

NOTE TO USERS

This reproduction is the best copy available.

UMI[®]

Six Feet Under: Lessons for Life and for the Classroom

Jennifer Sweer

Department of Culture and Values in Education
McGill University
Montreal, Canada
August 2008

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Arts

Copyright c Jennifer Sweer, August 2008



Library and Archives
Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-66991-4
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-66991-4

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

■ ■ ■
Canada

Résumé de mémoire

Jennifer Sweer

Six Feet Under: apprivoiser la mort en classe et ailleurs.

Dans la culture dominante de l'Amérique du nord l'acte de parler de la mort est largement frappé d'interdit. On ne sait trop comment en parler ni comment l'assimiler sur le plan social. La série télévisée *Six Feet Under* au canal HBO se confronte à cette interdiction tacite en traitant de la mort avec franchise, humour et émotion évidente. De nombreuses leçons peuvent en être tirées. Tout comme elle a révolutionné la télévision, les enseignants se doivent de révolutionner leur profession en se confrontant aux questions importantes et souvent occultées qu'on y soulève.

Les principes de Parker Palmer et Mary Rose O'Reilley en matière d'éducation sous-entendent le présent mémoire. En premier lieu, l'enseignant doit reconnaître sa propre vulnérabilité à ce sujet ainsi que celle de ses élèves. Deuxièmement, il faut prendre conscience que le deuil est souvent une nécessité et peut se manifester sous des formes très diverses. Troisièmement, la classe doit fournir l'occasion pour l'enseignant et les élèves de s'exprimer librement. Quatrièmement, la classe doit leur permettre de s'écouter sans gêne. Cinquièmement, les enseignants ne peuvent s'attendre à ce que les élèves changent leur perception de la mort que s'ils sont préparés à le faire eux-mêmes. Enfin, les enseignants ont le devoir d'établir un lien entre la classe et le monde extérieur.

C'est le bût de ce mémoire d'explorer le trajet des personnages dans *Six Feet Under* afin d'en tirer des leçons et de permettre aux gens (surtout les enseignants) de mieux connaître et accepter la mort.

Abstract

Jennifer Sweer

Six Feet Under: Lessons for Life and for the Classroom

There is a taboo surrounding death in our North American culture. We're not sure how to talk about it, or how to connect through it. The HBO series *Six Feet Under* breaks this taboo with its honest, humorous and moving look at death and dying. There are important lessons to be drawn from this series. Teachers could revolutionize their classrooms as this show has revolutionized television: by dealing with issues that most tend to avoid. Parker Palmer and Mary Rose O'Reilley's views on education provide a foundation for this thesis. First, teachers need to recognize the fragility of their students as well as their own. Second, they need to appreciate that loss comes in many forms, and that mourning is often necessary. Third, teaching needs to create a space for both students and teachers to express themselves. Fourth, this space also needs to exist in order for both teachers and students to truly listen to one another. Fifth, teachers need to change their own perception of death and dying if they expect students to do the same. Last, teachers need to promote the idea of connection with the world outside the classroom. This thesis's intention is to bring awareness and acceptance around death and dying to individuals, particularly teachers, by exploring *Six Feet Under* through the characters' journeys, and extracting its many valuable lessons.

Acknowledgments

The first time I watched *Six Feet Under* was in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. My friends Cory, Mike, and I went to visit James, who was working on an organic farm at the time. We watched the first episode together on a very small television, at James' suggestion. That vacation, we spent many sunny days inside, because we were hooked. I am grateful to James for introducing me to the series, and I thank Alan Ball for creating it, along with the many gifted writers who worked on the scripts. I am not an avid TV watcher, but this show transformed and inspired me.

While in university, I met three professors who taught me what teaching should be about. The first is Ronald Morris, the man who became my thesis supervisor. Thank you for teaching me to listen, to be vulnerable, and to see and respect what each student has to give. The second is Elizabeth Wood. Thank you for helping my friends and I create a 'Reclaiming Education' class when we felt we wouldn't make it through the education program unless we did things a little differently. The third is Teresa Strong-Wilson. Thank you for helping me see that loss is a broad term and includes much more than simply losing a loved one. We lose everyday, and lose every moment, and all loss deserves mourning. To the three of you: your classes were brilliant and inspiring.

Thank you Mom, Dad, and Steven for being my family along the way.

Dear, dear friends: Heidi, James, Jason, and Jen. Thank you for your support, love, and laughter. I admire you.

And Jesse. Without you, this thesis would not have happened. You are the best listener of them all. You embody the values that this thesis promotes. I love you.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Journeys.....	7
Chapter Two: Everything. Everyone. Everywhere. Ends.....	43
Chapter Three: Lessons.....	57
Conclusion.....	83
Works Cited.....	87

Introduction

“Why do people have to die?”

“To make life important.”

(Ball, 2002)

I am a high school teacher. I went into teaching because as I was jumping from classroom to classroom for most of my life, I felt something was missing. It took a long time for me to know what that something was. It was life. Real life. Being in class always felt so separate, so isolated, so disconnected. In CEGEP and university, I finally had glimpses of life, passion, excitement, and emotion in the classroom—and I vowed to become a teacher who would bring that same energy into mine. “The classroom is a microcosm of the world; it is the chance we have to practice whatever ideals we may cherish” (Tompkins, 1989, p.30).

I want to feel alive. So do Ruth, Nate, David, Claire, and Brenda. These are characters from *Six Feet Under*, a hit drama television series by creator Alan Ball, which ran on HBO from 2002 to 2006. It’s ground-breaking, mind-blowing television. This show, in an exceptionally original and straightforward way, breaks the taboo surrounding death and dying in our North American culture. Marie de Hennezel is the pioneer in Palliative Care in France and author of numerous books on the experience of death and dying. She writes: “We hide death as if it were shameful and dirty” (de Hennezel, 1998, xi).

Six Feet Under addresses ideas head on, not shying away from heaviness, sadness, tears, and even humor. It’s a show about death. It is unconventional in its address of several taboo subject matters, including: death, homosexuality, aging, sex in later life, drugs, mental

illness...Beyond its agenda to entertain, everything about this show is designed to provoke thinking and questioning: the situations, dialogue, lighting, scene changes, and topics. The Fisher family owns a funeral home, and this is the setting for all that unravels. Throughout the five seasons, the viewer is challenged to self-reflect, mourn, and heal.

Ruth is mother to Nate, David, and Claire. Her husband Nathaniel is the owner of Fisher and Sons, their family run funeral home. In the very first minute of the very first episode of the very first season, Ruth is on the phone with her husband. She is making a pot roast as she nags him to quit smoking. He is driving to the airport to pick up their son Nate, who is visiting for Christmas. He throws his cigarette out the window. As soon as they hang up, he lights another cigarette, and gets hit by a bus. He dies. This episode opens with the death of a main character. He is a main character, because he reappears throughout the five seasons as an apparition to his family, a ghost of sorts. There are other apparitions throughout the series, representing the inner voices of the characters.

When Ruth gets the phone call informing her of Nathaniel's accident, she Frisbees the phone onto the kitchen floor and throws the pot roast off the oven. When her son David runs into the kitchen, she says numbly and matter-of-factly, "Your father is dead and my pot roast is ruined" (Ball, 2002).

The viewer quickly comes to realize how closely linked death and humor can be. And so the Fisher family is forced to deal with this Christmas tragedy. Throughout the five seasons, each episode begins with a death. This death often sets the tone, makes a point, or brings new understanding to the characters. *Six Feet Under* does not shy away from death. It is not afraid to show death in all its shapes and colors.

A white man in his thirties dives into a pool smashing his skull. A porn star is electrocuted in her bathtub when her cat knocks her curlers off the bathroom counter. A baby dies of SIDS. A golf ball hits a woman in the temple while she enjoys a novel in her backyard. A Chinese man has a heart attack while taking out the recycling. Cancer. Suicide. Bee sting. Capital punishment. A boy on acid jumps off a roof. Diabetes. Choking. Cougar mauling. Murder. There is no death this show won't touch. It is not in denial. Men die. Women die. Even babies die. Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Americans, Jews, Catholics, Buddhists, and Atheists...we all die.

This thesis is an exploration of *Six Feet Under*. It is a self-reflective journey as I explore the series' impact on me, as a person, and as a teacher. This series affected me deeply, clarifying and challenging my values, and provoking me to think about why and how I teach.

Samuel Keen has a notion of education for serendipity. Serendipity is the art of making fortunate discoveries by accident. Watching *Six Feet Under* was a serendipitous experience for me, and learning in the context of a classroom, should feel like a serendipitous experience too, where fortunate discoveries are made 'accidentally', with the help and guidance of a teacher who is willing to teach beyond the basics. I have found that spontaneous discoveries are more exciting and are more likely to be remembered.

In chapter one, I take the reader on a journey with each of the main characters. It is crucial to give attention to each person's journey, in this context and in the classroom. Each character and student has a story. Only deep listening and an open heart can draw from these experiences, can witness real people, and can bring about empathy, compassion, and understanding. In chapter two, I blend the characters' journeys into one. A great loss is suffered

by the entire group. This community includes characters and viewers. The series ends. In chapter three, I look at the six major lessons of *Six Feet Under*, and how they might be of use to teachers. These are the lessons of fragility, loss, expression, listening, perception, and connection.

This thesis is a narrative, which also takes my journey into account. Parker Palmer believes that the identity of the teacher and good teaching are closely linked. I will therefore “speak fiercely from the I”, to quote Ruth, and bring myself and my voice to this work. All stories, including my own, have a yearning, a longing, to be heard. In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer writes: “The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require” (Palmer, 1998, 12). It takes tremendous courage to acknowledge death and to talk about mourning in a death- fearing culture.

This thesis also has a goal to promote being fully alive. What does this mean? “To be fully alive is to act. [...] But action is more than movement; it is movement that involves expression, discovery, re-formation of ourselves and our world. To be fully alive is [also] to contemplate. [...] contemplation [is] any way that we can unveil the illusions that masquerade as reality and reveal the reality behind the masks.” (Palmer, 1990, 17)

I hope this thesis will encourage and inspire both action, and contemplation.

I have been working at an all-girls Catholic private school for the last five years. Any experiences or insights or activities I mention will have occurred in this setting, this context. However, I believe the lessons I speak of to be universal, and applicable to all schools and levels and students. I am not talking about teaching death, as if anybody out there is qualified to do

that. No one has that knowledge and factual answers. I am talking about creating a space within ourselves and the education system. Why is this important, if not crucial? Because not acknowledging the ‘elephant in the room’ creates distance between us and prevents us from living our lives fully and honestly. This taboo and its many lessons deserve a place in school.

Henri Nouwen believes that technocratic education, wherein the teacher is the expert, obscures questions around how we live. Henri Nouwen encourages us, as teachers, to enter into fearless communication. I am encouraging all teachers everywhere to be whole, and to offer honesty, openness, and authenticity to their students. Teachers have to care about looking within. “We have to know ourselves, we have to search out the causes which make us think and do certain things, to find out why we are” (Krishnamurti, 1988, p. 10). The trick is to accept where we’re at, in order to move forward. “I have to study myself in actuality—as I am, not as I wish to be” (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 22).

In Eckhart Tolle’s most recent book *A New Earth*, he writes: “You are most powerful, most effective, when you are completely yourself” (Tolle, 2005, p. 108). Anything you read in this thesis will only work for you if the ideas ring true to who you are. All students, no matter their IQ, can spot fakeness. I am not a perfect teacher, or a perfect person by any means. Is this even possible? “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life” (Palmer, 2004, 5). We are all broken in one way or another. Let’s listen to each other’s stories.

The values that *Six Feet Under* has presented to me are ideals that I have brought or want to bring into the microcosm of my classroom. Here is a poem I was given to read in one of my university classes. Its message still gives me shivers to this day.

“Name me a crater of fire! A peak of snow!

Name me the mountains on the moon!

But the name of the mountain that you climb all day,

Ask not your teacher that.”

(St-Vincent, 1975, 52)

The name of the mountain that we climb all day is Life. School can’t just be about literature and history and mathematics, not if these subjects are disconnected from life itself, at the expense of real learning.

Six Feet Under tackled the death taboo, among others, and so should the classroom.

Chapter One

Journeys

The premise: a family-run funeral home. Real people. At times, the series seems to be dealing with so many issues and tragedies at once that it may feel unrealistic or overly dramatic. It is, after all, a television series designed to captivate its audience. The Fishers go through and overcome many obstacles, to say the least. I can see myself in their struggles. Perhaps you will, too. Ruth is trying to reclaim her life after the death of her husband: stubbornly, awkwardly, and successfully. Her eldest son Nate is on a spiritual path, finding his place in relationship: with women, family, work, a medical condition, God, and himself. His younger brother David is struggling to be true to himself and his sexuality, all while balancing this ‘self’ with the ‘self’ others see. Claire, the youngest sibling, is seeking something more in this world: more than superficiality. She gets there through her art, eventually learning real maturity. Brenda, Nate’s major love interest throughout the five seasons, is what she would call ‘messed up’. She is unlearning old habits and finding healthier ways to enjoy life. All these characters, through the most horrific of experiences, have the capacity to heal. They are inspirations for me: real, messed up people, who actually freak out once in a while, the way we all do, on their beautiful, difficult journeys. Until their journeys come to an end, as all journeys do.

In this chapter, I introduce *Six Feet Under*’s five main characters. In order to pay attention to the individual, to really listen to their story, I have separated their journeys. Bear witness to their lives. See yourself in them. Learn from their experiences.

Ruth's journey

Nathaniel was the first man Ruth ever slept with, and after their very first sexual encounter, she was pregnant. They got married immediately, wanting to do the 'right' thing. We find out soon after Nathaniel's tragic car accident that Ruth had been having an affair with her hairdresser, Hiram. Her sadness is mixed with much guilt, immediately showing the viewer how complicated loss can be.

Ruth is a careful person, a meticulous-to-the-extreme person, one who despises foul language and improper behavior, often saying, "Language!" after hearing one of her children swear. She has had her same safe wardrobe for decades, it seems. When her long hair is down, it is clearly a rare and liberating moment for her. Ruth had become numb.

Soon after her husband's death, she goes to a horse race with a friend, and loses twenty-five thousand dollars gambling. This is an exhilarating experience for her, and she says, "I don't want to be careful. I want to feel alive" (Kaplan & Ball, 2002). Ruth continues to seek out experiences which will make her feel alive. She decides to get a job at a flower shop, working for Nicolai, a Russian man she eventually starts dating. The smell of the flowers really affects Ruth, as she sobs, "It's the smell of the flowers. [...] I'm used to people crying and being exhausted. People being shattered. I'm so happy I can't wait to come back tomorrow" (Williams & Ball, 2002). Ruth enjoys her work at the flower shop, but receives complaints from customers about her funereal arrangements. She takes a course in flower arrangement, and learns to let go through proper breathing. She can now create beautiful flower presentations, and her hair flows beyond her shoulders.

