

# Making Sense of Loss

Nora Miller

How General Semantics Can Help

# My Approach

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Journalists tell stories with a fair amount of accuracy, so I decided to borrow their technique for getting to the facts of a story:

- Who
- Where
- When
- What
- How
- ~~Why~~



The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be only the beginning.

George Baker (1877-1965)

# My Story: Who

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- My Mother, Patience
  - Died at age 82 after a long illness and decline
- My Husband, Rick
  - Died at age 53 after a six month illness
- My Sister, Martha
  - Died at age 63 after a brief but intense illness
- Me
  - Experienced these events and learned from them

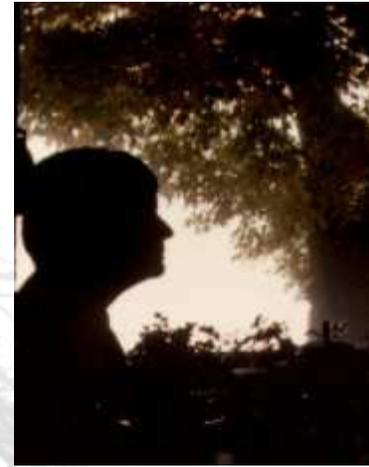


Rick, self-portrait, with friend

# Where

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- Vermont, Florida, Oregon
- At home with hospice care
- In my presence
- In my head

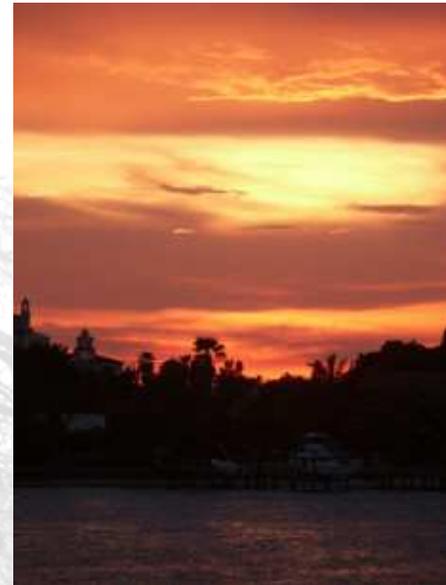


Patience Lyon Crowley  
in her Vermont home

# My Story: When

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- From 1996 to 2002
- Before
- During
- After
- Now



