
When an Abusive Parent Passes Away

WITH PATRICK TEAHAN



An existential problem in a survivor's life cycle.

We will be covering:

1. Outlining the problem
2. Discussing reclaiming meaning and power
3. Outlining healing goals





Honor your feelings
in this very moment.



The word-loss

- Can feel odd...
- Consider the word loss to mean more of the loss of the parent we needed vs. the loss of the parent we had.
- There is also the loss of good qualities and tiny connections, which get eclipsed by the abuse.



Ideally, the loss of a healthy parent... creates grief and the profound loss of a lifelong, safe connection.



Typically, loss of an abusive parent creates the existential crisis of lack of closure,

In short there is an existential crisis that in their death, an abused child is left holding the bag of the reality of what happened and what the parent was like.

Some examples of the existential problem.

- A parent squeezing their hand, knowing they were not there for them
- Not invited to the bedside of the passing parent
- Has to organize services with siblings and extended family who don't get it

Existentially, it feels
like again reality is
upside down.



It would not be such an existential problem
if any of the following took place.

➡ Shared honesty and grief.

➡ If the parent is brave...

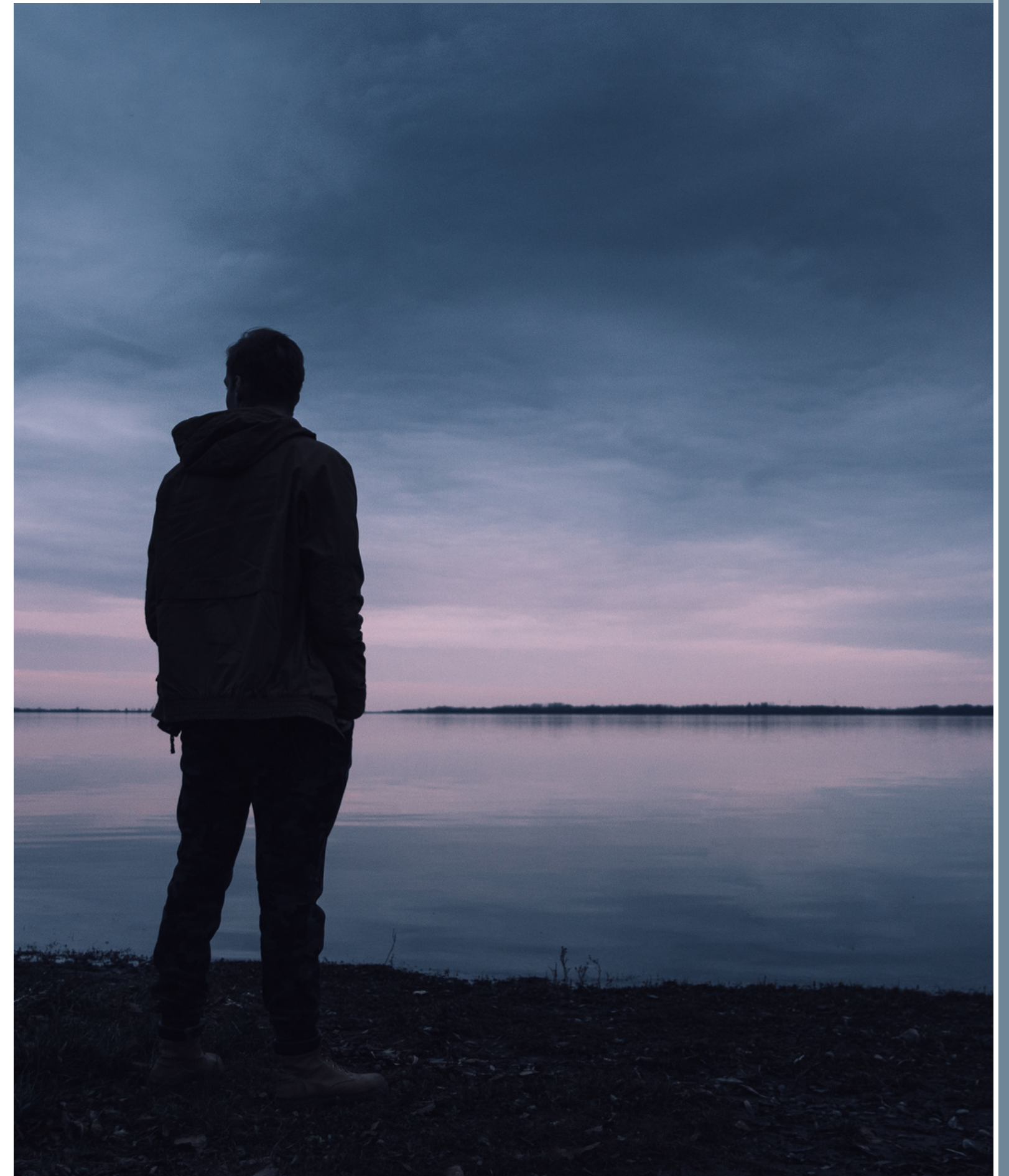
➡ Are real about who they were and the damage they created.
That goes beyond a celebratory, *"Gail was someone not to
tussle with."*

