

# One of us is Dying: Musings on Love, Loss, and the Beauty of a Möbius Strip Metaphor

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## Abstract

In this essay, we vulnerably reflect upon an exploration of love and loss in academic life grounded in nine months of shared reflective musings following one of us receiving a terminal brain cancer diagnosis. Together, we harness the powerful metaphor of the Möbius strip to conceptualize love and loss as inseparable, co—constitutive forces shaping identity, relationality, and meaning—making. We offer four interwoven themes and the tensions we felt within them—emotional (grief/gratitude), social (isolation/connection), ethical (extraction/generativity), and temporal (very little time/lots of time)—as an invitation to reflect upon how we each engage within our roles, with our ‘academic work’, and with those around us. We view these tensions as both an illustration of the profound intertwining between personal and professional and love and loss and an affirmation that being an academic is not merely a cognitive pursuit, but a deeply human one.

## Keywords

love, loss, autoethnography, work-life balance, tensions, poetry, humanity, relationships

## An Intimate Situating

One of us is dying. All three of us are heartbroken. Together, we acknowledge and embrace the deeply intertwined love and loss which connects us. Within the words shared here, we explore intimate reflections recorded on a journey we made together as dear friends. Our story is grounded in a heartfelt connecting of that which is so often viewed as disconnected—the personal and the professional. We are academics who have embraced both our friendship and our time together with love, and now loss, at the core of our relationships.

For the three of us, Fiona, Amy, and Suzette, the reflections and insights we share with you here originated in an online shared document which we titled “Musings.” Our musings journey began when we found out that Fiona was unexpectedly diagnosed, at 47 years old, with an inoperable brain tumor and was given less than 6 months to live. The intense and overwhelming loss we each experienced in those first days, and then the ongoing weeks and months, were deeply intertwined with our love for each other as colleagues and dear friends. The loss was profound in that it was also intimately connected to each of our histories. When Fiona was 19 years old, her mother died from cancer within 6 months of the diagnosis. At the time of our musings journey, Amy had only returned to work 2 years earlier following 11 years of treatment for a rare and aggressive cancer, and Suzette had recently lost two of her siblings to the same disease. Cancer was not something foreign to us; it had significantly affected our lives in both personal and professional ways.

As Fiona recounted those first days, “The three of us had already developed a safe space together, so I reached out to both of you because of your shared experience with cancer, and because I didn’t know where else to go. I was terrified, and no one else had any idea how to relate to me.” Shortly after reaching out, Fiona shared that she desperately wanted to continue working—which for her had always meant engaging, exploring, sharing, learning, and generating through her preferred methodology, autoethnography. Our first step was to create a shared online document to record our reflections. Given the fact that we each lived in distant geographic regions (with Fiona and Suzette in different parts of New Zealand and Amy in Australia), we were accustomed to communicating online. We called our reflections “musings” because the term has a sense of lightness and whimsicality to it which felt necessary given the heaviness and solemn nature of what we were processing. Our musings document was a space we created in which we could reflect individually, yet we could also be there, collaboratively, for each other. And so we embarked on a simultaneously heartwarming and

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heartbreaking journey of introspection, reflection, and connection. Our musings document became a place where we would regularly share our own, and read each other's, reflections about life and death... of emotions, connections, fears, joys, and everything in between.

Almost immediately, we discovered that our musings document had come to life—for us, it was a living manifestation of our friendship. With anthropomorphism fully embraced, the online document welcomed each of us on our own terms, our own times, and in our own spaces; spaces which called to us when we were ready to open our hearts as we read, reflected, and vulnerably shared. There were periods for each of us when we couldn't bring ourselves to look at it, it was too heavy and too real. There were also days when we would wake up bursting to read what our dear friends had newly written, or, if there were no recent additions, we would re-read earlier reflections and perhaps share some new thoughts of our own. And so we mused, some days fully present, some days fully absent, some days crying, some laughing, yet always communicating in our own voice at our own pace whenever we felt moved to do so, both from thoughts originating away from the document and those that emerged in the moment when reading others' reflections. For Amy and Suzette, we often opened the document just to see if Fiona had been there to contribute, and there were far too many periods of days, and at times weeks, in which we waited, not knowing if she was okay or not, often finding out later that she had an emergency visit to the hospital. These were terrifying breaks which were unexpected in our hearts yet expected in our minds.