Ruth goes camping with Hiram. While in the woods, she gets a bad headache. She reaches for her Aspirin, but accidentally takes a stray tab of ecstasy her son David hid in the Aspirin bottle. While Hiram is sleeping, she leaves the tent. She thinks she sees a bear, and chases it through the woods. The bear leads her to Nathaniel, her husband who died recently.

She says to him, "Nathaniel, what happened to us? We were so in love once."

"Life happened to us."

"I miss what we had."

"So find it again." (Taylor & Ball, 2002)

Nathaniel may be expressing these sentiments, but it is Ruth's hallucination. My impression is that his words are what she believes or needs to hear. Life happened to this couple, as it happens to all couples. What choices did they make along the way? What choices do *we* make?

Ruth dates Nicolai, and begins openly discussing her sex life with her children. One day, she finds him seriously injured at the flower shop. He has two broken legs. She pays for his medical bills and commits herself to take care of him in her home for eight weeks. Ruth needs to feel needed, and wants to take care of people, even though it is the one thing that completely stresses her out. She eventually ends up paying off Nicolai's enormous debt. After having put all this work and money into their relationship, Ruth asks Nicolai to move in with her. He doesn't want to. She decides to end the relationship herself at a movie theatre when it becomes clear to her that he's only staying in the relationship out of guilt.

Ruth is often the last Fisher family member to know something. She finds out that her son David is gay and reads *Now That You Know*. She follows it like a mathematical formula,

hoping to better deal with David, his homosexuality, and her own emotions. This is not the only time Ruth throws herself into a formula on her spiritual journey. She later starts The Plan, a self-actualization seminar. The facilitator of this seminar asks Ruth, “Are you a guest in your own house, Ruth?” (Robin & Ball, 2003). And so begin the house metaphors...Ruth then takes on a whole new way of speaking. “I am speaking fiercely from the I” (Andries & Ball, 2003) and “I was imposing my old blueprint on you” (Robin & Ball, 2003) are two of the many new Ruth expressions. I have certainly read my share of self-help books, and I can understand one’s language changing as a result. After reading *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective people*, I spoke of win / win situations and depositing into my emotional bank account. David eventually calls her on how ridiculous she sounds: “Mom, I’m happy for you if this whole Plan thing of yours has enabled you to draft your blue print [...] but just between you and me, you’re starting to sound like a crazy person” (Cleveland & Ball, 2003). And so The Plan ends, but not before Ruth has made ‘I forgive you’ phone calls and has learned to be a little more assertive. This seemingly silly workshop did transform Ruth after all.

One of the intakes at the Fishers’ funeral home is a woman named Emilie Previn. An intake is a body the funeral home receives for cremation or for an open casket preparation. Ruth learns she died alone at home, choking on her frozen dinner. Emilie Previn had no friends, no family. This death impacts Ruth. She wants to give Emilie a proper funeral. She chooses the outfit, jewelry, and shoes Emilie will wear in her casket. Ruth gathers the Fisher family, and calls Father Jack from her congregation to come to the funeral. Ruth doesn’t want to believe that some people die alone. *She* does not want to die alone. “I don’t want to turn into her” (Kaplan & Ball, 2003). Neither do I. Ruth’s encounter with Emilie’s death speaks of our fear of loneliness and of our need for connection.

Sarah is Ruth's sister. She stops by unexpectedly for a visit one day and spends some time at the Fisher home. A tension builds in Ruth, a resentment which eventually explodes. Ruth is jealous that her sister always seemed to have "more fun" than she did. When she finally complains to Sarah about this frustration, Sarah's response is:

"Fun? The only man I ever loved died when I was 21,
the children I so desperately wanted were impossible because my ovaries are dry as stone,
and I'm a terrible artist, but I surround myself with people who have talent
that I will never realize. It's all hard, Ruth. We just made different choices"
(Taylor & Ball, 2003).

At this point, Sarah takes the mop Ruth is holding and continues mopping the kitchen floor. It's a powerful moment between the sisters, and I believe it plants a new understanding in Ruth, about people and the assumptions we make. It does the same for the viewer. My own judgments of Sarah turn to compassion.

Brenda is Nate's girlfriend, and eventually becomes his fiancée. Ruth doesn't seem to like Brenda and never shows her any warmth, until the bridal shower. Ruth reveals, "I love you because you are so independent and spirited and you make no apologies for yourself. And you know you can't smother someone or you'll lose them. You accept Nate as he is and that's beautiful" (Kaplan & Ball, 2003). The truth is that Ruth wants to be more like Brenda, and this is intimidating. She has developed self-awareness about the way that she is as a person and in her relationships. For now. What is interesting once again is that these are only Ruth's assumptions about Brenda. Brenda is all of these things, and at the same time she isn't. She is human, with her own issues, which we'll explore later in her journey.

Ruth finds out that her son Nate is going in for surgery, and once again, she is the last to know. He avoided telling her what was wrong for as long as he possibly could. He tells her he was trying to protect her.

Ruth says:

“You are not supposed to protect me.

I’m supposed to protect you. [...] I can try.

That’s what a mother does. She tries to protect you
and most of the time she fails, but it’s the trying that makes you feel loved.

How are you going to feel loved if you don’t ever let me try?

[...] There were just so many months I could have loved you better.”

(Robin & Ball, 2003)

Nate breaks down in her arms. Being a mother now, Ruth’s words here impact me deeply. I can see how the love is in the trying. I won’t ever be a perfect mom. But I will try. What else can we do but try our best?

Ruth falls for the Fishers’ quirky young apprentice: Arthur. He makes her feel young again. She tries to please him, sneaks out and follows him when he’s jogging, and dances to the music he makes on his computer. This potential relationship quickly comes to a disappointing end when Ruth realizes that Arthur does not have a sex drive, is a virgin, and is actually quite strange. She was fooling herself; but she played, giggled, and danced in the meantime. Another silly experience with benefits.

Ruth meets her first real friend, Bettina, through her sister Sarah. They go for hikes, go out to eat, go shopping and shoplifting (Bettina gets Ruth to steal a lipstick), and go on a road

trip together. Ruth is more herself with Bettina than with anyone else. When romance isn't part of the equation, Ruth's insecurities seem less intense.

And then, Ruth meets George, a tall and thin professor who has published a book on rocks. He attended a funeral at the Fisher home and forgot his glasses. Ruth answers the door when he comes back for them. She breaks down and cries. George holds her. A complete stranger. Ruth and George decide to get married three weeks into their relationship. Her rationale is that she isn't getting any younger and she doesn't want to be lonely anymore. Ruth quickly realizes George is keeping things from her, which drives her crazy. She asks lots of questions and pushes him away by prying. He asks her, "Why do I have to be the center of everything for you?" (Oliver & Ball, 2005). George starts to lose his mind, literally, and the truth is that all along he has been struggling with depressive psychosis. Ruth takes care of George, with the help of his daughter Maggie, for what feels like an eternity. After receiving electroshock therapy, George comes back home to a Ruth who is sick of taking care of people. She decides to set him up in his own apartment and leave him, going to another extreme. Sometimes, this is how we find our way into balance.

Once Ruth and George have parted ways, Ruth visits Hiram, the flame she cheated on Nathaniel with, at his hair salon. She gets a haircut and they have sex. They decide to go camping for the weekend, a decision Ruth will forever regret. By the campfire, she says to Hiram, "You know what I'd like? I'd like to see life clearly. But that's the first thing to fly out the window when I get romantic" (Oliver & Ball, 2006). She sounds detached and more confident than usual. Ruth doesn't want to have sex with Hiram that night. They argue about it in the morning, and she decides to find her way home by herself, through the woods.

After walking for what could be hours, Ruth has a vision. All the men in her life pop up one by one in front of her. She is holding a rifle. They each have something to say to her.

Hiram says, "You came to me for a reason."

She shoots him.

Nicolai says, "Bring me my lunch."

She shoots him.

Arthur says, "Let's rub heads."

She shoots him.

George says, "It's perfectly normal to live in a bomb shelter."

She shoots him.

Nathaniel says, "I'm your first love." (Oliver & Ball, 2006)

She unexpectedly shoots Nathaniel too.

Ruth is moving on.

Nate's journey

Nate is the eldest of the Fisher siblings and has been living in Seattle working at a food co-op. He never wanted to be part of the funeral business. He is flying home for the holidays. He meets a woman named Brenda on the plane, and has sex with her in the janitor's closet of the California airport. It is at this moment that Nate receives his brother David's phone call. His father was killed in a car accident. Nate's world as he knows it, changes forever.

After Nate finds out that his dad left him half the funeral home, Nate chooses to stay in L.A. and pursue funeral directing, the one thing he'd been trying to get away from. It turns out

Nate has a gift for speaking to people who are grieving. He comforts his mother as she grieves for her husband. He encourages her tears and her insanity.

When Paco, a young gang member dies, these are the words he tells Paco's mom, "I'm not gonna tell you that it's all gonna be ok, that it just takes time. This is as bad as it gets" (Andries & Ball, 2002). Here, Nate acknowledges this woman's grief and its seriousness, not claiming the sun will come out tomorrow, which it won't. She can walk away feeling as though it's alright to be sad, for as long as she needs. Many families who come to the Fisher funeral home cry in Nate's arms. Nate believes in God, but isn't sure what this means, exactly. He is looking.

He soon finds out about the secret life his father had. Nathaniel traded funerals for oil changes, marijuana, and an empty room behind a restaurant. In Nathaniel's secret room, Nate finds cigarette butts and ashtrays, cards, old records, a lipstick stained glass...He wonders what his dad was up to in there, and realizes that there's so much he didn't know about his father. And now it's too late. Nate doesn't want to end up this way. He says to Brenda, "I don't want to be somebody who, when I die, nobody knows who I was."

Brenda's simple response to Nate's fear is, "So don't be" (Taylor & Ball, 2002). Nate doesn't want to become an Emilie Previn either.

Nate and Brenda have a very intense chemistry. They fall in love, or in lust, very quickly.

As Nate works his way to becoming a funeral director, Brenda suggests they visit different funeral homes, that they pretend to be purchasing a funeral. Through these fake interviews, Nate realizes that most of the business is NOT about what he values: communication, understanding, listening, and being present.

One morning, in the Fisher kitchen, David tells Nate about one of their intakes. A wife hit her annoying husband over the head with a frying pan. David says, “She told the police it was because he was boring.” Nate thinks a moment, and then responds with “The sick part is that I understand it.”

“Me too.”

“Sometimes I’m boring.”

“Me too.” (Kaplan & Ball, 2002)

Nate fears being boring, being unimportant. And he fears death too. “Of course I’m afraid of it. What sane person isn’t?” (Taylor & Ball, 2002). Would he be less afraid of death if he felt as though his life had meaning?

Nate and Brenda argue while Brenda is driving, about their common lack of healthy past relationships, and about marriage and children. They get into a car accident. They are not seriously injured, but while in the hospital after undergoing some normal tests and x-rays, Nate finds out he has AVM. AVM stands for Arteriovenous Malformation. An AVM is a tangle of abnormal blood vessels. Brain AVMs are of special concern because of the damage they cause when they bleed, which is what Nate has. They are very rare and occur in less than 1% of the general population. He could die from this. Nate does not tell Brenda about the AVM. A distance grows between them, perhaps a distance that was already growing... Brenda is going through her own questions and her own drama, and starts to pay less attention to Nate, especially sexually.

When Nate has to fly to Seattle to pick up a body, he invites his sister Claire to come along and they stay at his old friend Lisa’s. It is clear that Lisa has feelings for Nate. That

night, after having a disconnected phone conversation with Brenda, Nate breaks down in front of Lisa. He cries, and the viewer knows he has been struggling to cope with his AVM diagnosis. Lisa wants to believe he is crying for her. They have sex.

Brenda proposes to Nate upon his return to Seattle. He says yes.

Nate has a dream: he joins a game of Chinese checkers. He plays with his dad, and with the personified characters of Life and Death. He finds out that Life and Death are in business together. Death says, "Let's just call it a mutually beneficial arrangement" (Ball, 2003). What does it mean that life and death are in business together? They work together, having the same goal. They both benefit from their inseparability. Living life fully makes death less scary, and confronting mortality makes life more sacred.

Nate is at the beach when David phones to tell him he has passed his funeral director's test. Nate sees his dad, sitting in the sand next to him. Nathaniel tells him, "You're in the game now, buddy-boy, whether you like it or not" (Ball, 2003). The game is life. Nate is alive. He has AVM, he will be having a baby, but he is living and breathing. So now what?

The Fishers get an intake who teaches Nate an important lesson. A young black boy collapsed during football tryouts and died. Sunstroke. This boy keeps appearing to Nate throughout the episode, in tears, saying, "I'm scared. What's gonna happen to me now? I was so young. Why me?" Nate answers back, "What makes you so [...] special?" Nate, in essence, is talking to himself. At the end of this episode, Nate hears the football player sobbing.

Nate yells, "What? What [...] do you want from me?"

“I want you to see me. Look at me.” The football player is suddenly in front of Nate. He says seriously, no more tears now, “Look at me. That’s more like it.” (Andries & Ball, 2003)

Nate looks right at him, an acknowledgment of his AVM, his fear, and his own mortality.

It’s clear that Nate and Brenda have different spiritual outlooks, however subtle, from the very beginning. Brenda tells him, “I think people live on through the people they love and the things they do with their lives. If they manage to do things with their lives” (Andries & Ball, 2003). Nate asks, “But there’s no plan?” He needs to believe in something more.

At the Fisher funeral home, Nate meets a female rabbi. She is a beautiful young woman, and Nate asks her lots of questions about the Jewish way. He very quickly tells her about his AVM. Nate seems to be soaking in all her wisdom. She says, “I try to live my life every day in a way that honors God” (Soloway & Ball, 2003). I love this line. Even though I don’t personally choose to use the word God, I also want to live everyday in a way that honors life itself, not simply going along with whatever routine, unconscious of choice or beauty.

Nate wonders whether or not Brenda and he are meant to be together. The rabbi believes a soul mate is “the person that makes you be the most you that you could possibly be. [...] Maybe your soul mate is the person who forces your soul to grow the most. Not all growth feels good” (Soloway & Ball, 2003). Is Brenda his soul mate? The answer is not a simple “yes” or “no”.

Nate finally tells Brenda about his AVM. She holds him.

Nate runs into Lisa at a grocery store in L.A. He wonders why she isn't in Seattle. As it turns out, she is pregnant with Nate's baby. She does not expect him to be a father to the child, and she moves to L.A. simply for a vegan chef's job, a coincidence. This is a lot for Nate to take in, and the viewer as well.

