ON SAYING GOODBYE:

INTERACTIONAL ROLE LIMINALITY & POST-DEATH SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

By

Deborah Cobb

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Sociology

Department of Sociology & Leadership Studies

College Teaching Emphasis

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

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Abstract:

Grief is often understood as a process that culminates in detachment, with "saying goodbye" positioned as both an emotional and social necessity. Yet many bereaved individuals describe a different experience, one in which supernatural post-death contact allows them to receive messages from their deceased loved one. Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews and 47 anonymous open-ended surveys, this study explores how individuals who experience unsolicited post-death communication interpret these encounters and integrate them into everyday life. Analysis revealed three interconnected themes: resistance to saying goodbye, interpretation of encounters as specific messages from the deceased, and emotional stabilization following continued contact. These experiences facilitate adaptation by allowing participants to remain connected to their loved ones. Grounded in symbolic interactionism and continuing bonds, this study proposes interactional role liminality as a framework for understanding how bereaved individuals inhabit a stable in-between identity, sustaining prior relational roles through ongoing symbolic interaction across the boundary of death.

Introduction

Laura never expected to lose three of her sons at such young ages.

She is standing at the kitchen sink, doing dishes and trying to pretend that everything is okay. Nothing feels okay. Her life feels like it is falling to pieces. She was despondent at the funeral. She doesn't remember anything beyond sitting in her chair with a blanket in her lap, staring into nothing; numb. It's still a struggle to get up out of bed.

But now, standing at that sink, she is aware of her second-oldest son, Joseph, standing in the doorway to her left. She can see him out of the corner of her eye, wearing that stupid black and white checkered hoodie that she hated. It's so like him to wear that, and through all the grief, she laughs. Of course, her teenage son would wear that hoodie, just to annoy her.

Even if he's now deceased.

Somehow, she knows that if she turns her head to look at him, Joe will disappear. So, she stares straight ahead and soaks in his presence for as long as she can.

She remembers the police showing up at her door. It was only a few days before Joe was coming home from college to visit. But instead, the police broke the news to her that her son had passed away in a tragic car accident. Her oldest was already injured in a similar crash, leaving him in a wheelchair. She doesn't know it yet, but she will lose her two youngest sons to illness and cancer in the coming years.

She's stopped washing the dishes and instead savors this moment where she feels connected to her deceased son. He's not threatening. He's not really doing anything other than standing there, but the experience brings Laura a great sense of comfort. Joe came back to assure her that he was okay. That the end of one's life doesn't mean the end of everything.

No mother should ever have to bury one of her children, let alone three of her sons.

She dries her eyes from tears falling involuntarily and speaks out loud to her lost boy. She does not feel like a bereaved parent. She is still a mother. She has always been a mother to him. Death has not undone that.

Joseph doesn't come often. None of them do. But when they appear, it is enough to remind her that the relationship did not end when their lives did. That love does not require bodies to persist. That she is still their mother, and they are still her boys. Laura doesn't feel the need to say goodbye, not when she feels him standing there.

When Joseph fades into the ether, the kitchen is quiet again. The grief remains. It always does. But it no longer tells her that she has lost who she is. Instead, it sits alongside the certainty that motherhood did not stop when her sons died; it simply exists differently. That kind of love finds a way to continue.

She is still their mother. That will never change.

Grief in Western societies is often framed as a process that culminates in detachment. To “say goodbye” is frequently treated not only as an emotional milestone, but as a moral and social requirement. It is seen as signaling recovery, closure, and a return to expected social life.

Yet for many bereaved individuals, saying goodbye is neither possible nor desired. A substantial body of research documents ongoing bonds with the deceased as a healthy form of grieving in which the relationship is not severed, but transformed. When one experiences this continued relationship in the form of post-death contact, such encounters are often perceived as meaningful and emotionally sustaining. Despite this, they remain undertheorized in scholarly accounts of grief.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism and continuing bonds theory, this study proposes that post-death communication can function as a form of social interaction through which bereaved individuals sustain relational roles and reconstruct identity after loss. Rather than facilitating detachment, these interactions often stabilize grief by allowing individuals to remain in a relationship with the deceased.

This study draws on 22 in-depth interviews and 47 anonymous open-ended surveys with individuals who reported unsolicited post-death contact with a deceased loved one. Using an inductive qualitative approach, this analysis traces how meaning, interaction, and role performance shape the experience of grief following loss.

The findings introduce three core themes: the refusal of goodbye, interpretation of specific messages, and emotional equilibrium following post-death contact, which together give rise to the sensitizing concept of “interactional role liminality.” This study

situates this contribution within existing scholarship on grief, symbolic interaction, and the supernatural, and considers its implications for understanding bereavement in a micro-sociological sense.

At its core, this study is about what happens in the quiet spaces after loss. When the funeral is over and the world expects the bereaved to return to normal. It is in these spaces that many participants described continued moments of connection: a familiar voice in a dream, a sign that arrived at just the right time, a presence felt rather than seen. These encounters did not erase grief, nor were they intended to. Instead, they offered a way to live alongside it, allowing love, identity, and relationships to persist in an altered form. By examining these experiences, this study seeks to understand how the bereaved make meaning, maintain roles, and remain in conversation with those they have lost, suggesting that for some, goodbye is not an ending, but a reshaping of connection.

Grief and Mourning

Traditional Models of Grief & Mourning Rituals

The notion of "saying goodbye" presumes that grief ends with the termination of a relationship after the death of a loved one. This is evident in traditional models of detachment and closure, most often associated with Freud's (1917) psychoanalytic formulation of mourning, in which the goal of treatment is closure and the relinquishment of the prior relationship. As summarized by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996:25), "the bereaved person was expected to disengage emotionally from the deceased so that psychic energy could be freed for new relationships." These models treat continued

attachment to a deceased loved one as maladaptive or pathological, frequently interpreting it as a form of complicated grief. The DSM-5 describes Prolonged Grief Disorder (formerly known as “complicated grief”) as intense and prolonged grief that interrupts a person’s daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association 2022). Freud’s model assumes that emotional ties must be severed, attachment must be relinquished, and that successful mourning ends in reinvestment elsewhere (Freud 1917). These assumptions persist in modern therapy settings, cultural expectations, and popular grief discourse. The bereaved are encouraged to “say goodbye” to their loved ones as a necessary step of healing.

This model of closure was so prevalent and unquestioned in the 20th century that it not only shaped diagnostic criteria and therapeutic goals, but it also became a social script that one was expected to follow. As Romanoff (1998:708) observes, “bereavement is governed by cultural rules that define appropriate expressions of grief and the acceptable duration of mourning.” Dominant detachment models do not merely function as diagnostic or therapeutic but become normative social expectations of how grief must function. Within this rigid social structure, detachment becomes both expected and evaluated, positioning those who maintain relationships with the deceased as failing to properly adapt or move on.

The act of mourning has become ritualized in culture, as Goffman (1967) best demonstrates in his discussion of ritual order, where social interaction is governed by ritualized practices. Rituals function as mechanisms through which society maintains stability in the face of disruption. In the case of death, interaction is destabilized, and

social rituals restore stability. Death creates role ambiguity, emotional unpredictability, and interactional uncertainty, where rituals are seen as reestablishing normalcy and coherence in the face of disruption.

Goffman (1967) explains how closure is enforced in society, not merely encouraged, through rituals and the fear of stigma associated with failing to perform this social script. This is why the failure to say goodbye to a loved one may feel "wrong" to others; it goes against what is traditionally prescribed. Durkheim (1912) argues that collective rituals surrounding bereavement serve to reaffirm social order disrupted by loss. In this way, grief serves not only as an emotional function but as a social obligation. When mourners continue to speak to the dead, refer to them in the present tense, and are seen to "reject" moving on, they violate these ritual expectations. Through Goffman's dramaturgical model, a mourner in this state may engage in impression management, by which they maintain face with others by publicly performing these rituals, while privately sustaining those bonds with deceased loved ones. Grief scholars have identified a tension between this public form of mourning and the private grief expressed behind closed doors and away from those who may find continued attachment uncomfortable or unhealthy. Klass, Nickman, and Silverman (1996:151) also observed this impression management, writing: "Many mourners reported learning to keep their ongoing relationship private because of anticipated disapproval from others."

