

# Ambiguous Loss

- Ambiguous loss refers to losses that by their nature are unclear and have no closure.
- The term covers a wide spectrum, and we will all experience some of these losses in our lifetime.
- Many of these losses are not adequately validated in our society ('disenfranchised grief').

# Ambiguous Loss

- **Prof Pauline Boss, pioneering family therapist and researcher of family social science, coined the term in the 1970s**
- **Studied families where fathers were absent either physically or psychologically. Also her own father's experience of being an immigrant in the US.**
- **Worked with 9/11 families and victims of war and natural disasters where bodies were never recovered**
- **Model is now applied in many ways – e.g Red Cross, foster children, infertility, terminal illness)**



Emeritus Professor  
Pauline Boss

# Type 1: Person is Physically absent, but psychologically present

- Unconfirmed death:
  - Physically missing
  - Kidnapping, War, Terrorism
  - Ethnic cleansing, genocide
  - Natural disasters
- Prison
- Serving in military
- Divorce and relationship breakdown
- Adoption
- Immigration (separation from loved ones)
- Miscarriage
- 'Empty nest'

“Leaving  
without  
Goodbye”

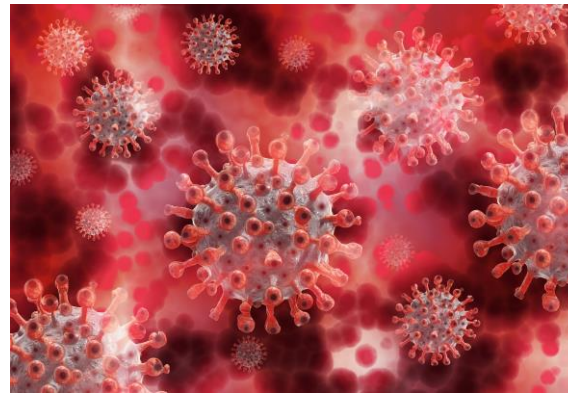
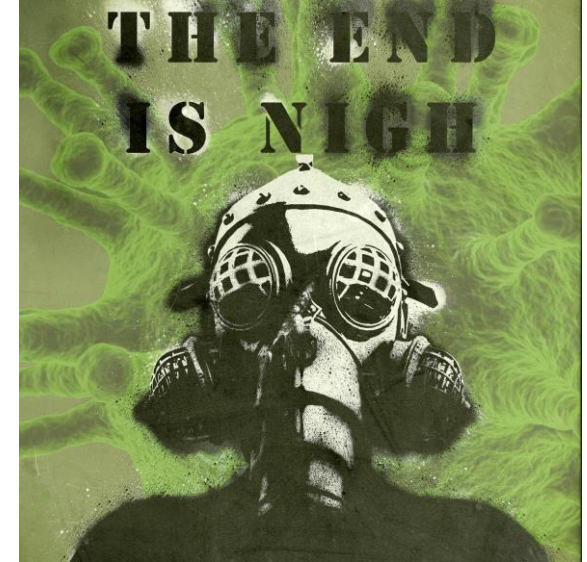