Nate does a fantastic job of being present for a biker gang's funeral, so much so that the dead man's wife gives Nate her husband's bike as a thank you. She says about riding a bike that it's "the closest thing to flying without leaving the ground" (Buck & Ball, 2003). Nate needs this after hearing Lisa's news. He rides the bike dangerously fast, but feeling alive, to the beach to think about what he needs to do. This bike is a symbol for Nate's independence and freedom, which he still has, to a larger extent than he realizes.

He tells Brenda about Lisa, finally convinced that honesty needs to be a basic rule for their relationship to work. Brenda is speechless, and takes time away from Nate, eventually deciding to still marry him. Brenda has her own guilt.

Nate tells Lisa that he wants to be a father to their baby. After all this, Nate finds out about the many affairs Brenda has had and been secretive about. He ends their engagement.

Nate fills out a pre-need before having surgery for his AVM. A pre-need is a form stating a person's requests for their own funeral and burial. The surgery is a close call and Nate temporarily dies. While he is in this state, the viewer sees different scenarios: Nate with serious loss of speech and motor skills being coached by his brother David, Nate happily married to Lisa, Nate married to and arguing with Brenda, Nate with an ex-girlfriend, and Nate if his dad had married someone else—a totally different person. These images show the viewer

that Nate, even in dream, is worrying and exploring different scenarios, and seeking answers. What will happen to him after surgery? And how will he choose to live his life thereafter?

In the first episode of the third season, Nate and Lisa are married. Their daughter's name is Maya. Nate wants to do the right thing for the baby, and seems to genuinely believe that it can work with Lisa. He sells his motorbike: his freedom. He tries hard. On the surface, they seem happy. It is soon clear that Lisa is extremely insecure about their relationship, perhaps rightfully so, and therefore nags and complains quite often. She circles problem purchases on the visa bill, and criticizes or questions most of Nate's actions and decisions. Nate, on the other hand, seems to be regularly apologetic in order to keep the peace, but on the side has started smoking cigarettes and lies about working late so he can have a beer and watch a television show. He fantasizes about Brenda. He needs his space, much like Nathaniel did.

When Nate finds out his mom only married his dad because she was pregnant, he says to Lisa, "I don't like knowing that my whole existence was an accident. It's just too [...] random" (Ball, 2004). Again, Nate wants to have a clear purpose in life. His father appears to him in a dream, saying how similar they are. Nate tells him: "I am not you. I love my family." His dad responds with, "Buddy-boy, do you think I would have stuck around if I didn't love mine?" (Cleveland & Ball, 2004). Nate is starting to realize how similar he and his dad actually are.

On a camping trip with Lisa, Maya, and friends of theirs, they spot a snake near the campfire. Nate attacks the snake with a stick, beating it to a bloody pulp—in front of everyone. The snake, throughout history, has come to represent many things. In this context, it may

symbolize temptation. Nate destroys his 'urges' for freedom, for Brenda, by killing the snake, trying so hard to do the right thing with Lisa. It's clear that there is much repressed anger in Nate. This only grows, as he is in such denial of it. He eventually blows up at Lisa, "I'm on your [...] leash. [...] I don't give a shit about smoking, Lisa. I give a shit about being myself" (Soloway & Ball, 2004).

When Brenda's father dies, Nate goes to the funeral. He and Brenda have a talk. They have missed each other. "I think it's all about timing," Brenda says to Nate (Wright & Ball, 2004). There is still a loving energy between them. Later that night, Nate has a dream. Bernard Chenoweth, Brenda's dead father is talking to Nate: "You don't have to worry about Brenda. You found your happiness, Nate. She'll find hers. It's just a matter of time."

"What if I haven't found mine?" (Wright & Ball, 2004)

Nate admits he hasn't found his happiness. He is ready to stop pretending. He has an honest talk with Lisa. He feels it's not working, that he can't give her what she wants. They later decide to give it a real try, but to do it from a place of acceptance and non-judgment. Nate wants to be allowed to be who he is. Nate still seems unhappy in the relationship but there is no sign he would ever be willing to desert it.

Lisa goes on a trip to visit her sister, leaving Nate and Maya behind. She never makes it to her sister's. She is missing for days, driving Nate to insanity. He constantly drinks, goes out, often leaving Maya with last minute reluctant babysitters or even alone. When Lisa's car is found by the beach, Nate stays at a motel nearby, hoping she will come back to her car. While

lying in bed, Nate hears a knock at the door. David and Claire have come. They don't say a word. Nate fiercely grabs his siblings and holds them tight, kissing each one.

Lisa is dead and her body is eventually found on the beach. When Nate finds out his wife is dead, he drinks at a bar and gets into a serious fight. He shows up, cut and bloody, on Brenda's doorstep. She lets him in and takes care of his cuts and bruises.

What's extremely interesting about this scenario is that it isn't just that someone's wife dies. How do you feel when your spouse dies, the spouse you wished you were not married to? There's the mourning and the grieving, but there's also the guilt, and the relief: one of the many paradoxes explores in the series. How does one cope with that?

Nate buries Lisa the way she would have wanted it, illegally. He buries her in nature, without chemicals, without a casket. Body to earth. This is a physically and emotionally exhaustive experience for Nate, but it is intense and healing as well. He screams, sobs, digs, yells, digs, sobs, and waits for the sun to rise. Nate continues to wonder about God and heaven and hell.

Being a funeral director no longer feels right to Nate, and he can't handle the sadness anymore. He starts to work at a dog kennel. He compares dogs with people who are grieving: "You just have to be with them in a totally instinctual way" (Robin & Ball, 2005).

Nate goes back to work as a funeral director when David needs him after having been through his own traumatic experience.

After using sex as a means of escaping his pain, Nate eventually decides he does want to be with Brenda. He brings Maya over and they quickly fall into a family routine. They also quickly fall into regular arguments. A girl, even Brenda, will not resolve Nate's state of mind.

Lisa's death continues to nag at Nate. When he finds a suspicious photo of Lisa at the beach in the book given to him by Lisa's niece, he confronts Lisa's brother-in-law. It becomes clear that he and Lisa had had an ongoing affair, and that he was there at the beach with her the day she went missing. Lisa made it clear to him she wanted to be with Nate now. Out of fear that Lisa would reveal their affair to her sister, his wife, he killed her. He doesn't tell Nate this in so many words, but he does end up shooting himself in the mouth in front of Nate and his own wife, who was eavesdropping nearby.

Nate marries Brenda, and they decide to have a baby together. The first time Brenda is pregnant, she has a miscarriage, so when she is pregnant for a second time, both she and Nate have fears about the baby making it to term and being healthy once it's born.

Sam Hoviak, an old high school friend of Nate's, dies. He was leaning out of his truck to pick up the newspaper, and accidentally ran over himself. Sam's high school version of himself says to Nate in the Fisher basement, "Do you remember that feeling? That there was nothing in the world you couldn't get away with and it would always be that way?" (Buck & Ball, 2006). Nate can remember that feeling. I can remember that feeling. Life was mine when I was a teenager. I lived it making no apologies for myself, having only the greatest expectations for what was to come.

At Sam's funeral, Nate meets another buddy of his, and they go out for drinks.

Nate says,

“I lie awake in bed at night thinking
 God thank you for letting me live this long [...]
 I’ve just had a lot of serious shit happen to me in my life.
 And I really get it now that this doesn’t last.
 I’m no different from anybody else. Yes, this will happen to me.
 It is happening to me a little bit each day.
 And that doesn’t freak me out. If anything, it’s liberating.”
 (Buck & Ball, 2006)

Nate claims to be confronting his own mortality.

His buddy tells him he’s nervous about turning forty. Nate responds, “Well would you change anything? Like who you’re with or what you do or what kind of person you are? Because if you would, do it now” (Buck & Ball, 2006). These are important self-reflective questions. Would we change anything? If so, why aren’t we? Is Nate ultimately asking himself these questions? Will he, does he, take his own advice?

In season five, Nate turns 40. He looks through old photo albums, reflecting on his life. Nathaniel suddenly appears. Nate looks over and says, “Time flies when you’re having fun, huh?”

“No, time flies when you’re pretending to have fun. Time flies when you’re pretending to love Brenda and that baby she wants so much. Time flies when you’re pretending to know what people mean when they say love. Let’s face it, buddy-boy” (Wright & Ball, 2006). Time flies when we pretend. We pretend to be who we’d like to be, to love our spouse, to love our

job. We pretend, and then it's over. Having real fun, being present with love and appreciation, actually makes time stand still.

Nate meets Maggie, George's daughter. They have death in common. Maggie's son died when he was two, of leukemia. They seem to have an immediate peaceful connection.

Brenda throws Nate a surprise fortieth birthday party, which he doesn't seem thrilled about. Everyone is there. Nate has a talk with Maggie, when he goes into the bedroom to get some space at the party. She was there needing alone time as well.

He says,

"I'm just really [...] lonely.

I just feel like all day long, all I do is manage myself.

Try to [...] connect with people.

But it's like no matter how much energy you put into getting to the station on time

or getting on the right train, there's still no [...] guarantee

that anybody's gonna be there for you,

to pick you up when you get there."

(Wright & Ball, 2006)

Maggie replies, "Well, I know that if you think life's a vending machine where you put in virtue and you get out happiness, then you're probably gonna be disappointed" (Wright & Ball, 2006). This truly speaks to Nate, who has been trying to be good, to do the right thing,

perhaps expecting happiness in return. Instead, he is miserable, and probably confused about why.

A bird flies in the kitchen window. No one can get it out. They leave the window open, hoping it'll find its own way out. It eventually does, but later on flies in through the bedroom window. And then back to the kitchen. Nate's frustration builds up to the point that he swats the bird to death in front of all his guests. I believe the bird is another symbol for freedom. Nate is angry at the bird, but the bird *is* Nate. Nate won't let himself be free. He continuously chooses to come back. To be trapped.

Nate later finds out that Maggie is a Quaker, when one of her friend's from Church dies. He is now curious about Quakerism. Maggie tells him all about the silent centering time, and listening for everyone's inner God. Nate convinces Brenda to go to his first Quaker meeting with him. At the gathering, Nate rises and says to the group, "All day long I deal with death and stress and it's nice to be in a place of peace" (Buck & Ball, 2006). On the way home, Nate and Brenda argue about spirituality.

When Rico, part owner now of the Fisher funeral home, David and Nate discuss the future of the home, Nate votes for going green. He wants to make a better world. "Wrap me in a shroud and plant me next to a tree" (Buck & Ball, 2006). Nate wants to be buried as naturally as possible.

Nate picks up Maggie to take her to a Quaker meeting. Instead of leaving, they stay and talk, and eventually have sex. When Nate gets up to leave, his arm goes numb. He falls over. Maggie phones 911.

David's journey

David is a few years younger than Nate. David is gay but his family doesn't know it yet. He is dating Keith, a black police officer.

He is extremely hurt when his father leaves half the business to Nate. He is afraid that Nate has always been the favorite son.

David believes in God, and in heaven and in hell. Both he and Keith go to Church regularly. David is invited to become a deacon at his Church and follow his father's footsteps. He accepts with honor. He wants to keep his homosexuality a secret from the Church as well. Keith can't deal with David's self-hatred, and decides to end the relationship until David can accept himself, and stop hiding all the time.

One of the Fisher intakes is Paco, a Latino gang member who was shot while at a payphone. He comes to life for David, teaching him to 'step up', to defend himself. In the meantime, the Croner company (a large corporation) is trying to buy out the Fisher family business. David, with Paco's help, becomes more assertive with Matt Gelarti, the Croner representative.

Another intake is a gay boy. He was beaten to death for being gay. David insists on restoring him. The boy speaks to David, appearing to him throughout the episode, but he is mangled and bloody, no matter how much work David does on his body.

David slowly lets Nate, and Claire know that he is gay. They are happy for him, in a healthy non-reactive sort of way. When David tells his mom, she only wishes he'd been able to tell her sooner. And about his dad, David says to himself, "I feel like my father would hate me if he knew" (Robin & Ball, 2002). He eventually also comes out to the Church. The mangled bloody gay boy reappears in a later episode—only he is smiling, with smooth features now, a sign that David has come a long way. David and Keith get back together.

David joins a gay men's chorus, finally doing something for himself. When his director asks him to relax a little with his solo, David learns to let go. David is very much like his mother, in the way that he has a stuffiness and tension about him needing to be released.

At a funeral directors' conference in Las Vegas, David is to present the speech that has normally been his father's job. He is nervous about following Nathaniel's act. He has meticulously prepared a long detailed speech, but decides to throw away the plan and all of his notes, to speak from the heart. He gets a wonderful, supportive reaction from the crowd. He is proud of himself.

As with Ruth and Nate, Nathaniel appears to David too. David tells him, "I miss you, dad" (Robin & Ball, 2003). A year after his father's death at Christmas time, David remembers last year, how he was so obsessed with his work that he didn't take the time to relax with his dad. This makes me wonder: how often am I too caught up with a particular goal to take a moment to be present to someone else? To what extent do life obligations compromise our capacity to experience the joy of being with others—our family, friends, students, colleagues?

David and Keith take care of Taylor for a while, Keith's niece, while Keith's sister is in jail. They act as parents for this little girl, and this experience surely motivates them to

eventually become parents together. They have a rocky relationship throughout the five seasons. They break up and get back together a few times, but they do ultimately stay together.

David's sexual journey is an important one for him. He goes from his commitment to Keith, to trying phone sex, to having sex with strangers, to calling a prostitute. He and Keith try a threesome together, and they go back and forth between having an open and a closed sexual relationship. There are control, anger, and insecurity issues that continue to get in the way, but they have a commitment to being together and they successfully work toward that end. At one point, David cries on Keith's shoulder, overwhelmed by all their issues, "I want us to last. I want us to stay together; I just want it to be worth it" (Cleveland & Ball, 2004). And it does turn out to be worth it. The gay couple in the series is the only couple that starts together, and ends together.

One morning, before leaving for a three month security guard tour, Keith tells David, "You're too insecure" (Buck & Ball, 2005). That morning, maybe as a reaction to that very comment, David picks up a hitchhiker on his way to work. Jake claims to have run out of gas. David takes him to a gas station, and then to an ATM machine, where Jake hits him over the head with a gun, taking his money. Jake continues to torture David that entire day and night.

In a normal episode of *Six Feet Under*, the viewer is taken back and forth between characters, but in this episode, as soon as we meet Jake, the focus is on David for the rest of the episode. The viewer is forced to deal with the horrific situation David has found himself in. There is no out. This was the hardest episode for me to watch. Jake ties David up, and later forces him to buy drugs and to smoke crack. Jake convinces David to go into an alley to look for his old childhood dog, but it was a trick. Jake pours gasoline all over David, and sticks a gun in

his mouth, saying, “Suck it. [...] You are so [...] pathetic” (Buck & Ball, 2005). David’s life flashes before his eyes. Jake takes off. David is still alive.