Although there were breaks, both our time together and our sharing continued, and the six months Fiona was originally given to live passed by. Months continued to come and go, each full of musings which held reflections, revelations, and deeper connections than before. After nine months of musings, and the occasional video call or email with each other, we put our autoethnographic hats on and dove gently yet wholeheartedly into the enormous document we had built together. We started individually, and then collaboratively, creating themes from our musings. We entered a place of revelation—one that stemmed from an overwhelming depth and breadth of emotion. We figuratively held each other as we strove to see and feel our way through a metaphoric chiaroscuro of darkness illuminating light. And it is here, in this essay, that we lay bare this experience with you the reader, transparently discussing the four themes we both *saw* and *felt* as we immersed ourselves in our reflections.

Each of the themes we share is its own interwoven tension within the macro theme of love and loss. These themes represent the things we built from our reflections of lived experience, both individually and collectively; each a tension that we produced from insights we saw as woven together over our 9 months of sharing. Each theme is interconnected, emergent, and continuously changing. They sit together as a whole, with no sequence or hierarchy, or ability to fully differentiate

between. They are ideographically unique to our interpretations and journeys. And yet, we believe, they have the potential to help guide others in the process of meaning making within their own experiences. Our themes are: (1) grief and gratitude, (2) isolation and connection, (3) extraction and generativity, and (4) very little time and lots of time.

## Why We Think This is Important

For so many management academics, working in business schools means that we exist within a variety of institutional, national, and international accreditation systems in which metrics and measures dominate our experiences. This setting leaves little space for, and even less recognition of, the emotional and relational dimensions of our professional lives. Yet we know that every aspect of our lives, including our teaching and scholarship, emerges from a space which Palmer (1998/2017) so evocatively calls our “inner landscapes”—a recognition of the ways in which our intellect, emotion, and spirit “depend upon one another for wholeness (and) are interwoven” (p. 5). Through our musings, we dove fiercely into our inner landscapes, quickly discovering that everything we were thinking and feeling was intertwined; we experienced a moment of cathartic wholeness when we recognized that the significant and deeply meaningful parts of our lives were fully interconnected. It is our hope that in exploring our musings we inspire the inclusion of seemingly contradictory, and often unspoken, emotions within Management Studies.

Within our own moment of revelation, we saw and began to identify something—the idea that the overarching interweaving within our landscapes was one of *love and loss*. Together, love and loss were intimately intertwining to shape everything we were thinking, feeling, and doing including how we were connecting with each other, how we persevered and found meaning in our work, how we discovered ourselves withdrawing at points, and how we were navigating the pressures of balancing the personal and professional within academia. As a result, the insights we share here, with you, are written in recognition of our core belief that to highlight the intertwining of love and loss as part of our shared experience is to affirm that being an academic is not merely a cognitive pursuit, but a deeply human one.

## Love and Loss as Two Parts of One Whole

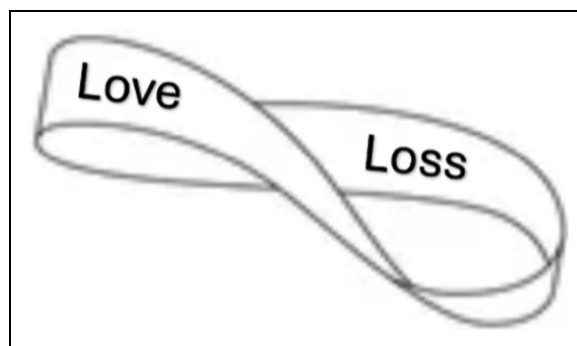
We embrace and are immensely grateful for the fact that love is a core element of our journey. For us, love is not a romanticized notion but a very real, deeply felt, and foundational element of our connection. It is the catalyst which has sparked action through reflection and created a fluidity to our ways of working and communicating. As authors Kiriakos and Tienari (2018) describe so beautifully, our writing together here *is* love. It requires courage and is something we desperately need more have in academia to help shape a culture of

universal dignity and justice (Jamil et al., 2024). As academics, we may be fortunate enough to see and experience love around us—expressed through mentorship, collegiality, collaboration, and the daily acts of care that sustain our academic communities. And yet, tragically, the underlying dimensions of love enacted within these processes—its quiet persistence, its emotional foundation, its ethical commitment—often remain unacknowledged, and indeed too taboo mention, within systems that privilege measurable outcomes over relational depth. We know that expressing emotion in most academic settings is not only “unvalued” but can be “held against us”, and to speak of love within the academy remains a radical act, despite repeated calls to more clearly embrace emotion into our profession (e.g., Askins & Blazek, 2017, p. 1099). Yet, we view this type of expression as an act which positions connection as a legitimate and vital form of intellectual contribution and moral engagement. We have chosen to stand together in confronting that taboo and embracing radicalism through the open, vulnerable, and intentionally visible sharing of our love for each other at a time when it is so deeply and intimately connected with loss.

