

GRIEF SUPPORT WORKSHOP

Working with the Grief Stone: Workshop exercises exploring how we live with grief and support the bereaved

These workshop activities are designed to support those who are grieving. The activities are suitable for those living with grief and for those who wish to support the bereaved. We can develop our 'listening ear' through acknowledging our grief and connecting with our physical and spiritual experiences of sorrow. These workshop activities are designed to be used in conjunction with the DVD 'Prophet and Loss'.

Things to incorporate in a workshop session:

- *sit the group in a circle of chairs. No tables are required.
- *place a selection of stones – one for each person – in the centre of the circle. The stones should be weighty, yet easily held in the hand. A range of smooth and textured stones will give people the opportunity to choose a texture that is symbolic of their own experience of grief.
- *ask people to bring a notebook and pen
- *allow time for writing and also bring the group together for discussion at regular points throughout the session
- *stop for a tea and coffee break if the session is longer than 90 minutes

1: Introductory exercises

Here are two exercises which develop our capacity to listen well.

Who are we and why are we here today

Sitting in a circle.
The workshop facilitator introduces themselves and the subject of the workshop.

Go round the circle passing the grief stone from one to the next person. As each member of the group holds the stone, they introduce themselves and say a few words about why they are here.

The listening ear

Sitting in a circle, after the facilitator has introduced themselves and the topic of the workshop, ask the group to turn their chair to face their neighbour, deciding who is A and who is B.

Explain that person B will be the listener, and is not allowed to comment or turn the

encounter into a dialogue. They can nod, or make encouraging sounds, but they must refrain from commenting on what is being said by their partner. It is important that they do not contribute anything to A's story – the task is to listen deeply.

When you start the clock, person A speaks for 3 minutes and B listens, without commenting or engaging in conversation.

Then swap roles. B speaks for 3 minutes and A listens.

Coming back into the circle as a whole group, lead a discussion about the experience of listening without speaking or interjecting. What was it like for the speaker? If appropriate, the listener might share some things they learned about their partner.

2. My house – listening to my memories

In this exercise we explore our memories through visualisation. The emotionally receptive state created by this exercise can help to bond a group and allow for deeper sharing of past and present grief. It is an appropriate activity for a longer workshop of 3-4 hours, or a retreat, or a series of workshops involving the same participants.

The leader guides the group through a series of visualisations which take participants on an imaginative journey back to a house they have lived in. This is a time for quiet reflection.

Here is a suggested text to lead the visualisation:

“Take a pen and paper to a separate part of the room. Remain seated or lie on the floor.

Make a list of every house you have ever lived in.

Now choose one of these houses.

Close your eyes.

Allow the sounds you hear around you to drift in and out of your mind.

Imagine the front door of your house. What colour is the door?

Visualise walking towards the front door.

What is beneath your feet?

You put out your hand to open the door. How does the handle feel?

What is the weight of the door as you open it?

Does it make a sound?

What do you smell inside the house as you step across the threshold?

What does the air feel like on your skin?

Find a favourite room in your house.

You sit down. What are you sitting on?

What can you see on the wall opposite you?

What can you hear?

What has happened in this room? Do you have a lovely memory?

Rest in the room.

Breathe in the air of your room.

Take three deep breaths, and on the third breath, become aware of the sounds in this room where we are today.

Take another deep breath, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Spend time now writing down everything you saw in your visualisation.

Colour, texture, smell, feelings, sounds, sensations and your memory.”

When the group is ready, ask them to share some of their memories. Remind the group to listen deeply, to not interrupt another’s story.

You may ask the group to reflect on any particular story that had special resonance. Sometimes the memories of others can trigger our own memories.

3. Acknowledging the grief stone

In this exercise, we use stones to imagine the physical shape of grief, and how it is a constant and heavy presence in the lives of the recently bereaved. This is an imaginative exercise which builds empathy and insight into grief and how we carry it in our daily lives. Suitable for support workers and those who work with the bereaved.

Choose a rock or stone from the centre of the circle that represents grief for you – the grief of others or your own grief.

Take your chair and your pen and paper and go to another place in the room – you can face the wall – you do not have to see what anyone else in the group is doing.

Hold the stone in your hand, notice its detail, its texture, its physical properties.

Spend some time writing about the qualities of the stone. You can write in sentences, or simply list adjectives. Imagine this stone represents all your sorrow.

Now leave your pen and paper on the floor and stand and hold your stone.

How do you carry it?

Try walking with the grief stone, how would you carry it if you had to take it everywhere with you?

How does carrying the stone effect your walking? Can you carry it -

Secretly
Carelessly
Boldly
Painfully?

Place the stone somewhere on the floor and move away from it. Notice your walking. Does it still feel as though the stone is with you?