David tells Keith what happened, and Keith immediately leaves the tour to come home and support David through this trauma. David simply tells his family that he was robbed and beaten. This situation is similar to Nate keeping his AVM to himself for so long. This silence is always disguised as being for the benefit of others, so they won’t worry. David has trouble letting himself be taken care of, as many of the Fishers do. As many of us do.

David does eventually open up to Claire about what really happened. He says, “I forgot to pray. Can you believe that? I totally forgot to pray.”

“It’s ok. God saved you anyway” (Robin & Ball, 2005). Claire says this through tears. This is particularly powerful because Claire doesn’t believe in God. She says this for him.

For his birthday, Claire gives David a framed photo she took of him by the Fisher garage sale. They had set the rest of their stuff on fire. The picture shows David walking among the flames. He looks like a firefighter hero. He looks confident. A very meaningful gift.

David is haunted by Jake, and begins to have regular anxiety attacks. He goes in to identify Jake. They have found him. David later visits Jake in jail, hoping to finally heal.

Jake asks, “Did you bring me anything?”

“Uh, no. I hate you” (Oliver & Ball, 2005). There is humor in this statement. David was hoping for an apology. Jake continues to play mind games, and David is left without the closure he was hoping to get from the meeting. Does complete closure ever really occur? Later that

night, David stands by his balcony door, looking out at the rain. Nathaniel is suddenly by his side. His dad tells him he is brave, and that he's proud of him.

Nathaniel goes on, in a surprisingly loving tone: "You hang on to your pain like it means something, like it's worth something. Well let me tell you it's not worth shit. Let it go. Infinite possibilities and all he can do is whine. [...] You can do anything [...] you're alive."

David responds, "It can't be so simple."

"What if it is?" (Oliver & Ball, 2005). David puts his head on his father's shoulder.

Keith and David decide to adopt. After a long, frustrating process, they end up adopting Anthony and Darrel, two young black boys. These boys have had a rough life so far, and have trouble trusting that David and Keith will truly stick around. But they do, and they manage to create a loving family.

Claire's journey

Claire is the much younger sibling of the Fisher family. She is still in high school, her graduating year, when *Six Feet Under* begins. She has inherited her mother's hair. She is high on crystal meth when she finds out her father is dead. Being in this state prevents, or at the very least, delays Claire's grieving process.

Claire is at first skeptical of the school 'bad boy' Gabriel Demos, but very quickly falls in lust with him. After sleeping together, he asks her to suck his toe. She does. The next day people from school have spray painted on her bright green Hearse: toe slut. Claire proceeds to steal a

foot from a dead man's dismembered body, and inserts it in Gabriel's locker. For doing this, she is sentenced to mandatory school therapy.

When her mother tells her how hard it was when she grew up, and how lucky Claire is, Claire asks, "Just because I wasn't dropped in some dumpster means I shouldn't want things to be better?" (Ball, 2002). I've often made these kinds of comments to my mother when she tells me how hard it was for her. Claire later tells the guidance counselor "My mom is just so [...] sad. I wish I could help her."

"So help her," (Ball, 2002) he says. Claire needs to realize that there are things she can do to better her relationship with her mom. Sitting back with 'I wish I could help' is not enough.

Claire meets and falls for Billy Chenoweth, Brenda's brother. He is much older than she is, but he flirts well. As soon as she is under the mistaken impression that they have started dating, he completely ignores her. Claire asks Brenda, "Is every man out there a total asshole?"

"Yeah, at some point. Then again, so are we" (Taylor & Ball, 2002). Brenda has a quick and very true response to Claire. "Everything I think I know is wrong" (Andries & Ball, 2002). Claire makes a very important realization here, one that comes and goes throughout the five year series.

Gabriel's little brother accidentally shoots himself with his mother's gun at the beginning of one of the episodes. When Claire sees Gabe come into her home for funeral services, she reaches out to him again, wanting to take care of him, perhaps the way she would have wanted to be taken care of when her father died. Gabe apologizes for the toe slut graffiti, and Claire and Gabe become an item again. When Gabe takes off after school one day, ditching Claire, Nate finds his sister sitting on the laundry machines. She is crying, "He needs me. [...] No one's ever

needed me.” She sobs about “feeling really close to someone and then having them disappear” (Kaplan & Ball, 2002). Nate reminds her that Gabe just took off for one night. Maybe Claire is ultimately crying about her father.

Like Ruth, Claire needs to be needed, to feel connected. When her councilor asks her, “What’s your shadow?” she says, “Death and silence. Sadness or fear maybe.” After opening up about her family always acting invisible, and asking him what she should do about Gabe, he suggests, “Try not to make yourself invisible” (Robin & Ball, 2002). Good advice for all of us. Claire decides to make herself quite visible, and puts all her energy into being present for Gabe.

In a later episode, Gabe phones her to pick him up. He is hysterical and on the run from the police for having robbed a convenience store. She does pick him up. When he shoots at another car, Claire kicks him out, but not before taking the gun. She reports Gabe to the police. She is devastated, angry, and confused.

Claire meets her Aunt Sarah for the first time. When Sarah sees some of Claire’s artwork in her room, she tells her, “You’ve got an eye. You see through the veil. It’s a blessing and a curse. [...] You can drop that generic apathy crap. That’s just laziness” (Taylor & Ball, 2003). Sarah tells it like it is, and this motivates Claire enough to care about something. To pursue art. All it takes is a few words to support someone. Or bring them down. Claire visits her Aunt Sarah in Topanga Canyon. There she meets many artist friends of Sarah’s—and Toby. Toby wants to wait to love someone before having sex. This is a nice change for Claire. They start dating and Claire invites him over for Christmas dinner. After making her usual sarcastic comments to her mother and acting quite negatively about the whole ordeal, Toby calls her on her crap: “Why are you so hostile? You act like you’re incredibly put out by being alive. Maybe you think that’s

cool, but really, it's just irritating" (Buck & Ball, 2003). This comment certainly seems to shake Claire a little, and it definitely ends her relationship with Toby.

Claire starts photographing all the dead bodies that come into the Fisher home for a class project. She is very proud of her work, but Nate scolds her for doing something illegal. She also ends up with a failing grade because the project was for English class and called for an essay—not pictures. Claire goes for an art school interview. It is here that she breaks down about her father's death for the first time. She is accepted, and is very excited about this being the thing that turns her life around. There is another Hearse parked next to hers in the parking lot. She doesn't feel like such a misfit here.

Claire meets Olivier, her new art teacher. He tells the class on their first day, "We despise ourselves so much that we consider our own point of view as trivial. But that's bullshit. That's your father talking. Or whatever bad teachers you had before me" (Robin & Ball, 2004). What voices are in my head? Do I think through my father, through my teachers, and the things they have said? Where is my actual voice, the voice welling up from within?

Over drinks after an art lecture, Olivier asks Claire why she's an artist. "Because I have a lot of pain."

"Promise me you'll do great things in your life and nothing less."

"I promise" (Cleveland & Ball, 2004).

Olivier's motivational words are also a powerful force in Claire's life, subtly carving her path.

Claire meets Russell, a fellow art student. At first she assumed he was gay, but they become very close friends and she learns he is in fact not gay. They begin dating. She allows herself to become vulnerable with him, even though she has had some pretty traumatic boy experiences recently. She lets him take care of her. She lets him love her. Russell ends up sleeping with Olivier. When Claire finds out, she is livid. It's over, and she wants nothing to do with Russell again, no matter how many times he apologizes.

Claire tells her mom she doesn't ever think she'll meet the love of her life. Ruth says to her, "Of course you will. Everyone does. But chances are it won't be anything like you expect" (Buck & Ball, 2004). And it isn't.

After her breakup with Russell, Claire learns she is pregnant. She immediately decides to have an abortion, not including Russell in her decision-making process. Claire seems to go through this whole experience quite numbly and matter-of-factly, but we do see later on the kind of impact it's had on her.

Claire goes to the cemetery to find her father's grave. She runs into Nathaniel and they walk together. Whenever Claire sees her father, he's wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and he's smiling and sarcastic and playful. He is a representation of who she would like to be. They walk into a carnival, which turns out to be how heaven is depicted. Claire sees Gabe there, and his younger brother. Maybe Gabe did die, or maybe this is Claire's idea of what probably happened, but it is a powerful healing moment for her. Gabe tells Claire he loves her. She can finally put that relationship to rest. This is her closure. Unlike David, who met face to face with the man who had tortured him, Claire seems to attain a sense of closure with Gabe without actually seeing him. Maybe we are doomed for disappointment if we expect closure to come from someone else.

Claire sees Lisa at the carnival too. There is a baby in a basket by her feet. It seems to hit Claire that this baby was the baby she aborted. Lisa tells her she'll take care of him, if Claire takes care of Maya. She agrees.

Claire joins a new circle of friends at art school. Edie is one of those friends. She is a performance artist and Claire looks up to her and develops an attraction for her. She inspires Claire to start taking pictures again. Edie's feminism and fearlessness rub off on Claire. Edie is gay, and Claire begins to question her own sexuality, or at least wonder if she can be with Edie. She tries to sleep with her, but she can't seem to follow through. She has a deep love and respect for her, but can't bring herself to be attracted to her sexually.

Claire makes a doll house, a mini Fisher home, wall casket and all. Nate asks, "Where's dad?" when he notices there is no little figurine for Nathaniel. Claire says, "He's not here" (Cleveland & Ball, 2005). Another step in the direction of acceptance and healing. Healing, to me, is the process of moving forward, with our emotional wounds slowly disappearing: but always leaving a reminder scar.

Claire creates her photo-collage idea and eventually ends up getting a prestigious show. She acts pompous at her show, and tries cocaine there for the first time. When Olivier approaches her, he says, "And so it all begins. From the first success, corruption" (Oliver & Ball, 2005).

Although Billy, Brenda's brother, did not treat Claire with much respect at first, they had been chatting online the entire time he was in rehab for going off his bi-polar medication. Billy, an artist himself, had become an art teacher at Claire's school. After Claire's art show, she lets Billy take her home. At the beginning of the fifth season, Claire and Billy are together, but no

one in Claire's family approves, especially Ruth, who almost disowns her daughter, partly because of Billy, and partly because Claire decided to quit school. Ruth doesn't let Claire have access to the trust fund her father left her until she's back in school.

Claire moves in with Billy. She believes he has changed. He's on his medication. They seem to have a healthy playful relationship, until Billy becomes jealous of Claire's creativity and decides to throw his meds down the toilet. Billy soon deteriorates and starts to scare Claire with his mood swings. Claire ends their relationship. She seems numb, detached.

She moves back in with her mom, who is still acting furious with her. Claire lazes around the house, consuming Ruth's food and smoking pot all day. Nate says to her, "Getting high in the morning, huh?"

"Mom wants me to get a job. Can you believe that?"

"Well we all have to work, Claire. We all have to get a job."

"Why can't anyone in this family just let me [...] be?"

"I just flashed on Maya at this age sitting in front of the TV feeling sorry for herself. Not caring about anything or anybody. And it just broke my heart" (Cleveland & Ball, 2006).

Claire starts to look for a job. Nate's words have an impact on her. She becomes a temp at an agency, while anxiously awaiting an artist's grant. When she doesn't get the grant, her Aunt Sarah says to her, "Maybe you're not an artist" (Soloway & Ball, 2006). It was her Aunt Sarah who in the first place encouraged Claire to pursue art. These words clearly upset Claire.

Claire meets Ted at work. He's a lawyer, a republican, and isn't completely against all wars. He isn't the type of person Claire sees herself with, but she is drawn to him somehow.

Claire opens up to Ted about art school and being an artist, “And now it sort of feels like it’s over which is kind of scary because that’s always how I’ve defined myself, but then again, maybe it’s freeing in a strange way” (Kaplan & Ball, 2006). It is freeing for Claire to stop seeing herself in one particular way. She is starting to go beyond her perception of what an artist needs to look like.

Attending an art show, Claire runs into Olivier, her old art teacher.

He asks her, “Where is your self-righteousness?”

“I don’t know. I guess I lost it” (Buck & Ball, 2006).

When Claire says she hasn’t been very creative lately, Olivier reassures her, “You must let the soil rest to prepare for new growth” (Buck & Ball, 2006).

Brenda’s journey

Brenda is not a Fisher, but her role in the series is just as crucial as any of the Fisher family members. Her mother is a psychologist and her father is a psychiatrist. When we first meet Brenda, she does Shiatsu. She has vowed not to become her parents, and claims their constant analysis and judgment ruined both her and her brother Billy’s lives. When she was a girl, her parents sent her to a psychologist who studied her and ended up writing a book about her: *Charlotte, Light and Dark*. Brenda pretended to be insane for this man, going from complete silence to barking like a dog for hours.

Brenda spent much of her life taking care of Billy, who lives with manic depression, and is constantly on and off medication. They were both obsessed with a book series called *Nathaniel*

and Isobel as children, and respectively got these names tattooed on their lower backs: Isobel for Billy, and Nathaniel for Brenda, which ends up being an interesting coincidence, seeing as how Nate Fisher becomes such a significant part of her life.

When we first meet Brenda, she is calm, confident, and very directly flirtatious, basically asking Nate to have sex with her at the airport. She is aloof with him, and won't share her name, until she ends up having to drive him to go identify his father's body. It's at this point that things turn more serious. It isn't long before Nate and Brenda become inseparable, mostly in bed, but also engaging in the occasional date.

When Brenda shows up at the Fishers for dinner and Nate isn't there yet, David tells her, "I wish I could tell you where Nate is, but I have no idea." Her very casual response is, "It's OK. I can exist without him" (Williams & Ball, 2002). There is a mixture of strength and denial in this statement. On the one hand, she is totally independent, her own woman, not needing a man to define herself. On the other hand, this adamant 'I don't need anybody' attitude prevents her from experiencing real vulnerability and connection.

Billy and his bi-polar condition continue to interfere with Brenda and Nate's relationship. Billy is jealous of Nate, and while off his meds, he attacks his own sister with a knife. He wants to cut off her tattoo, as he has cut his. When Brenda notices that his back is bloody and realizes what he is about to do, she knocks him unconscious, and has Billy committed: a very difficult thing for her to do.

"Sorry I'm so weird about intimacy," Brenda tells Nate (Andries & Ball, 2002). And she is. She has trouble being vulnerable with him, and really letting him in. She becomes depressed, losing attraction toward Nate. This creates much distance between them.

