IT'S OK THAT YOU'RE NOT OK

Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand

MEGAN DEVINE

Foreword by *New York Times* bestselling author Mark Nepo

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MEGAN DEVINE

SOUNDS TRUE
Boulder, Colorado

For those who are the stuff of other people’s nightmares.

Exposed to all that is lost, she sings with a stray girl who is also herself, her amulet.

ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK

For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love.

CARL SAGAN

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FOREWORD

There is a twin paradox in being human. First, no one can live your life for you—no one can face what is yours to face or feel what is yours to feel—*and* no one can make it alone. Secondly, in living our one life, we are here to love and lose. No one knows why. It is just so. If we commit to loving, we will inevitably know loss and grief. If we try to avoid loss and grief, we will never truly love. Yet powerfully and mysteriously, knowing both love and loss is what brings us fully and deeply alive.

Having known love and loss deeply, Megan Devine is a strong and caring companion. Having lost a loved one, she knows that life is forever changed. There is no getting over it, but only getting under it. Loss and grief change our landscape. The terrain is forever different and there is no normal to return to. There is only the inner task of making a new and accurate map. As Megan so wisely says, "We're not here to fix our pain, but to tend to it."

The truth is that those who suffer carry a wisdom that the rest of us need. And given that we live in a society that is afraid to feel, it's important to open each other to the depth of the human journey, which can only be known through the life of our feelings.

Ultimately, the true bond of love and friendship is knit by how much we can experience love and loss together, without judging or pushing each other; not letting each other drown in the deep or rescuing each other from the baptism of soul that waits there. As Megan affirms, "Real safety is in entering each other's pain, [and] recognizing ourselves inside it."

Our work, alone and together, is not to minimize the pain or loss we feel, but to investigate what these life-changing incidents are opening in us. I have learned through my own pain and grief that to be broken is no reason to see all things as broken. And so, the gift and practice of being

human centers on the effort to restore what matters and, when in trouble, to make good use of our heart.

Like John of the Cross, who faced the dark night of the soul, and like Jacob, who wrestled the nameless angel in the bottom of the ravine, Megan lost her partner Matt and wrestled through a long dark ravine. And the truth she arrives with is not that everything will be alright or repaired or forgotten. But that things will evolve and root as real, that those who suffer great loss will be inextricably woven with life again, though everything will change.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgil is Dante's guide through hell into purgatory, right up until Dante faces a wall of flame, which he balks at, afraid. But Virgil tells him, "You have no choice. It is the fire that will burn but not consume." Dante is still afraid. Sensing this, Virgil puts his hand on his shoulder and repeats, "You have no choice." Dante then summons his courage and enters.

Everyone who lives comes upon this wall of fire. Like Virgil, Megan is a guide through hell, up to the wall of fire we each must pass through alone, beyond which we become our own guides. Like Virgil, Megan points out a way, not *the* way, but a way, offering those in the mad turmoil of grief a few things to hold onto. It is courageous work to love and lose and keep each other company, no matter how long the road. And Megan is a courageous teacher. If you are in the grip of grief, reach for this book. It will help you carry what is yours to carry while making the journey less alone.

Mark Nepo

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I always read the dedications and acknowledgments in a book. I like to see the relationship lines, the mentors and guides, the life that surrounds the book, and the one who wrote it. A book is a tiny fragment of a life, and a by-product of it. They inter-feed, which is a weird way to put it. This book was hard for me, and beautiful, in ways that aren't always clear on the page but were clearly held by the people in my life. Samantha (who held everything), Cynthia, Rosie, TC, Steph, Michael, Sarah, Naga, Wit, and another handful of people who came in and out of this time—thank you for being there, for listening, and for digging me out when I got lost. To my twin loves, who during the writing of this book were my play, my adventure, my respite, and my joy—for as long as it lasts, and beyond, thank you. Thank you to my tango community, for being the one consistent place I could stop writing, even in my head. My writing students, for so many reasons, are the backbone of this book, their emails and notes often coming at just the right moment to remind me why I do this work. Thank you, my loves, for sharing your hearts and your words with me. To my friends and allies who died in the years since Matt's death, I still feel you around me. Then, as now, your support means more than worlds to me. Thank you to my agent, David Fugate, who believed in the message of cultural transformation from the moment we first talked about grief. And to my team at Sounds True, as I've told you before, I feel loved and cared for by you, and that is everything. Thank you.

And though it seems strange, or maybe arrogant, I owe an unending thank-you to myself—to the person I was, the person at the river that day and in the years soon after, the one who lived when she did not want to. This book is a love letter back to her, an act of time travel. In so many ways, through this book, I want for myself what I want for all who read

it—to reach back with my words, to hold her, to help her survive. I am so glad she lived.

INTRODUCTION

The way we deal with grief in our culture is broken. I thought I knew quite a bit about grief. After all, I'd been a psychotherapist in private practice for nearly a decade. I worked with hundreds of people—from those wrestling with substance addiction and patterns of homelessness to private practice clients facing decades-old abuse, trauma, and grief. I'd worked in sexual violence education and advocacy, helping people navigate some of the most horrific experiences of their lives. I studied the cutting edge of emotional literacy and resilience. I cared deeply and felt that I was doing important, valuable work.

And then, on a beautiful, ordinary summer day in 2009, I watched my partner drown. Matt was strong, fit, and healthy. He was just three months away from his fortieth birthday. With his abilities and experience, there was no reason he should have drowned. It was random, unexpected, and it tore my world apart.

After Matt died, I wanted to call every one of my clients and apologize for my ignorance. Though I'd been skilled in deep emotional work, Matt's death revealed an entirely different world. None of what I knew applied to loss of that magnitude. With all my experience and training, if anyone could be prepared to deal with that kind of loss, it should've been me. But nothing could have prepared me for that. None of what I'd learned mattered.

And I wasn't alone.

In the first years after Matt's death, I slowly discovered a community of grieving people. Writers, activists, professors, social workers, and scientists in our professional worlds, our small band of young widows and parents grieving the loss of young children came together in our shared experience of pain. But it wasn't just loss that we shared. Every one of us had felt judged, shamed, and corrected in our grief. We shared

stories of being encouraged to "get over it," put the past behind us, and stop talking about those we had lost. We were admonished to move on with our lives and told we needed these deaths in order to learn what was important in life. Even those who tried to help ended up hurting. Platitudes and advice, even when said with good intentions, came across as dismissive, reducing such great pain to greeting card one-liners.

At a time when we most needed love and support, each one of us felt alone, misunderstood, judged, and dismissed. It's not that the people around us meant to be cruel; they just didn't know how to be truly helpful. Like many grieving people, we stopped talking about our pain to friends and family. It was easier to pretend everything was fine than to continually defend and explain our grief to those who couldn't understand. We turned to other grieving people because they were the only ones who knew what grief was really like.

Grief and loss happen to everyone. We've all felt misunderstood during times of great pain. We've also stood by, helpless, in the face of other people's pain. We've all fumbled for words, knowing no words can ever make things right. No one can win: grieving people feel misunderstood, and friends and family feel helpless and stupid in the face of grief. We know we need help, but we don't really know what to ask for. Trying to help, we actually make it worse for people going through the worst time in their lives. Our best intentions come out garbled.

It's not our fault. We all want to feel loved and supported in our times of grief, and we all want to help those we love. The problem is that we've been taught the wrong way to do it.

Our culture sees grief as a kind of malady: a terrifying, messy emotion that needs to be cleaned up and put behind us as soon as possible. As a result, we have outdated beliefs around how long grief should last and what it should look like. We see it as something to overcome, something to fix, rather than something to tend or support. Even our clinicians are trained to see grief as a disorder rather than a natural response to deep loss. When the professionals don't know how to handle grief, the rest of us can hardly be expected to respond with skill and grace.

There's a gap, a great divide between what we most want and where we are now. The tools we currently have for dealing with grief are not going to bridge that gap. Our cultural and professional ideas about what

grief should look like keep us from caring for ourselves inside grief, and they keep us from being able to support those we love. Even worse, those outdated ideas add unnecessary suffering on top of natural, normal pain.

There is another way.

Since Matt's death, I've worked with thousands of grieving people through my website, Refuge in Grief. I've spent the past years acquiring expertise about what truly helps during the long slog of grief. Along the way, I've established myself as a nationally known, leading voice not only in grief support but in a more compassionate, skillful way of relating to one another.