Turner and Edgely (1976) further explored the dramaturgical expression of grief through the front-stage performance a mourner is expected to fulfill during Western funeral rituals. As they note, "mourners are expected to display appropriate affect, timing,

and demeanor, signaling both loss and eventual return to normal social life" (1976:69). In this framework, grieving is governed by rules and order, and deviation from them is seen as socially deviant. Those who stray from this prescribed order risk social discomfort or marginalization (Turner and Edgely 1976). This illuminates how mourners who fall outside of these prescribed roles and continue relationships with the deceased are not failing to grieve but occupying a socially unrecognized role that falls between sanctioned roles and expected ritualized outcomes.

Continuing Bonds

These historical requirements for what was considered healthy grieving are refuted and rejected by more recent grief literature, particularly the work of Klass, Nickman, and Silverman (1996), who introduced the concept of continuing bonds. This framework proposes that bereavement does not require a severing of emotional ties to the deceased but instead involves the transformation of the relationship into a new form. Rather than encouraging detachment and emotional withdrawal from the pre-bereavement relationship, continuing bonds frames continued attachment as an adaptive response to loss and a healthy form of mourning. These bonds may be preserved through memory, ritual, internal dialogue, or a sustained sense of presence, enabling the mourner to renegotiate the relationship with the deceased in ways that uphold meaning and continuity.

This reframes what was once considered failure or avoidance into a form of mourning that requires integration rather than refutation of the relationship. "Continuing bonds with

the deceased are not necessarily signs of pathology but may represent ongoing connections that are integrated into the mourner's life" (Klass, Nickman, and Silverman 1996:19). Rather than socially scripted rituals as Goffman (1967) described, it posits that these bonds are maintained through active and ongoing personal rituals integrated into daily life. Although this framework does not hypothesize interpreted direct post-death communication, it highlights how the deceased remains central to the bereaved's life in decision-making, self-understanding, and moral reasoning (Klass, Nickman, and Silverman 1996). Those who remain connected to their loved ones do so through their own agency and choice, in a process that appears highly interactional — even if it is not theorized as such.

A related perspective comes from cognitive neuroscience suggests that close relationships are built through repeated routines and expectations, and that the brain may continue to anticipate a loved one's presence after death (O'Connor 2022). It asserts that the grieving brain can "fill in" familiar experiences through patterns that were once part of everyday life pre-bereavement. This perspective complements continuing bonds by explaining one mechanism through which a mourner might transform their relationship with their deceased loved one through learned patterns of behavior. They may anticipate these patterns to continue, even after loss, and use this as confirmation of continued connection.

It's important to note that continuing bonds is not a prescriptive model for how one "should" grieve; rather, it is an empirically grounded framework derived from quantitative and qualitative observations of bereaved individuals across diverse contexts.

Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) emphasize that ongoing bonds with the deceased emerge repeatedly in lived experience, regardless of cultural expectations surrounding closure or detachment. Their work functions descriptively, identifying patterned ways in which mourners maintain connection and meaning following loss. By grounding the desire for continuity in a common and meaningful response to bereavement, continuing bonds serves as a key theoretical framework for this study, emphasizing continued connection after death.

Loss as Disruption of Identity & Meaning

Loss does not simply induce emotional distress but also destabilizes the relational and symbolic structures through which identity is sustained. It disrupts the meanings, routines, and social roles that organize everyday life, as documented in micro-sociological studies of bereavement (Maciejewski et al., 2021). As Maciejewski et al. (2021) argue, the death of a loved one produces a rupture in the web of meanings that structure experience, requiring survivors to actively reorganize their understanding of self and world. The process of meaning-making is deeply tied to identity. Lofland (1985) describes grief as a reflection of intimacy, emphasizing that loss fundamentally alters how individuals understand who they are in relation to others. When a tragic loss disrupts this sense of self, one must engage in ongoing identity work to reconstruct it.

Again, continuing bonds provides critical insight into this reconstruction process. As they note, “resolution of grief does not necessarily entail relinquishing ties to the deceased but rather finding a new way to relate to them” (Klass, Nickman, and Silverman

1996:18). This ongoing attachment offers a sense of continuity following loss, providing stability and coherence while identity is renegotiated through constructing the new reality without their loved one physically present in their lives. Loss forces a reexamination of who one is, as their pre-bereavement identity was co-constructed with a loved one who is no longer physically present.

Further empirical research supports the view that grief involves reconstructing meaning after loss. Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies (2002) emphasize that mourning is a process where individuals adapt their identity and worldview to incorporate the loss, arguing that "bereavement can be understood as a process of meaning reconstruction, in which the survivor struggles to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss" (Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies 2002:137). In this view, loss disrupts not only emotional equilibrium, but also the assumptions by which the individual understands themselves. The authors emphasize that "the reconstruction of meaning after loss often involves a redefinition of identity, as individuals struggle to integrate the implications of loss into their self-narratives" (Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies 2002:139). Meaning-making is not a finite task, but a continued effort to incorporate this loss into a new sense of self and reality, rather than to move beyond it and say goodbye. The very act of mourning is one of seeking meaning in loss. "Mourning is the process by which bereaved people seek and find ways to turn the light on in the world again (Shear 2012:131)." Through this, the search for meaning in loss is both internal and interactional.

The nature of the relationship between the bereaved and deceased can have a marked effect on the intensity of one's grief and identity disruption following loss. Lofland (1985) identifies four social components that influence grief after a significant loss, illustrating the variation in identity disruption:

1. Level of Significance of the Deceased: The degree of attachment, roles, emotional support, shared networks, validation, and future planning affects grief intensity.
2. Definition of the Death Situation: The social meaning ascribed to death (e.g., natural, tragic, heroic, shameful) shapes how the bereaved are expected to feel and act. Sudden or stigmatized deaths can intensify grief or isolate mourners.
3. Character of the Bereaved Self: The mourner's social identity and role (e.g., mother, spouse, elder) influences both how grief is experienced and what expressions are culturally acceptable.
4. Interactional Setting: The broader social environment, such as support networks, rituals, and expectations, mediates how other factors are processed. Societies with robust mourning rituals, for instance, may offer more structured pathways for integrating loss.

These factors suggest that loss and the disruption that follows are not limited to emotional pain but extend to the destabilization of roles, identities, and relational factors that were once pillars in the structure of daily life. Mourners who navigate these structures may find that they no longer fit neatly into prescribed categories but must instead forge new ways to seek continuity and make meaning of their tragedy.

Supernatural Experiences

Supernatural Belief

While the terms “paranormal” and “supernatural” are often used interchangeably in popular culture, I make the specific analytic distinction between them and choose to use the term supernatural with reasoned intent. In research on this subject, the term “paranormal” is typically used to describe a wide range of metaphysical phenomena, including extrasensory perception, extraterrestrials, cryptids, and other experiences framed as potentially measurable and tangible. Sociological studies of haunting and post-death presence have distinguished “supernatural” experiences as those involving ghosts, spirits, and deceased persons (Waskul and Eaton 2018). Accordingly, this study uses the term supernatural intentionally to reflect participants’ reports of ongoing interaction with the spirits of deceased loved ones. This study is not concerned with the ontological truth of such experiences, but with a sociological examination of the meaning-making, interpretation, and construction of reality that occur among individuals who report these encounters.