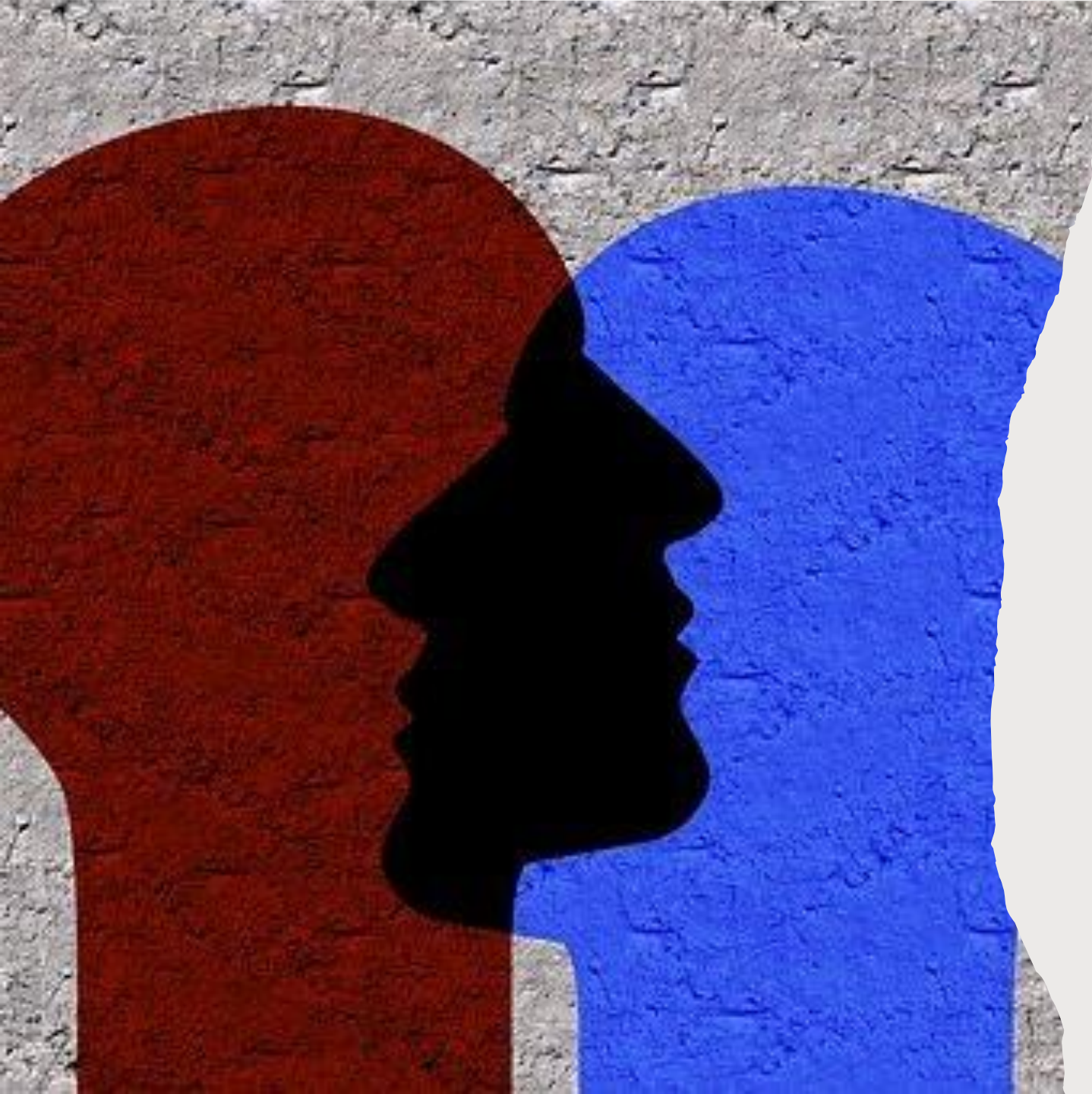


# Type 2: Person is Psychologically absent, but physically present

- Dementia
- Traumatic brain injury
- Addictions of all kinds
- Depression and chronic mental illnesses
- Obsessive thinking e.g. politics, world situations
- Ageing parents, relationship issues, alcoholic parent

“Goodbye  
without  
Leaving”





## Type 3: Personal Ambiguous Loss

### **INTERNALLY CAUSED:**

**Losing something that affects our relationship with self – physical or psychological (e.g illness, eyesight, hearing, voice, memory, ageing)**