Loss is a phenomenon that is equally present in the lives of academics, and yet it is also rarely discussed openly. We experience many types of loss in our profession—the loss of colleagues through relocation, changed profession, or health issues; the loss of identity through institutional restructures and professional secondments; the loss of confidence amid rejection from journals, grant funding organizations, and selection committees; the loss of autonomy and meaning in the relentless pursuit of metrics; the loss of students who are no longer able to, or interested in, continuing. Amidst these losses, it is not surprising that we experience grief, burnout, and disconnection—each rife within our higher educational institutional structures (Bergeron, 2023; Han, 2012). Yet so many of our losses are suppressed and hidden, or worse, they are shared and then left unacknowledged or unseen.

Here, we support a repositioning of the acknowledgement of loss as a vital element in encouraging a reconnection with relationality, an embracing of shared humanity, and the cultivation of collective resilience. Our words, and our open sharing about the loss which weighs so heavily upon us, remind us that vulnerability is not antithetical to academic professionalism—rather, it is the foundation that makes empathy, connection, and compassion possible. Embracing raw vulnerability with each other, in the safe space we have shaped together, also allows us to engage differently.

This seeming contradiction between love and loss intrigued us, but we also recognised that without one, we could not achieve the other. Ultimately, we assert that the willingness of academics to engage in conversations of love and loss signals a profoundly existential reimagining of what it means to be part of an academic community. When we acknowledge the emotionality of our professional lives, we make space for vulnerability, empathy, and shared purpose. In doing so, we affirm that academic excellence



**Figure 1.** Our Möbius Strip of Love and Loss.

and human connection are not competing priorities, but interdependent expressions of what it means to live and work well together.

### **Exploring our Musings and Discovering a Powerful Metaphor**

As we considered the complex relationships within, between, and among the reflections held within our musings, we discovered a metaphor which helped us better understand, and conceptualize, our thoughts. Like other parts of our journey, the discovery of our metaphor was serendipitous, not planned. It was shared during a personal conversation one of our authors had with Parker Palmer in which he described the Möbius strip as a representation of how individuals’ inner and outer landscapes continually shape one another. He defined the Möbius strip as “a geometric form in which the inside and the outside keep co-creating each other as they flow into one another. In the final analysis, there is no inside and outside, only one side which is constantly being co-created” (personal communication, February 10, 2025).

Framing the tensions we saw and felt through this metaphor of interconnection and seamlessness helped us wrap our heads around the idea that the feelings, emotions, and experiences we had which may have originally appeared at odds with each other were, in fact, continuously engaging in co-creation. To help illustrate this, please see the simple illustration we created of our Möbius strip of love and loss below (Figure 1).

Using this metaphor, we will share both our story and the themes we saw within our reflections with you.

### **Themes from our Love and Loss Musings**

The four themes we vulnerably share with you here reflect the complexities of our academic lives as we navigate this experience—they are complex because each theme holds tensions within it. The tensions, which are continuously reinforcing each other, illustrate an intertwining of the emotional (grief/gratitude), social (isolation/connection), ethical (extraction/

generativity), and temporal (very little time/lots of time) aspects of our profession. We realized that these tensions are always present together during our academic lives, but some are more palatable than others, or reveal themselves only when faced with a complex experience such as this. In shining the light on their presence, we redefine our roles as scholars and educators, not by using the labels our institutions give us, rather, through an embracing of our existence within a living network of human relationships, connections, and lived experiences. Each of the tensions we share below invites us to reflect upon how we engage within our roles, with our 'academic work', and with those around us. They illustrate the profound intertwining between both personal and professional and love and loss.

### The Intertwining of Grief and Gratitude (Which Includes Tensions of Guilt/Contribution, Loss/Gain, Life/Death, and Darkness/Light)

Within our musings on love/loss, we found a theme of *grief and gratitude* was one that helped us make sense of our experiences. We continuously found ourselves reflecting on moments of gratitude when the topic of grief arose, whether it be in relation to our work lives, our personal lives, or the complex intersections of them both. It felt like a natural reaction, gratitude as a response to grief—the 'not wanting' to hold space in grief for too long without reconnecting with the gratitude which sustained us, as we share with you here.