The belief in the supernatural is not a fringe belief; a significant portion of the population holds the view that an afterlife exists and that the deceased can appear to or communicate with the living. Kalish and Reynolds (1973) found that nearly half of bereaved individuals (44%) reported post-death contact experiences, including feeling the presence of the deceased, hearing their voice, or encountering them in dreams. Bader, Baker, and Mencken (2017:43) illustrate this exceptionally well with data that conclude:

"Approximately one-quarter of Americans agree or strongly agree that the living and the dead can communicate with one another." Although widespread, supernatural beliefs are not uniformly accepted in public discourse. This leads some who have experienced this phenomenon to keep their encounters private to avoid social sanctions or stigma.

The Supernatural as Social

Prior micro-sociological research posits that supernatural experiences are not psychological anomalies, but social phenomena shaped by interpretation, narration, and interaction. In *Ghostly Encounters* (2016), Waskul and Waskul define the parameters through which such experiences become socially recognizable, writing that "what makes an experience 'ghostly' is not the event itself but how it is interpreted and defined as such" (Waskul and Waskul 2016:7). From this perspective, a haunting is explained through a process of interpretation by the individual experiencing it through response and recognition. Stated differently, post-death contact is not always immediately recognized as supernatural; instead, it is framed through interaction with others who help assign meaning to the experience. A shadow, a whispered voice, or a dream of a deceased loved one can be understood as a genuine supernatural occurrence in one context but dismissed as imagination in another. These encounters do not become meaningful in isolation; they are analyzed and revisited over time. As Waskul and Waskul (2016:53) explain, "ghostly encounters are sustained through narrative work, as individuals continually revisit, reinterpret, and recount their experiences." Eaton (2021) similarly emphasizes that sensing spirits is a learned and socially patterned process, in which individuals come to recognize certain sensations or moments as meaningful through shared frameworks and

interactional feedback. Hufford (1982) asserts that belief need not be a prerequisite for these experiences either, as humans naturally seek frameworks to explain the unexplainable when faced with its existence. “Individuals often struggle to interpret extraordinary experiences until they encounter social frameworks that make them intelligible.” (Hufford 1982:21) Through this deeply narrative process, supernatural experiences are affirmed as socially meaningful.

For those who experience post-death contact, the deceased are defined as a socially present other, capable of observation, comfort, and response. Waskul and Waskul (2016:9) describe ghosts as “relational presences” that invite engagement rather than just detached observation. This illustrates that supernatural encounters are best understood as socially organized, relational experiences that mirror the interactional processes through which meaning and connection are ordinarily maintained among the living.

Castro et al. (2014) demonstrate that potential supernatural experiences are socially patterned, as one must construct meaning after the fact when considering an event that has occurred to them. Cultural and social frameworks assist in this meaning-making, providing a scaffolding for understanding and interpretation. “Experiences are often validated, challenged, or reinforced through interaction with others, highlighting their social rather than purely psychological character” (Castro et al. 2014:7). Similarly, Bader, Baker and Mencken (2017:115) reinforce that social interaction with others further strengthens meaning given to supernatural experiences, writing, “experiences interpreted as contact with the dead are often discussed within trusted social circles, where they are given meaning and legitimacy.” Rather than being random or irrational, these beliefs are

shaped by religion, community, and interpersonal trust, which determine whether experiences are affirmed or dismissed. These encounters are not merely interpreted as meaningful but are sustained through ongoing engagement, positioning the deceased as an active social presence rather than a passive memory.

Post-death Contact & Communication

I define post-death contact as communication and interaction with the dead through various means that the living interprets as direct contact. It is most often experienced as intentional communication rather than a random occurrence, with the deceased returning with a perceived message.

This study focuses on unsolicited post-death contact, namely, communication that one has not sought out directly. This is common among those who experience the supernatural, though some may seek out experts—such as mediums—to reach a loved one. Kalish and Reynolds (1973:215) explain that this is the most frequently reported type of contact: “These experiences were typically described as happening to the individual rather than being sought or willed.” While some may dismiss these experiences as fantasy or wish fulfillment, Parkes (1971) notes that such encounters are often involuntary and initially resisted by those who experience the supernatural. Romanoff (1998) situates unsolicited post-death experiences within broader grief processes, noting that they frequently violate expected mourning scripts precisely *because* they are not chosen or controlled. Although contact initiation is unsolicited, participants frequently interpret these encounters as intentional acts by the deceased.

While the traditional conception of an instance of post-death supernatural contact typically involves an apparition or poltergeist, studies have demonstrated that encounters may occur through multiple avenues, including symbolic signs, environmental disturbances, and vivid dream visitations. Kalish and Reynolds (1973:213) provide one of the earliest descriptions of these forms of contact: "The experiences … included hearing the voice of the deceased, seeing [them] in dreams or visions, feeling [their] presence, and smelling familiar odors associated with [them]." Parkes (1971) found that the most common reported form of contact was not a visual appearance of an apparition, but rather an embodied sense that someone was present with them; other experiences, such as dreams or hearing the deceased's voice, were common as well. Regardless of the form of communication, the critical factor was the interpretation of the individual who received the alleged message.

Dream visitations represent one of the most frequently reported and socially meaningful forms of post-death contact in bereavement research. Parkes (1971:104) observed that "dreams of the dead were often described as unusually vivid and emotionally intense, differing markedly from ordinary dreams." These dreams are not typically sought or intentionally induced; rather, they arise spontaneously and are often described as unexpected. Recognition of a dream as post-death contact often occurs retrospectively, through interpretation and contextual linking rather than immediate certainty. As Waskul and Waskul (2016:14) succinctly observe, "a dream is just a dream until something else happens," which captures how meaning is ascribed through subsequent reflection and interpretation. Importantly, dream visitations are

overwhelmingly described as comforting rather than distressing, suggesting that these encounters function as extensions of relational presence rather than manifestations of unresolved distress (Parkes 1971). Prior research positions dream visitations as a normalized form of post-death contact, experienced as interaction with the deceased rather than as just a dream.

Sensory dimensions of post-death contact have been widely documented in bereavement research. Kalish and Reynolds (1973) identified four primary forms of sensory post-death experiences:

1. Auditory Contact: hearing the deceased's voice, whispering, or name being called.
2. Visual Contact: seeing the deceased in dreams or as an apparition.
3. Tactile Contact: feeling a touch, a presence, or an unexplained physical sensation.
4. Olfactory Contact: smelling a familiar scent, such as perfume, cologne, or a specific environmental odor associated with the deceased.

These sensory experiences, while sometimes startling, are overwhelmingly described as comforting rather than distressing. Across studies, such encounters are more often associated with comfort, reassurance, and a sense of continued connection than with fear. Parkes (1971:105) observed that experiences of presence and dream visitation were "usually comforting and rarely frightening," a finding echoed in subsequent bereavement

research. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) note that encounters with the deceased often function as sources of reassurance, helping mourners integrate loss without relinquishing relational ties. Rather than disrupting the grieving process, post-death contact appears to offer emotional grounding, allowing individuals to navigate loss while preserving a sense of continuity and relational presence.

Liminality

Liminality refers to a state of being "betwixt and between" socially recognized categories, a concept first articulated by van Gennep (1960) and further developed by Turner (1969). Turner (1969) describes liminality as a transitional phase in which individuals are no longer what they once were but have not yet become what they are expected to be. Liminality has traditionally been understood as temporary, marking passage from one stable status to another, such as from living to dead, single to married, or child to adult. In the context of death, mourners often occupy a liminal position as they move from relational roles tied to the deceased toward socially sanctioned identities such as widow, widower, or bereaved survivor. Grief itself, then, has long been conceptualized as a liminal process: a period of disruption, ambiguity, and transition in which meaning, identity, and social positioning are unsettled.

Research on haunting and post-death presence extends the concept of liminality beyond human actors to the dead themselves. Waskul and Waskul (2016) describe ghosts as inherently liminal beings: neither fully present nor fully absent, neither alive nor gone. As they note, ghosts exist in the cracks of social reality, occupying thresholds between

worlds. This liminal status allows ghosts to remain socially present. When combined with grief, this produces a layered liminality: the bereaved inhabit an in-between state of identity and role, while the deceased occupy an in-between state of presence and absence.