My theories on grief, vulnerability, and emotional literacy have been drawn from my own experience and the stories and experiences of the thousands of people trying their best to make their way through the landscape of grief. From grieving people themselves, and from friends and family members struggling to support them, I've identified the real problem: our culture simply hasn't taught us how to come to grief with the skills needed to be truly helpful.

If we want to care for one another better, we have to rehumanize grief. We have to talk about it. We have to understand it as a natural, normal process, rather than something to be shunned, rushed, or maligned. We have to start talking about the real skills needed to face the reality of living a life entirely changed by loss.

It's OK That You're Not OK provides a new way of looking at grief—a new model offered not by some professor locked up in an office, *studying* grief, but by someone who's lived it. I've been inside that grief. I've been the person howling on the floor, unable to eat or to sleep, unable to tolerate leaving the house for more than a few minutes at a time. I've been on the other side of the clinician's couch, on the receiving end of outdated and wholly irrelevant talk of stages and the power of positive thinking. I've struggled with the physical aspects of grief (memory loss, cognitive changes, anxiety) and found tools that help. With a combination of my clinical skills and my own experience, I learned the difference between *solving* pain and *tending* to pain. I learned, firsthand, why trying to talk someone out of their grief is both hurtful and entirely different from helping them live with their grief.

This book provides a path to rethink our relationship with grief. It encourages readers to see their grief as a natural response to death and

loss, rather than an aberrant condition needing transformation. By shifting the focus from grief as a problem to be solved to an experience to be tended, we give the reader what we most want for ourselves: understanding, compassion, validation, and a way through the pain.

It's OK That You're Not OK shows readers how to live with skill and compassion during their grief, but it isn't just a book for people in pain: this book is about making things better for everyone. All of us are going to experience deep grief or loss at some point in our lives. All of us are going to know someone living great loss. Loss is a universal experience.

In a world that tells us that grieving the death of someone you love is an illness needing treatment, this book offers a different perspective, a perspective that encourages us to reexamine our relationship with love, loss, heartbreak, and community. If we can start to understand the true nature of grief, we can have a more helpful, loving, supportive culture. We can get what we *all* most want: to help each other in our moments of need, to feel loved and supported no matter what horrors erupt in our lives. When we change our conversations around grief, we make things better for everyone.

What we all share in common—the real reason for this book—is a desire to love better. To love ourselves in the midst of great pain, and to love one another when the pain of this life grows too large for one person to hold. This book offers the skills needed to make that kind of love a reality.

Thank you for being here. For being willing to read, to listen, to learn. Together, we can make things better, even when we can't make them right.

PART I

THIS IS ALL JUST AS CRAZY AS YOU THINK IT IS

1

THE REALITY OF LOSS

Here's what I most want you to know: this really is as bad as you think.

No matter what anyone else says, this sucks. What has happened cannot be made right. What is lost cannot be restored. There is no beauty here, inside this central fact.

Acknowledgment is everything.

You're in pain. It can't be made better.

The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside. There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of.

You don't need solutions. You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life.

Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

THE REALITY OF GRIEF

When out-of-order death or a life-altering event enters your life, everything changes. Even when it's expected, death or loss still comes as a surprise. Everything is different now. The life you expected to unfold disappears: vaporized. The world splits open, and nothing makes sense. Your life was normal, and now, suddenly, it's anything but normal. Otherwise intelligent people have started spouting slogans and platitudes, trying to cheer you up. Trying to take away your pain.

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This is not how you thought it would be.

Time has stopped. Nothing feels real. Your mind cannot stop replaying the events, hoping for a different outcome. The ordinary, everyday world that others still inhabit feels coarse and cruel. You can't eat (or you eat everything). You can't sleep (or you sleep all the time). Every object in your life becomes an artifact, a symbol of the life that used to be and might have been. There is no place this loss has not touched.

In the days and weeks since your loss, you've heard all manner of things about your grief: They wouldn't want you to be sad. Everything happens for a reason. At least you had them as long as you did. You're strong and smart and resourceful—you'll get through this! This experience will make you stronger. You can always try again—get another partner, have another child, find some way to channel your pain into something beautiful and useful and good.

Platitudes and cheerleading solve nothing. In fact, this kind of support only makes you feel like no one in the world understands. This isn't a paper cut. It's not a crisis of confidence. You didn't need this thing to happen in order to know what's important, to find your calling, or even to understand that you are, in fact, deeply loved.

Telling the truth about grief is the only way forward: your loss is exactly as bad as you think it is. And people, try as they might, really are responding to your loss as poorly as you think they are. You aren't crazy. Something crazy has happened, and you're responding as any sane person would.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Most of what passes for grief support these days is less than useful. Because we don't talk about loss, most people—and many professionals—think of grief and loss as aberrations, detours from a normal, happy life.

We believe that the goal of grief support, personal or professional, is to get out of grief, to stop feeling pain. Grief is something to get through as quickly as possible. An unfortunate, but fleeting, experience that is best sorted and put behind you.

It's that faulty belief that leaves so many grieving people feeling alone and abandoned on top of their grief. There's so much correction and judgment inside grief; many feel it's just easier to not talk about what hurts. Because we don't talk about the reality of loss, many grieving people think that what's happening to them is strange, or weird, or wrong.

There is nothing wrong with grief. It's a natural extension of love. It's a healthy and sane response to loss. That grief feels bad doesn't make it bad; that you feel crazy doesn't mean you are crazy.

Grief is part of love. Love for life, love for self, love for others. What you are living, painful as it is, is love. And love is really hard. Excruciating at times.

If you're going to feel this experience as part of love, we need to start talking about it in real terms, not as pathology, and not with some false hope of everything working out alright in the end.

GRIEF BEYOND "NORMAL" GRIEF

Everyday life carries losses and grief. There is immense work to be done in our culture around giving everyone a voice, around validating and honoring all the pains we carry in our hearts, all the loss we encounter. But this book isn't about those daily losses.

There are wounds in this life that hurt, that hurt immensely, that can eventually be overcome. Through self-work and hard work, many difficulties can be transformed. There really is gold to be found, as the Jungians say, at the bottom of all the heavy work of life. But this is not one of those times. This isn't a hard day at work. This isn't simply not getting something you deeply, truly wanted. This is not losing something beautiful just so something more "right for you" can come along. The work of transformation does not apply here.

There are losses that rearrange the world. Deaths that change the way you see everything, grief that tears everything down. Pain that transports you to an entirely different universe, even while everyone else thinks nothing has really changed.

When I talk about loss, when I talk about grief, I am talking about things beyond what we consider the natural order of things. I am talking about accidents and illnesses, natural disasters, manmade disasters,

violent crimes, and suicides. I'm talking about the random, atypical, unusual losses that seem more and more common as I do this work. I'm talking about the underground losses, the pain no one wants to talk about —or more, no one wants to hear about: The baby who died days before his birth, with no known cause. The athletic, driven young man who dove into a pond and came out paralyzed. The young wife who saw her husband shot in a random carjacking. The partner swept away by a rogue wave. The vibrant, healthy woman whose stage-four cancer was discovered during a routine checkup, leaving a husband, young son, and countless friends within a few months of hearing the news. The twenty-year-old kid struck by a bus while working a humanitarian mission in South America. The family vacationing in Indonesia as the tsunami hit. The community reeling after a hate crime claimed their friends and families. The young child taken down by a mutation in her bones. The brother, alive and well at breakfast, dead by lunch. The friend whose struggles you did not realize until they were found dead by their own hand.

Maybe you've come here because someone is dead. I'm here because someone is dead. Maybe you've come because life has irrevocably changed—through accident or illness, through violent crime or act of nature.

How random and fragile life can be.

We don't talk about the fragility of life: how everything can be normal one moment, and completely changed the next. We have no words, no language, no capacity to face this, together or as individuals. Because we don't talk about it, when we most need love and support, there's nothing to be found. What *is* available falls far short of what we need.

The reality of grief is different from what others see or guess from the outside. Platitudes and pat explanations will not work here. There is not a reason for everything. Not every loss can be transformed into something useful. Things happen that do not have a silver lining.

We have to start telling the truth about this kind of pain. About grief, about love, about loss.

Because the truth is, in one way or another, loving each other means losing each other. Being alive in such a fleeting, tenuous world is hard. Our hearts get broken in ways that can't be fixed. There is pain that becomes an immovable part of our lives. We need to know how to

endure that, how to care for ourselves inside that, how to care for one another. We need to know how to live here, where life as we know it can change, forever, at any time.

We need to start talking about *that* reality of life, which is also the reality of love.

SURVIVAL

If you've found yourself here, in this life you didn't ask for, in this life you didn't see coming, I'm sorry. I can't tell you it will all work out in the end. I can't tell you things will be just fine.