For me, grief is cumulative. I think each time a sorrow visits us, it leaves a mark. It is sadness, it is weary, it is personal. It overcomes at moments, and flutters by at times. It is trite, and it is all consuming, defining. It is scrambling. It is remembering joy, laughter, quietness. It is unique, and universal. It does not fit the academic calendar. (Suzette)

I am overwhelmed with grief at the reality of Fiona's prognosis. I remember the feelings of not knowing how much longer I had, but there was a sliver of a chance of life. I am sick knowing she is living through that, but with no sliver... no chance. These emotions are so intermingled, so confusing, and yet so pure – the fear, the strength, the fragility, the unknown and, hopefully, a peace found in gratitude for every single moment. (Amy)

There is a juxtaposition between the fact that we have created this space, which feels safe to process some of the grief and horrible stuff that's going on and the fact that in, and perhaps because of, this space there is so much love and gratitude. (Fiona)

Sitting within this theme, we also reflected about the intertwining of *guilt and contribution*. There is so much guilt when someone you love is dying, and an equal, if not heavier guilt when it is you who is dying—leaving not only the ones

you love, but also the professional identity and career goals you held so intensely for so long. For many of us, these organizational goals contribute to defining the academics we are striving to become and the people we aim to meet and collaborate with to gain approval from our institutions. In contrast, we found that our musings on guilt stood alone, and yet often fed into our reflections on contributions we had made. Again, we experienced this as a response through which we could 'come to the surface' and 'breathe the air' of contributions we had achieved, together and for Fiona alone, so we did not feel as if we were drowning in guilt. Here, in these examples, we share about the contributions we are working to create, as we each navigate through our respective 'guilt' on this journey.

Losing is the guilt of asking my colleagues to take over the work. But I don't want to let go, writing and scholarship and thinking and sharing is 'me'. So now I sit in a place of guilt and minimal contribution, filled with awareness of the jealousy I hold because I am not able to do this to the same extent anymore. Yet I am aware and grateful and humbled for the contribution others are making on my behalf. It is so hard letting go of contribution... (Fiona)

I remember the crushing wave of guilt when I was in treatment. Guilt of letting others down, myself included. It consumed me but I also embraced it – I knew, as I hope Fiona does too, that I had worked my ass off and was proud of achieving so much in a world which was predominantly white men - a world I barely knew or understood when I started. She has achieved the same, if not more. I hope she holds that knowledge in her heart; I will continue to remind her as often as I can. (Amy)

I spent this morning mentoring one of my doctoral students via email. She is lost, without a mentor, and I was planning on walking along beside her during this journey. I talked to her as honestly as I could, about 'carving up' her Ph.D. thesis, about the value of finding a nurturing research community and a group of colleagues to work with. I guided her through some other things. 'Everyone needs a Fiona' came her reply. (Fiona)

We found that as we shared our moments of loss, a key part of reflecting on grief is an acknowledgement that each of us not only suffers layers of *loss*, but also experienced surprising moments of love and gratitude. We began to recognise that loss came intertwined with its counterpart in things we *gain*. Here, we acknowledge our use of the word "loss" as situated both within one of the subthemes and as part of the overarching theme of love and loss. Yet, in this subtheme we focus specifically on the layering of this loss throughout our lives, and how these shape our experiences both within and outside of our institutions. With our whole hearts and smiles on our faces, we believe this highlights the complexity, interrelatedness, and innate beauty of this process. There is no 'right way' with clear demarcations that doesn't also hold a blurring and intertwining within it. Below, we share the losses and gains that we felt within our reflections noting that the gains, while

at times obfuscated by loss, were omnipresent. This insight reminded us that no one is without layers of loss, even those who so clearly embrace institutional norms designed to suppress this information so as not to compromise their potential for academic success.

There are so many layers of loss. Some are cumulative, others quite independent: health, physical state, naiveté, family, children, dreams, and then, of course, there are elements of my career, colleagues, professional identity, and potential contributions that are no longer a part of my life. This is a loss of an ultimate nature, but layered upon a life of loss, this is no less than another at the time. There have been so many: loss of promotion, loss of favourite teaching, loss of research autonomy, loss of funding opportunities... it is an endless list of loss in our profession. And yet this morning I hugged my daughter. It was a hug that lasted longer than it would have before my diagnosis, before our time for hugs was limited, and everything else around and within me disappeared. (Fiona)

Loss reminds me that I have often overlooked where it has appeared in my own life, the small and large, and how entwined this is with gratitude... overlooked the stability of having someone else always there - not for always being present, but for having a presence. Our friendship is a taken-for-granted luxury, a must have, a not wanting to let go. Loss, your loss, my loss, our loss. Being grateful, appreciative, humbled. Loss in its many dimensions of being and unbeing, of doing and undoing, of making sense of an absent taken-for-granted other part of life. Who will I turn to now? (Suzette)

Losing is our shared lives coming home to settle in the memories of our hearts and minds. Losing is asking to be allowed to take over the work that we used to share. It is sending whispers of encouragement and love, being silent, standing on the side, and waiting for instruction on how best to serve. Losing means being confronted with the reality of how important our friendship is to me. I treasure it beyond words. (Suzette)

Loss is such a strange and yet ridiculously expansive thing. (Suzette)

Within the Möbius strip of grief and gratitude, we also felt the all-too-confronting realization that we were reflecting on *life* and *death*. Tied to the subthemes above, when strong enough to articulate it, we found ourselves musing about the realities of the journey we were on now, and those we had been on before. All of them were tied to cancer... cancer we held in our own bodies (Fiona and Amy), cancer within the bodies of those we love (Suzette, Fiona, and Amy), and cancer as an inescapable and unpredictable presence in the lives of so many.