This study builds on these insights by suggesting that liminality in post-death relationships is not always a brief transitional phase. Under certain interactional conditions, particularly when communication, meaning-making, and relational roles are sustained, liminality may become stable rather than resolved. Rather than moving cleanly from one identity to another, individuals may remain indefinitely situated between roles, maintaining ongoing interaction across the boundary of death.

Methods & Data

This study was approved by the Minnesota State University, Mankato Institutional Review Board on June 18, 2025. Recruitment and data collection followed immediately after approval and occurred between June 19 and September 1, 2025. Participants of this study were adults who self-reported having experienced unsolicited post-death communication from a deceased loved one. For the purposes of this study, post-death contact was broadly defined to include experiences such as visual apparitions or poltergeist activity, auditory or olfactory manifestations, physical sensations, dreams interpreted as contact, or symbolic signs perceived as communication from the deceased. Experiences could include one or more of these sensory modalities.

Participants were excluded from eligibility if their reported experience occurred during a paranormal investigation, séance, cold reading, Ouija board session, or other deliberate method to seek contact with the deceased. This was employed to focus the analysis on spontaneous encounters and to avoid interpretive frameworks shaped by expectations, ritualized belief practices, or investigator or medium-led meaning construction. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age at the time of study participation.

Sampling relied on voluntary, self-selected recruitment, typical of research on stigmatized, emotionally sensitive, or privately held experiences. Recruitment materials were distributed via digital platforms, including social media and online communities relevant to grief, loss, or supernatural experiences. This included Meta platforms (Facebook & Instagram) and Reddit. Physical recruitment cards were also designed and handed out to potential respondents.

Data were collected using two complementary qualitative methods: in-depth, semi-structured interviews and an anonymous open-ended survey. This approach enabled both detailed narrative accounts and broader supporting data on post-death communication experiences.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary source of qualitative data. All interviews were conducted remotely using teleconferencing technology, which allowed participants to be diverse in their physical location. Most participants were located throughout the U.S., with two residing in England, one in Amsterdam, and one located in

Quebec. The researcher contacted participants who opted in to be interviewed to schedule an interview date and time. Interviews ranged from approximately 45 to 90 minutes in length.

A total of 22 participants completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and 47 participants completed an anonymous, open-ended survey. All interview participants completed a separate demographic and informed consent survey prior to participation. Survey respondents participated anonymously and affirmed informed consent before taking the survey.

FIGURE 1
MARITAL STATUS

FIGURE 2
AGE DISTRIBUTION

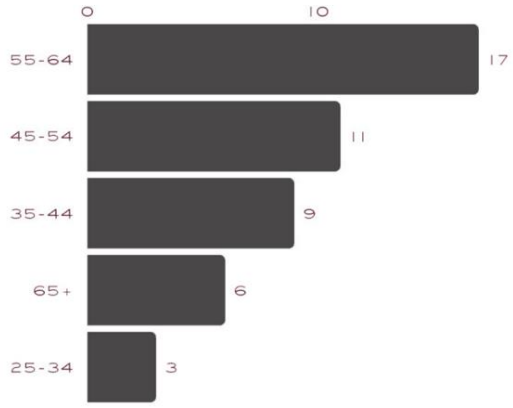


FIGURE 3
GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

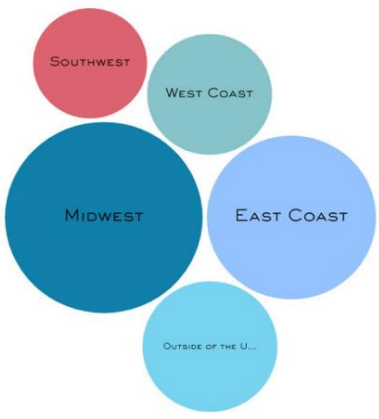
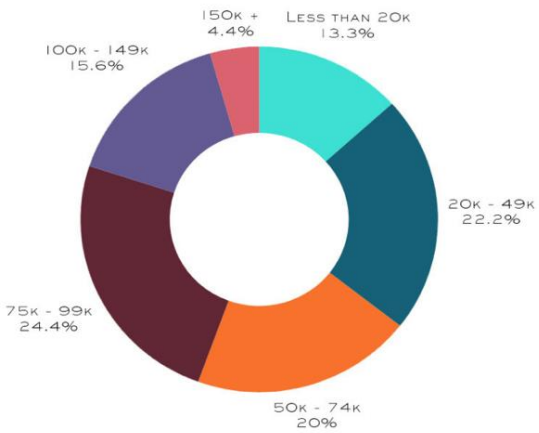


FIGURE 4
ANNUAL INCOME



Demographic information collected included age, gender identity, ethnicity, general geographic region within the United States, marital status, and yearly household income [see figures 1-4]. Participants were also asked three questions related to religious background and identity: the religious denomination in which they were raised, their current religious or spiritual identification, and their self-reported level of religious commitment [see figures 5-7].

Participants were recruited through a digital recruitment strategy designed to maximize accessibility while protecting participant privacy. All recruitment materials directed potential participants to a dedicated, secure WordPress website created

FIGURE 5

SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS

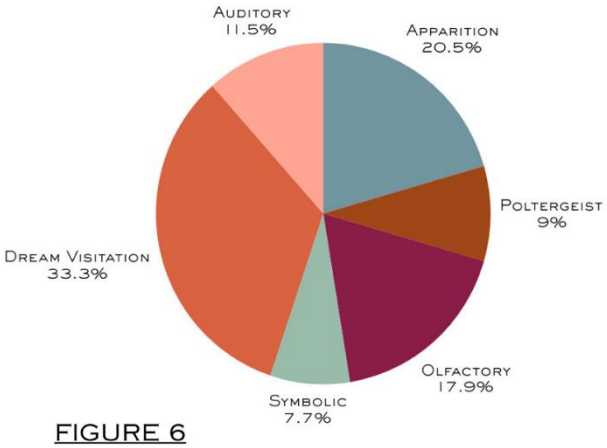


FIGURE 6

LEVEL OF RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT

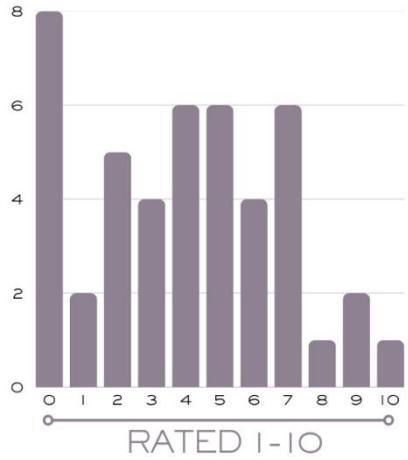
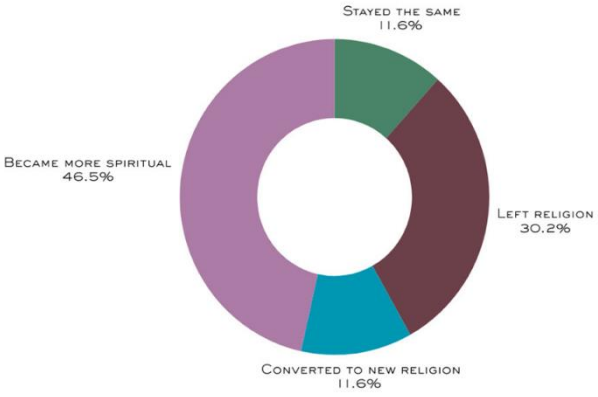


FIGURE 7

POST-CONTACT RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION SHIFT



for the study. This website served as a centralized point of entry for participation. Through this platform, individuals could review study information, complete informed consent materials, and indicate their preferred mode of participation. Three Qualtrics surveys were embedded on the site: an anonymous, open-ended survey, a form for those interested in opting in to be interviewed, and a hidden survey for interview participants to complete prior to participation. This facilitated information collection without requiring self-disclosure in public spaces.

