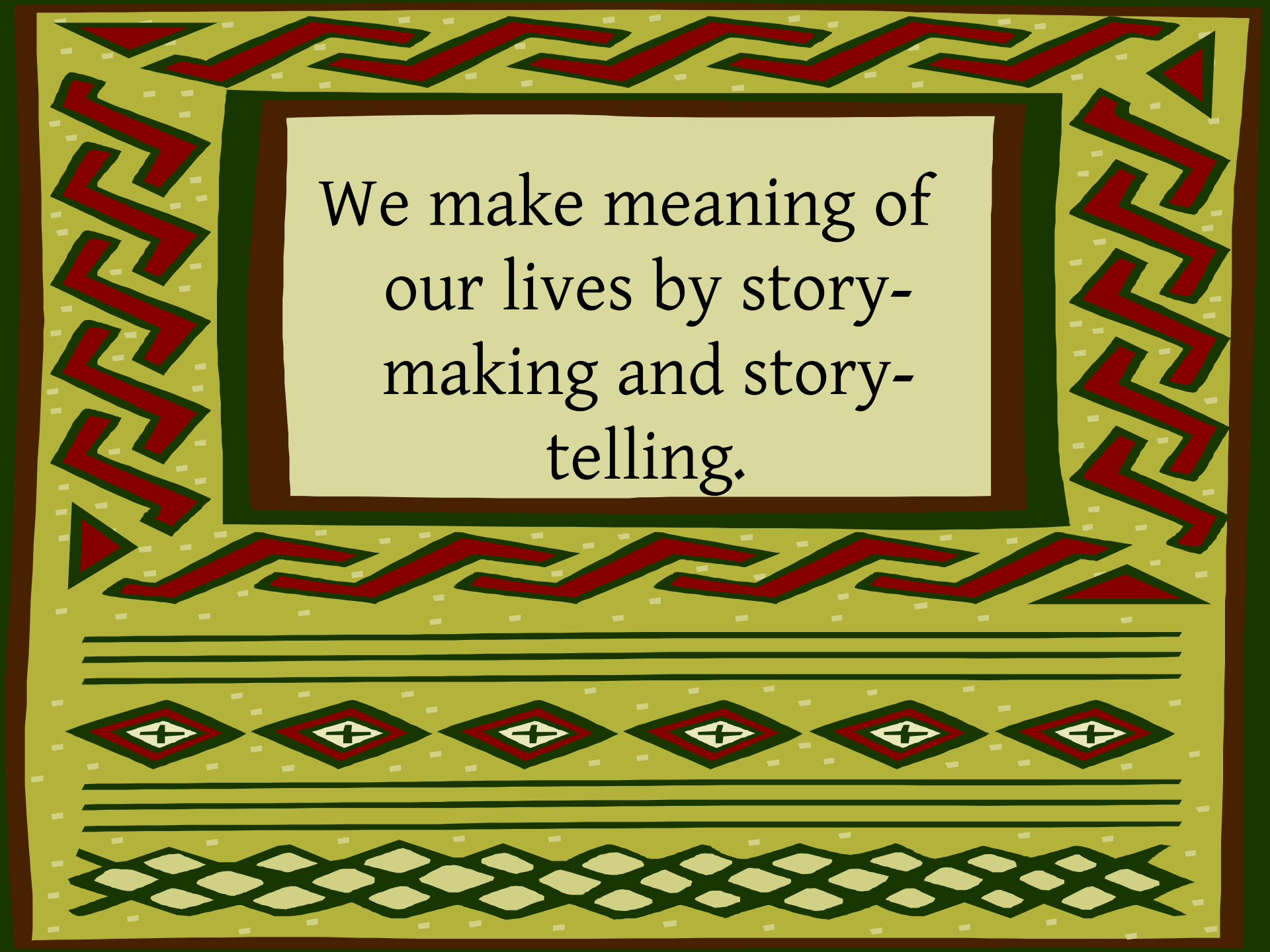
TODAY'S INVITATION



- ❖ TO EXAMINE GRIEF FROM A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE, DIFFERENT FROM A INDIVIDUAL VIEW
- ❖ TO EXPLORE HOW A FAMILY SYSTEM IS CHANGED BECAUSE OF GRIEF
- ❖ TO IDENTIFY WAYS TO BUILD BRIDGES WITH FAMILIES IN GRIEF

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- **All families encounter losses and transitions
- some welcomed, others unimagined.**
- **Death is recognized as one of the most stressful life event families face.**
- **There is movement from loss orientation to restoration orientation as families cope.**
- **Most families do not need counseling to cope.**
- **Grief as a family system phenomenon is gaining visibility and credibility.**
- **In western culture, death has become increasingly invisible.**