Turn and see your stone from your new place in the room.

Be aware of the connection between yourself and the stone.

As you move round the room be aware of how your body is in relation to the stone.

Now walk back to your stone.

Find a partner and when you are ready, exchange stones.

Spend a few moments looking at your partner's stone.

When you are ready, return their stone to the centre of the room.

Come back into the circle for a group discussion.

Talk about the qualities of your grief stone, and the experience of being aware of its presence. What would it be like to carry the stone all the time? What surprised you about your partner's stone? What did its different qualities reveal to you about living with grief?

4: Transforming the stone: a meditation

[The leader may suggest that those who have iphones may like to record the meditation so that they are able to use it in the future.]

The leader leads the group through the closing meditation to achieve a sense of peace and renewal. The leader needs to lead this quietly and in a meditative voice.

“Pick up your stone. Hold it, acquaint yourself with its qualities.

Close your eyes, take some lovely deep breaths, breathing in that wonderful fresh air and breathing out any energy that does not work for you.

Focus now on your feet as you feel the healing energy of mother earth coming into the bottoms of your feet. You may give this energy colour if you like.

Feel the energy now as it
Comes up through your feet into your ankles
Calves, gently swirling around your knees,
And moving now into the top of your legs

Feel that energy now as it spreads through your buttocks and settles you deeper into the chair.

The energy flows higher up now, becoming orange around your stomach.
Now it flows up into the area now of your solar plexus.

It now becomes a gentle energy as it flows around your heart
Feel it now as it flows down each arm and into your fingertips, relaxing each finger.

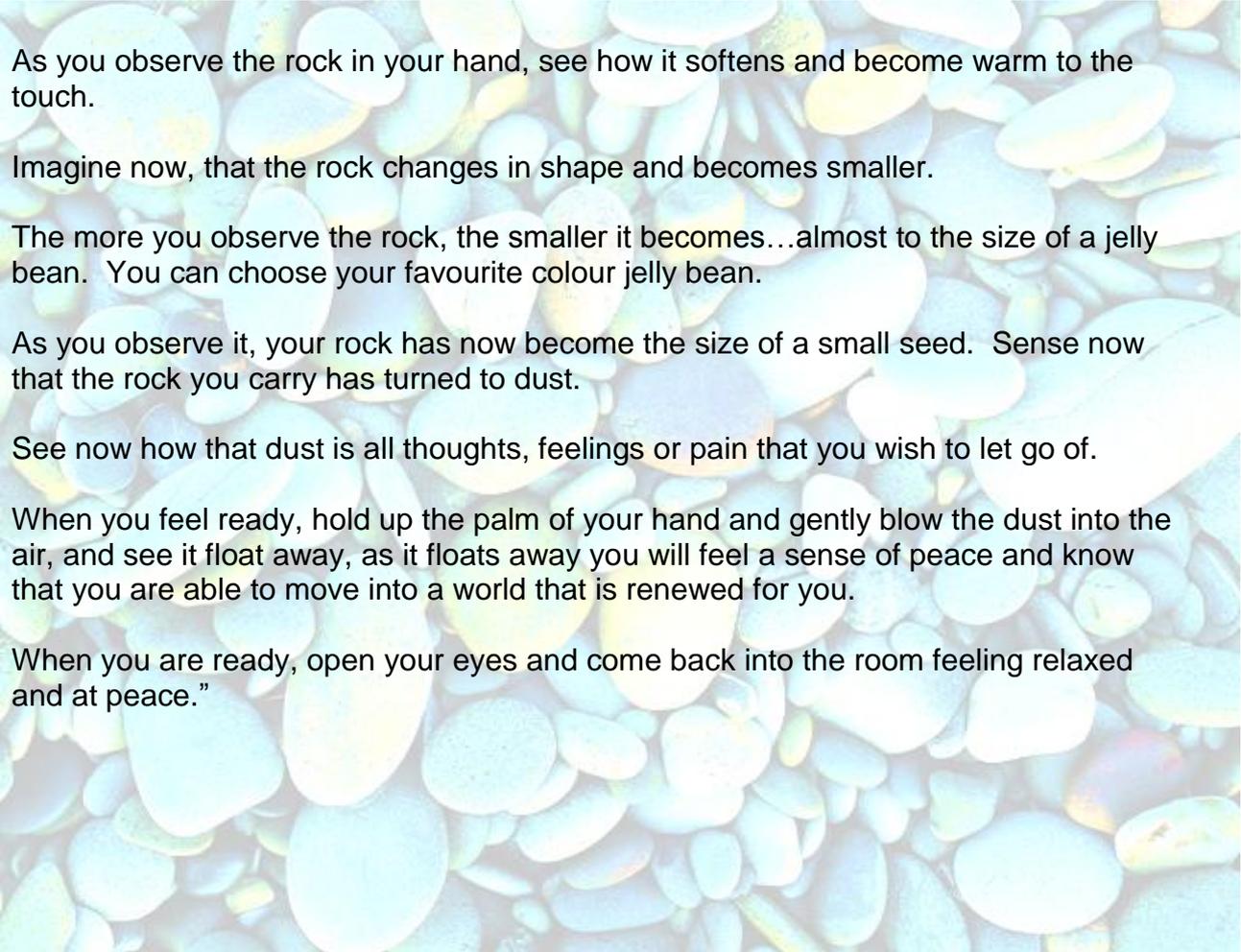
Feel now as the energy becomes a pale blue as it flows into your throat bringing a peace and ability to allow the energy to open and free any area of unwanted verbal negative talk.