Florida sunset, July 21, 2002

# How

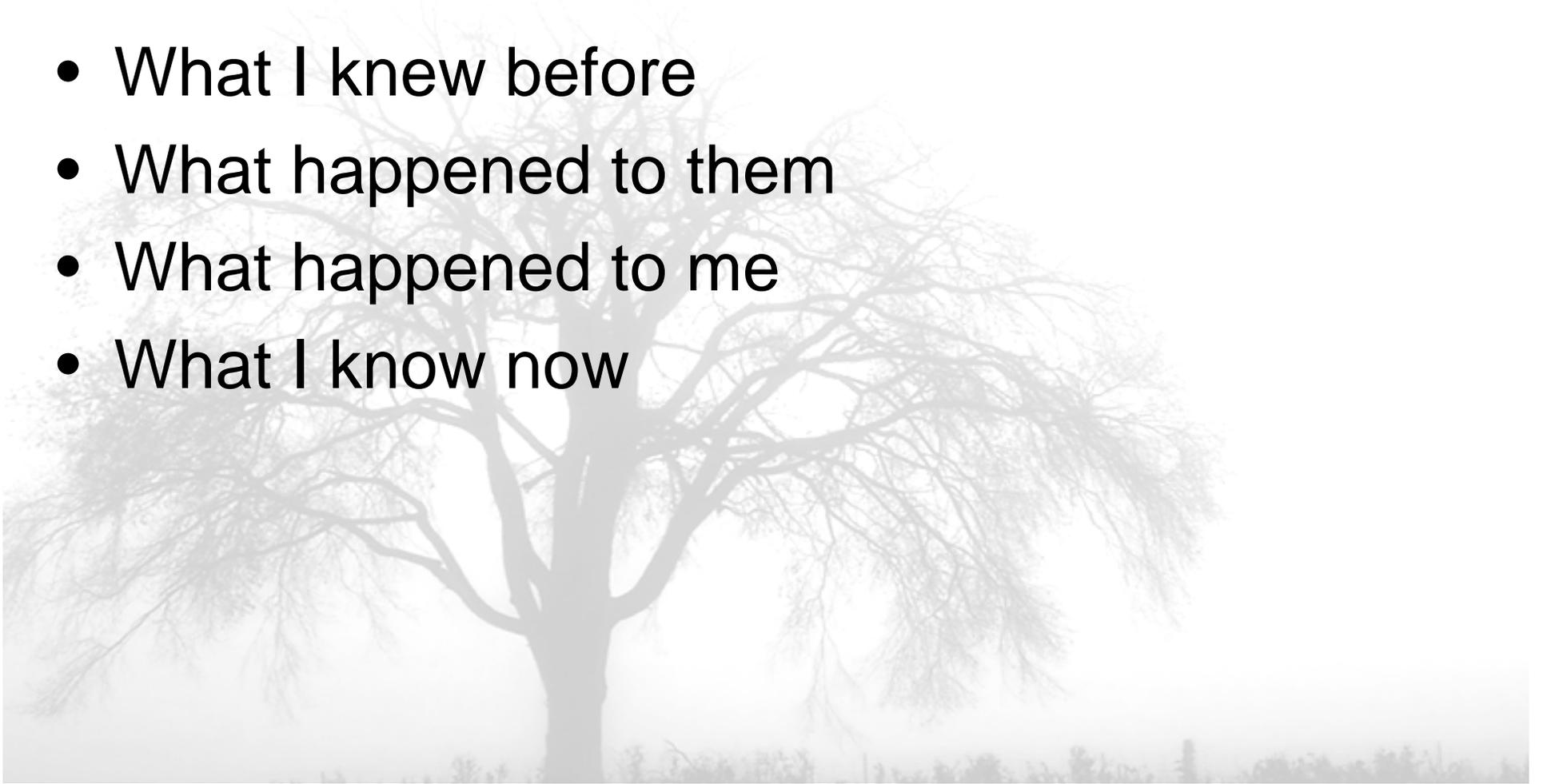
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- Actual event
  - Natural, inexorable, essential
- Method (how these particular people died)
  - Self-responsibility, autonomy, or the lack
- My experience vs theirs
  - Happening near me but not to me
- Logical fate in an existential world view

# What

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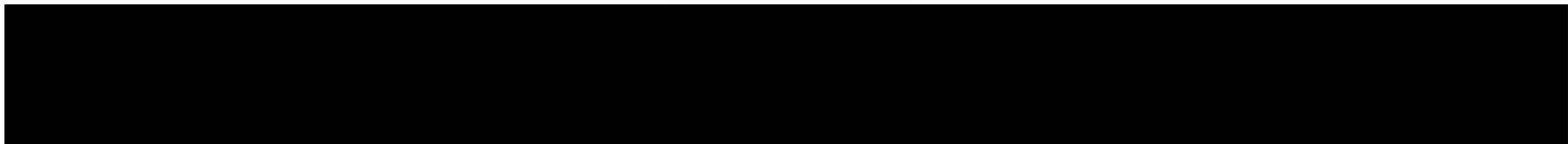
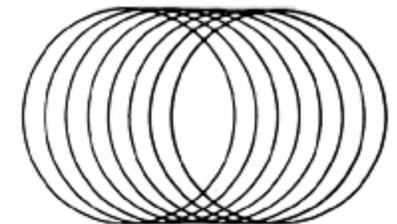
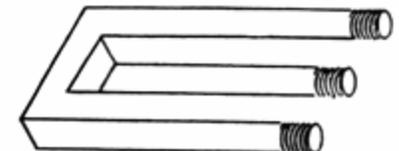
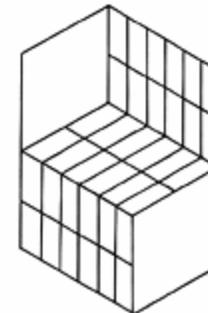
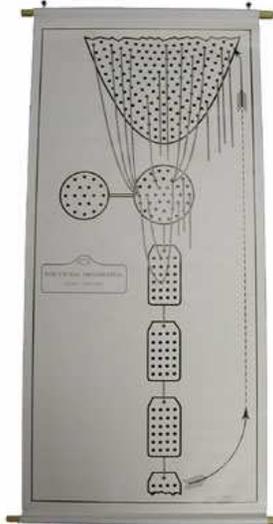
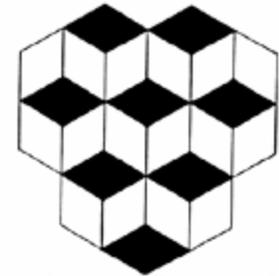
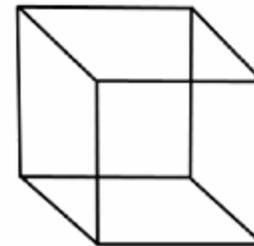
- What I knew before
- What happened to them
- What happened to me
- What I know now