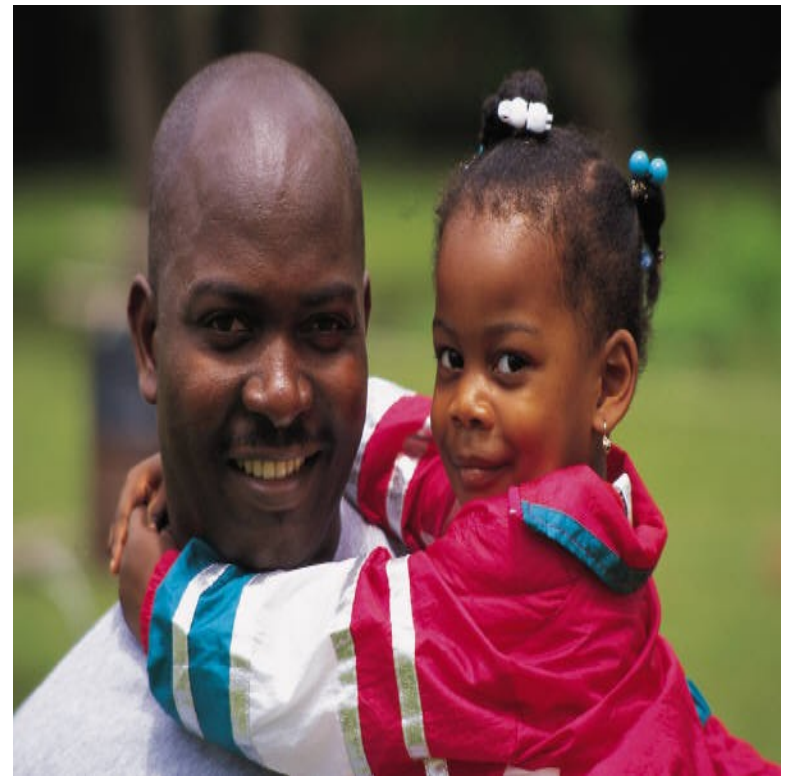
We make meaning of
our lives by story-
making and story-
telling.