**Or**

### **EXTERNALLY CAUSED:**

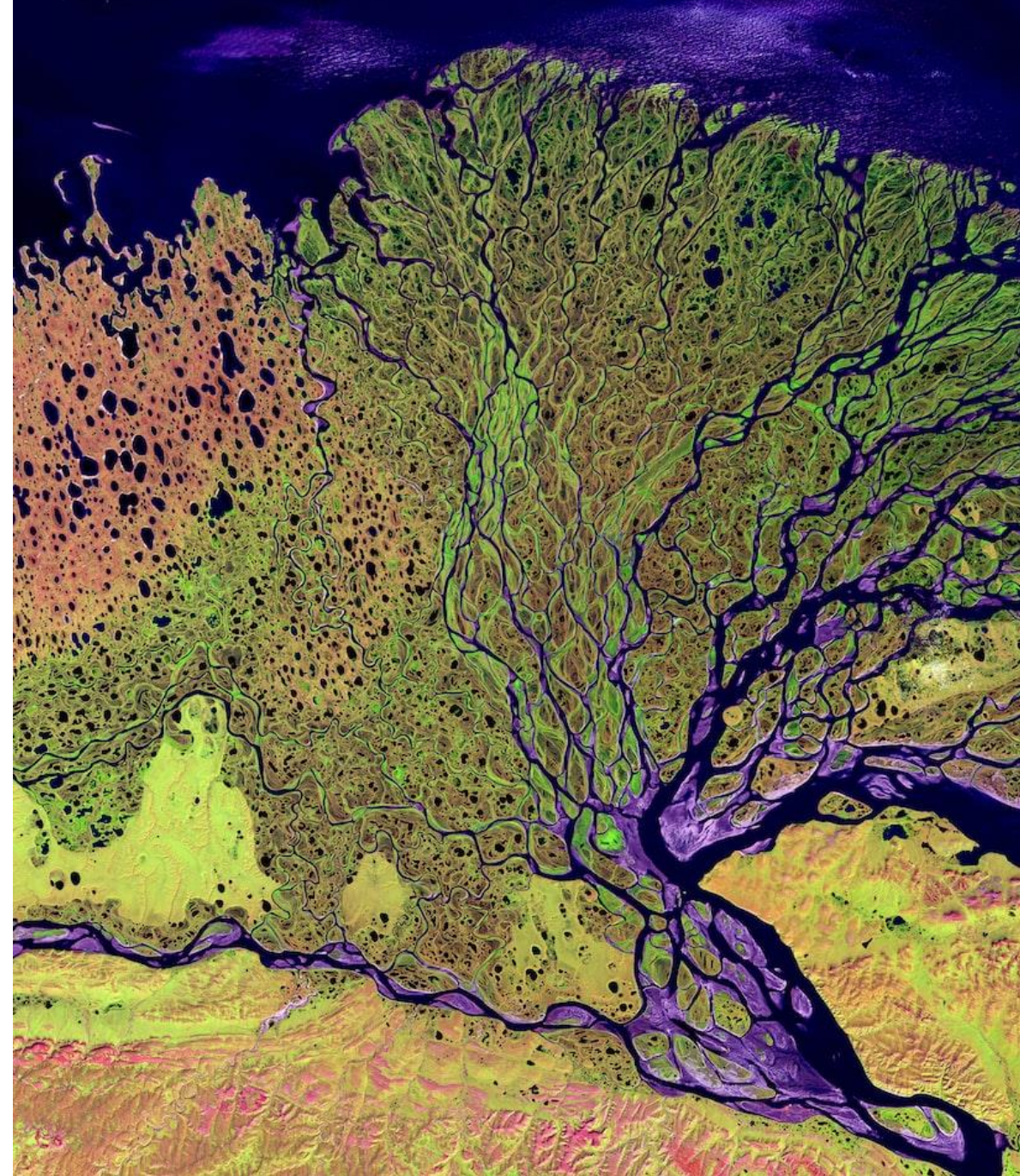
**loss of status, personhood, or purpose by some outside circumstance**



## One ambiguous loss can lead to another:

### Examples:

- Child experiences the physical loss one parent and psychologically loses the other parent, who is depressed
- A loss of health can lead to the loss of roles/identity
- A person who is displaced may experience multiple external and internal losses: loved ones, home, job, community, identity and more