The feelings of losing an abusive parent.

What should I be feeling?

When an abusive parent passes away, feelings range from indifference to numbness, to anger, to fear that the truth about who they were will be covered up.

We can feel like a terrible person for not feeling...



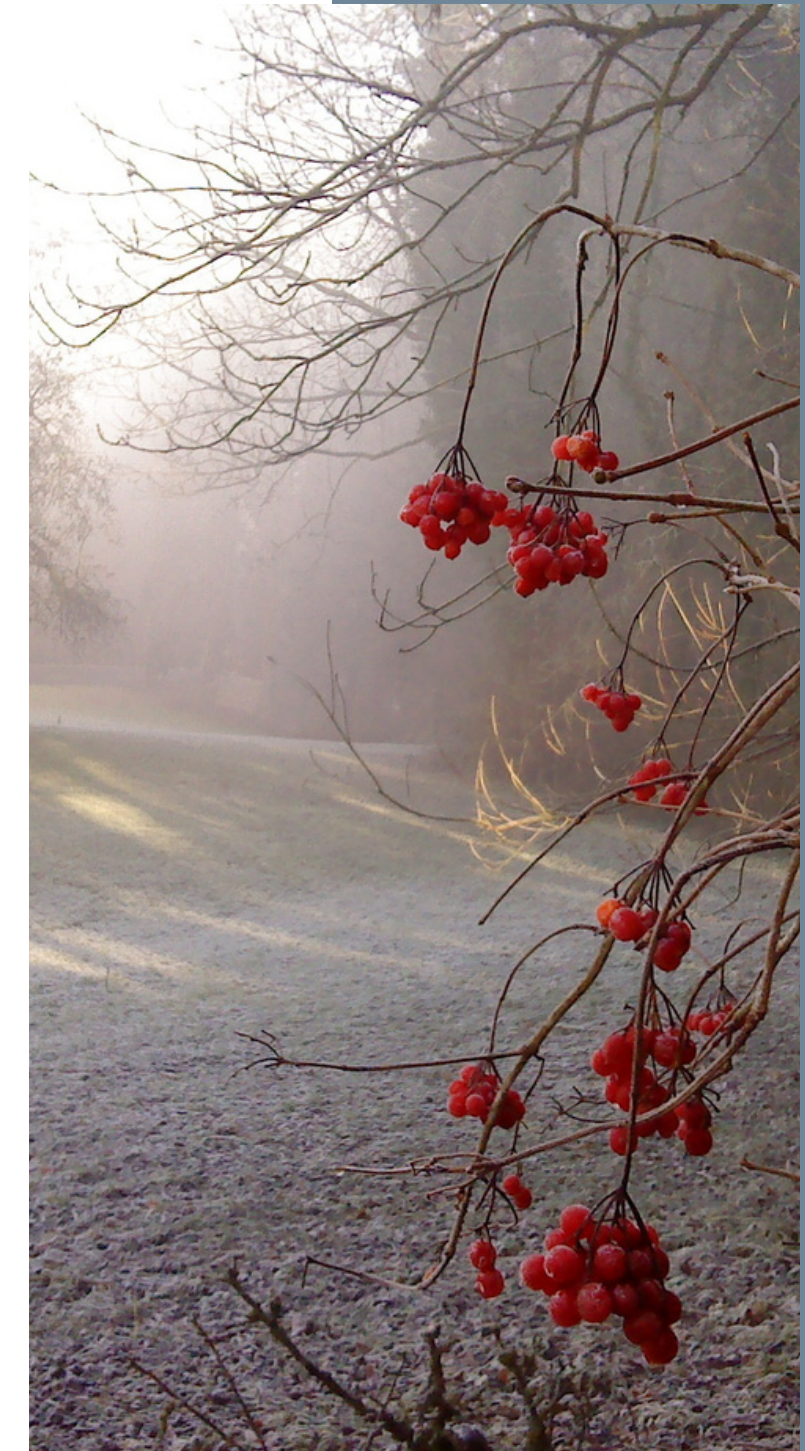
A reframe about the complicated feelings