# What I use to evaluate the world

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- Context
- Relativity
- Existentialism
- Uncertainty
- General Semantics



# Uncertainty, Relativity, Context, Meaning

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- From physics, I learned about relativity and uncertainty—that we can't know all about everything, and what we can know depends on our relative point of view
- From psychology, I learned about context—that what we perceive depends heavily on what we expect, know, believe, etc.
- From GS, I learned about meaning—that we define the meaning of a thing or event “in here” rather than discovering it out there.

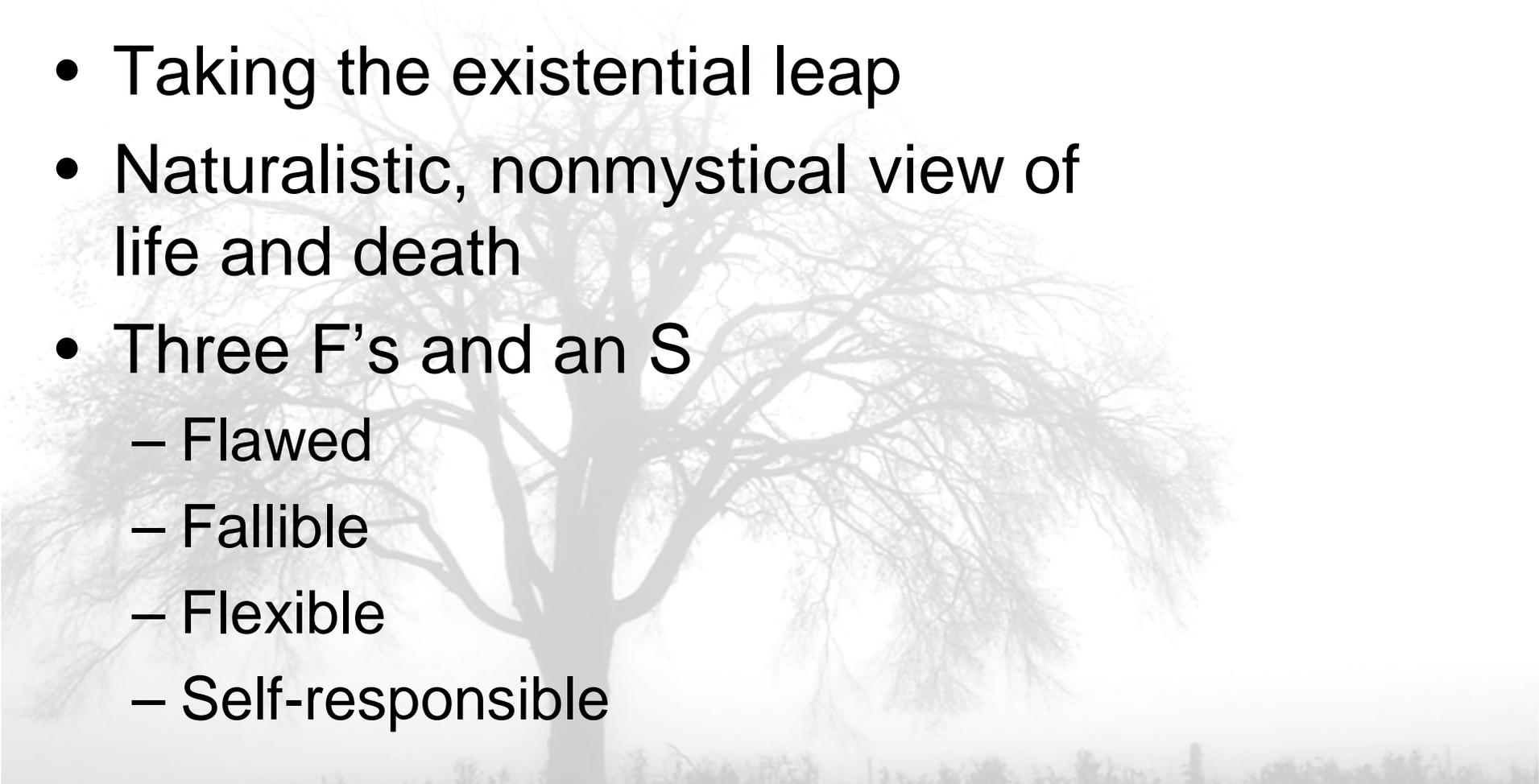
# General Semantics

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- Primary lesson—no meaning but what we make
  - as individuals
  - as a culture
  - as a language-using species with a large brain
- Second lesson—relativity of perception and therefore of meaning