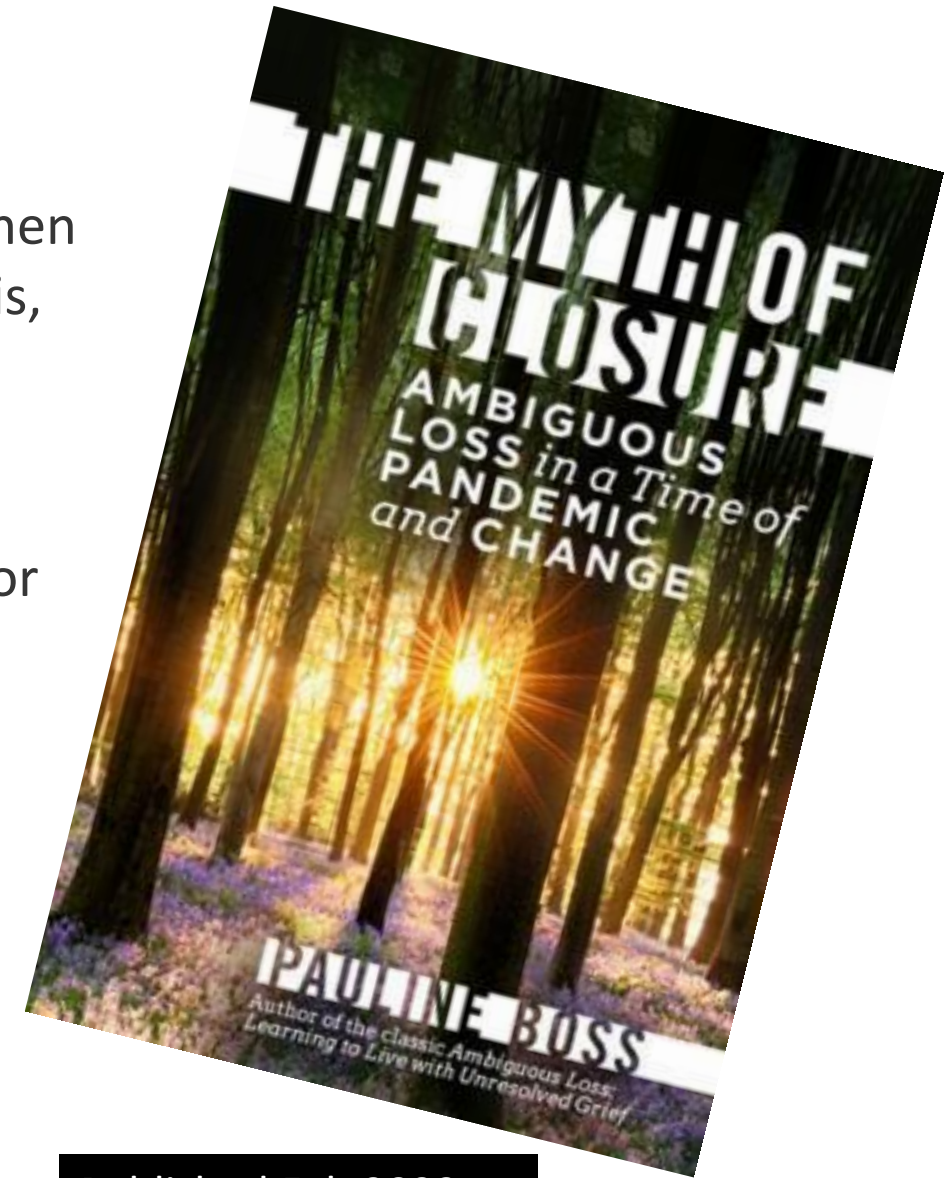
# Type 4: Societal and global losses

“Now, after much thinking since that fateful Memorial Day when George Floyd was killed, here in my hometown of Minneapolis, combined with the questions coming to me from around the world, I have expanded my ideas about ambiguous loss.”

“It can happen to one person, one family, a local community or the global community.”

- Covid pandemic
- Racial violence
- War in Ukraine
- Climate change

Loss of safety, will the world ever be the same again,  
will there ever be justice...



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**OVERALL AIM IS TO BRING SOME BALANCE TO THE  
LOSS, NOT A CONCLUSION**

**Loss**



**Hope  
Coping  
Meaning**



A photograph of a stone arch bridge spanning a river. The bridge is made of large, rounded stones and has a central opening. In the center of the river, directly under the bridge's arch, is a large pile of logs or debris. The river is calm, and the surrounding area is lush with green trees and foliage. The scene is reflected in the water.

LOSS

LIFE AS IT  
IS NOW



## Key principles in working with clients:

- **Linear models of grief unhelpful**- loss follows its own path. Western ideas of self sufficiency, rationality and 'working hard' to overcome are often unhelpful
- **There is nothing wrong with the person** - it's the situation that is causing the ongoing grief (similar to trauma: normal reaction to an abnormal event)
- **Coping methods may seem strange** - "People are very creative and very resilient in coping with Ambiguous Losses, but therapists have tended to miss it because it's sometimes considered rather strange behaviour."