- We wouldn't have chosen these feelings.
- We wouldn't have chosen the ways it ended.
- We wouldn't have chosen a fragmented or denial heavy family system.

Remember this idea about choice.
It's not our fault...

Another reframe

It being a result of the parent's legacy.



About one's legacy

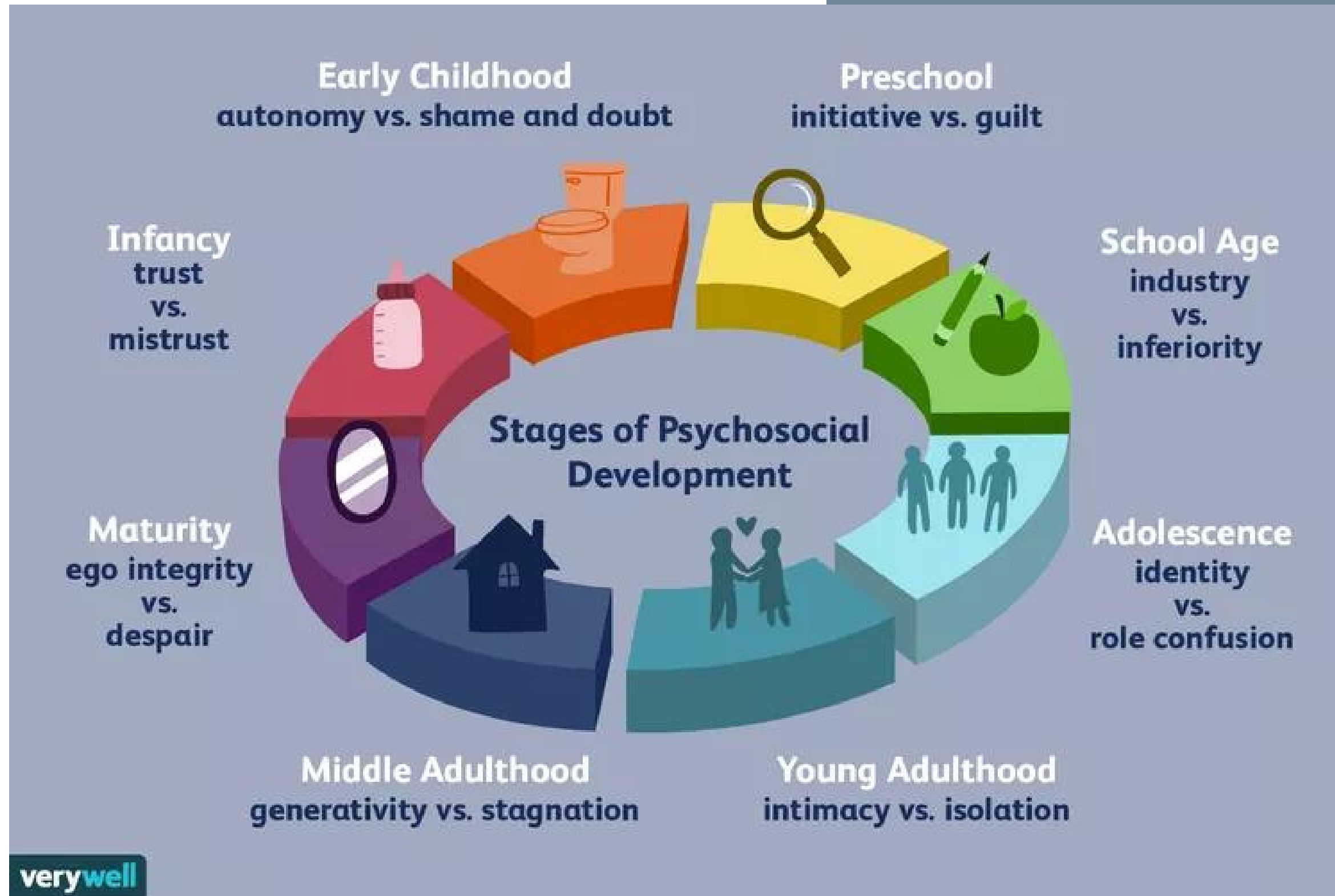
Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Development