The unfairness of her dying is palpable, intense, violent. It smacks me in the face. And yet there is so much care and love. I hope she

can feel it. She radiates it and SO deserves to feel it coming back to her with a pure, unfiltered, unexpecting, cocooning warmth. (Amy)

I am tired. Loss and regeneration go hand in hand. Flowers become seedpods to live the next day. It would be nice to pause. (Suzette)

The beauty is that we're not in a place of bereavement. We are in this beautiful place of felt tension between life and death and hope and pain and joy and sorrow. We're sitting in it with you, which is so wonderful. It's like a web of holding on to both your life and our lives together. (Amy)

As I read the reflections, I wish I could take some of Fiona's guilt. I wish I could show her that there is nothing at all to feel guilty for, from where I sit that is, yet I understand it. The irrational yet deeply intense feelings that come with cancer, with part of one's own body killing the rest of it. It's all-consuming and overwhelming. (Amy)

Finally, as we sat within our interconnected reflections of guilt, grief, and gratitude we felt the simultaneous presence of *darkness* and *light*. For each of us, our musings here were found within moments in which we felt ourselves looking to the light, searching for the warmth that even a figurative light gives us inside. We hope you can feel the light as we experienced it, as illustrated in these two reflections:

Losing, loss, hope, and despair are lives entwined... lives of laughter, annoyance, and travels, of sharing, caring, thriving and surviving, of secrets, of joys, and feelings of gratitude that we are not alone, knowing that we were never alone. Lives of angels and stars, and of brightness penetrating the darkness within and around us. (Suzette)

There is a beauty, grace, freedom, and lightness that comes with a cancer diagnosis, these are the things that come with knowing death is not so far away. It is the gratitude I remember having and Fiona shared about today. I hope she can hold onto it as long as possible. Light makes the darkness bearable. (Amy)

Spending time reflecting as a group, we were able to see how these things seemed to appear together, as though the same dynamic. It was freeing to feel the tensions described above, waxing and waning through each of the different, yet interconnected, sides of their Möbius strips. Our gratitude became our grief, and then our grief led us back to gratitude. Each non-existent without the other.

## The Intertwining of Isolation and Connection (Which Includes Tensions of Personal/Professional and Remembering/Remaking)

The second overarching theme we felt within our musings was one of *isolation and connection*. For each of us, going on this journey together, during a time when Fiona was initially told she had six months to live, and yet she continues to live well beyond that, was a testament to our deeply felt connection with each other. And yet, as we mused, there were periods of isolation. There were times when we each needed to pull away either for our own self-care and wellbeing, or to satisfy institutional requirements, or both. We recognized that for each of us the musings were emotionally burdensome—like a heavy yoke we carried on our shoulders of love and loss. We found ourselves being pulled into them but we also needed space from them.

I know I have had periods of silence during these musings. For me, during these times I needed to isolate myself so I could reflect on the *why* I needed silence and *why* I felt compelled to step back/down/away for a while. I know it was a form of self-protection. I needed to prepare myself to go back in and read. To be honest, I so appreciated the luxury of disengaging and standing on the sideline, knowing that you were both there, continuing to muse knowing in your hearts that I would return when ready. (Suzette)

With the theme of isolation and connection, we felt a tension between the *personal* and the *professional*. This is not a new theme for those in our profession. We exist in environments where our work is grounded in thinking, exploring, considering, extending—all things that we carry with us wherever we are. But in the space of dying, they take on a particularly salient meaning, as illustrated here:

I was a teenage mum at 19 years old, full of guilt about the path forward. I was spurred by my desire to make life better for my son. I started university three months after losing my mum when I was 19. I was so broken and lost then. But I never spoke of any of this at my own institution. I realise that, while I love my son, even this brought elements of loss as a young person, as a university student. I concealed it forcing a complete and very artificial separation between my personal and professional. I wonder, today, what would my teaching and research portfolios or promotion application look like if I started with this candid and ‘real’ positioning of myself? (Fiona)