One of Brenda's Shiatsu patients is a prostitute. Brenda pursues a friendship with this woman. It's at this point that Brenda begins to actively flirt with other men. Brenda decides to write a book, and begins to use her exciting sexual experiences as inspiration for her novel. She gives a client a hand job, lets a stranger feel her up at a clothing store, has a threesome at a lifestyles party, has sex with the author of *The Lie of Romance* after a book reading, and invites two young guys off her street into her place. They smoke pot and take turns sleeping with her. She writes about all these experiences. She feels alive. She shares her excitement with her new friend. Even the prostitute questions Brenda's actions and suggests she see a psychologist.

In the meantime, Nate and Brenda are engaged, and he has no idea what she's been up to. Nate has told her about his AVM, and about Lisa's pregnancy. Brenda forgave him quite quickly, maybe because of her own guilt. Then Nate finds out about Brenda's numerous affairs. He reads her book, and then accidentally meets one of the young guys Brenda slept with, who speaks and acts like the guy from her book, and he's wearing the same hat. This is a big clue that Brenda isn't just writing fiction, and Nate gets her to admit that all the experiences she wrote about she actually lived. Nate throws his engagement ring at her, saying, "Life doesn't have to be miserable just because you are."

"How long have you hated me like this, Nate?"

"Oh, I don't need to hate you. You do a pretty damn good job of hating yourself."

"The only reason you stay with me is because I was never really here" (Soloway & Ball, 2003). Brenda is aware that she had a foot out the relationship the entire time.

Brenda leaves town. She wants to heal. She goes to sex addicts anonymous meetings, becomes totally sober, and begins to meditate. When she comes back to town, Nate is married to

Lisa. Brenda visits Nate, and it's clear they still have deep feelings for each other. She decides to become a therapist, the one thing she never wanted to be. This is similar to Nate ending up as a funeral director. It is interesting how they both end up facing the very thing they'd been running away from.

Brenda meets Joe. She takes it very slowly with Joe, trying to make it to ninety days without sleeping with him. She almost makes it. Joe and Brenda decide to buy a house together, and to work on having a baby. While shopping for bedding for their new house, Brenda has a vision, of hundreds of pillows and blankets falling on her until she is completely covered. She is scared of the commitment she is making.

After Lisa's death, Nate comes around to Brenda's more and more, and Brenda repeats old familiar ways. She cheats on Joe with Nate. Joe finds out when he catches them together on the couch. Brenda almost resorts to going back to drugs for comfort and escape. She decides to go to another sex addicts meeting.

Brenda welcomes Nate and his daughter Maya into her life, very quickly becoming a mommy for this little girl. They decide to get married. Brenda is pregnant with Nate's baby, but has a miscarriage the day before their wedding. At the wedding, Brenda has a vision of dead Lisa. Lisa tells her she isn't maternal, and, "every time you try to have a nice normal life, you [mess] it up" (Robin & Ball, 2006). This is how Brenda feels about herself.

Brenda begins to work as a therapist and is soon pregnant again. She and Nate constantly argue, about parenting, about spirituality, about everything. Brenda doesn't feel as though he really wants this baby. There seems to be a world between them. They are no longer connecting. Brenda is also aware of all the time Nate is spending with Maggie, and his new interest in

Quakerism. Brenda goes to the Fisher home, and says to Nate privately, “It’s like we’re together but we’re not together. Just do what you want. God, for once in your life, just do what you want. Not what you think people want or what you should do” (Kaplan & Ball, 2006). There is a lot of strength in these words. Brenda means what she says, and at the same time, wants for it to work with Nate.

She later decides to meet Nate at a Quaker meeting. He is picking Maggie up, and she wants to surprise him there, and try to support his spiritual decisions. Nate never shows up.

Chapter Two

Everything. Everyone. Everywhere. Ends.

In this chapter, I bring Ruth, David, Claire, Brenda, and Nate together to take a look at the powerful conclusion of the series. Next, I personally connect to the series, and provide some analysis. In the following chapter, I extract six important lessons from the show, lessons that are crucial to our teaching, and to our everyday lives.

A major loss

Nate is in a coma after having slept with Maggie. He has developed a new AVM. He is in the hospital. He dreams he is talking to Brenda, “I used to think it was passion, but it’s just drama. Brenda, we have to face the truth. We don’t fit. [...] I’m forty years old and I see that there can be peace between a man and a woman and that’s what I want” (Oliver & Ball, 2006).

David is at home with Keith and their boys, watching a movie, when Maggie phones him about Nate’s seizure. She asks him to phone Brenda.

Brenda is at home after spending the evening waiting for Nate at a Quaker meeting. She’s been trying to reach him on his cell phone all night. David calls to tell her Nate is at the hospital.

Claire is out having dinner with Ted. They are speaking about the war in Iraq, adamantly expressing different points of view, when David phones Claire to tell her about Nate. Ted takes her to the hospital and does not leave her side.

Ruth is camping with Hiram, then shooting her exes video-game-style, then trying to make her way back home, as David keeps calling to let her know about her son. She cannot be reached.

When Nate wakes from his coma, Brenda is there. He finally sets himself free. “We’ve been trying. Both of us. For a long time. [...] I’m not gonna fight. I’m so tired of fighting” (Oliver & Ball, 2006). When he sees Maggie, he says, “I’m not sorry for anything” (Oliver & Ball, 2006).

Claire is thrilled that her brother is alive. She thanks Ted from the bottom of her heart for staying with her all night, kisses Nate goodbye, and goes home to shower. Still no Ruth. David stays with Nate at the hospital. They both fall asleep.

Nate has one last dream. A van is honking. David, turned surfer dude, pulls him into the van. Nathaniel drives them to the beach while they smoke pot together. Nate looks at David, smiling: “I had this whole other idea, [...] really I thought you were this whole completely other person” (Oliver & Ball, 2006). Nate and David are brothers, but do they know each other? Nathaniel says, “We are so [...] lost” (Oliver & Ball, 2006). They all laugh.

At the beach, Nate takes off his shirt and runs into the water. David and Nathaniel are back in their funeral home suits. This is the end of the dream. And the end of Nate’s life. Water is the ultimate symbol for life, so it is interesting to have Nate’s death represented by Nate running into the water without fear: into life. This is the ultimate message of the series: that death, and our awareness of it, brings us closer to life.

Nate flat lines. A beeping sound. This wakes David up.

Nate dies.

As surprising as it was to have Nathaniel Sr. die in the first moments of the first episode, it is even more surprising to have Nate Jr. die in the fifth season. He is a main character, if not *the* main character: the one that all the viewers have come to laugh with, cry with, worry with, and love. *Six Feet Under* makes us feel close to Nate, allows us to see ourselves in him, and then forces us to mourn his death. Even those we love dearly die.

Ruth, David, Claire, and Brenda also mourn Nate, each in their own way.

When Ruth finally knows of her son's death, she says, through tears, "None of it makes any sense" (Robin & Ball, 2006). She can't believe she wasn't there when it happened.

David tries to keep it together for the funeral. He picks up Nate's body, washes it, and decides to follow through with his brother's wishes: to be buried in a shroud, and planted next to a tree. Nate's death causes David to regress. He thinks he sees Jake everywhere, wearing a red-hooded sweatshirt, and starts having panic attacks again.

After Nate dies, Claire is devastated. She can't bring herself to dress for the funeral. She shows up wearing jeans and a t-shirt. David says to her, "You could have dressed."

"I couldn't."

"The rest of us managed."

"Well the rest of you win" (Robin & Ball, 2006).

I am pleased with Claire's snappy comment here. She simply could not bring herself to care about her appearance under the circumstances.

Rico speaks at Nate's funeral. There is a sad irony in his words: "He had a natural sense of what to say to people when they're grieving. I just think he'd know what to say to help us if only he were here" (Robin & Ball, 2006). David tries to speak at the funeral, but he gets choked up, has a vision of Jake walking into the room, red hood and all, and has trouble breathing. Keith helps him sit down again.

George is at the funeral. He stands up to speak and manages to capture the essence of Nate: "Nate was an idealist and he struggled all through life to be a good man. He wasn't perfect. But then who among us is? He never gave up on himself, the people he loved, or even love itself in all its vexing beautiful forms" (Robin & Ball, 2006). George truly captures the essence of Nate.

Ruth is touched by George's support and help at the funeral and asks him to join her and her family at the cemetery. He is honored to be invited.

David can't seem to get himself out of the car and walk to Nate's burial site. He keeps seeing a man in a red-hooded sweatshirt, and cannot breathe. It's a very touching scene when Ruth refuses to start without him. She convinces David to get out of the car, and both she and Keith walk with David, holding him up by his arms.

David can't bring himself to, so Claire steps in and helps Rico, Keith, and George lower Nate's body into the ground. Aunt Sarah reads an excerpt by Rumi, an Indian philosopher and poet, which I believe expresses the very root of *Six Feet Under*: "Regarding him say neither bad nor good, for he is gone beyond the good and the bad" (Robin & Ball, 2006). Rumi speaks

of acceptance, of people and all their contradictions. Nate was neither good nor bad: he simply was.

Everyone puts earth over Nate's body.

Brenda has been very quiet at the funeral and at the cemetery. She is pregnant, her husband is dead, and right before he died he slept with another woman and told Brenda it was over between them. How is she supposed to feel? Loss is complicated.

Brenda is the last to leave the cemetery. Her car won't start. Dead Nate appears in the passenger seat. He yells at her, telling her she has no spiritual depth.

Brenda later brings Maya to Ruth. She can't cope. Ruth is pleased to have her son's child with her. She has someone to take care of, to put her energy into.

David says to Keith, "It's been six weeks. It's time, right? To get it together?"

"It's time when you feel that it's time" (Wright & Ball, 2006).

There can't be a time limit on the healing process.

David becomes paranoid that his boys will be abducted. He continues to have anxiety attacks. "My brother's dead, Keith. I don't need anymore [...] perspective. I need to be loved" (Wright & Ball, 2006). Keith eventually suggests that David leave for a while, to get himself together. It isn't healthy for the boys. David moves back home. This also pleases Ruth. Someone else to keep her company, to look after. She offers David some cereal, and puts it in his childhood yellow bowl.

David's next intake is a dead soldier. As he embalms the young man, he is suddenly being spoken to:

“You're gonna die, David. Just like Nate, just like your dad,
just like everybody. You're scared. You're more scared now than
you've ever been in your life.

You thought you knew what fear was when Jake poured gas all over your head,
but this? This simple unavoidable fact that you're alive and alone,
and then someday you'll be dead, gone. You'll never see Keith after that.

You'll never see your boys.”

(Wright & Ball, 2006)

The soldier is confronting David with his own mortality. Of course, David is the one thinking these thoughts. David yells at the soldier to shut up.

Claire has been drunk or high everyday at work, and is eventually fired. As Ted escorts her gently out of the building, Claire stops at a woman's desk and says, “Everyone you know is gonna die” (Wright & Ball, 2006). Claire confronts her mortality in her own way, by throwing it in someone else's direction. Ted drives her home in the Hearse, and leaves her there, but not before taking her keys and letting her yell at him about what a loser he is, and how she can't believe she even liked him in the first place.

Claire finds her other set of keys once Ted is gone, and she drives to Nate's burial stone. She says, "Why did you have to die? Everything's unraveling since you're gone. I miss you. I miss you so [...] much."

Nate appears and says, "I miss you too" (Wright & Ball, 2006). Nate doesn't need to be there in actuality for Claire to express herself. Her words seem to find their own direction. Claire hears the sound of some kind of wild animal and runs to her car. She speeds off. Suddenly, a deer appears in her headlights. She stomps on the breaks, swerving off the country road. The Hearse is totaled. But she is alive.

It is symbolic that the Hearse is now totaled. Claire has grown up in a funeral home—and the family business was part of her life, whether she liked it or not. Her mode of transportation, her one symbol of freedom, was a funeral vehicle, attaching her to her past and wounds. She now needs a new mode of transportation, a new way of seeing the world. She cries and takes the bus home.

Brenda wants Maya back. Ruth doesn't want to let her go. Nate keeps appearing, telling Brenda that Maya should be with Ruth. Billy stays with Brenda for a while, helping her through her pain. One night, Brenda tells Billy, "I used to think I'd have more people in my life as time went on."

"It's almost like as we get older, the number of people that completely get us shrinks" (Wright & Ball, 2006). This statement feels true to me. My circle of close friends has shrunk. What causes this? Being busy? Getting older? Having kids? Or did the others not really 'get me' to begin with?

Brenda goes to Ruth's to get Maya. She wants her daughter back, and she won't take no for an answer. As she and Ruth argue, Brenda's water breaks. She goes into early labor. Ruth is by her side at the hospital. Willa is born at 2 pounds, 4 ounces. She is barely breathing. Ruth says to Brenda, "Don't you worry. Willa is going to get through this, and be healthy, and she's going to be home with you soon. And Maya is going to be home with you too" (Ball, 2006).

Ruth finally lets go of her selfish desire to keep Maya all to herself, which she was doing as a way of keeping Nate close to her. This sudden compassion is touching. Brenda smiles in response. Willa does end up surviving, but Brenda constantly worries about her health and development. And Nate continues to appear; telling Brenda there's something dreadfully wrong with Willa.

Ruth tells Brenda she knows that Nate loved her, the best that he could, but that she also knows he didn't give her enough. Ruth asks to be involved. She wants to help. Brenda cries with joy.

Claire gets a phone message from Ted: "You're too smart. You're too good. Don't waste that" (Ball, 2006). This is enough for them to put their differences aside. One morning, Ted brings fresh kiwi to Claire in bed. He says, "I know you don't like kiwi, but I think you need to give it a second chance" (Ball, 2006). She never thought she'd like a fruit like kiwi, but now she does. Claire takes pictures of Ted, and feels her creativity come to life again.

Ruth continues to grieve. She says to George, "Each day I feel worse. More empty. More dead. I barely even remember my life before Nate. [...] How can I live without him? I can't" (Ball, 2006). Of course she can't. Not yet. Not for a long time. And even then, she will

be living *with* Nate, with the memories she will be ready to embrace. George asks Ruth to let him take care of her, like she took care of him. He holds her as she sobs.

David has a vivid and powerful dream. He and his dad are in the Fisher basement. Nathaniel lets out a red-hooded monster from behind bars.

“You don’t exist,” David tells the monster (Ball, 2006).

The monster slashes David with a knife.

David decides to fight.

He disarms the monster, gets the knife.

He puts the knife against the monster, ready to stab.

He looks up.

The monster is him. He’s looking into his own face.

It was him all along. He was afraid of himself. Of his own mortality.

He hugs the monster.

David wakes up from his dream to see Nate smiling at him.

Claire gets an exciting phone call from New York. Someone recommended her for a photographer’s assistant job at New Image. All she has to do is move to New York. Claire later finds out it was Olivier who put in the good word. When Claire tells her mom she won’t go to New York because she wants to stay to be there for her mom, Ruth says, “Absolutely not. Go. Live. I’ll unfreeze your trust fund. Take it and find whatever life has in store for you” (Ball, 2006). They hold each other and cry.