This recruitment structure allowed individuals to engage with the study privately and at their own pace, which was an important consideration given the sensitive nature of post-death communication experiences, especially following the loss of a close loved one. This design preserved participants' autonomy and protected all identifying information. All information collected through the website was stored securely and was only accessible to the researcher.

Interviews were recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Names of the participants' loved ones were also changed. These interviews were then stored on a password-protected digital device.

The 18-question interview guide was designed to be flexible and exploratory, allowing participants to tell their stories in as much or as little detail as they felt comfortable. Questions focused on participants' relationship with the deceased prior to

death, their experiences of loss and grief, the nature of their supernatural post-death contact experience, perceived changes in identity and continuity, and emotional coping. Participants were encouraged to guide the conversation toward aspects of their experiences they found most meaningful. This approach allowed for rich data collection and the emergence of unanticipated themes.

In addition to the interviews, an anonymous open-ended survey was administered using Qualtrics. The survey was made available to all individuals who responded to recruitment materials and provided a means of participation for those who preferred not to participate in an interview. Questions in the survey paralleled many of those in the semi-structured interview but were designed to elicit concise narrative responses without follow-up.

Respondents were not asked to provide any identifying information and could complete the instrument at their own pace; many provided lengthy responses to the prompts. These data were meant to serve a supplementary role in analysis, providing additional accounts that helped contextualize and reinforce patterns identified in interview data. While survey responses were generally less detailed than the interviews, they provided valuable insight into the range of post-death communication experiences and widened the scope of the sample.

Due to the nature of exploring topics related to death and grief, participants were advised that they could pause or discontinue participation at any time, decline to answer specific questions, or request breaks throughout the interviews. These interviews were

very emotionally charged and elicited significant responses from participants. To mitigate this and support participants, all were provided with a handout of grief-related support resources, including hotlines, counseling services, and further reading suggestions. This was made available digitally prior to participation and could be easily downloaded from the study's WordPress website.

Data analysis began with an inductive, grounded-theory-informed (Charmaz 2014) approach alongside data collection. This enabled analysis of early data to reflexively adjust interview flow and emerging lines of inquiry in subsequent interviews. This process allowed patterns to develop organically over time, rather than being imposed in advance.

All interview transcripts and survey responses were imported into the Atlas.ti platform for qualitative analysis. Coding began with line-by-line coding to remain closely attuned to participants' interpretation of their experiences. These initial codes were then compared across the data to be grouped into thematic clusters. Analytic memo writing was employed throughout the process to document observations, emerging patterns, and potential conceptual connections.

Core themes emerged from comparisons of survey and interview data, ultimately supporting the development of a sensitizing concept that alleged the underlying interactional and interpretive processes present across the collected accounts of supernatural experiences and loss. Finalized themes and concepts were repeatedly compared against original line and thematic coding to ensure coherence and consistency,

serving as an internal validity check and ensuring the claims remained grounded in participants' narratives. I also repeatedly listened to interview audio recordings while selecting excerpts from the data for illustrative purposes, which allowed for further attention to emphasis, tone, and emotional expression as part of the narratives presented.

This rigorous analysis led to the development of the concept of interactional role liminality, identifying patterns and themes that supported a micro-social, interactive, and interpretive process that suspended pre- and post-bereavement roles in a liminal yet stable state. In the next section, I will outline these patterns as they appeared in the data and how they connect to interactional role liminality as a sensitizing concept.

Neither Here, Nor Gone

Interactional Role Liminality

Patterns began to emerge with unexpected clarity in the analysis of interview transcripts and survey responses. Despite differences in age, background, nature of visitation, and beliefs, participants reported many of the same experiences, interpretations of meaning, and used similar language to describe their supernatural encounters with loved ones.

First, participants overwhelmingly rejected the idea of saying goodbye. Very few desired that sort of closure and, instead, described it as impossible. Secondly, post-death encounters were interpreted by participants as having a purpose; typically, to convey a specific message. These supernatural experiences were understood as intentional and meaningful communication. Third, participants consistently reported that their

experiences were emotionally soothing in the face of crippling grief. While the devastation did not evaporate, it shifted into something manageable. Sharp sorrow became bearable; crushing grief became easier, and the fear of death softened or was eliminated by these reassurances from the deceased.

Interview and survey data suggested this could be a sequence: beginning with a strong bond and resistance to farewell, followed by interpretation of direct post-death contact, and resulting in a sense of emotional peace and a stable liminal identity.

As the pattern emerged, another finding emerged: many participants rejected the role of the "bereaved," and instead occupied a space between roles. They continued to follow social scripts that defined their relationship with the deceased, such as wife, partner, child, or friend—roles that death should have ended—while also navigating expectations others placed on them as mourners.

From this observation, the sensitizing concept I propose, interactional role liminality, emerged. Interactional role liminality would suggest that many bereaved individuals inhabit a stable, liminal identity between the role assigned to them by having experienced loss and the role they maintain through interaction with the deceased. In this liminal space, symbolic interaction becomes the mechanism that allows one to heal, identity to be affirmed, and for a relationship to persist beyond the living world.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate how refusing goodbye, interpreting specific messages, and the experience of emotional equilibrium that results collectively support the logic of interactional role liminality. By tracing these patterns through the

data collected, I illustrate how participants assign meaning, sustain identity, and stay connected to their lost loved ones in a way that blurs the boundary between life and death.

Mike was Jackie's soulmate.

She never expected to be holding his hand in hospice. Never expected to be learning how to live without him. She thought they would spend their lives together, never apart. Now she sits in her living room, staring at the bed they moved to the ground floor when Mike began to lose mobility. She doesn't have it in her to move it back upstairs, so she sleeps there instead.

Living alone lets the silence in. Jackie keeps as busy as she can to block it out.

About two months after Mike passed away, strange things begin to happen. The soap dispenser in the upstairs bathroom starts pumping soap into the sink on its own. At first, she chalks it up to a particularly warm spring. But it keeps happening, even after she replaces the dispenser.

She speaks aloud to Mike.

"You're the one who always bought the soap and you're wasting it."

A few days later, it happens again. Jackie can't help but imagine Mike laughing. He had a big laugh, the kind that filled every room. For a moment, Jackie laughs with him. It's the first time she's smiled since the funeral.

After that, the signs continue. A song on the radio. A flock of birds lifting suddenly into the air. A car breaking down at just the right moment. Numbers lining up on a receipt. Jackie feels Mike's presence wherever she goes.

The house is still quiet.

But the silence is no longer empty.

(Not) Saying Goodbye

Role Preservation and Social Negotiation

In traditional models of mourning, the act of saying goodbye is viewed as a necessary stage of healthy grieving as a ritualized declaration of emotional detachment. In these models of closure, one is expected to be suffering from pathological or prolonged grief if they cling to prior relationships and roles. It assumes that not saying goodbye is to engage in emotional avoidance, rather than a form of healthy, emotional continuity. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, saying goodbye is more than a private emotional gesture; it is adherence to a social script. Within this script, the mourner is expected to transition from one role to another; from wife to widow or daughter to orphan, thus affirming that their social life continues among the living. Within the framework of interactional role liminality, this moment represents a tension between the assigned social identity (such as widow) and the prior-held, comfortable roles held before loss (such as wife). Many participants in this study refused to cross this boundary, professing they were still in relationships with their loved ones, even after death.

For these individuals, farewell was not a goal, but something to deny. As Jackie explained, “I have no intention of ever saying goodbye.” An anonymous participant echoed this, saying: “I have not said goodbye and have no intention of doing so. He’s still with me, we are still married, he’s just on another plane of existence right now.” This refusal of closure was not an indication of denial or delusion, but conviction. An act of resistance that preserves the relationship in their daily lives. As Goffman (1959) observed, social life unfolds through rituals and performances designed to construct and affirm shared definitions of reality. Durkheim (1912) also described these collective rituals as a reaffirmation of moral order. In this script, saying goodbye serves as a ritual: one that confirms the deceased’s departure from social life, and the mourner’s return to it. By defying that script through post-death communication, mourners enter a liminal space in which they are betwixt and between two identities.