You are not "OK." You might not ever be "OK."

Whatever grief you're carrying, it's important to acknowledge how bad this is, how hard. It really is horrendous, horrifying, and unsurvivable.

This book is not about fixing you, or fixing your grief. It's not about making you "better" or getting you back to "normal." This book is about how you live inside your loss. How you carry what cannot be fixed. How you survive.

And even though that thought—that you *can* survive something as horrifying as this—is unsettling and horrifying in its own right, the truth is, you will most likely survive.

Your survival in this life post-loss won't follow steps or stages, or align with anyone else's vision of what life might be for you. Survival won't be found, can't be found, in easy answers or in putting your lost life behind you, pretending you didn't really want it anyway.

In order to survive, to find that life that feels authentic and true to you, we have to start with telling the truth. This really is as bad as you think. Everything really is as wrong, and as bizarre, as you know it to be. When we start there, we can begin to talk about living with grief, living inside the love that remains.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

It's OK That You're Not OK is divided into four parts: the reality of loss, what to do with your grief, friends and family, and the way forward.

Throughout this book, you'll find excerpts from students in my Writing Your Grief courses. Their words, often even more so than my own, illustrate the challenging and multifaceted aspects of grief lived honestly and openly.

While the book progresses in a somewhat linear fashion, jump around however you see fit. As with grief, there's no right way to explore this. Especially in early grief, there's only so much you can absorb. Even if you had a deep attention span before your loss, grief has a way of shortening that considerably. Take things in manageable chunks. (I discuss more on how grief affects your brain and body in part 2.)

The first part of the book is about the culture of grief and how we come to pain like yours. It dives into the historical roots of emotional illiteracy, of our deep aversion to facing the realities of pain. It's the wide view of grief, the view of what grief—and love—looks like when seen through a much longer lens.

If your world has just imploded, why should you care about the wider view? Why should you spend any time at all reflecting on how emotionally illiterate this world is?

Well, it's true: cultural understandings of grief don't really matter in the early days. What does matter is knowing that you aren't alone in feeling like the world at large has failed you. Discussions of the way we deal with grief in this culture can help you feel less alone. They can validate the crazy dissonance between your reality and the reality others foist on you.

That difference between what the outside world believes and what you know to be true can be one of the hardest aspects of grief.

I remember my own early days after my partner drowned—shoving myself out into the world, frazzled hair, sunken cheeks, mismatched clothes, looking for all the world like a homeless woman, babbling on to myself. Trying to keep moving. Doing what was reasonable, expected, ordinary: groceries, dog walks, meeting friends for lunch. Nodding back at people who told me everything was going to be OK. Holding my tongue, being polite, when therapist after therapist told me I had to progress through the stages of grief more quickly.

All the while, beside me, inside me, was the howling, shrieking, screaming mass of pain, watching this normal and ordinary person being reasonable. Polite. As though anything was OK. As though what I was

living was not that bad. As though horror could be managed through acceptable behavior.

I could see the fault lines running through everything, knowing that all these reasonable people talking to me about stages of grief, about pushing myself through the pain to some exalted vision of "getting better," all the books that pointed toward getting out of pain by simply rising above it somehow—I knew it was crap. Saying so only got me labeled as "resistant."

What I would have given to see my reality reflected back to me. Grief support is kind of like the emperor's new clothes of the relational world—those in pain know that what passes for support is truly nothing at all, while well-intentioned support people continue to spout off empty encouragement and worn-out platitudes, knowing in their hearts that those words don't help at all. We all know this, and yet no one says anything.

How irrelevant it is to talk about grief as though it were an intellectual exercise, something you can simply use your mind to rise above. The intelligence that arranges words and dictates stages or steps or reasonable behavior is on a wholly different plane than the heart that is newly smashed open.

Grief is visceral, not reasonable: the howling at the center of grief is raw and real. It is love in its most wild form. The first part of this book explores our cultural and historical reluctance to feel that wildness. While it won't change anything inside your loss, hearing your personal experience set against the wider, broken culture can help shift things somehow.

The second part of this book is what you can actually do inside your grief—not to make it "better," but to help you withstand the life you are called to live. Just because you can't fix grief doesn't mean there is nothing you can do inside it. When we shift the focus from fixing your pain to simply tending to it, a whole world of support opens up. Validation and frank discussion of the realities of grief makes things different, even when it can't make things "right."

Part 2 explores some of the most common, and least discussed, aspects of grief, including the mental and physical changes that come with intense loss. There are exercises to help you manage unnecessary or unavoidable stress, improve your sleep, decrease anxiety, deal with intrusive or repetitive images related to your loss, and find tiny windows

of calm where things aren't all better, but they are somewhat easier to carry.

In part 3, we explore the often frustrating and occasionally amazing support from friends, family, and acquaintances surrounding you. How is it possible that otherwise intelligent, insightful people have no idea how to truly support you inside your loss? While we can't fault those with "good intentions," it's simply not enough to say they mean well. How do you help those who want to help you? My hope is that you'll use the third part of this book to do just that: hand it over to those who truly want to be of help, and let this book guide the way. There are checklists, suggestions, and first-person essays to help your support teams be more skilled in how they come to your pain. And just as important, part 3 helps you figure out who simply can't be there for you, and how to cut them from your life with at least *some* skill and grace.

The last part of this book looks at ways we move forward after devastating loss. Given that your loss is not something to be fixed, what would "living a good life" even look like? How do you live here, in a world that is so completely changed? It's a complex and complicated process—carrying love with you, moving forward as opposed to "moving on." Part 4 dives into the ways we find true support and companionship inside loss, and the ways that pain—and love—get integrated into a life lived alongside loss.

And that's the truth about grief: loss gets integrated, not overcome. However long it takes, your heart and your mind will carve out a new life amid this weirdly devastated landscape. Little by little, pain and love will find ways to coexist. It won't feel wrong or bad to have survived. It will be, simply, a life of your own making: the most beautiful life it can be, given what is yours to live. May this book help you find the thread of love that still exists, following it forward into a life you didn't ask for, but is here nonetheless.

I'm so sorry you have need of this book, and I'm so glad you're here.

2

THE SECOND HALF OF THE SENTENCE

Why Words of Comfort Feel So Bad

It's incredibly hard to watch someone you love in pain. Those who love you tell you you're strong enough to get through this. You'll feel better someday. It won't always be this bad. They encourage you to look to your much brighter future, to a time when you aren't in so much pain.

People offer suggestions for how to get out of your grief faster. They tell you what they would do if they were in your position. They tell you about their own losses, as though every grief is exactly the same. As though knowing someone else has suffered makes anything any different.

From close friends to casual acquaintances, everyone has a take on your grief; everyone wants to make it better for you somehow.

Of course people want to make you feel better—it's part of being human: We want to take away what hurts. We want to help. We want to *be* helped. We want things from each other we should be able to give. But instead of feeling held and comforted, many grieving people feel shamed, shunned, and dismissed. Instead of feeling effective and useful, those trying to help feel unwanted, frustrated, and unappreciated.

No one gets what they want.

Most of this part of the book focuses on our messed-up cultural models around grief and pain, but this chapter stays personal: it's important to validate how crazy other people's responses to your loss can make you feel. Wondering if other people are nuts or you're just being

"too sensitive" adds an additional level of stress. Validation and acknowledgment are important—there really is something not comforting in the way people are trying to comfort you.

THEIR WORDS SEEM OK: SO WHY DO THEY MAKE ME SO ANGRY?

A very dear friend of mine's father died during the time I was writing this book. She sent me a text about a week after he died: "People are sending me the sweetest condolence cards. Why does this make me so enraged? I hate them and their stupid cards. Even the nicest words seem mean."

Intense grief is an impossibility: there is no "making it better." Words of intended comfort just grate. "Help" from other people feels like an intrusion. Attempts at connection or understanding come across as clueless or rude. Everyone has an opinion as to how you should be grieving and how you can make this better for yourself. Platitudes about coming through this "even stronger" and admonishments to "remember the good times" feel like a slap in the face.

Why do words of comfort feel so horribly wrong?

Before my partner died, I was reading *There Is a Spiritual Solution to Every Problem* by Dr. Wayne Dyer. It's a great book. When I tried to pick it up after Matt died, though, I couldn't get back into it. It just kept feeling wrong, like there was a burr inside the words that scratched uncomfortably. I kept trying to find comfort in the words I found comforting and helpful before, and those words were just not doing it.