The day before Claire's planned move to New York, New Image phones with bad news. They have been bought out. Sorry. No job. *Six Feet Under* does this over and over again. Just when the viewer starts to believe in a happy ending, they realize there is always another struggle. Maybe this happy ending just isn't what we imagine.

Nate appears and says to Claire, "Ah, who cares? Go anyway. Claire, you want to know a secret? I spent my whole life being scared. Scared of not being ready, of not being right, of not being who I should be. Where did it get me?" (Ball, 2006).

Claire decides to go anyway.

Brenda has a dream. Nate and Nathaniel are standing over Willa's crib. Nate holds Willa. Nate says, "I love her so much. And I always will" (Ball, 2006).

He walks over to Brenda and puts Willa in her arms. Nate and Brenda kiss. Once again, perhaps dreams and visions are enough to bring closure, to change perceptions.

After Nate's death, David has gone back and forth about wanting to sell the funeral home. Keith suggests that he and David buy Rico's share, and move in with the boys. They renovate and re-decorate and move in.

Ruth moves in with her sister Sarah and her good friend Bettina.

The morning after Claire's farewell party, Claire says her goodbyes. She tells David to be happy. He says he is. Ruth tells her, "I pray you will be filled with hope as long as you possibly

can” (Ball, 2006). Claire takes a picture of everyone in front of the Fisher home. Nate, from behind, says, “You can’t take a picture of this. It’s already gone” (Ball, 2006). A comment on how precious the moment itself is. It can’t be carried into the future as a photo and contain the same meaning. Claire starts her new car. She drives off, listening to a mix CD Ted made for her. She sees Nate jogging in her side view mirror. She cries.

And so do I.

The end

As Claire drives toward her new destination, the viewer is brought back and forth between events of the future and Claire on the highway. These glimpses into the future of the Fisher family are blurry and have a bright white fogginess about them. The viewer hears no words, only Ted’s mix CD playing in the background.

The first image is that of Ruth and Bettina, good friends sitting on lounge chairs, throwing dog biscuits at their dog daycare. They are laughing. Next we see David, in the basement of the Fisher home, showing his son Darrell how to embalm someone. Then it’s Willa’s first birthday party. Everyone is there, and Brenda smiles as she holds her little girl on her lap. The next flash is that of David and Keith, on their wedding day. Brenda is at the wedding, newly pregnant and with a new partner. They hold hands. Ruth is at a hospital, on her deathbed. David, Claire, and George are nearby. Nathaniel and Nate, at different corners of the room, smile at her. She dies. Everyone is at Ruth’s funeral. Claire notices Ted walking toward the family. Keith, much older, now a security guard, opens the back doors of a van to unload

money. He gets shot. He dies. Claire and Ted get married. David, much older, is at a family barbeque. He sees a young Keith catch a football. They smile at each other. David's head tilts to the side. He dies. Rico has a heart attack while on a cruise with his wife Vanessa. He dies. Billy and Brenda, old now and in a nursing home, are chatting. Brenda dies. The last image is that of Claire's many photos, old and new, on the walls of her home. She is an old lady now, lying in bed. We see that she has become a successful artist. She dies in 2085.

Many people I have spoken to have said this was the most powerful last episode of a series they had ever seen. I agree. I cry every time I see the ending sequence. And not just tears falling gently and softly down my cheeks. I'm talking loud wild animal death sobs. The slogan for the last season is *Everything. Everyone. Everywhere. Ends*. How appropriate. The viewer is left mourning not only Nate, but also the entire Fisher family, and the series itself which they have grown attached to. If seen as a microcosm, *Six Feet Under* helps us connect this inevitability to our own lives and to the lives of others.

We all die.

When a woman who has lost her aunt asks Nate, "Why do people have to die?" he answers, "To make life important" (Ball, 2002). This, I believe, is the show's central idea.

I heard Alan Ball, the creator of the series, in an interview talking about Nate being the primary seeker of the show. I won't argue with the creator's perspective. It is true that Nate is the most obviously self-reflective, questioning member of the Fisher family. He did, after all, leave the life that was laid out for him to find out what other possibilities there were. He thinks

about God, wonders about religion, questions people on their beliefs, and through his AVM, develops a closer relationship with death and its inevitability.

Although these are the ways in which Nate manifests his 'seekingness', all the other characters seem to be doing the same thing in their own way. Ruth searches for a deeper meaning through a self-help seminar, through knitting circles, and through her romantic relationships. David does the same through Church, through the exploration of his sexuality, and through Keith. Claire very clearly believes there must be something more than all of this. She manifests her passion constantly through her art. She keeps trying to escape her reality with drugs and alcohol, all the while ending up in very destructive relationships, but all of her experiences end up bringing her more within herself. And although Brenda makes it very clear that she does not believe in God and that there is nothing after this life, she also has quite the journey, and does care about becoming a better person: through a sober lifestyle, through meditation, through motherhood, and through her eventual career as a therapist.

There are elements of all these characters in me –perhaps in all of us. Like Ruth, I have been known to pick up a self-help book and follow it like a mathematical formula. Like David, I have had personal insecurities which have come to life in my intimate relationships. Like Claire, I have wanted to be apart, I have criticized all others for not living right, all the while craving meaningful interaction. Like Brenda, I have mistaken sexual attention as love, and have made efforts to go beyond.

And lastly, like Nate, I want to be a good person and do the right thing, and I fear losing myself in that. There seems to be something in these people that anyone can relate to.

What can be learned from these people and their journeys? How can I apply these lessons to my own life and to the roles that I play: as a woman, as a mother, as a partner, as a friend, and as a teacher?

In the next chapter, I try to answer these questions. Although I do explore some teaching tools and techniques, I agree with Palmer when he writes that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 1998, 10). In her book *Radical Presence*, Mary Rose O’Reilley writes: “The ‘secrets’ of good teaching are the same as the secrets of good living” (O’Reilley, 1998, ix-x). Any ‘secrets’ that follow apply to both teaching and to life.

Chapter Three

Lessons

While travelling in India when I was 21, I read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey. I counted on this self-help book to change my life, to redirect me. While the book ended up being a useful tool, and while I ended up doing some hard honest work on myself, there is one habit that has stayed with me and continues to affect how I live my life. Covey suggests living a principle-centered life: having our values dictate what our actions will be: not our family, work, church, or friends. Values. I look for values in what I hear, read, and watch.

In this chapter, I have chosen a quote from the series to represent each of the six lessons *Six Feet Under* has taught me. These lessons can also be seen as values, principles. I look at the lessons of fragility, loss, expression, listening, perception, and connection. I explore these lessons in the context of our everyday lives, and in the context of teaching.

Lesson 1: Fragility

“Be careful with him. He’s a lot more fragile than he’d like to think.”

“Aren’t we all?”

(Andries & Ball, 2002)

Early on in the series, Ruth tells Brenda to be careful with Nate. That he is fragile. She is looking out for her son, and is skeptical of Brenda as a choice of girlfriend. But beyond this simple interaction, there is a deeper meaning. We are *all* fragile, and keeping this in mind can only lead to more compassion in our own lives and in our classrooms.

My fiancé Jesse, my daughter Alexa and I were on our way back to Montreal from Toronto after having spent New Year’s weekend at his parents’ house. I was driving, Jesse was in the passenger seat, and Alexa was in her car seat. It started to snow. This didn’t strike us as dangerous until the roads got slippery very fast, until visibility became nearly impossible, and until we noticed dozens of cars stuck in ditches, some upside down, off the highway. Then it got dark. And then I was afraid.

I was going no more than 40km/h in the slow lane, when the car went over ice or snow or something and started to swerve into the next lane. Then what I remember is trying to keep the car on the highway but my hands kept frantically moving the steering wheel, and we turned at least once, if not twice, a full 360 degrees on the highway. Thankfully, nearby cars must have moved out of the way, and we ended up colliding into a soft snow bank, the front of the car facing the highway. With Jesse’s adrenaline, he managed to push us out and we eventually made it home, unharmed, in one piece, and I kissed the floor. I was shaking all the way back.

We didn't die. We weren't even hurt. But this moment was an important lesson for me regarding just how fragile we are. I developed a very real appreciation of Jesse and Alexa, and it has remained in my consciousness, albeit fleetingly, that I could lose either one of them at any time for any reason. I asked myself: what if Alexa had died? Or Jesse had been seriously injured? How would I cope with any of it? These thoughts are scary, and sad, and maybe even a little morbid according to some. But where do I go from there? Now what. That's where I go. How do I live my life with the recognition that I am fragile, and that all those who surround me are fragile as well? By enjoying my time with people, and those precious alone moments too. Simple enough.

How would this transform who I am as a teacher? Well, in exactly the same way. I am more likely to enjoy the classroom moments. If my students are fragile, how do I treat them? With care and attention. I'm not talking about walking on eggshells, or about constant worry. But teachers need to be aware of the power of their words, and looks, and gestures. We don't know our students' life stories or what's happened to them in the last day, or even minute. Sensitivity doesn't make a teacher a soft pushover. Recognizing the fragility in our students has the potential to make teachers more trustworthy and approachable and compassionate. "A confident man is a dead human being" (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 25). If I see myself and others as fragile beings, I come to life in a very particular way.

When we don't rely on what is and we let go of our expectations of how things should be, we create a space in the classroom for anything to happen. Brenda says, "There's only one thing that's certain. Everything changes" (Kaplan & Ball, 2002). We change, our students change, the times change, trends change, the curriculum changes. It is all fleeting, in many

ways. But the values behind the teaching—the authenticity, the integrity, the passion—have a stability that goes beyond the inevitability of change.

Lesson 2: Loss

“I mean I hated [...] high school.

But it was my life and it was all I knew.”

(Buck & Ball, 2004)

What is loss? Everything is loss. Death of people, pets, end of a relationship, of our youth, divorce. Each moment, once gone, is a loss. In this passage, Claire expresses her sense of loss. While in high school, Claire constantly complained and wished she was elsewhere, but now that it’s over, maybe there are elements of it that she misses. All loss deserves mourning. And all loss creates an opening to welcome something new.

Six Feet Under’s main theme is death, but there are many other types of loss. Relationships and friendships coming to an end, as well as the loss of sanity, ability, and motivation. I relate to Claire’s experience of high school. At the time, I didn’t appreciate my own high school. I was judgmental of my classes and teachers and most of my peers. I wanted something more. But I remember my last day of high school very clearly. I remember it was a sunny day, because light was beaming in through all the windows. I remember soaking in every last detail of what my teachers had to say. I remember playing my trumpet for the last time. I remember looking at some of the peers I had made fun of and thinking I would miss them. I

remember crying. I have been known to cry quite hysterically in fact, at the end of anything I become really attached to: summer camp, grade six, the end of a play. Some family members have made fun of me for it, commenting, “Oh—today is your last swimming lesson. Are you going to cry?” That was my way of mourning. And I suppose it still is.

When Alexa was born, I spent two weeks crying about the loss of me, my loss of freedom. And after breastfeeding Alexa for the last time, I lay awake in bed crying to Jesse that night. We would no longer connect in that way. Sometimes I cry simply remembering the way Alexa used to lay in her bassinette, or the way she would chew her grapes as a baby. These moments are gone. That is a fact. They are not coming back. But the Now What is again what is crucial.

Although unaware of it at the time of loss, a space is always created for something new: a new experience, a new person, a new understanding.

“You cannot live without dying. You cannot live if you do not die psychologically every minute. This is not an intellectual paradox. To live completely, wholly, every day as if it were a new loveliness, there must be dying to everything of yesterday” (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 77).

The question from the series, “Why do people have to die?” can be replaced with ‘Why did my parents get divorced?’ and ‘Why did my best friend move away?’ All these questions have the same answer: “To make life important.” All forms of loss teach us to appreciate what we do have.

Children Full of Life is a documentary that aired on CBC's *Passionate Eye* series. It is a beautiful example of how one teacher approached loss in the classroom. In Japan, in April 2002, Mr. Kanamori teaches 35 grade four students. He is a fifty-seven year old man who asks his class at the beginning of the year, "What's the most important thing this year?" The students chant, "To be happy!"

Grade four students have as their academic goal: to understand how to live a happy life, and to care for other people, all the while valuing and teaching academics. Phenomenal. But how does Mr. Kanamori do it? The students are to write notebook letters every day for homework. These are similar to the journaling my students do in class, but they are specifically directed to their classmates. Each day, a few students share their letters.

These letters bring the class together on a regular basis. One day, a boy shares that his grandmother has died. His openness causes tears, and creates a space where the other children begin to share their stories about loss of loved ones. In particular, Mifuyu was three when her father dies, but she hasn't been able to talk about it until now. Mr. Kanamori puts his arm around her. He believes empathy is the greatest thing, and that people live in our hearts.

It takes a while, but eventually Mifuyu can talk about her father and smile. Her classmates applaud her courage. Mr. Kanamori believes about teachers that their job is "to show just how precious life is", and that they should connect theory with real life—which is exactly what he does.

During this school year, Tsubasa's father dies. Mr. Kanamori shares the sad news with the class. He says, "I don't want it to happen to other people, but there's no certainty in life."

He doesn't pretend that it's ok, not even with children this age. They can know the truth. They have the ability to grow through this experience, and he will not stop them from doing so. Mr. Kanamori encourages his students to try to help their friend, but allows them to come up with how. They decide to write him a letter. When Tsubasa finally comes back to school, he has 34 letters to read, letters acknowledging his pain and supporting his healing. Ten year-olds did that.

As a final class project, the students, with Mr. Kanamori's subtle guidance, decide to write a letter to both Mifuyu and Tsubasa's fathers. They engrave the characters outside in the earth to tell these men about their children and how they're doing. An "act of mature creative compassion."

I admire Mr. Kanamori and his ability to be real with his students, to treat them as equals. Being young doesn't prevent someone from feeling loss, and in fact, the earlier we can provide children with techniques that will encourage healing, the less likely they will be to repress emotions surrounding loss all throughout their lives.

One of Mary Rose O'Reilley's students said to her, "The best thing I learned in this class is that tears are sometimes appropriate" (O'Reilley, 1998, 2). The tears in Mr. Kanamori's class are certainly appropriate, as are the tears that fall in my class, which I discuss in the next section on expression.

Mr. Kanamori's idea of education is similar to Parker Palmer's. They both believe in creating a space, one that is "bounded and open, hospitable and 'charged'" They "invite the voice of the individual and invite the voice of the group, honor the 'little' stories of the students and the 'big' stories of the disciplines and tradition, support solitude and surround it with the

resources of community, welcome both silence and speech” (Palmer, 1998, 76-77). Both Mr. Kanamori and Palmer break the taboos surrounding death and expressing emotion.