Feel the energy now as it flows gently around your face, chin, eyes, nose, eyes and releases any tension in your brow.

This wonderful energy now touches the top of your crown, leaving your body feeling a deep sense of relaxation and peace.

Allow any thoughts to float from your mind, see them as they float off into the beautiful blue sky above.

Allow yourself now to imagine a rock in the palm of your hand. Sense the feel of it, how firm or hard it may be, see the shape of it, and sense the colour. Feel the temperature of it too. This rock represents any pain or unwanted thoughts or emotions that you carry.



As you observe the rock in your hand, see how it softens and become warm to the touch.

Imagine now, that the rock changes in shape and becomes smaller.

The more you observe the rock, the smaller it becomes...almost to the size of a jelly bean. You can choose your favourite colour jelly bean.

As you observe it, your rock has now become the size of a small seed. Sense now that the rock you carry has turned to dust.

See now how that dust is all thoughts, feelings or pain that you wish to let go of.

When you feel ready, hold up the palm of your hand and gently blow the dust into the air, and see it float away, as it floats away you will feel a sense of peace and know that you are able to move into a world that is renewed for you.

When you are ready, open your eyes and come back into the room feeling relaxed and at peace.”

5. 'Prophet and Loss' – the play and the documentary

'Prophet and Loss' was commissioned by Creative Ministries Network, a Uniting Church Agency, in 2006. Writer and theatre director Jane Woollard worked with grief support worker Bette Phillips as she visited clients in their homes. Bette's clients generously shared their stories with Jane as she researched the issues around work-related death. In 2009, the production was presented at the Centre for Theology and Ministry in Parkville, Melbourne. The play incorporated contemporary stories of bereavement, text from the Book of Isaiah and a medieval musical lament.

The DVD of 'Prophet and Loss' is a documentary exploring the creation of the play. The film features interviews with bereaved families, grief support workers, the cast and crew of the theatre production and with a professor of Old Testament studies. The interviews are intercut with scenes from the play.

How to use the DVD as a resource in a grief workshop

The DVD is structured around the themes of walking a labyrinth. The DVD runs for 52 minutes and can be viewed as a whole or viewed as chapters interspersed with workshop activities and discussion.

If only some chapters from the film are viewed, it is important that workshop leaders inform their group that interviews in the film are interspersed with scenes and music from the theatrical production of 'Prophet and Loss'. The prophet Isaiah is represented in the play by each of the five actors – he is represented in an old grey overcoat.

Here is a breakdown of the DVD chapters with running times for each chapter:

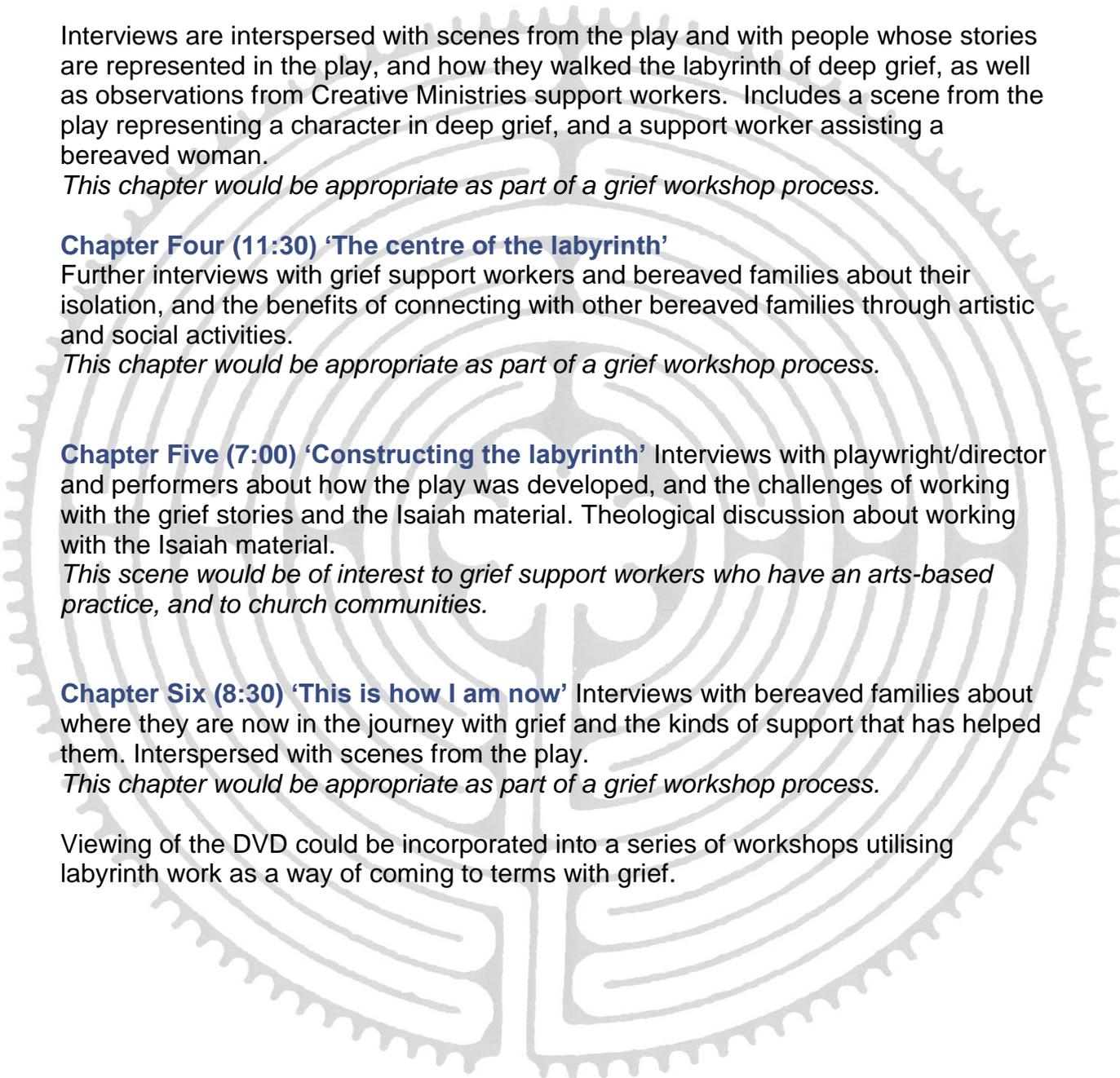
Chapter One (5:40) The prologue outlines the rationale and vision for creating the play, and features interviews with the director of Creative Ministries Network John Bottomley and grief support worker Bette Phillips, as well as with playwright/director, production designer and performers.

This chapter would be of interest to grief support workers who have an arts-based practice and to church communities.

Chapter Two (7:30) 'At the edge of the labyrinth' features bereaved families describing the day their loved one died. The interviews are intercut with brief footage and music from the play of 'Prophet and Loss'.

This chapter would be appropriate as part of a grief workshop process.

Chapter Three (14:30) 'Walking the labyrinth' explores the use of the labyrinth as an overarching image for the play. Interviews with playwrights, production designer, Centre for Theology and Ministry Artful Faith Co-ordinator Christina Rowntree. This chapter also features interviews with the performers and their experience of presenting stories of work-related death as well as their own experiences of grief.



Interviews are interspersed with scenes from the play and with people whose stories are represented in the play, and how they walked the labyrinth of deep grief, as well as observations from Creative Ministries support workers. Includes a scene from the play representing a character in deep grief, and a support worker assisting a bereaved woman.

This chapter would be appropriate as part of a grief workshop process.

Chapter Four (11:30) ‘The centre of the labyrinth’

Further interviews with grief support workers and bereaved families about their isolation, and the benefits of connecting with other bereaved families through artistic and social activities.

This chapter would be appropriate as part of a grief workshop process.

Chapter Five (7:00) ‘Constructing the labyrinth’ Interviews with playwright/director and performers about how the play was developed, and the challenges of working with the grief stories and the Isaiah material. Theological discussion about working with the Isaiah material.

This scene would be of interest to grief support workers who have an arts-based practice, and to church communities.

Chapter Six (8:30) ‘This is how I am now’ Interviews with bereaved families about where they are now in the journey with grief and the kinds of support that has helped them. Interspersed with scenes from the play.

This chapter would be appropriate as part of a grief workshop process.

Viewing of the DVD could be incorporated into a series of workshops utilising labyrinth work as a way of coming to terms with grief.