I put the book down. I picked it back up. The burr rasped and the words didn't fit, and I put the book back down.

It was several weeks later when my eye happened to catch the title of the book as it lay on the coffee table: there's a spiritual solution to every problem.

Every *problem*.

Suddenly, it made sense. There may in fact be a spiritual solution to every problem, but grief is not a problem to be solved. It isn't "wrong," and it can't be "fixed." It isn't an illness to be cured.

We assume that if something is uncomfortable, it means something is wrong. People conclude that grief is "bad" because it hurts. We hear

about relieving the pain, getting out of pain, dreaming of a time when there is no pain. We behave as though grief is something to get out of as soon as possible, an aberration that needs healing, rather than a natural response to loss.

Most people approach grief as a problem to be solved. Your friends and family see you in pain, and they want to relieve your pain. Whether that aim is stated clearly or not, it's the sole reason why words of comfort usually feel anything but comforting to you in your grief. Intentionally or not, by trying to solve your grief, they aren't giving you the support you actually need.

As I told my friend, those sweet-seeming condolence cards feel offensive because, at their root, they're trying to fix pain. They skip over the true reality of the situation: this hurts. Though they often don't mean to, people make grief feel much worse when they try to pretty it up, gloss over it, or make it go away. Whether comfort and condolences come in person or in those beautiful/awful cards, this chapter goes over some of the ways the best of intentions can backfire.

HEY, ME TOO!

When they hear about your loss, many people will try to empathize by telling you their own grief stories. This ranges from the close-but-no-cigar comparison of "My husband died, too," to "My goldfish died when I was eight, so I know just how you feel."

We share stories of loss to communicate that we understand where you are: "Hey, look. I've walked this road. I understand how you feel."

Shared loss stories are an attempt to make you feel less alone inside your grief. They don't usually land that way, though. Comparing one grief with another almost always backfires. One experience of loss does not translate into another. Grief is as individual as love. That someone has experienced a loss—even one similar to yours—does not mean they understand you.

When someone relates their own story of loss, they're hoping to remove some of your pain. True. But that's not all. Everyone carries grief—from the everyday losses to the bigger, life-altering ones. Because we don't talk about grief in our culture, we have personal and global backlogs of unheard and unspoken grief. When you become visible in

your grief, it's like a portal opens, a doorway into acceptability and openness. When you start talking about loss, it's like there's suddenly this permission, and we think, *Oh, thank goodness, we're talking about grief now. Let me tell you about the losses I've suffered!*

We all want to talk about our pain. We all carry stories that need acknowledgment. But right now? Right now, when you are in pain, when your loss is primary and powerful? That is not the time for a two-way, give-and-take discussion about the losses we all sustain.

Grief comparison and shared grief stories do not bring you comfort. Of course they don't.

It can feel like your own loss has been eclipsed by the speaker's need to tell their own story—no matter how long ago it happened, or how irrelevant it is to your loss.

Talking about their own pain is a way the speaker moves the focus off supporting you and onto getting their own needs met. It seems nefarious, but it's just one of the subtle ways our faulty grief culture impacts your actual grieving process.

There is a time and a place to discuss our shared stories of loss. When your world has just imploded is not one of those times. You feel "mugged" by other people's grief stories because something has been taken away from you: the central importance of *your* current reality.

THE COMPETITION OF GRIEF

Sharing grief as a way to connect with the griever almost always turns into a competition of grief: the grief Olympics. Whose pain is worse? Whose grief means more?

If you've told someone that their experience of loss is not the same as yours, I bet you've heard a defensive backlash from them. They're hurt. Offended. If you respond to the speaker's shared grief story by saying, "They aren't the same thing," what they hear is: "Your grief is not as real as mine." They hear that their pain wasn't bad enough. They hear that distinction as an insult to their heart, a dismissal of their pain.

What started out as an attempt to connect devolves into an argument over whose grief hurts more.

We need to talk about the hierarchy of grief. You hear it all the time —no grief is worse than any other. I don't think that's one bit true. There

is a hierarchy of grief. Divorce is not the same as the death of a partner. Death of a grandparent is not the same as the death of a child. Losing your job is not the same as losing a limb.

Here's the thing: every loss is valid. And every loss is not the same. You can't flatten the landscape of grief and say that everything is equal. It isn't.

It's easier to see when we take it out of the intensely personal: stubbing your toe hurts. It totally hurts. For a moment, the pain can be all-consuming. You might even hobble for a while. Having your foot ripped off by a passing freight train hurts, too. Differently. The pain lasts longer. The injury needs recovery time, which may be uncertain or complicated. It affects and impacts your life moving forward. You can't go back to the life you had before you became a one-footed person. No one would say these two injuries are exactly the same.

A stubbed toe hurts, and it gets to be honored and heard without being dismissed as no big deal. A torn-off foot is different. It gets to be honored and heard without being dismissed. That all grief is valid does not mean that all grief is the same. Ordinary heartbreaks are difficult, even without reordering the world as you know it. Random, out-of-order, life-altering losses have an echo that reverberates in a different way. Not better, not worse—simply not the same.

We need to be careful that we don't exclude anyone's grief. We all deserve to be heard in our grief, no matter what that grief may be. At the same time, we can't assign equal weight to all losses and successfully support someone in pain. Making no distinction between levels of grief does not support the griever.

It's also true that after a certain point, comparisons become useless. Is it worse to lose a child or to lose a partner? Sudden death or long illness? Suicide or murder? Babies die. Children get cancer. Lovers drown. Earthquakes open the seemingly solid ground, and thousands of people disappear. Bombs go off in random places. The seemingly ordered universe is split open into a big yawning chasm, and no reality makes sense anymore. Distinctions between losses like these do not matter, and they are not helpful.

What we need to remember—as a working practice—is to honor all griefs. Honor all losses, small and not small. Life changing and moment changing. And then, not to compare them. That all people experience pain is not medicine for anything.

Defending the uniqueness of your own loss against the comparisons of others is just not going to help you feel better. Pointing out the various orders of magnitude in loss is not going to help you feel better.

When someone tries to alleviate your pain by sharing their own story of suffering, know that they are attempting to connect and relate. And know that there is a reason it feels so crappy: they aren't actually connecting. They're unintentionally turning the focus away from you and onto their own stories of pain. Your reality is erased, which is exactly the opposite of what they'd hoped to do.

It then sets up this "my grief is worse than yours" dichotomy that leaves everyone feeling unheard and dismissed.

Comparison doesn't work for anyone.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE SENTENCE

Even without comparison, words of comfort from other people can still feel horribly wrong.

We've all been on both sides of the "comfort" equation—jumping in with words meant to soothe someone in pain, feeling helpless and awkward and ridiculous, and being on the receiving end of someone else's words, feeling dismissed or patronized rather than comforted. Why do our intentions come out so backward? Why, even when you know they mean well, do the words of other people grate and annoy?

Stepping over some of the more egregious and ridiculously hurtful things people have said (for now), here's a short list of some of the things grieving people have heard from people intending to offer comfort and support:

At least you had them for as long as you did.

You can always have another child/find another partner.

They're in a better place now.

At least now you get to know what's really important in life.

This will make you a better person in the end.

You won't always feel this bad.

You're stronger than you think.

This is all part of the plan.

Everything happens for a reason.

Saying something like "He wouldn't want you to be sad" or "At least you had her for as long as you did" might seem like a comfort. The problem is, there's an implied second half of the sentence in all those familiar lines. That second half of the sentence unintentionally dismisses or diminishes your pain; it erases what is true now in favor of some alternate experience. That ghost-sentence tells you it's not OK to feel how you feel.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE SENTENCE

For each of these familiar comforting statements, add the phrase "so stop feeling so bad."

At least you had her for as long as you did (so stop feeling so bad).

He died doing something he loved (so stop feeling so bad).

You can always have another child (so stop feeling so bad).

If you cringe or feel angry when friends and family try to comfort you, it's because you hear the second half of that sentence, even when they

don’t say it out loud. The implication is always there, speaking louder in its own silence: *stop feeling how you feel*.

Friends and family want you to feel better. They want to take away your pain. What they don’t understand is that in trying to take your pain away, they’re actually dismissing and minimizing the extent of your grief. They aren’t seeing your reality for what it is. They don’t see you.

Words of comfort that try to erase pain are not a comfort. When you try to take someone’s pain away from them, you don’t make it better. You just tell them it’s not OK to talk about their pain.

To feel truly comforted by someone, you need to feel heard in your pain. You need the reality of your loss reflected back to you—not diminished, not diluted. It seems counterintuitive, but true comfort in grief is in acknowledging the pain, not in trying to make it go away.