## Key principles in working with clients:

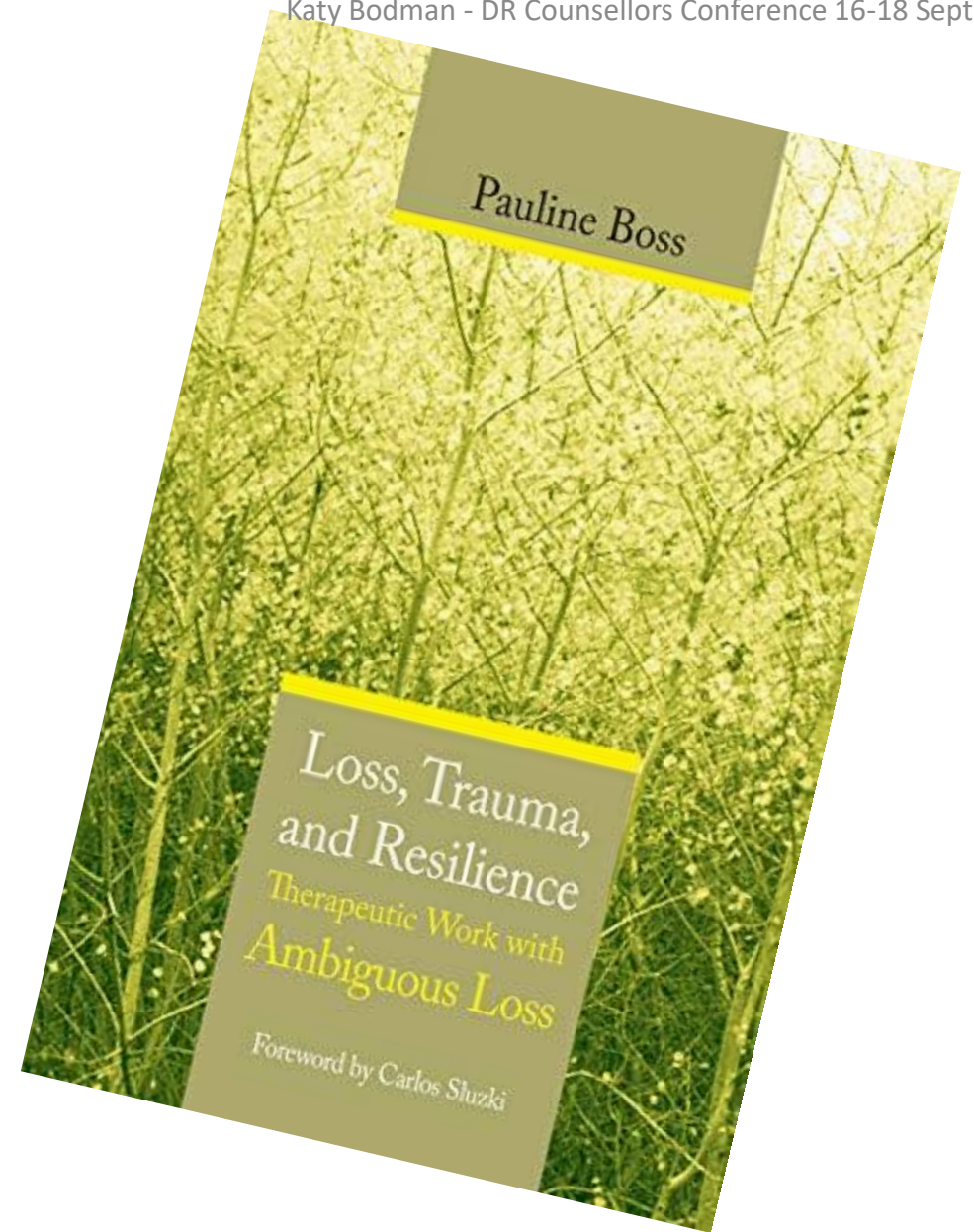
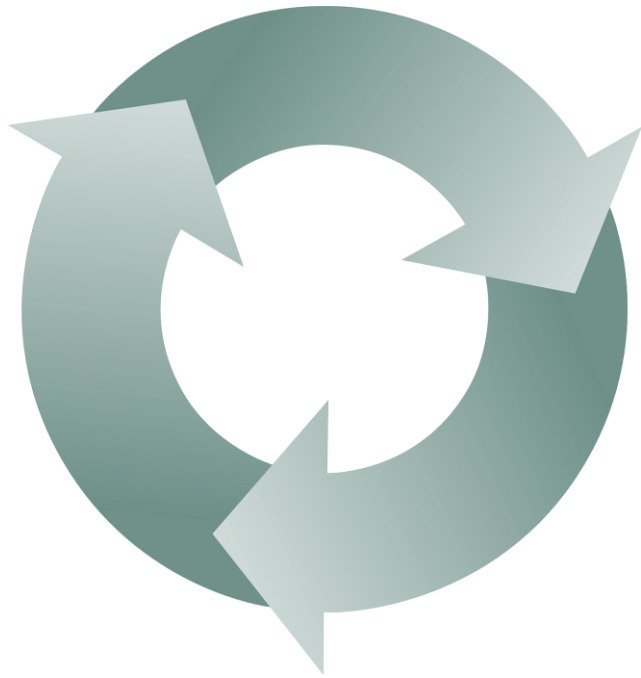
- **Non-dualistic thinking is helpful:** allowing ourselves to think or feel more than just one thing about the loss, even holding seemingly opposing ideas:

...with the physically missing, people might say, “He’s gone, he’s probably dead, and maybe not,” or “He may be coming back, but maybe not.”

- **Close the door on closure:** neat endings are not usually reality. “Closure is a terrible word in human relationships. Once you’ve become attached to somebody, love them, care about them. It’s a different dimension, but you can’t just turn it off.”



# Six guidelines for coping with Ambiguous Loss & Developing Resilience





# 1) Finding meaning - *What does the situation mean to them?*

- We need meaning to move forward
- Their meaning, not ours – (e.g – died a hero, fate, God)
- Sensitivity to cultural/religious/spiritual meanings
- Self-blame, guilt, revenge feelings common
- Meaning can be action – e.g seeking justice or even no meaning becomes one (e.g. wrong place, wrong time or why not me?)
- Can understandably be a long process



## 2) Tempering mastery - *How do I let go of what I cannot control?*

- Western society: big on problem solving, and controlling outcomes: 'mastery'
- Beliefs, scripts and drivers:
  - if I work hard, life will be good
  - bad things shouldn't happen to good people
- Balance feelings of helplessness with 'self-mastery', e.g. meditation, exercise, prayer, music, community, self-care, therapy

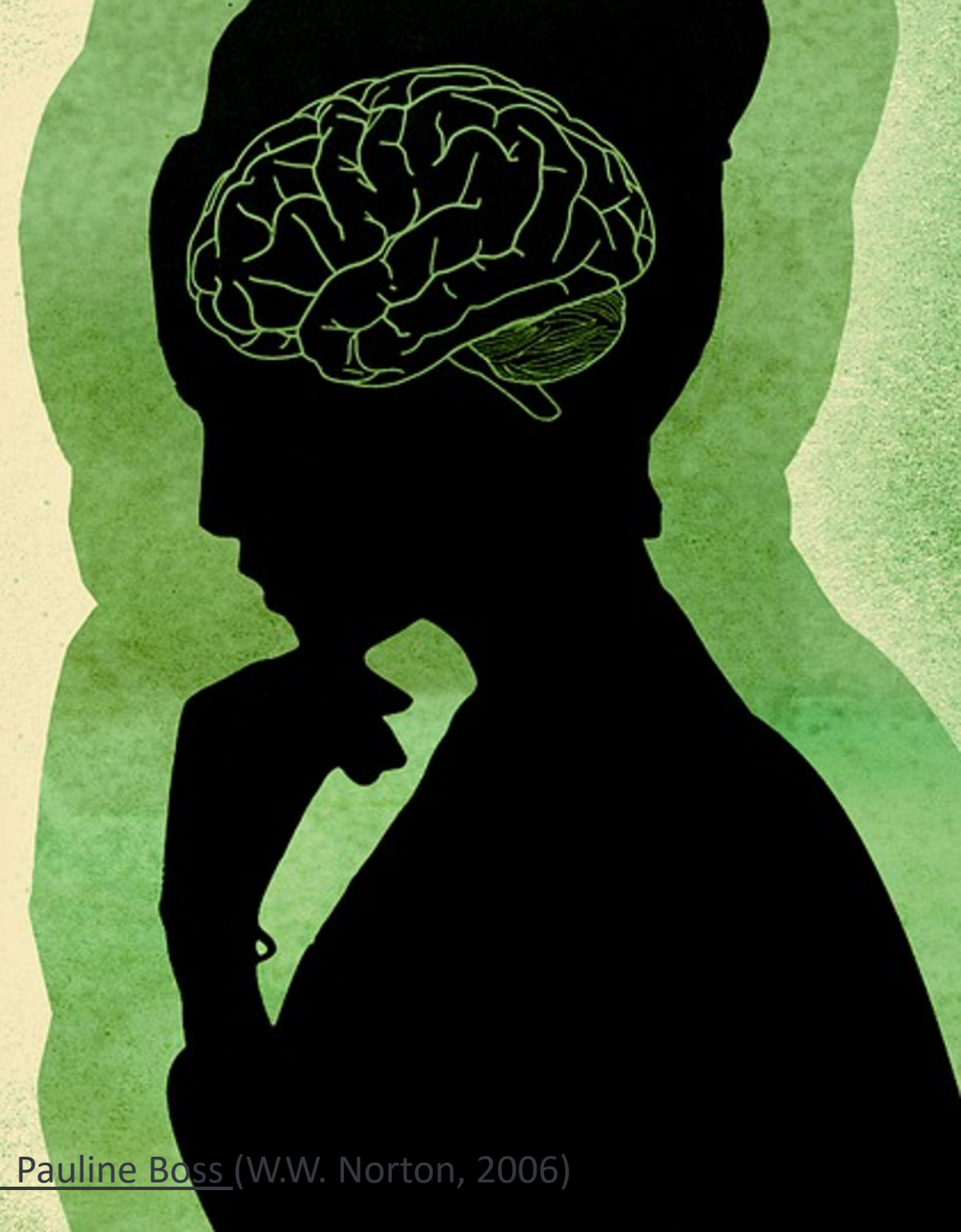




### 3) Reconstructing identity

*- Who am I now that my loved one is ambiguously lost?*

- Am I a wife or a widow? (e.g. missing person)
- Am I a husband, or carer?
- Peace with the paradox of who I was, am and will become





## 4) Normalising ambivalence

– *What do I do with my conflicted feelings?*

- Conflicted feelings are normal – “the situation is crazy, not you.”
- Guilt and anger are common: “I’m glad she’s alive, but angry I feel trapped - and I feel guilty for thinking that.”
- Empathy for & engagement with every part of the client
- Film, dance, music, art, literature can help – often depict ambivalence