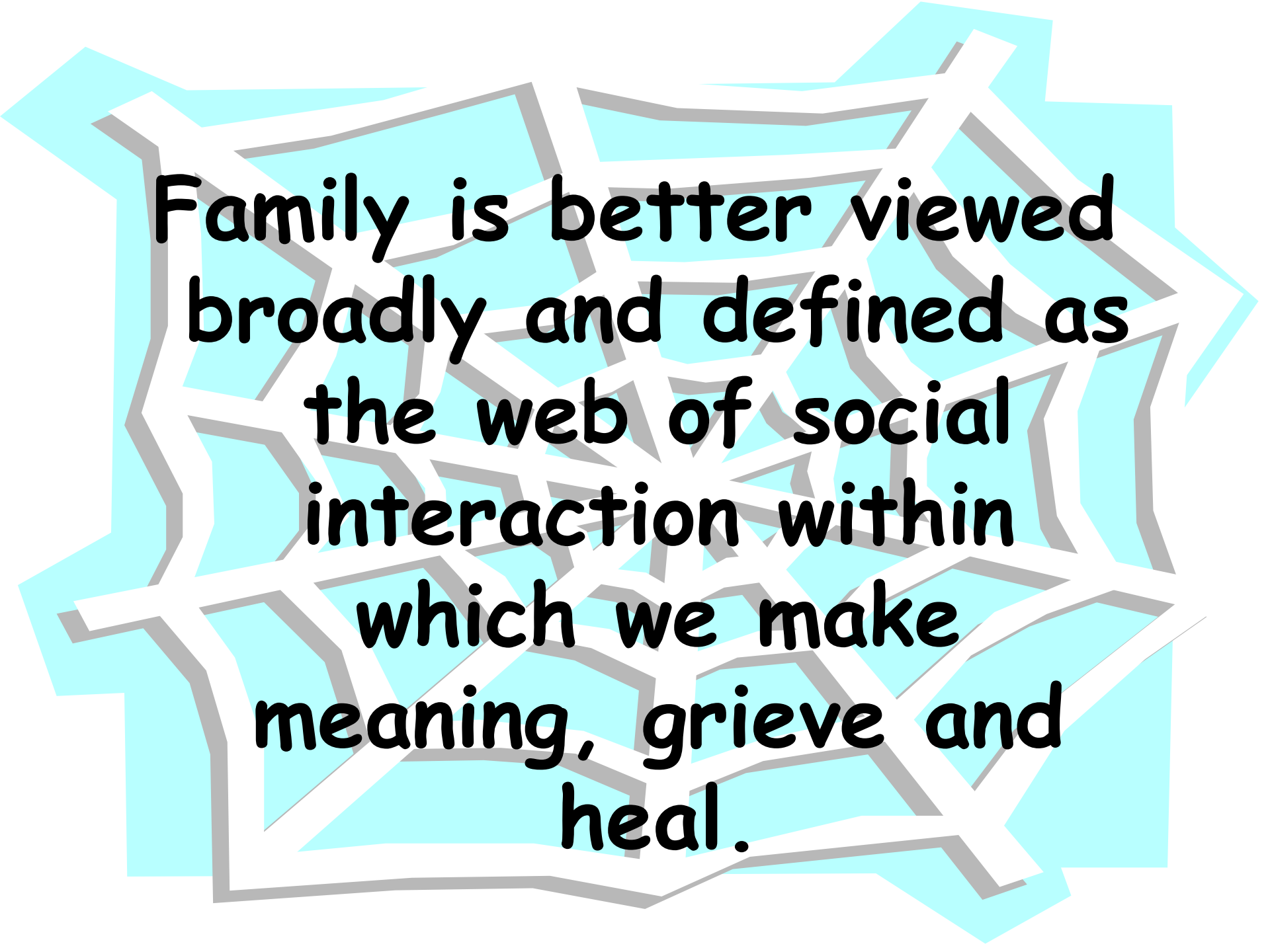


“Families are a weaver’s dream as unique threads from the past are intertwined with the present to form a colorful tapestry of relationships in time.”

Samuel T. Gladding

FAMILIES, AS WE DEFINE THEM FOR OUR OWN LIVES, BECOME A HOLDING PLACE FOR THE EVOLVING STORY OF OUR LIFE.





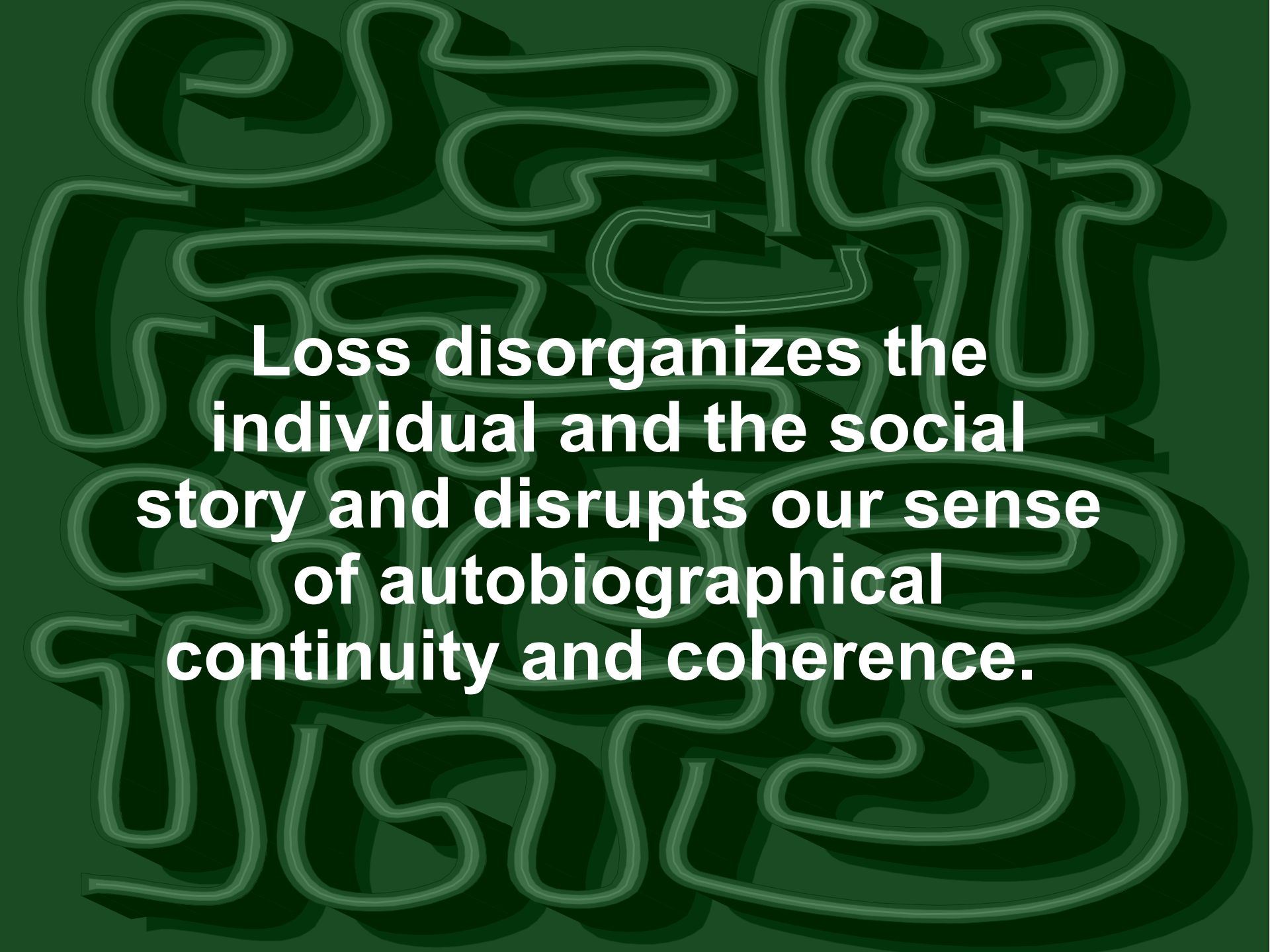
**Family is better viewed
broadly and defined as
the web of social
interaction within
which we make
meaning, grieve and
heal.**