# What I Believe (or don't)

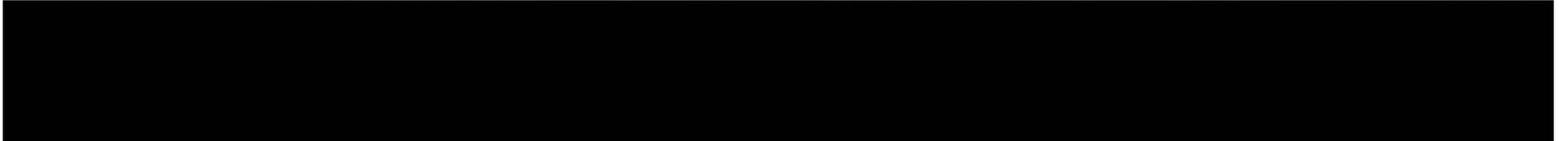
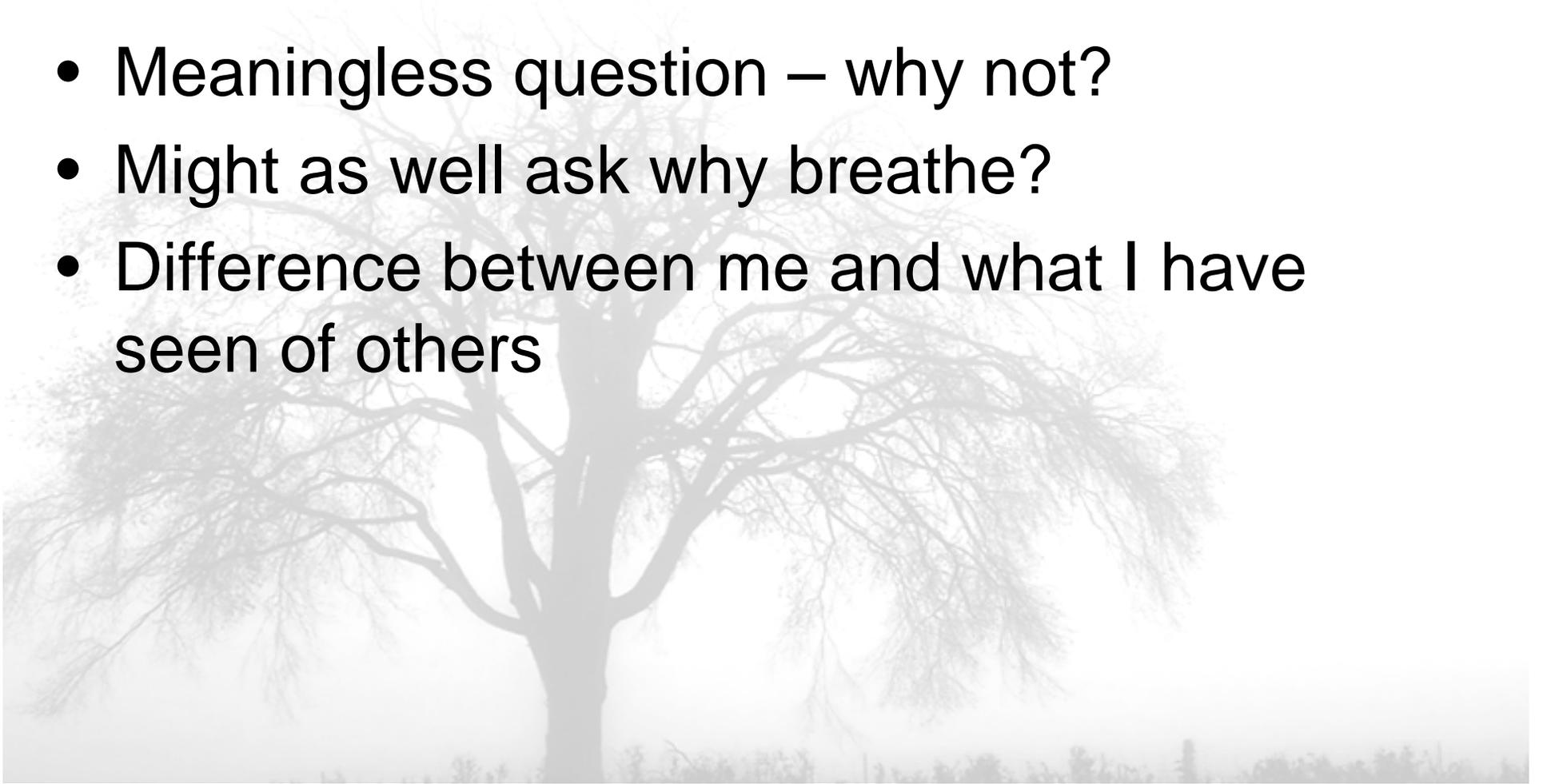
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- Taking the existential leap
  - Naturalistic, nonmystical view of life and death
  - Three F's and an S
    - Flawed
    - Fallible
    - Flexible
    - Self-responsible
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# Why