- Integrity Vs Despair
- "How did I do?"

A human struggling with oncoming death will be going through an adjustment

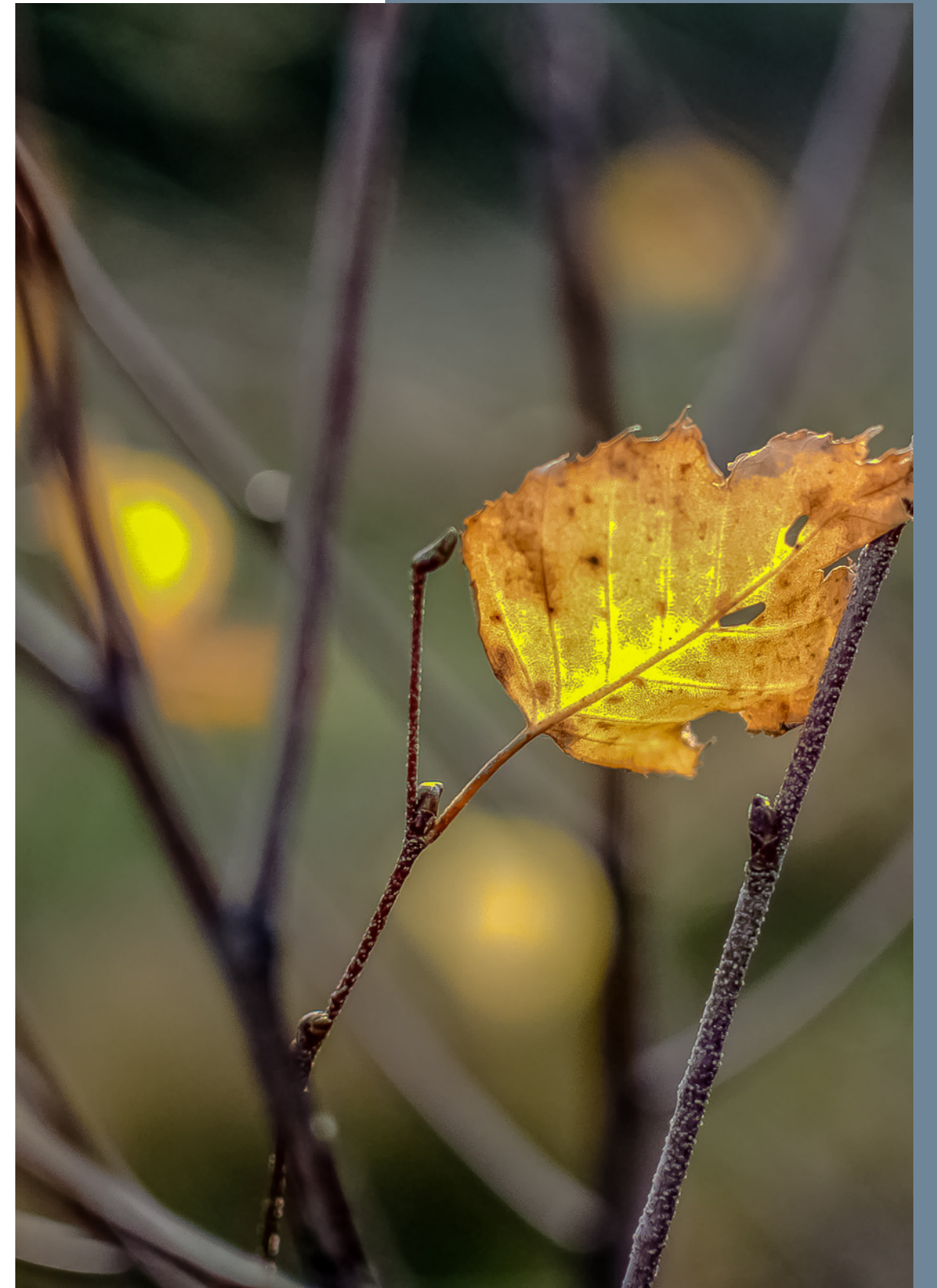
- Did I love well?
- Did I do good things?
- Did I set my loved ones up for success?