I often feel that it is harder for academics than those in other professions to balance the professional and personal – to nurture those people and topics we love, the things that drive us and get us out of bed in the morning (and often, the middle of the night too, either for caregiving to those around us or to write fiercely

when we are moved by insight or catharsis). I have yet to figure it all out. It’s messy, but it’s who I am. (Amy)

Another aspect we felt was held within isolation and connection was our continuous process of *remembering* and *remaking*. Tied to many of the elements above, there is a generativity found when remaking things with those you love, especially when those things are grounded in a remembering, a celebration, an outlet for care and compassion and love. We see this in the following reflection by Amy:

Everyone who has ever met Fiona will deeply feel the loss but will forever be better people from having her in our hearts and lives... F\*\*king cancer. There is so much more she has to give the world. That is why we are doing this - creating, shaping, building, sharing. We are giving parts of her, and all of us, to the world so her voice – her messages, her insights, her brilliance and care for others – can be heard and celebrated. She will be remembered for so much. This is our way of remembering her and continuing to build her legacy together.

## The Intertwining of Extraction and Generativity (Which Includes Tensions of Metrics/Legacy and Responsibility to Ourselves/Responsibility as Academics)

The third overarching theme we felt arose from our individual and collective musings is tied directly to the pressures we experience as academics. The constant tension to do more, do better, achieve, tick boxes, and meet an ever-increasing workload. There are so many tensions which exist for us in this domain. The first we saw within our musings is the tension we hold between meeting *metrics* and being driven by a *legacy* of passion.

All of the new projects I am passionate about, I am only halfway through. I am so lucky to have great colleagues whom I trust to take these forward (or not, if that is what they decide). But my own ideas, contributions, knowledge – that is all gone now. I wonder, have I achieved anything that will be remembered? Was it all for nothing? Great academics occasionally get special issues about their work, or eulogies written about them... but what about every other academic, like me, who is just doing their best? Who tries to care and design classes for the ‘average’ student? The educator who does their best? How will we be remembered? (Fiona)

Within our reflections of extraction and generativity we felt a tension between our *responsibility to ourselves* and our *responsibility as academics*. Our profession can be all-consuming. For each of us, throughout our years together, we shared about the things we gave up as part of our academic journeys—family time, personal hobbies and passions, the ways we have compromised our health to be ‘productive.’

These are things we will never get back, and we gave them up because of a deeply felt responsibility to our professions which, at times all, but extinguished our responsibility to ourselves.

I want to make it easy for colleagues but I know a number of projects will drop off. Do they know how much I care about these endeavours? I may be dying but *I care*. Deeply. I am still 'me'. How can I separate from this to allow myself space for those at the core that surely 'should' matter the most—my children, my family? I know I need to focus on them, and yet I don't seem to be able to 'turn off' the academic within. (Fiona)

In this space of dying I am much more aware of my skepticism of the artificial academic identity, the curated ways we are all encouraged to act. Are we even these people? Why are we doing the kind of research we are, just to maximise publications for some artificial measure? Why are we not undertaking the most meaningful research we can? Maybe the love gets lost and the loss starts early – the loss of the 'dream' of academia, the loss of who we are, the loss of respect for purely instrumental colleagues. (Fiona).

### **The Intertwining of Very Little Time and Lots of Time (Which Includes Tensions of Interruption/Seamlessness, Holding/Releasing, Waiting/Contributing, and Listening/Sharing)**

The final theme we felt when we read through our musings together was tied to temporality. This comes as no surprise, given the context of our reflections—one in which time has become so precious. One in which death is close and the beautiful and yet so often underappreciated privilege of time, for one of us, will end soon.

Two weeks before my diagnosis, I was on an overseas conference/invited visit trip, presenting papers, engaging with academics, posting fabulous pictures with alumni. I was Associate Dean and I looked forward to making so many career-lasting contributions. Suddenly, time changed. Now, there is so little time left. (Fiona)

We were moved by our reflections sitting within the theme of temporality yet describing a tension related to our experiences of a continuous back-and-forth of *interruption* and *seamlessness*.

It's really interesting... for something like death there are no clear timelines; this really challenges organisations because it requires thinking outside the circle not inside the square. It just blows the minds of so many administrators to the point they cannot cope with it, so they have to make demarcations and draw hard lines. (Suzette)

I'm smiling thinking about Fiona and her children this weekend. May they dance, sing, laugh, cry, love, and live... just live and be in the moment. For today, we are all here. None of us is in the stars yet. For today, we can all hug and eat marshmallows with those we love. I like that. Dried tears covering my face and a big smile. I breathe. I am so tired but I am smiling for and with her. Today, she has time. (Amy)

Our musings related to time also encompassed a tension we felt between our desire to engage in *holding* and the necessary act of *releasing*.