Lesson 3: Expression

“So many questions.

Why didn’t you ask them when I was alive?”

(Taylor & Ball, 2002)

Nate didn’t get to know his father while he was alive. He never said all he wanted to say, or all he thinks of saying once his father is dead.

In my family, communication and expression is not a strong point. My brother and I grew up witnessing grudge after grudge, and we vowed to always be open and honest with each other, resolving issues rather than letting them sit for months or years, or worse yet, not ever speaking to each other again. I know my grandmother and uncle didn’t speak for years, and even as a young girl, I wondered why. What is so important that a mother and son can’t put aside their differences and get along? I remember thinking, someone is going to die at some point, and then how will the other person feel? I worried about these things.

My grandmother did die, and my uncle did not attend the funeral. I won’t attempt to figure out the why or the how of the situation. I don’t know the details. But I do wonder if my uncle is left with guilt and regret over not having resolved issues with his mother before she died.

At this point in time, neither my uncle nor my aunt is speaking with me or my mother. My aunt has an alcohol addiction and is holding on to something that happened ten years ago, and I believe my uncle is upset with me for having had a baby without being married first. But I can't be sure of any of it, because neither one of them will express how they feel. At first I was incredibly hurt, and took it very personally that people in my family were choosing to push me out of their lives. I decided to close myself off too. I would not phone them, or reach out to them ever again. I was angry. But then I realized I was becoming them.

Shutting my family out never felt right to me. So when my uncle was in a car accident, I phoned and left a message expressing recovery wishes. I tried to reach out to my aunt, as well, who also happened to be my godmother. I phoned her to try to figure out how we could resolve our issues together. I wanted her to meet my daughter. On the phone, she sounded emotionless, distant, not like the aunt I remember. She said she did not love me, and that she did not care to meet Alexa either. When I hung up, I was in tears, and completely confused. What was I supposed to do? I almost decided to shut her out completely. I had the 'if she doesn't care, why should I?' attitude. But after much thought, and honest reflection, I decided to continue to include her in my life. Whether or not she responded was beside the point. The point was that I would live *my* life reaching out, expressing myself. After buying our first home, I invited both my uncle and aunt to our house warming party. Neither one of them came, but my uncle sent flowers.

My best friend throughout my five years of high school was Cara. She was the person I was going to commit suicide with when we both turned 65. We were going to jump off a bridge. We never wanted to be old and incapable of taking care of ourselves. Of course, 65

doesn't seem so old anymore. After high school, we grew apart, as they say. And years later, I have trouble accepting that she is no longer a part of life, that she might never meet Alexa. I still miss her. About a year ago, I got her Ottawa address from her parents, and mailed her a letter. I expressed in this letter everything I was feeling. That I missed her, that I had had a little baby girl, that I hoped she was doing well. I never heard from her. Maybe the letter freaked her out. Maybe there are other reasons for her decision to keep her distance. I can't know. But my decision to write to her wasn't about expectation or result. It was about expressing myself, allowing myself to be vulnerable. I can't regret that. What I might have regretted is not trying.

Expressing yourself to someone you trust and love, someone who also expresses themselves to you, can be pleasant, reaffirming, and important. What is extremely difficult is expression to someone you love when you have a fear of being rejected.

My father has only ever really hugged me once. If he says he loves me, it's with a "love you", omitting the I, and it's rare. And unless I push him with questions at just the right time with just the right attitude, I'm not likely to find anything out about the guy. I had been angry with my father for a very long time. No amount of acceptance or 'zen-ness' had changed that. I was still the 8 year old girl who wanted her father to stay. Who wanted her father to at least put up a fight for custody. Who wanted to feel wanted. Who didn't want a step-mother or any other siblings to come in between her and her daddy. I have told my father many times what I want from him, what I need from him in order to feel better. He usually gives me whatever that is, temporarily, and then goes back to his usual ways. The problem was that my expression had very specific expectations. I expected him to become different, or for him to respond in a certain way that would fix me.

My expression exists now for its own sake, and I value it without result. I have learned there is nothing anyone else can do to fix this or that emotional imbalance in me. Only I can do that. This is difficult to admit, but simultaneously a wonderful gift. It means the power exists in me, and I don't have to rely on someone else to make me better.

I can see my father for the human being that he is, one with flaws, and pain, and struggle, like anyone else. We are more real with each other now than we ever have been, and when I laugh with him, it's a kind of laughter I don't share with anyone else.

We can express ourselves even after loss. Oldfield refers to the youth specifically: "The soul in adolescence craves occasions to express itself and its needs however and wherever it can. If mainstream society cannot or will not provide a context for that expression, the young are forced to create one for themselves" (Oldfield, 1994, 219).

Here is one way that I created a space for expression in the classroom. In a religion/social justice course I taught, I began each class 'going around the circle'. Sometimes the students would finish a sentence, such as "Today I feel..." or "My favorite animal is..." Sometimes I would ask them to pray for a loved one, or to talk about an appreciation, or to say something they are thankful for. No student was ever forced to speak, and the few times someone decided to pass, I would come back to them at the end and ask if they wanted to share now, and they always did. This exercise was a wonderful way to get to know each other, and to create a comfort around expression of thought and emotion.

In *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer speaks about creating a space. I read about "circles of trust", after doing something quite similar in the classroom. Palmer writes that a circle of trust "make[s] it safe for the soul to show up and offer us its guidance" (Palmer, 2004, 22). It

does so “in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of other people” (Palmer, 2004, 27). “When we create a space where the soul feels safe, it will help us deal with our most divisive issues” (Palmer, 2004, 65).

Henri Nouwen speaks of the concept of hospitality in *Befriending Life*:

“The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness,
not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter
and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs,
speak their own languages, dance their own dances;
free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host,
but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.”

(Porter, 1994, 72)

I created an assignment to blend the importance of expression and death awareness. The assignment: write a letter to someone close to you who has died or is dying. The students share their letters in class. We started in the usual way. I went around the circle and each student took a moment to express what was on her mind, or to pray for someone, or to be grateful for something. Then I asked if anyone was willing to share their letter. Surprisingly, many hands went up. The class listened to each letter with absolute focus, all eyes on the speaker. We heard about someone’s grandmother, grandfather, uncle, and neighbor. The letters brought up vivid memories, feelings of sadness, regret, joy, and mourning. Tasia’s grandfather loved chicken McNuggets. Catherine’s grandmother was the only one in her family who would let her put sugar on her strawberries. Ranjita realized she’s never told her father she loves him. Most students were in tears, and I passed around a box of Kleenex.

When the class was over, I asked myself: what have I done? There was so much pain, and so many tears. Why would I want to create that? Were the girls alright? Had this exercise ruined their day? What if they told their parents? What if someone had walked by, and noticed all the sobbing? How would I be perceived, and how would I justify my lesson plan?

“Most of us believe, at some level, that what happens in the classroom is caused by the teacher. In reality, we cause or control very little. To ‘create a space’ acknowledges both our sphere of responsibility and our lack of control” (O’Reilley, 1998, 2). It is my responsibility as a teacher to create the space, but once it is created, I have little or no control of where that will take us. This can create a fear of the unknown, or can be seen as limitless possibility. It can be exciting. I have to have “a willingness to take risks, especially the risk of inviting open dialogue, though I can never know where it is going to take us” (Palmer, 1998, 72).

That was the first time I tried the letter-writing exercise, and I have done it every year since. Months and years later, students remember sharing their letters. Many have told me their letter helped them heal, or to re-connect with a family member. Many students decided to read their letters to their parents and siblings, bringing a new closeness and openness to their home life. Avoiding the pain and sadness that come with this type of experience is impossible, and is not my goal. Through this expression, students do feel intensely, and it isn’t always pleasant, but their pain brings them closer to each other, and closer to healing. What can be more meaningful?

“If you want him to open up to you, you have to open up to him” (Buck & Ball, 2006). This is advice Brenda receives about her relationship with Nate. If I want my students to open up to me, I have to open up to them. It needs to be ok that I am expressive in the classroom. In

his book *A Hidden Wholeness* Palmer writes: “ ‘Don’t wear your heart on your sleeve’ and ‘Hold your cards close to your vest’ are just two examples of how we are told from an early age that ‘masked and armored’ is the safe and sane way to live.” He believes “a teacher who shares his or her identity with students is more effective than one who lobbs factoids at them from behind a wall” (Palmer, 2004, 16-17). It isn’t easy to share one’s identity in the classroom context, because doing so requires an acceptance of vulnerability. But is it worth the risk? I believe it is.

What writing exercises have done in my creative writing classes is no less than amazing. I never tell the students what to write. There is always choice, freedom. Maybe a genre is made clear, but the student decides what to do with it. Or maybe there is a choice among genres. They have to *want* to write. I will sit down with a student and help her get to the point where she is passionate about her idea before letting her write. I have been fortunate to have small groups most of the time. I recognize that the large classrooms of today do not allow for as much individual time, but we often have to work with what we’re given. Rather than complain about the situation, or say to ourselves ‘if only I had this, then I would...’, we need to ask ourselves, ‘what can be done with what I have?’ With a group of thirty-two students, I had to design independent activities that would be useful for the entire class, while I called on students one at a time to dialogue about their work. I was able to do this three or four times throughout the year. It doesn’t have to happen often to have an impact.

I start each class with a writing exercise, sometimes guided by a question, a quote, a poem, some music, or art. “Writing exercises [...] can create a spacious moment: at the beginning of class to find a spiritual center; in the middle, to brainstorm; and at the end, to reflect” (O’Reilly, 1998, 6). The space that is created allows the students to express themselves

in a silent written form that does not necessarily need to be shared with the group. It can still be healing and it often inspires further creativity. An authentic writing teacher also enjoys writing. When they write, so do I. Instead of circling the class to make sure they're on task, I make sure I'm on task. I have found that this type of behavior is more likely to provoke ideas, and engage the students in the task at hand. I am giving them trust. I have even shared some of my writing with them if they beg and plead for long enough. When it comes to expression, and any other lesson, the teacher is a model for her students.

Lesson 4: Listening

"I think everyone has the answers to everything in life.

It's just a matter of knowing how to listen."

(Kaplan & Ball, 2003)

The Fisher family's greatest problem was their inability or refusal to listen to one another. Each individual was suffering on their own, and often so immersed in their own pain, that they could not or would not understand anyone else's. At one point, Nate is forced to deal with Lisa's disappearance while David struggles in his relationship with Keith, while Claire copes with the fact that she's just been cheated on by a boy she finally made herself vulnerable to.

To listen isn't to hear, or to obey; it is to be present. If, as someone is speaking to me, I am thinking about what to say next, or I am checking my watch, or wondering what to eat for

supper, I am not listening. Listening involves much more than hearing the words. When we are truly present, we can often feel someone's mood and needs, and respond accordingly. In order to do this, however, we need to let go of our own drama, our own pain. What real listening can do is quite miraculous, for both the person being listened to, *and* the listener.

In his book *The Lost Art of Listening*, Michael P. Nichols writes: "By momentarily stepping out of his or her own frame of reference and into ours, the person who listens well acknowledges and affirms us. That affirmation, that validation is absolutely essential for sustaining the self-affirmation known as self-respect" (Nichols, 1995, 15). A lack of self-respect can certainly cause destructive behaviors in both children and adolescents, whether they set out to destroy others or themselves. Would bullies be bullies if they felt heard?

"It matters very much how you listen.

Either you listen to words, intellectually, agreeing or disagreeing,

or you listen with a mind that is interpretative,

translating what you hear according to your own particular prejudices.

You listen comparatively, that is you compare what you hear

with what you already know.

All listening of this kind obviously prevents you from listening. [...]

Whereas if you listen, without condemning or accepting,

listen with a certain quality of attention,

as you listen to the wind among the trees, if you listen with your whole being,

with your heart and with your mind,

then perhaps we shall establish communication between ourselves."

(Krishnamurti, 1988, 13)

How do *I* listen?

The Rico character in *Six Feet Under* observes Nate and his interactions with the grieving. He is in awe. He wonders how Nate manages to connect with these people, in ways that are different from one person to the next. Nate doesn't seem to follow any kind of formulaic response, and when Rico asks him for advice, Nate says, "Just be present" (Robin & Ball, 2004).

I remember writing papers in high school, sometimes essays, sometimes short stories. I would often ask my mom to read my work. My poor mom, at the time single, struggling financially, and stressed out from work, would skim through what I had written, pausing to take something out of the oven or to answer the phone. Then she would say, almost on autopilot: "It's good." It's good. OK, so it's good. I can handle that response for the first few papers, but after a while, I realized she wasn't actually paying attention. I wanted real feedback, honest response, a genuine smile: something. I can look back and understand her many distractions, but at the time I needed and wanted her presence. But was I listening to her?

One of my university professors is a perfect example of someone with a deep understanding of what it is to be present. He is as busy as anyone in his position would be, but when you speak with him, he is yours. No straying eyes, no answering phone calls, and no checking the time. I know he does this for all his students because I have had to wait in the hallway for another one of his meetings to run its course. But it's worth waiting for someone who listens. Sometimes there is silence after I say something, only because he is thinking, 'how

can I help?', 'what resources can I offer?', or 'do I have any relevant personal examples to share?' It's an incredible skill.

In her book *Intimate Death*, Marie de Hennezel writes: "One actually is less exhausted by a total involvement of the self—provided one knows how to replenish one's reserves—than by the attempt to barricade oneself behind one's defenses [...] Those who give themselves, [...], also recharge themselves at the same time" (de Hennezel, 1997, 130). I have found that when I truly pay attention, I walk away from a conversation or situation energized, almost on a high from having been present.

Am I a good listener? I'm certainly much better at it than I used to be. It's like a whole muscle that needs to be regularly worked out. And depending on my mood at the time, I can vary from 'totally distracted', to 'forced attention', to 'genuine listening'. But I have an awareness about it which helps me listen more often than not.

"Formless attention is inseparable from the dimension of Being. [...]"

As you look at, listen to, touch, or help your child with this or that, you are alert, still, completely present, not wanting anything other than that moment as it is.

In that moment, if you are present, you are not a father or mother."

(Tolle, 2005, p. 104)

You are not a teacher, either. You are simply there, in the moment, soaking it all in, feeling alive.

At the beginning of every school year, I explain to my students what is meant by listening. I don't say, "Listen to your teacher!" I say, "We all need to listen to one another." When students are told to listen, it often means "do as I say", so the concept of being present needs working on. It starts at the beginning of the year, and continues throughout. English literature and creative writing are classes that lend themselves to numerous discussions and debates throughout the year, but any class can incorporate the value of true listening.