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- Meaningless question – why not?
- Might as well ask why breathe?
- Difference between me and what I have seen of others



# Coping Skills

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- Be Here Now
- Self-observation (conscious of abstracting)
- Self-responsibility (his and mine)
- Developing independence
- The need to know and benefits of knowing
- Hope (the last evil spirit in Pandora's box)
- Different experiences—his vs mine vs others

# How GS makes a difference

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- Dating—Rick<sub>(1999)</sub> is not Rick<sub>(1968-1998)</sub>
- Indexing—Rick<sub>(ill)</sub> is not Rick<sub>(healthy)</sub>
  - Nora<sub>(with Rick)</sub> is not Nora<sub>(alone)</sub>
  - Nora<sub>(alone 1999)</sub> is not Nora<sub>(alone 2000)</sub> etc
- Non-allness—Rick was not the only person in my life, not all good, not without flaws, etc.
- Process orientation—Rick's illness and death represent a part of the process of life

# How GS makes a difference (cont'd)

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- To-me-ness—no matter what I felt, this wasn't happening to me. Awareness of that helped reduce self-pity and self-absorption.
- Fact vs Inference—Rick drew conclusions without facts. Awareness of that helped me alleviate his fears and concerns.
- Multi-valued logic—I evaluated medical information more rationally by remembering this principle.
- Improved predictability—more reliance on facts, less on hope

# On My Own

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- Spent little time on false-to-facts denial
- When faced with potential guilt due to a pleasant experience, I chose to “enjoy for 2”
- Unable to sustain “It’s not fair” for very long, so crying never lasted very long
- Silly souvenirs, “messages”, voice in my head—all permitted with self-acceptance

# On My Own (cont'd)

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- “How Proust Can Change your Life”
  - telling a story moves it from the emotional (nonverbal) level to the more rational level, thus reducing its ability to command emotion
  - “Once we explain an event, we can fold it up like fresh laundry, put it away in memory’s drawer, and move on to the next one; but if an event defies explanation, it becomes a *mystery* ... and refuses to stay in the back of our minds. ... Explanation robs events of their emotional impact because it makes them seem likely and allows us to stop thinking about them.”
    - Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Knopf, 2006, pp. 186-189

# On My Own (cont'd)

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- Counseling help give perspectives I couldn't achieve
  - “I'll never be as happy in the future as I have been in the past.”
- Recalibrating the internal yardstick
  - Acknowledging flawed perceptions
  - Expecting fallible evaluations
  - Responding flexibly to new situations
  - Exercising self-responsibility

# Two Hearts

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- Learned to operate on two levels—regular life and internal life
- Awareness of abstracting helped me deal with multiple simultaneous conflicting emotions and thoughts
- What I learned from Rick's death enabled me to help my sister face her terminal illness in ways my other siblings could not

# Summing up

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- When I learned general semantics, I acquired a set of skills that
  - reduced my emotional instability
  - increased my cognitive accuracy
  - enabled me to navigate difficult experiences with fewer shocks and surprises.
- The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.
  - William Arthur Ward, college administrator, writer (1921-1994)

# Questions?

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