A family connection can be a context for reconstructing the story. The family conversation can hold, change and reconstruct one's meaning of what has happened.

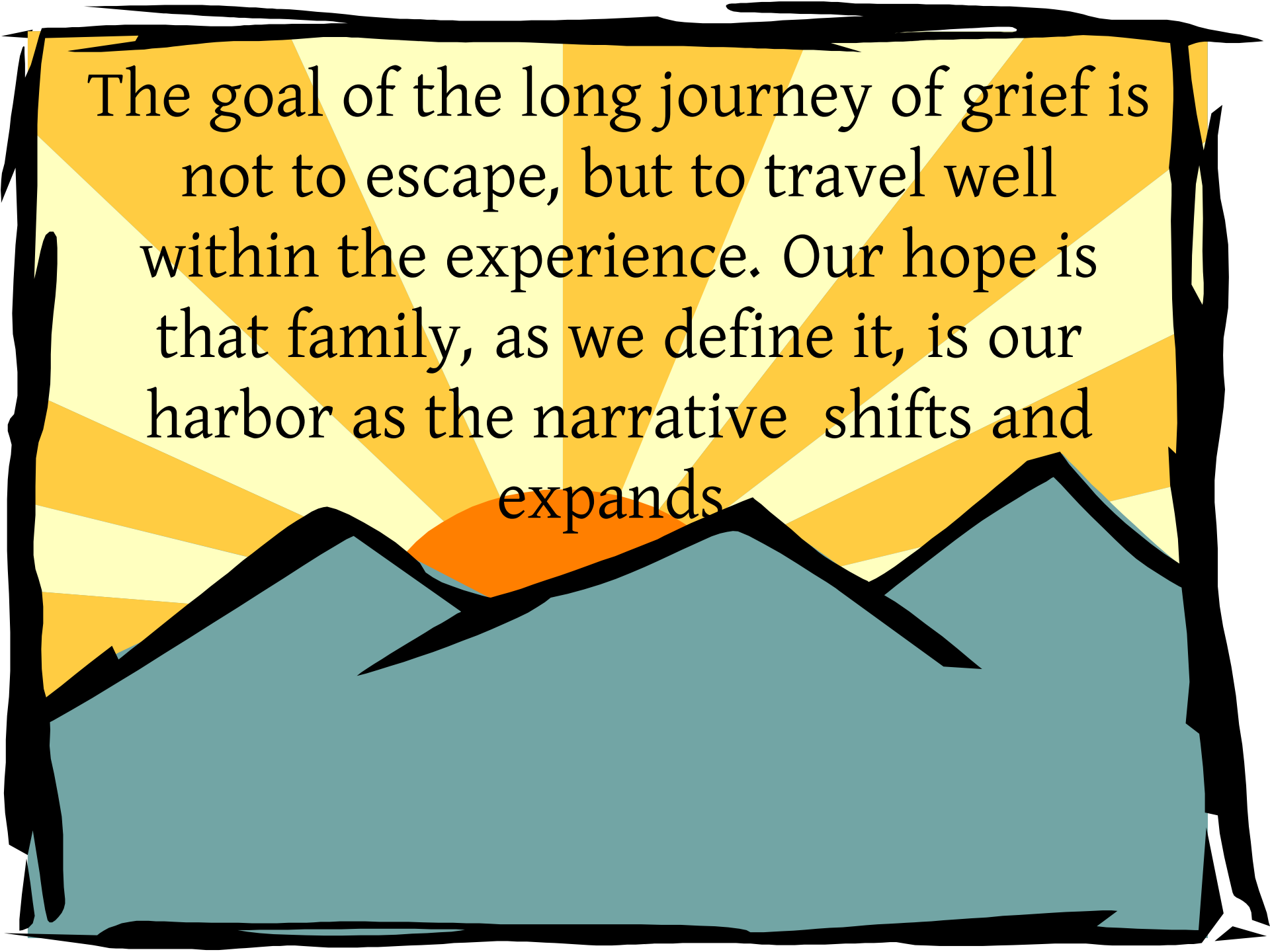


THE STORY EVOLVES AND INCLUDES THE LEGACIES ONE LIVES, THE PEOPLE TO WHOM ONE BELONGS, AND THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN WHO ONE HAS BEEN AND WHO ONE WILL BE.