The idea of letting go, for many participants, would mean severing a relationship that structured their sense of self. From the perspective of interactional role liminality, they resist crossing the symbolic boundary between past and present, between roles that continue to feel active and the socially assigned roles awaiting them post-bereavement. As Minerva explained, skeptics of her experience with olfactory contact with her mother often dismissed it as avoidance, claiming she was “just trying to find meaning— just looking for a reason to not say goodbye, yet.” But for Minerva, making meaning out of the encounter was the very point. The scent of almond extract connected her to her mother, and she interpreted it as a message of enduring love. The relationship had not ended; it transformed. Kitty redefined farewell itself, saying: “Once I figured out that it

wasn't the end, it was more like, 'see you later; goodbye for now.'" Like others in this study, she found familiarity in the encounter: the gestures, the emotional rhythms, and the conversations that sustained their identities as daughter, wife, or friend. Within this refusal, they found continuity where others expected closure.

Continuing bonds theorists Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) would describe this defiance as a transformation, rather than a termination of a relationship. In interactional role liminality, refusing goodbye becomes a mechanism for role preservation. It's a way for mourners to sustain their identity across the boundary of bereavement. One participant, Jackie, spoke of this conviction: "Nobody, fortunately, has suggested that I should say goodbye or move on. It would not be in their best interest if they did." Her humor underscores a serious point: for Jackie, refusing to say goodbye affirms both love and self. The ongoing acknowledgement of her husband's presence and communication allows her to remain, simultaneously, wife *and* widow, grounded in a relationship that death could not dissolve. Willem offered a quieter version of the same resistance: "I don't call myself a widower unless I have to fill out a form. It's just a word that doesn't fit." His daily rituals of pouring two cups of coffee and speaking to Irma each morning allow him to remain her husband, performing marriage in her absence.

Keeping this continuity can mean navigating boundaries of socially accepted scripts. Participants described an awareness that their contact with the dead risked being misunderstood by those around them. In a culture that values closure, attachments such as theirs invite suspicion, especially among skeptics of the supernatural. Goffman (1963) would describe this as management of a "spoiled identity," a social status that becomes

vulnerable when behavior violates social expectations. This is similar to the concept of disenfranchised grief, in which the relationship between the bereaved and deceased may not be socially supported (Corr 1999). In both cases, individuals are understood as "doing" grief incorrectly because of their community's collective perception of mourning. However, unlike classic cases of disenfranchised grief, where the relationship itself is deemed illegitimate, participants in this study faced scrutiny not for *who* they were grieving, but for *how* that relationship continued. Continuing to speak to the dead or refer to them in the present tense is considered outside the normal scripts of what is considered healthy grieving and thus invites criticism. Celine explained, "People don't really know what to say when you tell them you still talk to him every day. They just nod politely, like you're fragile." Willem, aware of how his connection with his deceased wife might appear, keeps his experiences private: "I keep most of this to myself. You start telling people you still make coffee for two, and they start looking at you sideways." Olivia likewise withheld her dream visitation, knowing others might dismiss it as "just grief talking." Together, these accounts reveal that impression management is required to sustain these continued relationships in a culture that demands farewell.

To avoid this stigma, many participants learned to perform closure in public, but preserve their relational continuity in private. This dual performance reflects the very essence of role liminality. On the front stage, they perform the expected rituals of mourning: funeral attendance, polite acknowledgement of loss, and gratitude for well-wishers. Backstage, however, they sustain dialogue, seek advice and continue to interpret signs and messages from their lost loved ones. "People look at me crazy a lot of the time

when I talk about my husband in the present tense," Theresa confessed. "Some people think it's romantic and beautiful and sweet, and other people— they're like, she's a big weirdo." These negotiations reveal that mourning is an interactional process managed through performance and impression management. Within interactional role liminality, this delicate balancing act gives mourners the ability to remain socially credible, while privately maintaining the bond that affirms their sense of self.

Refusing to say goodbye, for these participants, was not just an act of denial but a way of keeping the deceased present in their daily social life. One anonymous woman wrote, "Staying in contact has saved me. I know he still exists and that we will be together again." Another noted that even years later, "He's right here with me… we are both crazy in love." These narratives reveal how continuing bonds are not just emotional, but also interactional, as they maintain social scripts that preserve their pre-bereavement roles in the present tense.

Olivia drifts in and out of sleep.

The hospital room is dim, the air heavy. Machines hum softly, their rhythms uneven. Her body feels distant from her, heavy and unreliable. She knows she has a fever, knows she is sick, but time has started to blur. Nurses come and go. Voices float in and out of focus.

At some point, she opens her eyes and sees her father standing near the foot of the bed.

He is talking to the doctor.

Not glowing. Not translucent. Just standing there the way he always did, calm and steady, asking questions in the measured voice Olivia remembers from childhood. Is she going to be okay? The doctor answers him seriously, as if this conversation is entirely ordinary.

Her father turns toward her then. He meets her eyes.

"You're going to be okay," he says.

There is no drama in it. No warning. Just certainty.

When Olivia wakes, tears are already running down her face. Her chest aches. Not with fear, but with something softer, heavier. She knows her father is dead. She knows he is not supposed to be there. But the moment does not unravel the way dreams usually do. It lingers. It feels deliberate.

She lies still, replaying it, holding onto the sense that he came to check on her. That he saw her in that room and stayed long enough to make sure she would be all right.

For the first time since he died, the space between sleep and waking does not feel empty.

Whispers in the Silence

Symbolic Interaction Across the Boundary of Death

In the quiet following loss, meaning begins to rearrange itself. For many participants, the first instance of post-death contact came swiftly—sometimes before they had even found words to describe their grief. "Within that first week that he passed, he

came to me in a dream," Emma recalled. This contact can manifest in a multitude of ways: dream visitations, a song on the radio, the sudden appearance of a bird or a flicker of a lamp. These moments weren't received as mere coincidences, but social gestures that reestablished conversation. "It was a visitation dream," Olivia recalled. "She was communicating with me, and there were no words spoken, just letting me know everything was okay." For Carrie, the moment was sensory and domestic: "The first spring after she died, I came home from work, opened the door, and the whole house smelled like lilacs." In the stillness of absence, participants found meaning in significant things to their loved ones and answers to their questions in signs and symbols around them. Within the framework of interactional role liminality, these encounters represent interactions that persist across the boundary of death. Even when meaning is no longer exchanged through speech or touch, they are instead carried by symbols, sensations, and interpretation.

These messages were not simply noticed, but interpreted through the same social and symbolic processes that govern interaction with the living. As Mead (1934) articulates, selves emerges from a "conversation of gestures," and even in death, that conversation may continue. Rowan described how she invited confirmation out loud during her encounter. "I said, 'If you're still around, just let me know somehow,' and right then the car filled with this smell: his aftershave." Patrick interpreted a storm-slammed window as playfulness: "I said, 'alright, alright, I'm closing it, you win.'" Theresa experienced reassurance through electricity itself: "The lamp next to me flickered. Once, then steady. I said, 'You're here, aren't you?' and I swear I could feel

him smiling." For each, the experience became a response, a moment of understanding that invited them back into the previously severed relationship. As Blumer (1969) observed, meaning is not inherent in things but created through interaction. These moments reveal that for the participants in this study, such interaction need not end with mortality.

For many participants, the act of noticing and interpreting became a ritual of renewed connection. Celine reflected: "It's the timing of it, the way words just come when I need them." Theresa explained, "When the lights flicker, I just say, 'Okay, I see you.'" Through these interpretive processes, meaning was constructed and the dead remained social actors in the living world, still there through their loved ones' recognition and their perceived response.