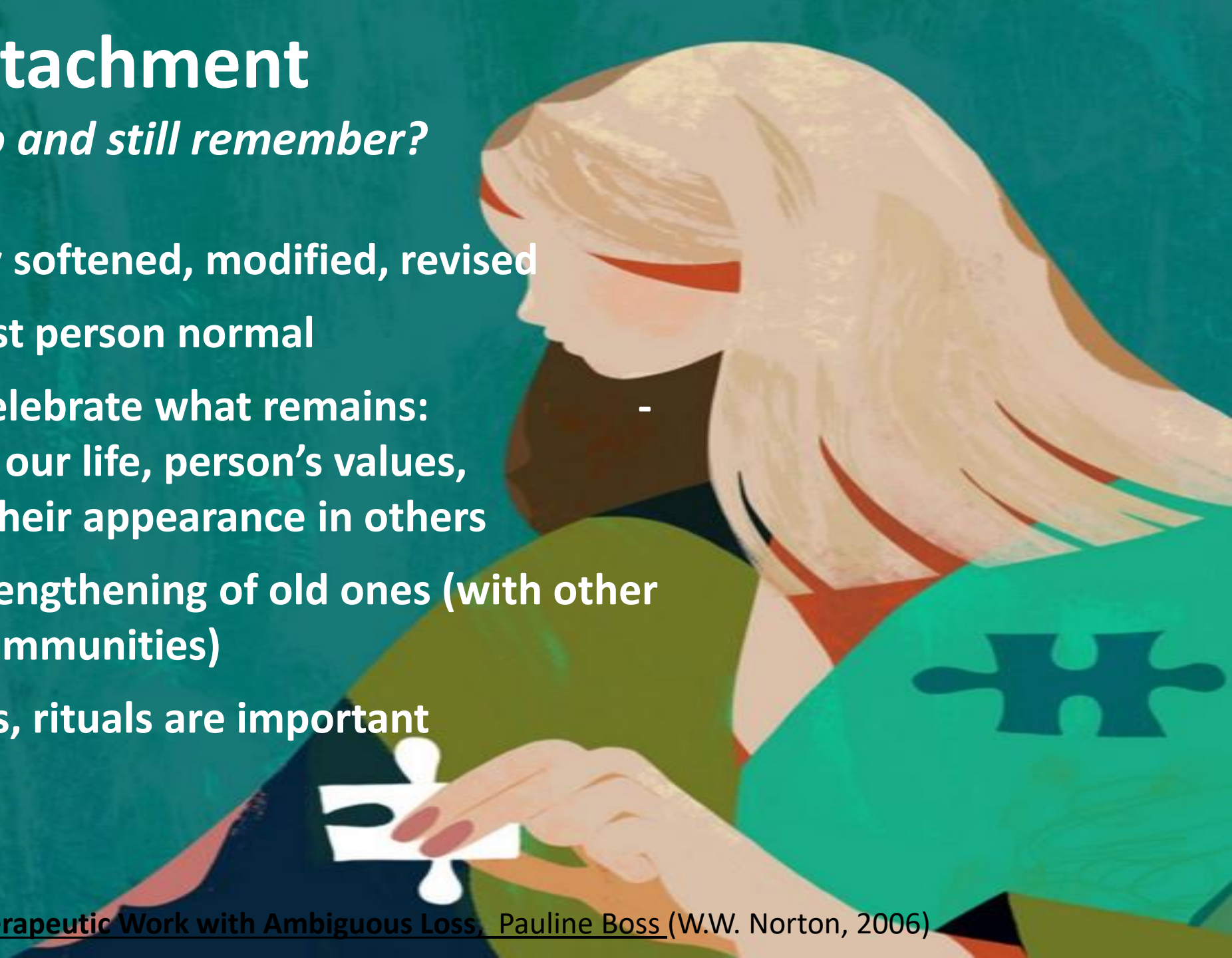




# 5) Revising attachment

*– how do I both let go and still remember?*

- Attachment gradually softened, modified, revised
- Talking to, 'seeing' lost person normal
- Grieve what is lost, celebrate what remains: the mark they left on our life, person's values, achievements, even their appearance in others
- New connections, strengthening of old ones (with other survivors, families, communities)
- Memorial ceremonies, rituals are important



## 6) Discovering hope

– *how do I find hope in an ongoing loss that has no closure?*

- **Becoming more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty**
- **May need periodically adjusting – e.g. moving from finding a cure, to a ‘good’ death**
- **Be open to future possibilities**
- **We may put energy into helping others**



# To think about...

- Many of us are taught that if we work hard enough we'll be able to 'get over' our losses (and perhaps if we work hard enough as counsellors we'll help our clients get over theirs). What do you think?
- Can you recognise ambiguous losses in your own life?
- Does the idea of ambiguous loss help you to feel differently about those losses?
- How can your own experiences of loss serve as touchstones to meet clients in their pain?
- Do you recognise ambiguous loss in your clients? How might Pauline Boss' concepts and 'six guidelines' help you in your practice?



“When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified; or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identity—then understanding is called for.

The gentle and sensitive companionship offered by an empathic person... provides illumination and healing. In such situations deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another.”

## **Carl Rogers**

*A Way of Being*, Houghton Mifflin, 1980: 160–161