The background is a dark green color with a complex, abstract pattern of lighter green, swirling, and wavy lines that create a sense of movement and depth. The text is centered and reads:

Loss disorganizes the individual and the social story and disrupts our sense of autobiographical continuity and coherence.

The background of the image is a stylized illustration. The upper half features a sunburst pattern with alternating yellow and orange rays emanating from a central point. Below this, the lower half of the image shows a range of mountains in a solid blue-grey color. The entire scene is framed by a thick, black, hand-drawn style border.

The goal of the long journey of grief is
not to escape, but to travel well
within the experience. Our hope is
that family, as we define it, is our
harbor as the narrative shifts and
expands



“Stories heal us because we become whole through them. As in the word *‘remember’*, we *re-member, re-store, re-vitalize, re-juvenate, re-cover, re-claim, re-new.*”

Deena Metzger, 1992, p. 71

WHAT IS A FAMILY SYSTEM?

- An ordered composition of elements in a unified whole
- The whole is larger than the sum of its parts
- The individual impacts the system
- The system influences the individual
- Dynamics exist within the system
- Systems have ways of functioning
- Families are impacted by wider culture

CULTURE DEFINES:

- WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BODY DURING THE FUNERAL PERIOD
- WHAT ARE THE CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS OF MOURNERS AND THOSE WHO ASSIST
- WHAT ARE THE MOURNING PERIODS
 - HOW DOES THE COMMUNITY CONTINUE TO INCLUDE THE DECEASED IN LIFE



ETHNICITY & CULTURAL DIFFERENCE ILLUSTRATIONS:

- MANY NATIVE AMERICANS BELIEVE
“THERE IS NO DEATH, JUST A
CHANGE OF WORLDS”**
- OFTEN AFRICAN AMERICANS
REGARD FUNERALS AS PRIMARY
RITUALS WITH OBLIGATION TO
PARTICIPATE**
- OFTEN RURAL BRAZILIAN MOTHERS
ARE DISCOURAGED FROM WASTING
TEARS ON DEATHS OF BABIES**

