



# Coalition News

Quarterly Newsletter of the Minnesota Coalition for Death Education and Support  
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Since 1977...Education and Support for Those Providing Care to Grieving Persons

December 2021

## Mark Your Calendars

**Dec 16** ♦ *Celebrating and Caring for Loved Ones with Memory Loss During the Holidays.* Free virtual event. Info at <https://www.sph.umn.edu/event/celebrating-and-caring-for-loved-ones-with-memory-loss-during-the-holidays/>.

**Dec 16–18** ♦ *End of Life Symposium.* Offered by City of Hope. Information at <https://cme.cityofhope.org/content/end-of-life-symposium>.

**Jan 13, 2022** ♦ *Obituaries 101: Writing With Love.* Offered by Lakewood Cemetary. Info/register at <https://www.lakewoodcemetery.org/events-calendar/>.

**Jan 18-19** ♦ *Grief Support Services Facilitator Training.* Grief facilitation skills, group process, and how to develop a support group. Information at <https://www.essentiahealth.org/classes-events/search-results-detail/?eventId=7293963a-be1f-ec11-a84a-000d3a611c21>.

**April 19-23** ♦ *ADEC 2022 Annual Conference.* Info at [https://www.adec.org/page/2022\\_Conference](https://www.adec.org/page/2022_Conference).

**May 6** ♦ MCDES Spring Conference: *Self Compassion: Sustaining the Ability to Care in Challenging Times.* Speaker: Darcy Harris, PhD, FT. See page 15 or [www.mcdes.org](http://www.mcdes.org).

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## Fall Scholar Conference Reviews *The Personal and Professional in Times of Ambiguity and Change*

**Speakers: Pauline Boss, PhD, and Ted Bowman, MDiv**

### Review From Amy Dircks

At first glance, a virtual all-day conference for over 200 attendees may seem impersonal, disconnected, or unengaging. However, it did not take me long, a first-time MCDES conference participant and scholarship recipient, to recognize the beauty of this unique opportunity shared not by just one, but two renowned presenters: Pauline Boss, PhD, and Ted Bowman, MDiv.

On October 1, 2021, this fall's MCDES conference registrants logged in from homes, offices, and various places of comfort to settle in for a day of learning about ambiguous loss, closure, normal grief, re-authoring lives after change, and navigating when the professional becomes personal.

It was a treat to sneak a peek into one Zoom frame of Pauline Boss's mid-century modern living room as the funky-spectacled, widely celebrated family therapist and educator started her lecture. As expected for an academic, her overflowing bookshelves adorned a large portion of her background and additional books lie stacked across many of the horizontal surfaces within view. Dr. Boss began her presentation on a deeply personal note, sharing an anecdote from her 32nd wedding anniversary lunch with her husband, Dudley Riggs. She then shared the news that Dudley died in September 2020 after suffering a stroke. While she was blessed to be with him when he died, Dr. Boss reflected that she felt a void from the online memorial service. In an era of a pandemic, it can be difficult, she pondered, for people her age to memorialize loved ones and perform closure rituals in an online format. I can relate to Dr. Boss' assessment and believe that this void may be experienced by not just older generations, but broader groups of individuals as well.

### Ambiguous Loss

Over forty years ago, Dr. Boss coined the term "ambiguous loss" and expanded on this concept in her soon-to-be released book *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*. According to Dr. Boss, ambiguous loss is defined as "a loss that remains unclear and without resolution." An ambiguous

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loss may be physical and/or psychological, and with incongruence between absence and presence. Examples of ambiguous loss vary and may include a loved one who experiences Alzheimer's disease or dementia, a missing family member, divorce, gender transition, military deployment, addiction, depression, infertility, etc. With a more recent focus, COVID-19 creates ambiguous losses as well, such as loss of routines, hopes, dreams, and plans for the future, loss of travel to see family and friends, loss of ability to spend time with a sick or dying loved one, loss of trust in the world, and loss of freedom to move about as we please. Dr. Boss reiterates that ambiguous loss does not include validated death, a grief disorder, or PTSD, but it may lead to symptoms similar to complicated grief.