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

Humans are such funny creatures. We’re quick with “comfort,” judgment, and meaning-making when it comes to other people’s losses. How many times have you heard “Everything happens for a reason” inside your loss? Those same people would be the first to refute that statement if something horrendous happened to them. We use words on one another we would never accept for ourselves.

Things like “Everything happens for a reason” and “You’ll become a stronger/kinder/more compassionate person because of this” bring out rage in grieving people. Nothing makes a person angrier than when they know they’re being insulted, but they can’t figure out how.

It’s not just erasing your current pain that makes words of comfort land so badly. There’s a hidden subcontext in those statements about becoming better, kinder, and more compassionate because of your loss, that often-used phrase about knowing what’s “truly important in life” now that you’ve learned how quickly life can change.

The unspoken second half of the sentence in this case says you *needed* this somehow. It says that you weren’t aware of what was important in life before this happened. It says that you weren’t kind, compassionate, or aware enough in your life before this happened. That you needed this experience in order to develop or grow, that you needed this lesson in order to step into your “true path” in life.

As though loss and hardship were the only ways to grow as a human being. As though pain were the only doorway to a better, deeper life, the only way to be truly compassionate and kind.

Statements like this say you were not good enough *before*. You somehow needed this.

It's implied, and certainly the speaker would deny it if you pointed it out. But those ghost words are there. And they matter.

If it were true that intense loss is the only way to make a person more compassionate, only self-absorbed, disconnected, shallow people would experience grief. That would make logical sense. That it doesn't? Well, it proves my point. You didn't need this experience in order to grow. You didn't need the lessons that supposedly only grief can teach. You already were a good and decent human, making your way in the world.

Learning happens in a million different ways. Grief and loss are one path to depth and connection, but they are not the only path. In an essay on post-traumatic growth, a veterans' therapist states that people who look back and see their devastating loss or injury as a growth experience are those who felt most dissatisfied or disconnected in their personal lives before the event. They are not grateful for what happened, but they see the arc of their own development in the shadow of their loss. But for those whose lives were full and deep before their loss? The researcher admits that these participants didn't experience big surges in growth because there were no big surges to make. There's no comfort in "becoming a better person" when you were already happy with the person you were.

Grief is not an enlightenment program for a select few. No one needs intense, life-changing loss to become who they are "meant" to be. The universe is not causal in that way: you need to become something, so life gives you this horrible experience in order to make it happen. On the contrary: life is call-and-response. Things happen, and we absorb and adapt. We respond to what we experience, and that is neither good nor bad. It simply is. The path forward is integration, not betterment.

You didn't *need* this. You don't have to grow from it, and you don't have to put it behind you. Both responses are too narrow and shaming to be of use. Life-changing events do not just slip quietly away, nor are they atonements for past wrongs. They change us. They are part of our foundation as we live forward. What you build atop this loss might be growth. It might be a gesture toward more beauty, more love, more

wholeness. But that is due to your choices, your own alignment with who you are and who you want to be. Not because grief is your one-way ticket to becoming a better person.

When you choose to find meaning or growth inside your loss, that's an act of personal sovereignty and self-knowledge. When someone else ascribes growth or meaning to your loss, it diminishes your power, gives subtle shaming or judgment to who you were before, and tells you that you needed this somehow. No wonder it feels so bad.

Words of comfort that imply you needed this, that you needed whatever has happened to rip open your world, can never be of comfort. They're lies. And lies never feel good.

SELF-CHECK AND REALITY CHECKS

There's so much correction inside grief, it can be hard to feel that anything is helpful. For now, it's important to know that most things offered as "support" in our culture are really designed to solve problems or to get you out of pain. If it feels wrong to you, it is. Grief is not a problem to be solved; it's an experience to be carried. The work here is to find—and receive—support and comfort that helps you live with your reality. Companionship, not correction, is the way forward.

The next few chapters further explore the deeper roots of Western culture's inability to be present to pain. While cultural studies may not feel personally relevant, seeing the scope of the problem can help you feel less crazy, less alone, and help you find your own true path inside your loss.

3

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S US

Our Models of Grief Are Broken

When someone you love has just died, why does it matter that our cultural models of grief are broken? I mean—who cares? This is about you, not everyone else. Except that, especially in early grief, everyone thinks you're doing it wrong. The reflection you get from the outside world can make you think you've gone crazy on top of everything else. The dismissals and platitudes of others can make you feel abandoned inside your grief, just at the moment when you most need to know you're loved.

Your personal experience is affected, intimately, by the wider cultural sweep of grief illiteracy. Seeing that illiteracy laid out can help normalize a wholly abnormal time.

You aren't crazy. The culture is crazy. It's not you; it's us.

> Reexamine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul.
>
> **WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass***

TRICKLE-DOWN PATHOLOGY

Collectively, we wear a massive set of reality blinders when it comes to grief. Clinical counseling training programs devote very little time to the subject, even though most clients will come to us with immense grief. What *is* taught is a hugely outdated system of stages that was never

meant to prescribe the correct ways to grieve. What is taught to the medical professions trickles down to the general population.

As a culture, our views on grief are almost entirely negative. Grief is seen as an aberration, a detour from "normal," happy life. Our medical models call it a disorder. We believe that grief is a short-term response to a difficult situation, and as such, should be over and done within a few weeks. Grief that hasn't disappeared, faded back into fond memories and an occasional wistful smile, is evidence that you've done something wrong, or that you aren't as resilient, skilled, or healthy as you thought you were before.

Sadness, grief, pain—they all mean there's something wrong with you. You're stuck in the so-called dark emotions. You aren't following the stages of grief. You're blocking your own recovery, still being so sad. You have a condition now, and it needs to be fixed.

When grief is spoken of in more positive terms, it's always as a means to an end. Our popular psychology, self-help books, movie storylines, book plots, and spiritual texts all glorify grief and loss as a way to grow as a person; to transcend loss is the biggest goal. Happiness is considered the true mark of wellness. Your health and sanity depend on your ability to rise above your grief, to claim equanimity, to find your happiness within.

Your broken heart doesn't stand much of a chance in the face of all this. There's no room for your pain to just *exist*, without pathology.

THE ANTI-GRIEF NARRATIVE AND THE BIZARRE THINGS WE HEAR

In my own early days, I heard unimaginable things about my grief, about my skills in dealing with grief, and about Matt himself. I was told that I wasn't a very good feminist if I was this upset over "losing a man." I was told that my personal and spiritual development must not have been as good as I thought if I couldn't find the gift in this situation. I also heard that Matt never loved me, that he was happier freed from his body than he ever could have been while alive, that he would be horrified at how badly I was doing. I was told that Matt and I created this, with our intentions. That we had a contract in this life; we agreed to this, and since we agreed, there was no reason to be upset.

I also heard seemingly wonderful things—that I was strong and smart and beautiful, that I would find someone new right away. That I would turn this loss around and make it into a gift, that I should think of all the people I could help. That if I would stop being so sad, I'd feel his love around me (but only if I stopped being so sad). Anything to get me out of my pain and sadness and back into a more acceptable way of being.

The things I was told pale in comparison to stories I've heard from grieving people around the world: You caused your baby's cancer with your unhealed personal issues. You have two other children; you should be thankful they exist. If it was meant to be, she would have lived. It's god's plan. You really need to get over this and move on; they weren't that great of a person anyway. A truly enlightened person is not this attached to the other humans in their life; clearly you're codependent. You must have called this experience to yourself with your thoughts; you needed it for your own learning. So what if you're paralyzed? Some people never get a chance to see what they're really made of, and you do.

Judgment, criticism, and dismissive comments are the norm in deep grief, not the exception. Sure, most people have "good intentions," but the difference between their intentions and the actual impact of their words is vast.

The thing is, people think the whole point of grief is to get out of it as quickly as possible. As if grief were some strange thing, some bizarre, and incorrect, response to someone (or something) you love being torn from your life. Grief gets a narrow window to be expressed. After that, you are expected to return to normal, carrying with you the gifts you've learned from the experience. You're supposed to become wiser, more compassionate, and truly understand what's important. Staying sad means you're not doing it right.

Our cultural ideas are so deeply embedded that it can be hard to describe how it feels to be on the receiving end of what passes for grief support. We'll get into this more deeply in part 3, but it's important to state here that most people simply stop saying how misunderstood they feel in their grief because it seems no one wants to hear it. We stop saying "this hurts" because no one listens.