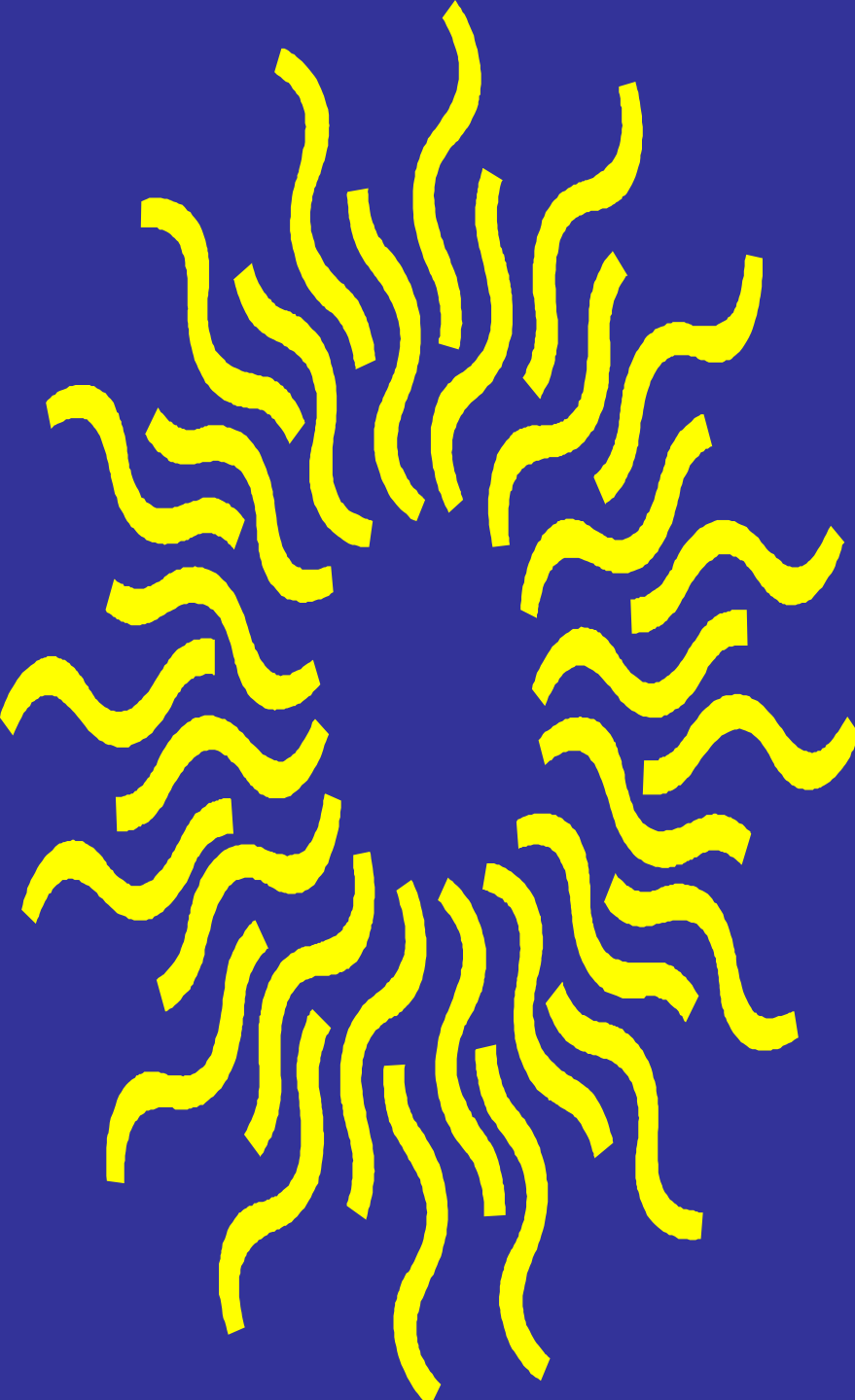


- *VIETNAMESE PEOPLE PRACTICE A FORMAL GRIEVING PERIOD FOR SEVEN WEEKS AFTER A DEATH DURING WHICH THE SOUL OF THE DECEASED IS INVITED INTO THE HOME*
- *ARMENIAN PEOPLE INVITE FAMILY & FRIENDS INTO THE HOME TO OFFER RESPECT AFTER A DEATH BUT ONLY BLACK COFFEE IS SERVED (NO FOOD). THESE SUPPORTERS RETURN AGAIN IN SEVEN DAYS.*



INSTRUMENTAL GRIEVERS:

- LIMITED/CONTAINED FEELINGS
- THINKING PRECEDES/DOMINATES FEELING
- FOCUS IS PROBLEM-SOLVING
- ANGER/GUILT OUTWARDLY EXPRESSED
- ACTIVITY FOCUSED
- RELUCTANCE TO DISCUSS FEELING
- PRIVATE INTENSE EXPRESSION MORE IMMEDIATELY THAN LATER