I spoke of circles of trust in the previous section on expression. Through these circles, students can also learn to truly listen to one another because "how we *listen* in a circle of trust is as important as how we speak" (Palmer, 2004, 119). "As *our listening* becomes more open—and speakers start to trust that they are being heard by people whose only desire is to make it safe for everyone to tell the truth—*their speaking* becomes more open as well" (Palmer, 2004, 120).

For anyone, and especially teenagers, it is difficult to let go of their thoughts and ideas and drama, and to truly engage with what a peer might be saying or feeling. It takes practice and constant reminders, but they eventually begin to catch themselves drifting off, or interrupting, or putting their hand up to respond before a student is done speaking. The process of listening might feel forced or fake at first, because we are breaking old habits. We actually look at people when they are talking, we avoid fidgeting, we respond with our bodies: we smile, or nod, or shrug. At first, I felt like a badly trained therapist. But my responses became more genuine as I became more present.

When I ask my students what it feels like to listen, and what it feels like to be heard, the response is phenomenal. Many said they never get this kind of treatment at home or in another

classroom. Many agreed that throughout the year they had become more approachable: people were opening up to them more. Shy students were speaking out more in class. Opinionated students were thinking more. It creates a win/win situation in the classroom.

The next step is to encourage students to listen to themselves, to trust in their ability to assess their own needs. To believe that they have this wisdom. “To become better listeners, and use empathy to transform our relationships, we must identify and harness the emotional triggers that generate anxiety and cause misunderstanding and conflict” (Nichols, 1995, 3).

Mary Rose O’Reilley writes in her course pack:

“This course moves rather slowly
and covers material in depth rather than breadth.

Try to be patient with going back over material in silence and slow time.

I don’t like to talk all the time, or to hear other people talk all the time.

I often have to sit quietly in order to come up with an answer or analysis;

sometime I have to write a little, and perhaps I will stop class to do that:

or perhaps that is not stopping class, but continuing class in a different way.

I think that if we proceed in this rather contemplative manner

we can get to deeper understandings.

This is not McSchool; there are no golden arches out front.”

(O’Reilley, 1998, 7)

The statement she is making here reminds us to slow down, to let the learning happen. Silence is uncomfortable for many teachers, but with it one can create a space in which listening happens naturally, and is more likely to happen. “You are listening people into existence. You are saving lives” (O’Reilley, 1998, 29).

Lesson 5: Perception

“Everything is so black and white for you.

You can’t ever really know a person.

If you think you can, you’re living in a dream world.”

(Buck & Ball, 2004)

Rico is constantly tempted to categorize things as good or bad, right or wrong. He epitomizes the categorical thinker. In this passage, David imparts his wisdom unto him, telling him to let go of assumptions and such categories. Situations and people are always much more complicated than they seem.

One of the many things I love about *Six Feet Under* is its ability to show the grey in all situations. The viewer may feel at one point or another that they are on Nate’s side, or Brenda’s side, or David’s side, or Keith’s side—but the show always goes on to give the viewer a new insight and therefore forces them to question the assumption they had made in the first place. As human beings, we tend to want to put things in a box. It’s easier that way. This person is bad, this person is good. This person I like, this person I don’t like. But people aren’t like that; they are instead a constant swirl of many energies, energies we can’t hold onto.

I’ll use Brenda and Nate’s relationship, for example. Throughout the series, I was constantly torn between siding with Brenda *or* Nate. Neither one of them is perfect, and when one of their actions seems ‘bad’ or destructive, the show has given me enough information to at

least understand where the character is coming from. “No human being can be reduced to what we see, or think we see. Any person is infinitely larger, and deeper, than our narrow judgments can discern” (de Hennezel, 1998, 19).

Adolescents can be more likely to categorize in a black or white fashion. This can be a way of avoiding responsibility. By avoiding the grey, they don’t have to think more deeply about the issue or person in question. And thinking might lead to realization which might lead to action.

In one of my university classes, I was given a handout which contained the epilogue from H.G. Ginott’s *Teacher and Child*. It is a letter written for teachers everywhere, and it spoke to me, sending shivers up my spine:

“Dear Teacher:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp.

My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by *learned* engineers.

Children poisoned by *educated* physicians.

Infants killed by *trained* nurses.

Women and babies shot and burned by *high school* and *college* graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your students become human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important

only if they serve to make our children more humane.”

(Ginott, 1972, 245)

So how can we encourage students to see the grey in all situations and people? Olivier, Claire's art teacher, calls this process 'breaking the eye'. To change our perception. To see with new eyes. Claire does this in order to create art. We all need to do this.

"You might say, 'What a dreadful day,' without realizing that the cold, the wind, and the rain, or whatever condition you react to are not dreadful. They are as they are. What is dreadful is your reaction, your inner resistance to it, and the emotion that is created by that resistance" (Tolle, 2005, 110). And as a teacher, I need to do it first. How can I expect my students to see the grey if I can't?

An effective film I have shown in class to get students to see the grey is *Crash*. The film's primary focus is racism, but it unravels this topic unlike any film I have seen before. We meet a wealthy white politician, a black detective, a Persian store owner, and a Mexican locksmith, to name a few of the complex characters. Their lives end up intertwining in very interesting, and at times tragic ways. Like *Six Feet Under*, this film presents the viewer with a situation, allowing them to make a judgment. But over and over again, the idea we form in our mind about what someone is like falls apart when we are presented with the bigger picture or given additional information. We are challenged to re-evaluate our judgment. I use this film in class to help shatter students' beliefs about race, and about any assumptions they might make throughout the film. The viewing is accompanied with journaling and regular discussion. I have witnessed significant changes in awareness arising from students after seeing *Crash*. If before watching the movie, they did not think they were racist in any way, after the movie, they admit

to realizing that they held racist notions they were not even aware of. This is what happened to me after viewing the film in theatres for the first time. In addition to ‘breaking my eye’, this movie has served me well as a teaching tool, and has helped students see the grey.

After watching the movie, it is important to connect these lessons with the students’ everyday lives. What did they learn? How does it apply to their lives in the present moment? What assumptions do we make about people all the time? What if we are wrong? How can we change our approach to see people and situations as they really are?

Lesson 6: Connection

“I’m a lonely little petunia in an onion patch, an onion patch, an onion patch...”

I’m a lonely little petunia in an onion patch, and all I do is cry all day!

Woo woo, woo woo. Woo woo, woo woo.”

(Kaplan & Ball, 2005)

The siblings join in to sing their childhood song to Maya when she gets fussy at the dinner table. It’s such a beautiful moment. Nate starts singing, and David and Claire join in, as though they were children themselves. They have a connection with each other that no one else can mimic or replace. Through all their tragedies and depressions and meltdowns, there are enough moments of connection to sustain them and carry them through. Claire stays with David and takes care of him after his trauma. Both David and Claire show up at Nate’s motel

when he is waiting for Lisa's body to be found. And sometimes, a smile or a joke, or poking fun at their mother is enough to establish connection.

Connection is the last of the six lessons, and the most important one for me. As I mentioned earlier, I went into teaching wanting each student in my classroom to feel a sense of connection, something I felt had been lacking from my personal classroom experiences. I want them to feel connected to themselves, to each other, to me, and to the world outside the classroom. Palmer writes: "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness" (Palmer, 1998, 11). "But we cannot embrace that challenge all alone, at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support, if we are to sustain the journey toward an undivided life" (Palmer, 2004, 10).

Going back to the documentary *Children Full of Life*, Mr. Kanamori is also a fantastic example of a teacher who promotes connection in his classroom. Even at the private high school I work at, there is significant bullying going on. When bullying and teasing happen in his classroom, Mr. Kanamori does not tolerate it one bit. He wants to talk it out. When the grade fours first begin to talk about the bullying, they blame others, or make comments about what they have observed in others. No one admits they did something wrong. They do not take responsibility. Mr. Kanamori calls them on their inability or unwillingness to see that each one of them is partly responsible for the bullying problem. Something he has engrained in their minds from the beginning of the school year is, "If one person is unhappy, everyone is unhappy."

It takes time, days of discussion, but Mr. Kanamori is patient and takes the time they need to resolve the bullying problem. Eventually, the students start to write honest notebook

letters about either being a bully or being a victim of bullying. When the victims share their letters, it is particularly powerful. One girl begins to cry and the class can see how deeply she has been affected by another person's words. These letters, combined with Mr. Kanamori's guidance, allow the class to re-connect, in an even deeper way.

Later on in the school year, the students take part in a rafting project. In groups, they have designed and built their own rafts, and this is the day they will try them out on the water. But in class that morning, Yuto has been chattering and laughing and being disrespectful. Mr. Kanamori tells him he cannot participate in the rafting that afternoon. But he is also the teacher that has taught this class about connection, and the importance of taking care of each other. Yuto's friends, as well as the entire class, stand up for him, trying to convince the teacher that the punishment does not match the crime.

Mr. Kanamori, being the person that he is, allows his students to express themselves. He listens to them with eyes closed. He ends up agreeing with them, and goes back on his decision. It took strength for the students to stand up for their friend, and strength for a teacher to admit to being wrong, but all this could happen in this classroom, because there was such a deep sense of connection to begin with. Yuto later shares a grateful and apologetic notebook letter.

These students feel alive in their classroom, and all they do is connected to a greater picture. They are connected to each other, and have learned how to go out into the world and connect to it. "Your own growth cannot take place without growth in others. You are part of a body. When you change, the whole body changes. It is very important for you to remain deeply connected with the larger community to which you belong" (Porter, 1994, 89).

Conclusion

*“And like a poem,
it can mirror back to us our condition,
changing as we change,
clarifying as our vision becomes more clear,
until its insights become as familiar and obvious
as our own face.”*

(Rilke, 1986, xvi)

As Rilke writes, death is like a poem, acting as a mirror, reflecting our lives. *Six Feet Under* shows us our lives through its constant honest look at death. When Nate dies at the end of the series, I mourned for him. I went to work the next day, and one of my co-workers thought I had lost someone close to me. In a way I had, but when I told her it was a character on television, she laughed. So did I. But that is the power of the show. Without having to lose someone that is dear to me in my own life, I can still experience the very intense emotions that surround loss and death. I can still confront my own mortality, in turn forcing me to look at my own life, and the decisions I've made. I continue to ask myself the important questions. Where do I go from here? Who am I to the people I love? Do I feel connected? Do I feel alive? What can I do to get there?

And professionally, am I teaching as I had always envisioned? Have I lost the passion and reason for doing that fueled my pursuit of teaching in the first place? Or is it still there

somewhere, waiting to be asked to come out again? I will keep trying to answer these questions, or at the very least, live the questions fully.

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms
or books written in a very foreign language.

Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.

Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually,
without even noticing it,
live your way into the answer.”

(Rilke, 1986, 34)

Palmer writes, “We teach who we are” and he asks, “Who is the self that teaches?” (Palmer, 1998, 8). As teachers, let’s ask ourselves this question everyday, if not every minute, because who I am and what I value is what emerges in the classroom. If I am afraid to talk about death, if I am afraid to acknowledge fragility and loss, to promote expression and listening, to change perceptions, including my own, and to bring about connection and community, my students will only suffer as a result. And so will I.

I agree with Palmer when he writes: “We separate head from heart. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that do not know how to think. We separate teaching from learning. Result: teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk” (Palmer, 1998, 68). We have a “fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even

compel us to change our lives” (Palmer, 1998, 39). This otherness can be death, or any other taboo subject. Even emotions, and often our own. Someone once said to me that courage isn’t not being afraid. It is precisely having the fear, and moving forward anyway.

I am afraid to die, leaving my children behind. I am afraid of losing loved ones. I can’t fathom living in a world without my mother or father in it. “I cannot escape my own death or the deaths of the people I love” (de Hennezel, 1998, 19). I am afraid of my own vulnerability, and what might result from being emotionally honest with myself and others. But I must be some kind of courageous, because I want to move forward anyway. I want to feel alive, to enjoy the process, to be vulnerable, and to die feeling as though I have changed the world, just a little bit. I suppose I am like Nate, wanting to be remembered.

“The rock-bottom truth is that life is both wonderful and terrifying” (Keen, 1999, 47).

In her book *A Walk on the Beach*, Joan Anderson starts with a quote from Maya Angelou. It reads, “They are not dead who live in lives they leave behind—in those whom they have blessed, they live again.” When Nate dies, he not only leaves his spirit and memory with his fictional family, but with me and many other viewers as well.

“The darkness around us *is* deep.

But our great calling, opportunity, and power as educators
is to shed light in dark places.

In a world that needs new professionals—true professionals—
in every institution, let us resist the temptation to respond with a fearful ‘no’,
or an elusive ‘maybe’
and allow our lives to speak a clear and heartfelt ‘yes’.”

(Palmer, 1998, 213-14)

“If we are to live our lives fully and well, we must learn to embrace the opposites”
(Palmer, 2000, 55). Life *and* death.

“If we try to gain life by denying death, the paradoxical result is that we become lifeless”
(Palmer, 1990, 155).

I hope this thesis has shown that it is not so important that “the mystery of existence and death [is solved], but [rather], [that] it is fully experienced” (de Hennezel, 1998, ix). Thinking about death, and becoming aware of its inevitability, will only serve to deepen our connection to life, making what we are doing *now* the most important thing of all. For me, that’s parenting, teaching, and learning.

Bibliography

Anderson, J. *A Walk on the Beach*. (2004). New York: Broadway Books.

Ball, A. (Producer and Creator). (2002-2006). *Six Feet Under*. [Television series]. Las Angeles: Home Box Office.

Children Full of Life: Learning to Care, Passionate Eye. (2004) Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

De Hennezel, M. (1998). *Intimate Death*. New York: Vintage Books.

Ginott, H.G. (1972). *Teacher and Child*. New York: Avon Books.

Haggis, P. (2004) *Crash*. [Motion Picture]. U.S.A.: Lions Gate Films.

Keen, S. (1999). *Learning to Fly*. New York: Broadway Books.

Krishnamurti, J. (1969). *Freedom from the Known*. New York: Harper Collins.

Krishnamurti, J. (1988) *Talks with American Students*. Boston: Shambhala.

Nichols, M. (1995). *The Lost Art of Listening*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Oldfield, D. (1994). *Nourishing the Soul: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

O'Reilley, M. (1998). *Radical Presence*. Portsmouth: Boynton/ Cook Publishers.

Palmer, P. (1990). *The Active Life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Palmer, P. (1998). *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Palmer, P. (2000). *Let Your Life Speak*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Palmer, P. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Porter, B. (Ed.) (1994). *Befriending Life*. New York: Image Books.

Rilke, R. (1986). *Letters to a Young Poet*. New York: Vintage.

St-Vincent Millay, E. (1975). *Selected Poems*. Centenary Edition.

Tolle, E. (2005). *A New Earth*. New York: Plume.

Tompkins, J. (1989). "Teach by the Values You Preach." *Harper's Magazine*. Volume 52, no. 6.