GETTING STUCK IN GRIEF

I'm often asked what to do when a friend or family member seems to be "stuck" in their grief. My response is always the same: "What would 'not being stuck' look like to you? What are your expectations?" For most people, "not being stuck" means that the person has gone back to work, regained their sense of humor, attends social events, doesn't cry every day, and is able to talk about things other than their loss or their grief. They seem . . . happy again.

We think "happy" is the equivalent of "healthy." As though happiness were the baseline, the norm to which all things settle, when we're living as we should.

In short, "back to normal" is the opposite of "being stuck," and getting back to normal (happy) has to happen fast.

HOW LONG IS TOO LONG?

I remember telling someone I was having a rough day, about five weeks after my partner drowned. "Why? What's going on?" they asked. "Uh. Matt died," I replied. "Still? That's still bothering you?"

Still. Yes. Five days, five weeks, five years. One of the best things someone said to me in the months after Matt died was that, with a loss of this magnitude, "just happened" could mean eight days ago as easily as it meant eighty years. When I speak to someone within the first two years of their loss, I always tell them, "This just happened. It was just a minute ago. Of course it still hurts." Their relief is palpable.

We have it so deeply engrained in us that any kind of hardship shouldn't last more than a couple of months, at most. Anything more than that is considered malingering. As though the loss of someone you love were just a temporary inconvenience, something minor, and surely not something to stay upset over.

Our medical model calls grief that lasts longer than six months a "disorder." Descriptions of so-called complicated grief—grief requiring psychological intervention—include still longing for the person who has died, feelings of injustice, and a pervasive sense that the world can never go back to what it was (and other forms of so-called hopelessness). In real-life experience, that timeline of expectation is actually far shorter. Many clinicians, clergy, and therapists believe that being deeply affected by loss after the first couple of weeks is a faulty response. What the

medical model believes moves out to the general population, perpetuating the idea that you should be back to normal as soon as possible.

Medicalizing—and pathologizing—a healthy, normal, sane response to loss is ridiculous, and it does no one any good.

THE STAGES OF GRIEF AND WHY THERAPISTS FAIL

As a therapist, I often find myself apologizing for my profession. With alarming frequency, I hear horror stories from grieving people who have gone to see therapists for support, only to leave shaken and angry. Grief is routinely dismissed, judged, medicated, and minimized by those in the "helping" professions.

No matter their theoretical orientation to therapy, or their intent to help, clinicians are often the least skilled people in the room. Many grieving people find themselves educating their therapists about the realities of grief.

As I mentioned, our professionals are largely taught the five stages of grief model proposed by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*, published in 1969. Even if the five stages are not explicitly mentioned, they underlie so much of what counselors and doctors think of as the "healthy" way to grieve. No wonder so many grieving people have given up on getting professional support: the stages don't fit.

The stages of grief were developed by Kübler-Ross as she listened to and observed people living with terminal diagnoses. What began as a way to understand the emotions of the dying became a way to strategize grief. The griever is expected to move through a series of clearly delineated stages: denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, eventually arriving at "acceptance," at which time their "grief work" is complete.

This widespread interpretation of the stages model suggests that there is a right way and a wrong way to grieve, that there is an orderly and predictable pattern that everyone will go through. You must move through these stages completely or you will never heal.

Getting out of grief is the goal. You have to do it correctly, and you have to do it fast. If you don't progress correctly, you are *failing at grief*.

In her later years, Kübler-Ross wrote that she regretted writing the stages the way that she did, that people mistook them as being both linear and universal. The stages of grief were not meant to tell anyone what to feel and when exactly they should feel it. They were not meant to dictate whether you are doing your grief "correctly" or not. Her stages, whether applied to the dying or those left living, were meant to normalize and validate what someone *might* experience in the swirl of insanity that is loss and death and grief. They were meant to give comfort, not create a cage.

Death, and its aftermath, is such a painful and disorienting time. I understand why people—both the griever and those around them, whether personal or professional—want some kind of road map, a clearly delineated set of steps or stages that will guarantee a successful end to the pain of grief.

But you can't force an order on pain. You can't make grief tidy or predictable. Grief is as individual as love: every life, every path, is unique. There is no pattern, and no linear progression. Despite what many "experts" believe, there are no stages of grief.

Despite what the wider population believes, there are no stages of grief.

To do grief well depends solely on individual experience. It means listening to your own reality. It means acknowledging pain and love and loss. It means allowing the truth of these things the space to exist without any artificial tethers or stages or requirements.

You might experience many of the things other grieving people experience, and hearing that can help. But comparing one way of living with loss with another, as though it were a pass-fail endeavor? That is never going to help.

Until our medical professions are taught to come to grief with the respect and care it deserves, it's going to be hard to find therapists who are willing to sit with pain without pathologizing it.

So again, on behalf of my profession, I'm sorry it's so rough out there. There are, in fact, many, many beautifully skilled therapists and doctors. I found them for myself in my own early grief, and I've met many of them as I continue to do this work. If you've looked for professional support and been disappointed, please keep looking. Good people are out there. (And check the resources section at the back of the book for national and regional resources. It's a great place to start.)

> "According to some clinical diagnostic criteria, I am suffering from moderate to severe depression, and my anxiety levels are high. My therapist suggests antidepressants and some online cognitive behavioral therapy. I leave feeling worse than when I went in. I'm not just grieving anymore. I'm now mentally ill. Someone in some central NHS office has created a downloadable test that tells me so. It must be true: I am failing grief. I try not to let it get to me, but I wonder again if I should be over this by now. I have passed the six-month milestone after all.
>
> **BEVERLY WARD, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her partner**

BUTTERFLIES, RAINBOWS, AND THE CULTURE OF TRANSFORMATION

A lot goes into the making of a grief-illiterate culture. There's so much behind all those simplistic and innocuous-seeming platitudes. We've already talked about the solution-oriented messages behind most of what people say and think about grief, but the roots of our anti-grief culture run deep. The trickle-down effect of the stages of grief model is just the beginning.

Any quick search on the terms "grief" or "hardship" will turn out hundreds of thousands of rainbow-bearing, positive-attitude, "this too shall pass" memes. We acknowledge that hard things happen, sure, but with hard work and the right attitude, everything will turn out great. After all, our movies and books about grief always show the widower, or the grieving mother, coming back even better than before. If things seem a little sad or bittersweet sometimes, it's OK because at least now our hero knows what's really important. That grieving parent created something beautiful out of their child's death, and just think—it wouldn't have happened otherwise. That terrible near-death accident didn't result in death, in fact, it brought the whole family closer together. Things always work out for the best.

Part of our strange cultural relationship with grief comes from a seemingly innocent source: entertainment.

All of our cultural stories are stories of transformation. They're stories of redemption. Books, movies, documentaries, children's stories,

even the tales we tell ourselves—they all end on a positive note. We demand a happy ending. If there isn't one, well, that's the hero's fault. Nobody wants to read a book where the main character is still in pain at the end.

We believe in fairy tales and Cinderella stories, stories where, through effort and perseverance, things always work out. We rise to meet adversity head-on. We don't let our troubles get us down, or at least, we don't let them keep us there. Our heroes—whether real or fictional—are models of bravery and courage in the face of pain. The villains, the disappointing characters, are the ones too stubborn to turn their pain around.

We are an overcoming culture. Bad things happen, but we come out better for them. These are the stories we tell. And it's not just on the screen.

Social scientist Brené Brown argues that we live in "a Gilded Age of Failure," where we fetishize recovery stories for their redemptive ending, glossing over the darkness and struggle that precedes it.[1]

We've got a cultural narrative that says bad things happen in order to help you grow, and no matter how bleak it seems, the end result is always worth the struggle. You'll get there, if only you believe. That happy ending is going to be glorious.

Grieving people are met with impatience precisely because they are failing the cultural storyline of overcoming adversity. If you don't "transform," if you don't find something beautiful inside this, you've failed. And if you don't do it quickly, following that narrative arc from incident to transformation within our collective attention span, you're not living the right story.

There's a gag order on telling the truth, in real life and in our fictional accounts. As a culture, we don't want to hear that there are things that can't be fixed. As a culture, we don't want to hear that there is some pain that never gets redeemed. Some things we learn to live with, and that's not the same as everything working out in the end. No matter how many rainbows and butterflies you stick into the narrative, some stories just don't work out.

NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

Without always knowing why, many people rebel against those transformation stories. Or at least, we're beginning to rebel against them. Those easy, tacked-on endings are starting to (very slowly) lose favor.