## The Myth of Closure

Dr. Boss addressed the idea of closure and its historical legacy as mostly an American theory on unresolved loss. She argues that if our culture continues to deny death it will demand closure. She believes that closure is not a good word to use when dealing with human relationships that, by structure, do not require certainty. She considers instead that because ambiguous loss does not end, its oscillating nature implores us to find meaning and live with the uncertainty. Dr. Boss encourages an adoption of a more Eastern view on grief and loss, one in which suffering is viewed as a part of life and knowing it is possible to have a good life while living with the suffering of loss.

## Normal Grief

Dr. Boss neared the end of her lecture with the suggestion that there is a need to understand normal grief in order to comprehend complicated

grief. There can be conflicting ideas between the personal and the professional. She shared her thoughts on how grief experts, such as Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, promoted the idea of closure and finishing the work of grieving, while telling a different story when referring to their own losses. In Dr. Boss's opinion of Kübler-Ross, the "five stages were not about helping the living but were more about helping the dying." Dr. Boss honors Kübler-Ross for her last writings in her life, where she wrote about how grief is so much more than the five stages. In her closing remarks, Dr. Boss encouraged the finding of meaning, the importance of rituals, the impact of resilience, and the helpfulness of "both/and" thinking as ways to reduce stress and live with ambiguous loss. "She is both gone—and still here. I must find a way to both hold on—and let go." Practice and embrace the ambiguity.

## Ted Bowman

The afternoon session began with a casual dialogue between Pauline Boss, PhD, and Ted Bowman, MDiv, as they discussed the difficulty, after suffering loss, of separating the personal from the professional, as well as their thoughts on self-care. Later in his lecture, Ted Bowman revealed that his wife, Marge, died in 2020 from a sudden and non-COVID-19 related event. His experience with profound grief and loss this past year reiterates his use of bibliotherapy as a perspective and a tool. Bibliotherapy, also known as poetry therapy, combines literary tools, metaphors, and personal sharing in grief care. Ted Bowman, an educator, author, and consultant who specializes in change and transition, has written a new book, *Ambiguous Parables: Poems and Prose of Loss and Renewal*, <https://bowmanted.com/>.



Amy Dircks

## Bibliotherapy

Bowman, a gifted and avid storyteller, organized his presentation around stories that, in turn, evoked more stories. Through his artful use of words, Bowman attempts to connect individuals and prompt responses in grief care. In an effort to relearn the world after a loss or disruptive change, Bowman also endorses the concept of "re-authoring lives" where one examines the compelling plights of life to transition and come to terms with their changed world.

## Being With a Client

A highlight of the afternoon was Bowman's perspective on being with a client during grief. All too often, he reported that clinicians spend so much time protecting themselves from the client's grief that they cannot "be with the client." He noted that self-awareness is key to supporting clients through their grief. His advice for workers is to sit with the client, be comfortable with the heaviness of the room, and don't be in a rush to "fix" anything. A quality worker can move between conversations about grief and restoration to validate the client's grief and lessen the client's heavy burden.

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## Personal or Professional

Bowman concluded that our professional work with clients is extremely personal in nature. Our emotional responses impact the moment with the client, whether we are aware, admit to, or want them. Bowman recommends that clinicians spend less time preparing and more time listening—a good bibliotherapist is first, a good listener, and uses stories as prompts for client consideration. He ends with the suggestion that compassion, empathy, and honesty encourage hope within clients.

## Closing Remarks

The day's events thoroughly impressed this Dorothy Geiss scholar and satiated my curiosity of Pauline Boss and Ted Bowman. At the end of the final session, one attendee's thank-you comment to both presenters really captured the essence of the day: "One of the greatest gifts of this conference is that we get to experience you, your wisdom, and your art, even for just a little while... That part will always stay with me." Thank you for providing me a scholarship. I look forward to attending future MCDES conferences!

**Editor's Note:** Amy Dircks is a current MSW student and Area of Emphasis in Aging scholar at the University of St. Thomas. She is a career-changer from the professional world of wealth management and is busy raising two teenagers with her husband in Deephaven, MN. After graduation, Amy is interested in pursuing a career in hospice social work, grief, and loss.