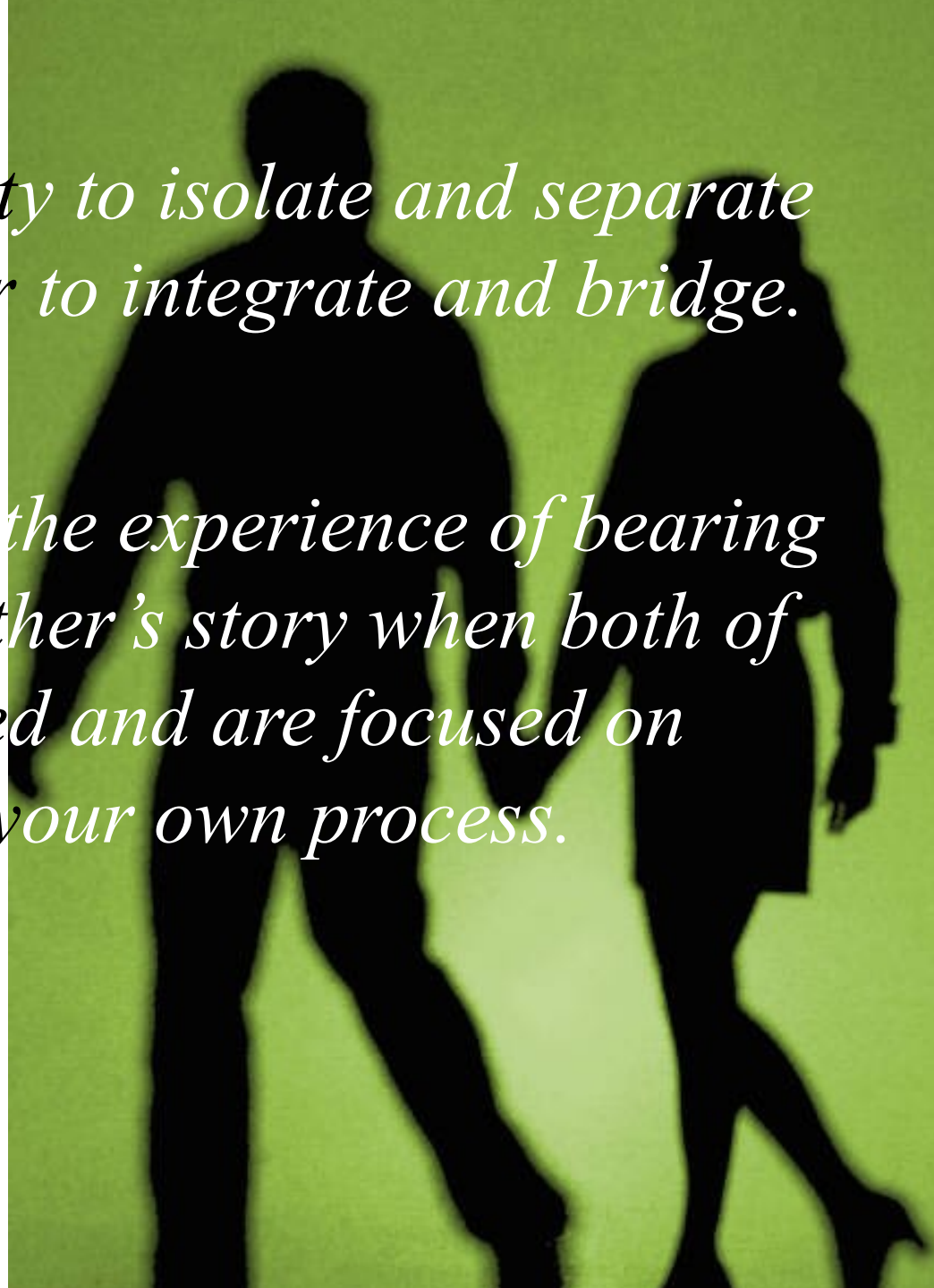


INTUITIVE GRIEVERS:

- EXPRESS ANGUISH IN TEARS
 - SOCIALIZED TO BE NURTURING/EMPATHIC
- UNAFRAID TO DISCUSS GRIEF
 - SEEK SUPPORT
- DIFFICULTY EXPRESSING ANGER
 - PRONE TO GUILT
 - CAREGIVERS
- KEEPERS OF THE FAMILY CIRCLE

Grief has the capacity to isolate and separate family members or to integrate and bridge.

There is difficulty in the experience of bearing witness to each other's story when both of you are affected and are focused on managing your own process.



David Kissane's Types of Families

- **WELL FUNCTIONING** – supportive, cohesive, tolerant, conflict resolving (55%)
- **INTERMEDIATE** – less consistent well functioning characteristics; can be adversely impacted by stress (35%)
- **DYSFUNCTIONAL** – rejecting, depressed, have muted anger or hostility, fractured (10%)

KISSANE'S KEY QUESTIONS:

- **How open & effectively does the family communicate?**
- **How does the family operate as a team? (cohesiveness)**
- **How does the family manage conflict or difference?**