I have just read this. Crying is allowed, I assume (or is this just an overabundance of water in my eyes, on my cheeks, flowing from my heart, and now getting into my keyboard). F\*\*k me! I will muse tomorrow, for musings on losing are musings of being quiet, of being loud, of being outraged, and of being gracious. Right now, I am being outraged, and ungracious, and unthankful, and selfish. Losing is holding hands where we can, being the front gal if needed, sweeping the floor, and sponging the brow. (Suzette)

There are so many people who have made odd contributions in my life, some seem fleeting but are important to me. How do I let go, and acknowledge, these people who are so often forgotten but so crucial? (Fiona)

It's safe to say that most institutions would prefer if we kept our personal private and did not release it into the public. It's the layers that scare them. They don't want to deal with the complexity of it all. They want us to hold it all in, but that's destructive. But I am still here today and dying has given me a freedom to choose to release. (Fiona)

It came as no surprise to us that we felt our reflections tied to the tensions we experienced of *waiting* and *contributing* belonged in our theme of "very little time and lots of time".

Although this week has been ridiculously stressful and reflective, I've also become aware that this type of reflective academic work is giving me energy; it is the only 'work' I feel like doing. And so I am engaged and have done more work this week than I have for weeks, even amongst the 'chaos' of living amongst hospice services, district nurses, and oncologists. This space is regenerative for me. (Fiona)

There is so much left to do in every moment of every day. Yet, this can't wait. I push everything else I can to the side to do this work with Fiona - to record her thoughts and ideations. Her voice is the only voice that matters right now. I listen. I learn. I consider. I write. Having this work published while she is still here would be such a gift. Love, gratitude, and an understanding how important this is to do now are the things that keep me moving. (Amy)

It will come as little surprise to most academics that there is a tension in terms of waiting and contributing in the context of publishing this essay before Fiona dies. As academics, there is very little that we can hold on to with respect to concrete outcomes and recognized contributions. Having our writing published is one of the most recognized, and for many, personally rewarding forms of contribution. The magnitude of the significance of that contribution is directly tied to our investment in it—how much we care about the messages we are sending through our scholarship. For the three of us, there is no more important message, and no publication we would rather give ourselves to, than sharing Fiona’s voice in a way which will make her feel seen, heard, and valued before she dies. Here, we are not waiting, we are fiercely working to contribute as much as we can.

The final tension we felt belonged within our theme tied to temporality is one of *listening* and *sharing*. For two of us (Suzette and Amy), the moments in which we could be with Fiona—talking to her through video calls, sharing thoughts and ideas through email and texts—were extremely important to us. We held every moment of them deeply within our hearts. We longed just to listen to her, to hear whatever she was inspired to say. We hung on every word, because we knew how precious they were.

We will walk this journey with Fiona. Holding her hand, holding each other’s hands, walking next to her, or behind, or a bit away (yet always near, in the dimly lit areas, but still close) when she needs space, or stopping with her for respite, or carrying her when she needs and wants it, or watching her walk strongly, and then sitting with her when she breaks from the pain and loss and anger and selfishness of not wanting to miss anything that was in front of her in this beautiful life she has built, of which we are all small specks... And we are so grateful to be specks, to be some of the pollen that has stuck to her hand, her shoe, her clothes, her being... pollen that she carries with her and is a part of her world wherever she goes, as she has stuck to us, generating new life and thoughts and musings everywhere we go simply because we have come into contact with her, simply because we met her... now we carry her with us forever, pollinating the world with the beauty and fierce knowledge/change/thinking/ideas/generativity she has helped to nurture in us. (Amy)

When viewed holistically, the themes above remind us that academia is sustained not by certainty or control, but by interconnected human beings who have the capacity to live gracefully within tensions and seeming contradictions—holding loss alongside love, grief alongside gratitude, isolation alongside connection, extraction alongside generativity, and time as something that can be fleeting or abundant. When we embrace the intertwined complexities of our lives, we are not only feeding personal and academic wellbeing, but also opening ourselves up to new insights. Only through our musings did we discover the power of the Möbius strip metaphor to help us see ourselves more wholly. Embracing it encouraged an

understanding of the complex layering and interweaving of love and loss and the tensions that exist within it in our lives, as Fiona so beautifully shares here:

I think the intertwined nature of loss and love is something that really sticks out to me – how these things are both part of the lived experience of both dying and watching someone you love die. Everyone’s lived experience is brought into that space and becomes part of the process. It is layers of loss on top of layers of loss – with love as the foundation and part of the layering which informs of our experiences.