The despair

- bitterness, hopelessness, running out of opportunities



A toxic parent on their deathbed
is still self consumed.

We don't experience a parent being at peace.

Legacy.

- Family usually isn't thinking about that.
- Concept of legacy to develop reclaiming their truth and become more empowered.



My father's legacy

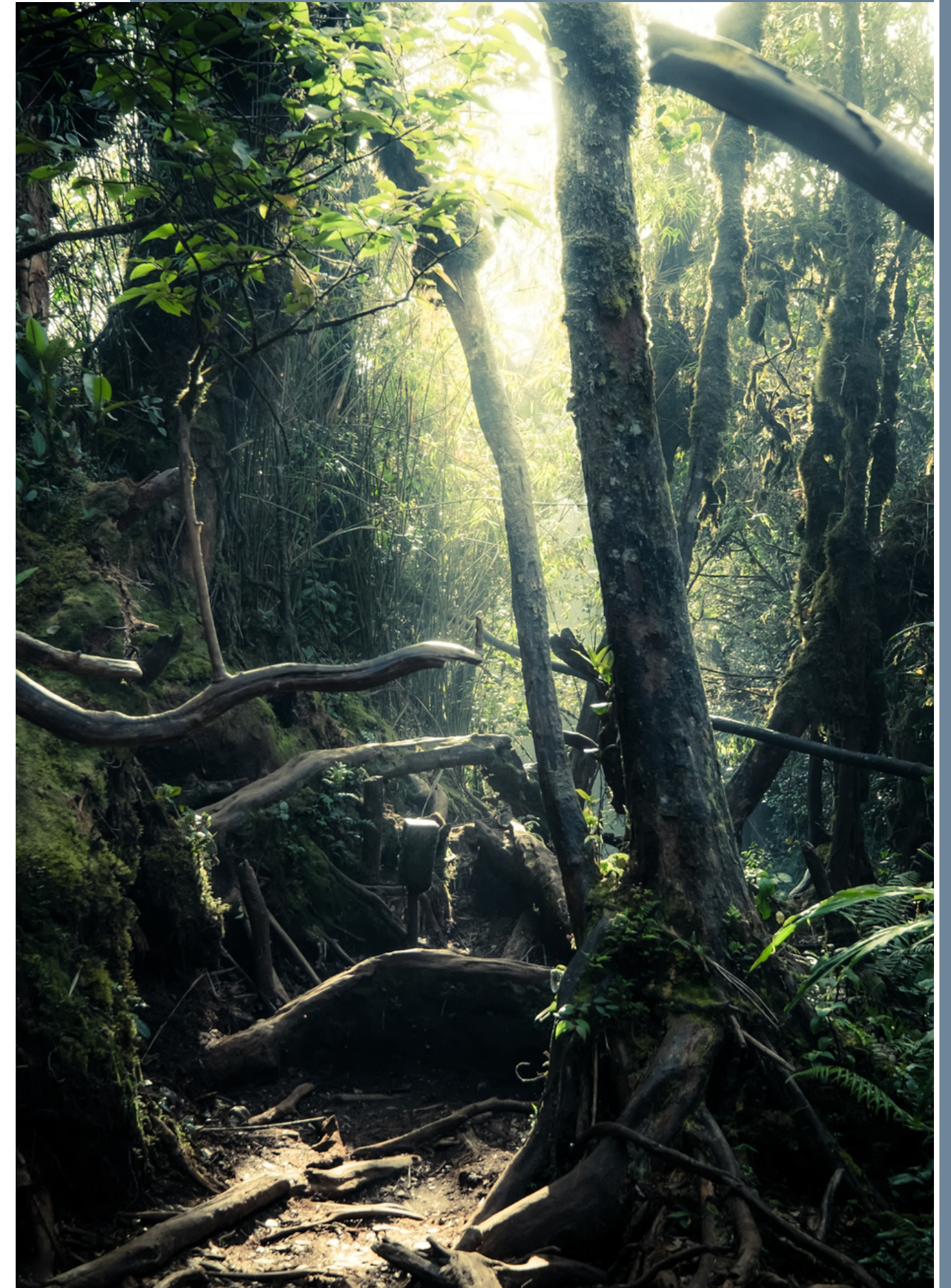
- Not well liked
- Did not know his children
- The world wronged him
- His death brought relief to his family
- His son needed years of therapy
- Remembered for grandiosity and self interest