Margaret explained an instance of synchronicity that she interpreted as direct communication from her husband, Charles:

> I go walking a lot. I was at a pond, and I was alone there this particular day, and this blue heron, a great blue heron, flew in over me. At that time, I had just put next to his picture on my dresser an ibis [Charles] had picked up in Egypt on a trip—it needed to be repaired, a leg needed to be glued. So I put it there to remind me to do it. And I thought when I saw the heron, I thought, well, Jesus, this is him. Two, three weeks later, I was listening to a live poetry broadcast, and one of the poems was about a great blue heron. Then, about an hour and a half later, I opened an email from this website…and it was a poem called Hope and Love,

> about a great blue heron that slept in a barn. The whole thing was so clear—boom, boom; three references to a great blue heron in a row.

Margaret's experience reaffirms not only her ongoing contact in the form of symbols and signs, but also her interpretive process. A blue heron may mean nothing to the average person, but to Margaret it means *everything*. It means that her husband is not gone. Willem described a quieter but equally persistent form of conversation: "I make coffee for two, even though one goes cold. The day I stop, it'll feel like a second funeral."

Reassuring words of wisdom from loved ones broke through the barrier between life and death, offering comfort and advice. An anonymous respondent spoke of her grandmother appearing to her, whom she had never heard speak due to a stroke long before her death:

> …in this visitation, she could speak clearly and plainly. She told me that she loved me and that things were gonna be tough, but I was tougher than the things that were coming, and that to be as strong as I could, and never, ever, ever give up.

Making meaning surrounding death is socially patterned, woven into shared cultural understandings of the supernatural. Some participants sought out advice and reassurance from others who could help validate their experiences. Celine explained, "It helped to talk to others who had the same thing happen. It made me realize I'm not crazy." Sunflower described a collective sense of presence, noting that "sometimes I'll text her old friends when I feel her around, and they'll say, 'Me too.'" Through these

exchanges, reaffirmation helped strengthen these bonds and made supernatural occurrences a socially shared event.

Continuing bonds (Klass Nickman and Silverman 1996) suggest post-death relationships persist through transformed bonds. Within interactional role liminality, exchanges take shape in a way that reaffirms both self and relationship. Experiences of post-death contact continue relationships that do not end in death, but instead open communication with interpretation of messages from beyond. For many, these experiences offer proof of an afterlife, reassurance, and for some, validation that love endures beyond the veil of mortality.

Jackie described her husband's visits as affectionate reassurance, stating, "It's like he's reminding me: I still love you, I'm still here." For Olivia, a visitation dream conveyed the same message without words: "She didn't say anything, but I knew what she meant: it was peace." Mourners use these interpretive acts to reaffirm their identity in this new liminal role. While supernatural discourse suggests the dead already exist in liminal spaces, the mourner enters a new one that allows their loved one to continue to speak in the silence.

This liminal state between roles offers comfort and stability in the face of devastating loss. Through symbolic gestures and interpretive meaning-making, the mourner maintains a dialogue from beyond the grave. They find comfort in knowing their loved one persists, returns when needed, and that the relationship they relied on is not gone. When the deceased's presence is reaffirmed, the status of the new social role feels

less concrete, and the state betwixt these roles may offer emotional equilibrium. As Willem described from his porch at dusk, “Sometimes the wind will shift, gentle and deliberate, like someone smoothing the air. I’ll say, ‘You checking in?’ and [she] always answers.”

Willem wakes early on a weekend. He begins his day the way he always has. When he pours his coffee, he pours two cups. When he lights a cigarette, he imagines lighting another beside it. He speaks into the quiet kitchen; part ritual, part habit.

Everything in the house tells Willem that Irma isn’t there anymore. The second cup of coffee grows cold. Her chair stays empty. But Willem does not think of himself as a widower. After twenty-seven years of marriage, how could you simply let that go?

Sometimes there is only silence.

But sometimes, Irma speaks back.

They talk about their adult children and what advice they might need. They talk about the afterlife. They talk about the neighbors and their terrible landscaping. They speak nearly every day, and Willem learns to live in the in-between. He describes it like a television signal: Irma on one channel, himself on another. Sometimes, the airwaves line up just right.

Today, the channel is clear. Irma cannot drink the coffee or smoke the cigarette, but she is present all the same. She expresses her love for the man who stood beside her for twenty-seven years.

Eight years after her passing, Willem feels more connected to her than ever. What was once crippling grief has softened. Irma softens everything when he hears her voice.

Learning to Live in the In-Between:

Emotional Equilibrium through Continuing Bonds

Before the whispers, before the dreams and the songs on the radio, there was only silence.

Participants often described the early days of grief as an unraveling. The routines and reflections that had ones affirmed who they were dissolved along with losing the person they loved most. “I thought I was prepared for it, but you’re never prepared” Patrick recounted and went on to explain:

> The quiet after the funeral was its own kind of violence. I sat in the house and couldn’t figure out what to do with my hands. You spend years building habits around someone else and then they’re just-- gone. You keep reaching and there’s nothing to touch.

In these moments, selves fracture. Mead (1934) wrote that selves arise through interaction, through the conversation of gesture by which one becomes known to another.

When death interrupts that dialogue, the mourner loses not only a close companion, but the mirror through which they once saw themselves. Here, identity falters. As one participant explained, “You go numb, but it’s not peace. It’s like your brain is protecting you by turning everything down to static.” Laura felt this faltering early in her grief after her husband’s passing. “I didn’t want to see people. I didn’t want to answer questions. I just wanted him back.”

From the perspective of interactional role liminality, the first stage of mourning is an experience of *role dislocation*: a state in which the individual can no longer perform the social scripts that once defined them. Turner (1969) might call this the *threshold of liminality*: the place between what was and what will be, when the person is stripped of familiar form. In this state, grief is not just an emotion, but a social unmaking. Participants in this study described living half in memory and half in disbelief, unable to inhabit the roles that had once steadied and buoyed them. “It’s strange. You think the world will stop when someone like that dies, but it doesn’t,” Willem recounted while reflecting on the devastating grief that struck him after his wife’s death. He goes on to explain:

> The mail still comes. The coffee still brews. The cat still wants feeding. That’s the part that hurts the most: how ordinary everything stays when nothing is ordinary anymore.

Then, something happens. A song played at the right moment. A dream visitation brought a familiar voice. The air shifted in a room where there was no draft. These experiences

arrived like interruptions in the silence; a spark of recognition that their loved one's voice was not completely silenced and the conversation had not come to an abrupt end.

For many, the moment of initial post-death contact was as bewildering as it was comforting. "At first, they were scary as all-get-out" Kitty recalled about her first few visitations from her husband, which she interpreted as genuine contact. "I'm like, wait a minute, this is not supposed to be happening. And it wasn't until later that I realized there was nothing bad at all… after that, it actually became a comfort." These encounters were not hallucinations or interpreted as coincidences, but gestures, signs that dialogue continued across the divide.

At this stage, meaning begins to be built through interaction. As Blumer (1969) reminds us, meaning arises in the process of social exchange and is shaped by interpretation. Through these experiences, the bereaved re-engage in that exchange; perceiving, interpreting and responding to that stimulus. Mead's conversation of gestures extended beyond the physical world. Death did not end it; it simply altered its form. "We were just in bed talking, like we always used to… just girl talk all night," Rowan said, smiling as she recounted her experience of conversing with her deceased grandmother. "Before I fell asleep, she said, '*Thank you, baby… you're gonna be okay. I'm always here if you need me. Grandma's always here for you*" (emphasis in original).

These gestures resurrected the interactional processes that grief had interrupted. The mourner's identity, once destabilized, began to find footing in a new constructed reality. Where once there had only been absence, now there was response and an

emotional and symbolic adaptation to social life without their loved one. “He looked right at me and smiled… It gave me peace I didn’t know I could have,” one anonymous participant reflected, and added: “It was the first time I felt hope since he died.”

Within interactional role liminality, this moment of contact represents the reawakening of role performance. The mourner reenters the conversation of gestures as a presence, reconstructing selves through renewed connection. The silence begins to talk back.