In another example of the insights nurtured through our musings journey, as we waded through the intensely heartfelt, private, and emotionally evocative reflections we were uncovering within ourselves and had decided to share publicly, we were inspired to write a poem. To do this, we turned to an Indigenous methodology and harnessed the power of poetic inquiry (Cooms & Saunders, 2024). We share our poem with you here because it provides another literary form of artistic expression through which readers can differently access our thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

#### **We are a Möbius Strip of Love and Loss**

There is a façade of wellness in organizations.  
So many live with pain unseen. It is destructive and unhealthy.  
And yet it is a reality which smacks us in the face.

We are three co-authors who love one another –  
relationships which grew from colleagues to friends to family,  
hearts warm and full of admiration, respect, trust, and care.

Yet, today, only two of us are at work. One of us is at home,  
dying.  
For those of us at work, we sit in meetings full of meaningless  
words.  
We are restless. This is time wasted. Every single word of hers is  
precious.  
Frantic, together, we try to capture her voice, stories, and wishes.  
There is so much more she has to say, but the door is closing.  
We are so angry. Where is the time we thought we had?

For all three of us, the pain runs so deep; feelings tangled and  
hidden.  
Heartache overwhelms at this – our – intersection of love and  
loss.  
We feel love as a comforting light, and yet loss is a darkness seep-  
ing in.

We exist on a final Möbius strip: one of love and loss, life and  
death, acceptance and anxiety;  
a moment in time where each one becomes the other.  
We see this in every part of our lives, personal and professional,  
inside and out.

It is a softening with roots in grief, and a strengthening of loss drawn from gratitude.

It is the overwhelming lightness of joy, and the unbearable heaviness of fear.

It is holding fiercely in our hearts, and releasing gently with our hands.

Two of us walk into our academic offices to ‘work,’ with a pain too deep to see,

Others’ eyes averted. No words shared. Organizational façade of wellness intact.

All three of us are alone and yet together... we are a Möbius strip of love and loss.

## The “And” at the End of Our Vulnerable Sharing

Before we conclude our essay, we would like to respectfully acknowledge that our experience is not unique; there is loss and simultaneous love in so many different forms for so many. As a tribute to those who are vulnerably sharing about the intricacies of love and loss, we will begin our ending with the word “and.” In another example of the deeply human connections we are able to create, and the gifts we are able to give each other in our roles as academics, one of the *Journal of Management Inquiry* reviewers for this essay suggested we read Schulz’s (2022) *Lost & Found* as a way of connecting with another author who shared about the experience of living with loss. In her book, Schulz titles her last chapter “And” as a homage to the power of this short three-letter conjunction which has a unique history and a complex meaning. Her description of “and” is that it is “a kind of linguistic superglue, capable of binding together almost anything... It is a connection made of nothing but connection... ‘and’ is the most fundamental, the first and simplest knot we learn to tie” (pp. 191–192). We could not agree more fully. Schulz’s “and” is our Möbius strip. Our journey here is an “and” for navigating the smallest and largest tensions of life, for supergluing our professional and personal lives, for embracing each other, for understanding the inseparable binding of love and loss. “And” is everything we have shared with you here. It is the embodiment of intertwining, connection, relationality, and humanity. It is our musings, wrapped in the tragic yet inescapable reality of death and dying.

As a final “and”, we are moved beyond words with gratitude for the privilege of being able to share our voices and musings with you here. As we hope every reader will feel through our words, this essay holds a very special place in each of our hearts. Our love for each other runs deep. Because of that love and our prior experiences with cancer, Fiona’s diagnosis evoked an overwhelming array of emotions for each of us. Our musings flowed like a mighty river roaring after a storm. The calming of that river came through our discovery of the Möbius strip. That was a gift we did not expect, yet it has helped


us to transform our musings into something we could both understand and share with you here. It has helped us recognize that the complex tensions we experience as we walk through challenging periods of life, especially those which are marked by death and dying, are made easier through an embracing of intertwining and interconnection. Through our Möbius strip of love and loss, we recognize that the sense of overwhelming loss is held within us because of our deeply felt love—the two are inseparable. They feed each other in beautiful and generative ways with one unable to exist without the other.


The Möbius strip is a gift we will carry forever, and we share here with you. We hope it is a gift you will choose to carry also—one which highlights the intertwining of love and loss and affirms the humanity sitting at the core of our roles and relationships as academics. May it give to you what it has given to us... the interconnected knowledge and visual representation of love feeding into loss and vice versa—two sides of the same Möbius strip strand—which brings with it strength within fragility, peace within disruption, and hope within despair.

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### Data Availability

Given the sensitive nature of the data, and the ethics approval granted for this research, the data are stored in a secure university repository not available to the public.

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