How was the abusive parent talked about?

- Usually there is celebration of a life in an obituary
- contradicts the abusive parents integrity vs despair

****Side note, one can have a toxic parent who is blissfully unaware...Making it look like they achieved the integrity vs despair challenge.*



For the adult childhood trauma survivor...

Which legacy do we choose?

Which legacy is the truth?

*They loved their garden.

*Their children were
disappointments.

*A pillar of the community

*They appreciated
things

*They gave up their
dreams for family

*It's their loss that they didn't know and
enjoy their children. How unfulfilling.

*They used superiority as a weapon
because they were mentally ill.

*They put all their energy into looking
generous and graceful which was all for
show.

*They refused mental health treatment
and became a hoarder - damaging their
children's safety and well being.

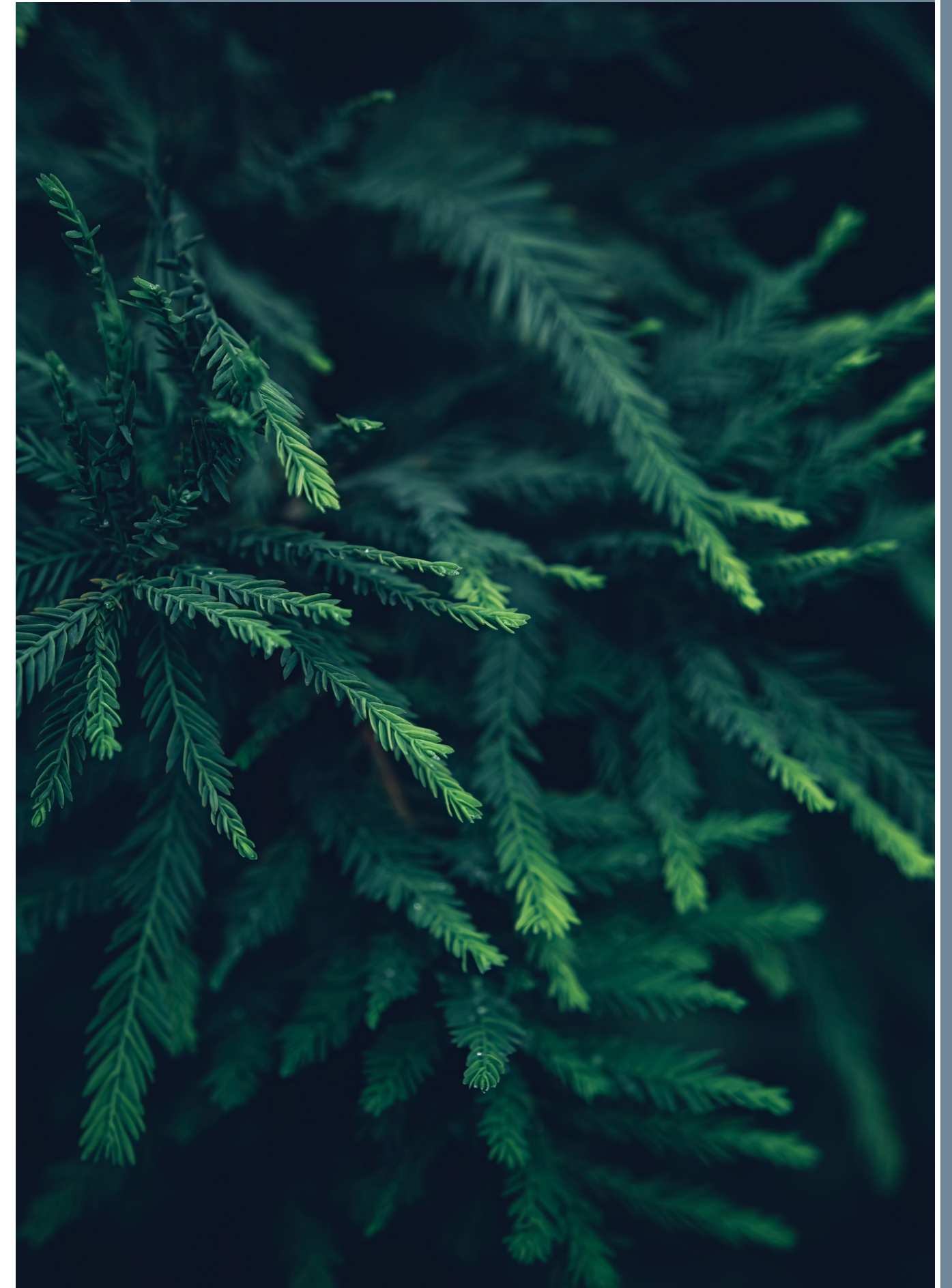
*They created a long victimized narrative
at their children's expense about their
choices.

Unfinished Business

Typically, someone writes an obituary...,
the services are over,
then what?