SYSTEMS CONCEPTS

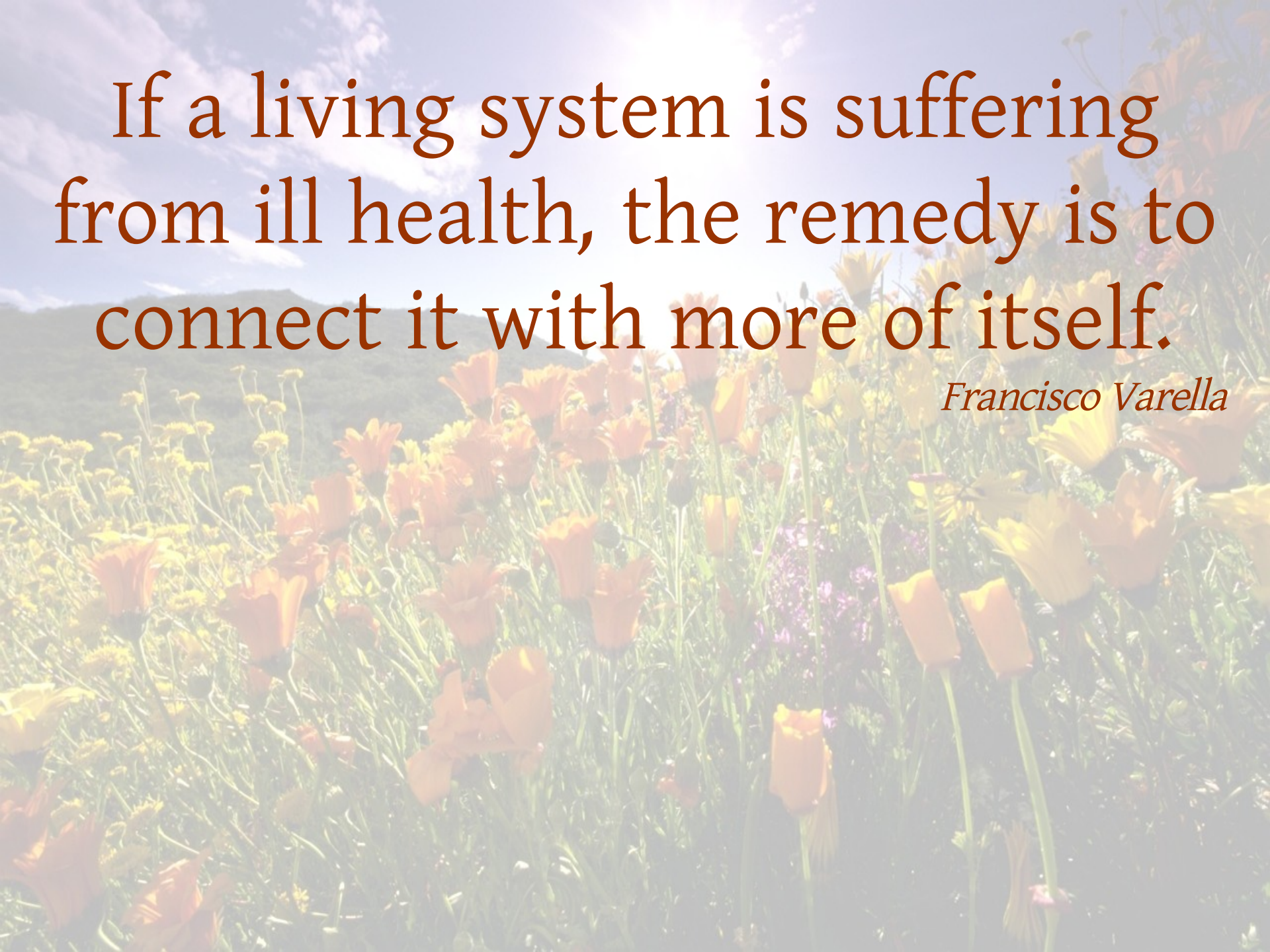
- **EQUILIBRIUM OR HOMEOSTASIS**
- **BOUNDARIES**
- **ROLES**
- **RULES**
- **RITUALS**
- **PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION**
- **SECRETS & PROTECTION**
- **MEANINGS**
- **GENERATIONAL LEGACIES**

SYSTEMS CONCEPTS, CON'T.

- **FAMILY STRUCTURE, POWER DISTRIBUTION, HIERARCHY**
- **FAMILY RESILIENCE – problem-solving communication; flexibility; hope; hardiness; emotional health; equality; family time & routine; spirituality**

THESE VARIABLES IMPACT FAMILIES IN GRIEF

- Gender differences
- Age/developmental differences
- Other diversity factors – culture, ethnicity, religion, orientation
- Type of event
- Events of disenfranchised grief
- Events of stigmatized losses
- Stressors concurrent with loss (timing)
- Conflicted relationships with the deceased

A vibrant field of orange and yellow flowers, possibly cosmos, stretches across the foreground. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, with some fully open and others as buds. The background shows a soft-focus landscape with green hills under a bright, hazy sky. The overall tone is warm and positive, with a strong emphasis on natural growth and health.

If a living system is suffering
from ill health, the remedy is to
connect it with more of itself.

Francisco Varella

SUGGESTIONS FOR BRIDGING WITH GRIEVING FAMILIES:

- **Stay aware of your own grief issues so you don't sidestep things because of your needs.**
- **Recognize losses in the family.**
- **Be solidly present with a grieving family so as to create safety for the unit.**
- **Attitudinally, view the family as a resource.**
- **Listen & validate the experience of each family member.**
- **Encourage families to hear differences, value the uniqueness of each person's view, & tolerate individual experiences/styles.**

SUGGESTIONS FOR BRIDGING, CON'T.

- **Educate families about differences within their group regarding age, gender, meaning.**
- **Reframe differences as strengths.**
- **Encourage flexibility so that roles can be redefined and tasks get accomplished.**
- **Focus on what has worked before – be strength-based & solution-focused as opposed to problem saturated.**
- **Listen for meaning statements in family language with particular attention to hear troublesome meanings.**

SUGGESTIONS FOR BRIDGING, CON'T.

- **Assist with creating new rituals with the family.**
- **Open lines of communication and conflict resolution.**
- **Invite the family to connect with one another.**
- **Help the family to manage emotions.**
- **Help to co-create a family survival story.**
- **Facilitate coping within the family.**
- **Take care of yourself so that you can weather the long haul.**
- **Encourage forgetting perfectionism...assume “there is a crack in everything...that’s how the light gets in”.**

A close-up photograph of two white orchids with yellow and red centers, set against a dark, textured background. The orchids are in focus, with their petals and stamens clearly visible. The lighting is soft, highlighting the delicate structure of the flowers.

“convening conversations for
healing”

piper leigh