Honestly, I think this is why the Harry Potter books were so wildly successful. They were dark. J. K. Rowling dove into that darkness, never once making it syrupy or pretty or sweet. Things did not turn out OK in the end, even though there was beauty in the end. Loss, pain, and grief all existed in that world, and they were never redeemed. They were carried.

Rowling's world spoke to us, collectively, because we needed a story that sounded more like us.

Stories are powerful. Throughout human history, mythology, origin stories, and fairy tales gave us images to live into, to pattern our lives after, to learn from. They helped us locate our own experience against the backdrop of something wider. They still do. We still need stories.

We're hungry for a new cultural narrative. One that actually matches the way we live, one that matches the inside of our hearts more than it matches some made-for-TV movie. If we're going to change things, if we're going to create new, valid, realistic, and useful storylines to live into, we have to start by refusing the happy ending. Or maybe, by redefining what a happy ending is.

A happy ending inside grief like yours cannot be a simple "everything worked out for the best." That ending isn't even possible.

THE NEW HERO'S TALE

When Matt died, I went looking for stories of people who had lived this kind of loss. I went looking for stories of people living in pain so huge it obliterated everything else. I needed those stories. An example to live into. What I found were stories of how to get out of pain. How to fix it. How to transform grief as soon as possible. I read over and over that there was something wrong with me for being so upset.

It wasn't just the books that told me that. The people in my life, close friends, the wider community, and the therapists—they all wanted me to be OK. They needed me to be OK because pain like mine, like yours, is incredibly hard to witness. Our stories are very hard to hear.

It wasn't their fault. Not really. They didn't know how to listen. But this is what happens when we only tell stories of how pain can be redeemed: we're left with no stories that tell us how to live in it. We have no stories of how to bear witness. We don't talk about pain that can't be fixed. We're not allowed to talk about it.

We don't need new tools for how to get out of grief. What we need are the skills to withstand it, in ourselves and in others.

Collectively, we carry an immense backlog of grief that has never been heard, simply because we have no story that helps us hear it. We need to tell new stories. We need new stories that tell the truth about pain, about love, about life. We need new stories of bravery in the face of what cannot be fixed. We need to do this for each other; we need to do this *with* each other because pain happens. Grief happens.

If we truly want to be helpful to people in pain, we need to be willing to reject the dominant story of pain as an aberrant condition in need of transformation or redemption. We need to stop trotting out the stages of grief that were never meant to become universal scripts.

In telling better stories, we weave a culture that knows how to bear witness, to simply show up and be present to that which can never be transformed. In telling better stories, we learn to be better companions, to ourselves, and to each other.

Pain is not always redeemed, in the end or otherwise. Being brave—being a hero—is not about overcoming what hurts or turning it into a gift. Being brave is about waking to face each day when you would rather just stop waking up. Being brave is staying present to your own heart when that heart is shattered into a million different pieces and can never be made right. Being brave is standing at the edge of the abyss that just opened in someone's life and not turning away from it, not covering your discomfort with a pithy "think positive" emoticon. Being brave is letting pain unfurl and take up all the space it needs. Being brave is telling *that* story.

It's terrifying. And it's beautiful.

Those are the stories we need.

THERE'S EVEN MORE TO THE STORY . . .

We've covered a lot of cultural territory in this chapter. That wider lens can help you feel more normal, and less crazy, inside your grief. It can also help you as you search for professional and personal support in your grief—identifying those who don't necessarily adhere to the stages model or the cultural narrative of transformation is a great starting point.

If you want to dive even deeper into our collective avoidance of pain and the far-reaching, and surprising, roots of grief shaming, head over to chapter 4. If it feels like too much for right now (early grief really does mess with your ability to take in information), go right to chapter 5. There, you'll find the new vision of grief support and what living your grief well might look like.

4

EMOTIONAL ILLITERACY AND THE CULTURE OF BLAME

There's such a pervasive weirdness in our culture around grief and death. We judge, and we blame, dissect, and minimize. People look for the flaws in what someone did to get to this place: She didn't exercise enough. Didn't take enough vitamins. Took too many. He shouldn't have been walking on that side of the road. They shouldn't have gone to that country if it has a history of monsoons. She shouldn't have gone out to that club, knowing how dangerous it is these days. If he's that upset, he must not have been very stable before this happened. I bet they had unresolved childhood issues—see what unhealed issues do to you?

I have a theory (as yet scientifically unproven) that the more random or out-of-order the loss, the more judgment and correction the grieving person hears. It's like we just can't reconcile the fact that someone could be alive and well at breakfast and dead by lunch. We can't understand how someone who ate well, exercised, and was a generally good human being can get cancer and die at the age of thirty-four. We can't understand how a perfectly healthy child can drop dead of what started as a simple cough. How someone biking to work, using a dedicated bike lane, wearing reflective clothing, their bike adorned with flashing lights, can be struck and killed in an instant.

They had to have done something terribly wrong. There has to be a reason.

It's terrifying to think that someone who seemingly did everything right could still die. It's terrifying to look at a person torn apart by their grief, knowing that could be us someday.

Losses like this highlight the tenuous nature of life. How easily, how quickly life can change.

When Matt died, the one (and only) news story I read blamed him for his death because he wasn't wearing a life jacket. To go swimming. The more polite comments underneath the article made Matt into an angel, looking over everyone, even those who didn't know him; his work on earth was done. Far more of the comments blamed me for "making" him go in the water, or castigated both of us for being too stupid to know better.

In the days after Matt died, I overheard more than one conversation in which people judged my response to Matt's death quite unfavorably. Keep in mind that I wasn't publicly screaming, didn't hit anyone, and wasn't causing big "scenes" anywhere. I was simply—openly—very, very sad.

VICTIM SHAMING AND THE CULTURE OF BLAME

My experience of blame and judgment, both for my grief and of Matt in regard to his own death, is not unique. Most grieving people have felt judged and shamed inside their pain.

Especially when the loss is unusual, violent, or accidental, the backlash of blame is intense: we immediately point out what someone else did wrong. That person did something ridiculous or stupid; we would never do that. It soothes our brains, in some ways, to believe that through our own good sense, we, and all those we love, can be kept safe. And if something bad did happen (through no fault of our own), we'd be strong enough to handle it. Grief wouldn't take us down like that; we'd deal with it so much better than that other person. Everything would be OK.

Brené Brown's research states that blame is a way to discharge pain and discomfort. Intense grief is a reminder that our lives here are tenuous at best. Evidence of someone else's nightmare is proof that we could be next. That's seriously uncomfortable evidence. We have to do some fancy footwork (or rather, fancy brain-work) to minimize our discomfort and maintain our sense of safety.

When someone comes to you in your pain and says, "I can't even imagine," the truth is: they can imagine. Their brains automatically

began to imagine. As mammals, neurobiologically, we're connected to one another. Empathy is actually a limbic system connection with the other person's pain (or their joy). Being close to someone else's pain makes us feel pain. Our brains know we're connected.

Seeing someone in pain touches off a reaction in us, and that reaction makes us very uncomfortable. Faced with this visceral knowledge that we, too, could be in a similar situation, we shut down our empathy centers. We deny our connection. We shift into judgment and blame.

It's an emotionally protective instinct.

We do this on a personal level, but we also do it globally. We can see this clearly in our cultural epidemics of violence against women and minorities: *the victim must have done something to deserve this*. We see this in our response to large-scale natural and manmade disasters as well: in the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami in Japan, some called it "karmic payback" for Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor.[1]

In many different ways, in many different forms, our response to others' pain is to lob blame: if something terrible happens, you brought it on yourself.

Blaming someone for their pain—whether that's grief or some kind of interpersonal violence—is our go-to mechanism. How quick we are to demonize rather than empathize. How quick we are to move into debate, rather than hang out in the actual pain of the situation.

At the root of our fears around grief, and in our approaches to grief and loss, is a fear of connection. A fear of acknowledging—really feeling—our relatedness. What happens to one person can happen to anyone. We see ourselves reflected in another person's pain, and we don't like to see ourselves there.

Disasters and deaths bring out a level of emotional empathy that asks you to go there, to acknowledge that this could happen to you or someone you love, no matter how safe you try to be. We hate to see evidence of the fact that there is very little in this life over which we have control. We'll do almost anything to avoid letting that in. What starts as limbic system-based connection reverts to a brain stem survival instinct, an us-or-them response, that puts those in pain on the wrong side of the line, and us, always on the right. We distance ourselves from pain rather than feel annihilated by it.

The culture of blame keeps us safe. Or rather, it lets us believe we're safe.