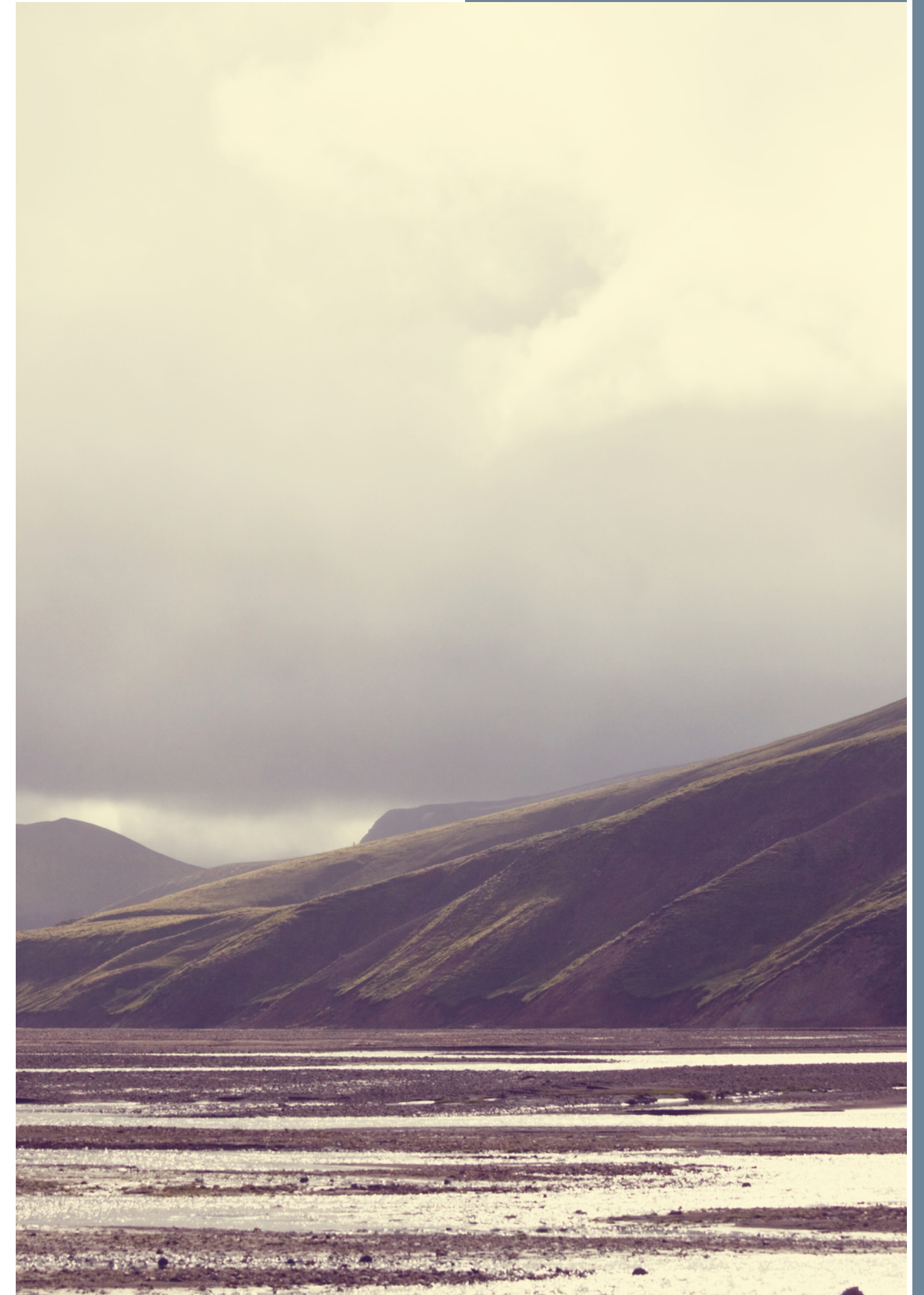
Survivors are often left with much unfinished.

- An existential silence – that's it?
- The abusive parent leaves with their opinions of you.
- An absence of those close to us who get who the parent was.



Unfinished business means...

- Gestalt therapy term
- RRP – unfinished dynamics, and closure with an abusive parents



Examples of unfinished business in RRP from general childhood trauma

- Were they right about me?
- My partner can't be mad ever.
- It's up to me to make everything work.
- People aren't interested in me.
- Needing to prove oneself.






We can often assume that loss of the abusive parent means loss of any chance of healing our abuse with that parent.

Good news – this isn't true.



RRP Based Therapeutic Interventions on The Passing of an Abusive Parent (Goals)

- The **relationship also needs to pass away** (unfinished business).
- Having the **opportunity to do a goodbye** and tell the truth to the deceased.
- Being able to **tell the truth** in family and community.
- Being able to **express the ugly feelings** and being cleansed.

A photograph of a single yellow flower with a dark center, growing out of a crack in a dark, textured rock. The flower is positioned in the center of a blue arch that frames the image. The background is a blurred landscape with trees and a body of water. A thin pink horizontal line is visible on the left side of the image.

RRP based interventions.
These will be included in
your worksheet for ideas.

- **Experientially based** – trauma is brought up with a different outcome.
 - **Require a witness** (friend, spouse, therapist, fellow survivor).
 - **Require action and ceremony** vs. cerebral understanding.
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