Over time, the sharp edges of grief began to smooth. What had once been startling folded into their ordinary existence. Participants described no longer waiting for proof that their loved one was near; they simply knew. “My wife has communicated and interacted with me every day, on an ongoing basis, for the past 8+ years,” an anonymous respondent professed, illustrating how ordinary that constant contact became for him.

This movement marks the moment in which liminality ceases to feel like a suspension and becomes a way of existing comfortably. The mourner learns to live with presence and absence at once, finding rhythm where rupture once was. Through small, repeated acts of connection, the relationship is reaffirmed and the devastation is lessened. Hochschild (1979) would call this emotion work: the labor of bringing feeling into harmony with meaning. By performing familiar gestures and allowing them to carry new significance, participants transformed grief from chaos into coherence. “I heard him say, ‘Mornin’, Red!’ just exactly like he did when he was here,” one respondent said of her husband’s morning greeting. “It made me feel loved… like he was right there.”

These daily performances are not just habits—they are continued bonds (Klass Nickman and Silverman 1996) in actions. For the participants in this study, relationships do not end in death, they change form, and that transformation was tangible. Willem still made coffee for two, Celine greeted her husband each day before leaving for work, and Margaret kept the Ibis sculpture on her bedside table—a sentinel of hope and connection. In maintaining the dual roles of wife and widow, husband and widower, selves find equilibrium. Mourning did not vanish; it simply softened into comfortable coexistence. “I feel whole, complete, satisfied, enthusiastic, deeply in love, and very excited about our lives now and for what is to come,” Willem recounted. For one woman, the visits from her daughter had a marked effect on her grief: “It made me feel like I could breathe again.”

This emotional steadiness reveals the adaptive function of interactional role liminality. Through continued symbolic interaction, the moral and emotional order that was once shattered is reconstructed. The living and dead occupy the same universe again, bound by routine, connection, and affection. In this quiet balance, participants discovered that the in-between could feel like home. A space not of loss, but of belonging. “Staying in contact has saved me,” one anonymous woman wrote. She goes on to write, “We still have a partnership… I talk to him daily, ask him for guidance… I feel him near me.”

Grief never disappeared; it just changed form and became easier to carry. Participants spoke of their own sorrow not as a problem to be conquered, but as something to carry more gently. The pain remained, but its sharpness dulled. “I still miss him every single day,” one anonymous woman wrote, “but I can breathe again.” Rather

than extinguishing grief, post-death contact reoriented it, allowing love and loss to live side by side. This is the essence of interactional role liminality: the ability to inhabit both roles at once: the bereaved and the beloved, the living and the one still in conversation with the dead.

For many, this coexistence reshaped their understanding of death itself. “I’m no longer afraid,” Jackie admitted softly. “If my time comes, I welcome it. He’ll be there.” The continuing bond with her husband did not erase her grief but transformed his death from terror and devastation into a reunion, threaded with meaning rather than despair. Hochschild’s (1979) notion of emotion work again illuminates this process: participants managed sorrow by transforming its emotional logic. Where society expected detachment, they cultivated peace. This allowed grief to remain, but in a refined form of connection.

“I miss him terribly, but it’s not the same crushing pain,” Theresa explained. “It’s more like… he’s with me, so it’s bearable.” Theresa was one of many participants who explained the same shift, feeling emotionally soothed by the contact with their loved ones. “I feel like the grief isn’t gone. It’s something that I carry around with me,” Sunflower expressed about her close friend whose life was taken too young. “But I’ve learned to live with it. Feeling her near me made it easier.”

Willem expressed this transformation with characteristic simplicity. “It completely eliminated my grief,” he said and added, “Now, I consider myself the happiest, luckiest man in the world.” His words do not deny loss; they describe what happens when loss finds a place to rest. Within the framework of continuing bonds (Klass Nickman and

Silverman 1996) this represents the reorganization of relationship. In interactional role liminality, grief becomes livable through sustained interaction and identity find harmony in liminality. “I miss him every day… but I don’t feel as alone as I did,” Celine professed after telling the story of seeing her husband in a dream visitation after his death and further explained, “It’s not that the grief is gone; it’s just [long pause] softened.”

Through this coexistence, participants redefined what it means to live with death. Mourning no longer requires closure in the traditional sense. Happiness no longer demanded forgetting or moving on. Instead, they learned to dwell in a world where love persists in a liminal relationship that is beyond the physical, where death speaks softly rather than shouting. Turner (1969) described liminality as a temporary passage, but for these mourners, it became a state of being. A permanent threshold where meaning, identity, and affection could coexist. “Some people would say I’m imagining it… or that it’s just my grief talking,” mused Willem when asked about how others see his enduring connection with his wife, Irma. “I don’t care if I’m delusional. It helps me get through the day. It feels real, and that’s enough.” In learning to live in the in-between, they found rhythm instead of resolution; a way to hold grief without being held back by it, to live in conversation with the dead and recognize that their deep connection persists, even in death.

To Say Goodbye, but Stay Together:

Interactional Role Liminality as an Adaptive Process

Taken together, these findings suggest that participants were not just experiencing the supernatural, but also quietly reorganizing the terms on which grief, love, and relationships continued after death. The refusal to say goodbye signified a desire to keep the relationship intact, rather than relinquish it after loss. Their interpretations of specific messages from their loved ones illustrated that participants understood these exchanges as meaningful and reciprocal, rather than coincidental or passive memories. The emotional shift from devastation and role confusion to stability followed these interpretations of communication. This suggests that interaction itself had a hand in restoring emotional balance following bereavement.

I propose that these are not three unrelated outcomes, but three dimensions of the same interactional process. Participants did not let go of their loved ones in the way dominant grief models would prescribe. Instead, they found ways to stay in their relationship, through words, rituals, sensations, symbols, and everyday gestures that kept the deceased co-present in their lives.

Within this process, communication with the dead, however it was experienced or understood, played a central role. Dream visitations, apparitions, synchronicities and sensory encounters were treated as living gestures that called for interpretation and response. Participants spoke back, asked for guidance, expressed gratitude and fondness, and adjusted behavior in light of what their loved one conveyed. In doing so, they

engaged in social interaction that functions much like interaction with the living. It shapes their self-understanding, guides their decisions, and re-stabilizes their emotional world.

Interactional role liminality offers a way to name and conceptualize this observed pattern. Rather than treating ongoing bonds as solely internal or symbolic, interactional role liminality suggests these continued relationships are interactional and role-based. The bereaved in this study did not fully inhabit the socially assigned identities of widow, orphan, or bereaved parent; nor did they remain exactly who they were before the loss. Instead, they occupied a liminal position between these roles; still wife, still daughter, still partner, while also living in a world that named them as bereaved. Post-death communication provided the interactional evidence that made this position tenable. As long as the relationship remained active, the role could be preserved.

This suspended place, or liminal state, allowed communication from the deceased to function as interaction that sustained that prior relational role. Whether supernatural, a sign, sensation, or interpretation adjusted the way participants viewed their relationship with their loved one. Participants responded, interpreted, and adjusted in ways that mirror interaction with the living. These interpreted gestures are important not only emotionally but also socially. They affirmed identity, preserved routines, and held the relationship close.

In this framework, refusing to say goodbye is not pathological, but an expression of role continuity. Interpreting specific messages is not wishful thinking, but a

mechanism through which interaction can be sustained across the boundary of death. Emotional stability doesn't emerge in spite of this connection but, in many cases, because of it. Therefore, interactional role liminality can reframe post-death contact as an adaptive social process. Through communications with the deceased, mourners negotiate an identity that allows them to continue forward without surrendering the relationships that shaped who they are.

The findings here show that for many mourners, "goodbye" was never meant to be a final farewell. Instead, it became a threshold. Participants did not close the door behind the dead; they simply learned to speak through it. In this way, the act of *not* saying goodbye becomes a continued conversation shaped by love, interaction, and meaning.

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