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE OF PAIN AVOIDANCE

We want so desperately to see evidence that everyone we love is safe, and will always be safe. We want so desperately to believe we'll survive, no matter what happens. We want to believe we have control. To maintain this belief, we've created—and sustained—an entire culture based on a magical thinking continuum: think the right thoughts, do the right things, be evolved/nonattached/optimistic/faithful enough and everything will be OK. In chapter 3, we talked about the cultural storyline of redemption and transformation. That, too, is part of this survival safety mechanism.

Pain and grief are never seen as healthy responses to loss. They're far too threatening for that. We resist them in equal measure to our fear of being consumed by them.

The problem with this—among many problems—is that it creates a societally acceptable blame structure in which any kind of hardship or pain is met with shame, judgment, and an admonishment to get back to "normal" quickly. If you can't rise above it, you are, once again, doing something wrong.

WHAT ABOUT GOD?

I'd be remiss here if I didn't at least touch on organized religion's part in the culture of pain avoidance. When someone we love is sick or in danger, we pray that they'll be OK. If they survive, we thank god for the escape. "We are so blessed!" is a common way of telegraphing relief in a positive outcome. As we discussed in chapter 2, there's a second half to that sentiment: If god saves some people, especially those who were prayed for, then those who die, or whose outcomes are not what we consider favorable, are therefore . . . not blessed. Prayers, and the humans who prayed them, failed. Either that, or a capricious, all-knowing god had a reason not to save them. This idea that some overarching force of the universe decides who lives and who dies creates, as Cheryl Strayed writes, "a false hierarchy of the blessed and the damned."[2]

In fact, Strayed describes this so perfectly, I can't do it better. In her book *Tiny Beautiful Things*, Strayed addresses a mother wondering what

role god might have played in saving her child from a life-threatening illness (or giving it to her in the first place), and if she could still believe in that god had her child died:

> Countless people have been devastated for reasons that cannot be explained or justified in spiritual terms. To do as you are asking (why would god do this?) creates a false hierarchy of the blessed and the damned. To use our individual good or bad luck as a litmus test to determine whether or not god exists constructs an illogical dichotomy that reduces our capacity for compassion. It implies a pious quid pro quo that defies history, reality, ethics, and reason.[3]

This belief in a god who can be swayed by human petition is incredibly tricky territory. It's plagued people throughout human history. We can't reconcile our ideas of a loving god—in any tradition—with the horrors that happen on a personal or global scale. What we've created in the face of that cognitive dissonance is the idea that there is a force you can please or displease, through your actions or your petition. It gives us some sense of power and control over what seems to be a random universe full of injustice.

The roots of any tradition call us to love and companion one another inside whatever life brings. Faith is not meant as a means to change the outcome of anything. This vending-machine god who doles out reward and punishment based on our changing ideas of what it means to be "blessed" is a disservice to those who lean on faith in times of hardship. Such a narrow definition of faith is also a disservice to the beautiful traditions we do have: belief in something larger than us helps us survive. It comes up alongside us to help us live what is ours to live but doesn't tell us who is right, who is wrong, who is saved, and who should suffer.

Using faith as a cover for our fears around safety, control, and connection is just one more part of the pervasive culture of blame. It adds an element of spiritual cruelty to an already-challenging path.

THE CULT OF POSITIVITY

It's easier to create sets of rules that let us have the illusion of control than it is to accept that, even when we do everything "right," horrible things can happen. In one form or another, this blame-as-a-form-of-safety idea has been around as long as humans have.

Victim blaming (and grief shaming) is so all-pervasive, we don't always recognize it.

While organized religions have historically trafficked in this model of the one-false-move universe, modern culture has tacked on a New Age, mindfulness-esque yoga-speak around difficulty, death, and grief as well: You create your own reality. Everything that happens on the outside is just a mirror of the inside. You're only as happy as you make yourself be. There's no room for both sadness and gratitude. Intention is everything. Happiness is an inside job. A negative attitude is the only real disability.

Even if we stretch to allow that things happen that are beyond our control, we insist that how we respond *is* in our control. We believe that sadness, anger, and grief are all "dark" emotions, the product of an undeveloped, and certainly less skilled, mind. We might not have been able to prevent what happened, but we can mitigate the effects by simply *deciding* to be all right. Any lasting sign of upset is proof that we aren't seeing this whole thing from the right perspective.

Hidden inside this seemingly encouraging advice to take charge of your emotions, and therefore your life, is that same culture of blame. It's the avoidance of pain clothed in positive, pseudo-spiritual speak. It's the presumption that happiness and contentment are the only true measures of health.

> "Over three years now since you left and I am still tired of having people ask, "How are you?" Do they really think I will tell the truth? I am tired of hearing how it was all planned before you were born and how you and I agreed to your death for my soul's learning and for yours. No one here wants to acknowledge that there might just be chaos and that some things happen because they can, like cars running people over, like bullets ripping through a skull or tearing open a heart, like blood clots filling lungs so you can't get air, or cancer consuming what is left of the body. A pre-mapped-out

lifetime doesn't make the death of someone you actually love any less devastating.

I am tired of hearing there is a reason for your death, for my heartbreak, and that when we get to the other side it will all make sense. It will never make sense, even when my heart stops hurting so much. I miss you. I wish you had never died.

DRU WEST, Writing Your Grief student, on the death of her daughter, Julia

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING POSITIVE?

Author and researcher Barbara Ehrenreich calls this the "tyranny of positive thinking." Her experience with the machinery of positive thinking (and a forced "happy outlook") came first from living with cancer, with exhortations to see her diagnosis as a gift, and to banish "negative" emotions in order to triumph over her illness:

> The first thing I discovered is that not everyone seems to view this disease with horror or dread. Instead, the only appropriate attitude is upbeat. This requires the denial of understandable feelings of anger and fear, all of which must be buried under a cosmetic layer of cheer. . . . Without question there is a problem when positive thinking "fails" and the cancer spreads or eludes treatment. Then the patient can only blame herself: she is not being positive enough; possibly it was her negative attitude that brought on the disease in the first place. . . .
>
> [There is] an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before—one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune and blame only ourselves for our fate. . . . In fact, there is no kind of problem or obstacle for which positive thinking or a positive attitude has not been proposed as a cure.[4]

Ehrenreich went on to study positive thinking during the mid-2000s financial crisis, and its ramifications for those who lost their jobs, their homes, and their retirements. Facing poverty and other financial distress,

many were told that layoffs and home loss were gifts, and that to be truly successful, one needed to simply believe in oneself and exude a positive attitude. Any external obstacle could be overcome if you believed hard enough. As a way of deflecting responsibility away from the actual corporations that created the collapse, enforced positivity was a brilliant strategy: "What could be a better way of quelling dissent than to tell people who are suffering that it's all their attitude," writes Ehrenreich.[5]

What better way to silence pain than to blame those who feel it?

This kind of blanket rule against complaint, discomfort, or doubt has deep roots. As a way of not addressing the real underlying causes of poverty, violence, inequality, or instability, governments and ruling bodies throughout history have quelled dissent by mandating optimism and by silencing accurate portrayals of the situation. Sharing your doubts or your fears about what was happening could get you killed, or ostracized (which in many cultures meant death, as you were then outside the protection of your community). If enforced optimism didn't work to stem revolt, shifting the focus away from the current reality onto some kind of promised land or heavenly future often did: *The more you suffer now means a greater reward for you later. You're being tested to see how well you can do under pressure.*

We can loop this back to the old religious model on which much of Western culture was built. If something is wrong in your life, it's because you've done something wrong. You've pissed off god (or the ruling class). You weren't following the rules well enough. Suffering is the price of sin. Of course you're being punished. If somehow you were doing everything right, but things still went sideways, well—your reward is in heaven. Those who suffer are closest to god. Your reward is in the after-life, the promised land, some mythical better time where things work out in the end.

This kind of victim blaming and the glorification of suffering is not new; we just have much prettier language to talk about it now.

Some governments in the world still use blame deflection for political reasons, and it's absolutely present in the way we come to grief and loss in a lot of different cultures. You can see this show up in pop-psychology and New Age renditions of Eastern philosophy, with a slightly different bent: If you're suffering, it's because you aren't in right alignment with your true self. If you were more in touch with your "core," you would have seen this coming. Illness or difficulty is a sign

that you were harboring some kind of negativity or resentment—it just showed up in physical form because it was hiding in your thoughts.

Certainly, if something bad does happen, we feel for you. Eastern traditions have taught us that we're meant to have compassion for one another. But everything happens for a reason, and if you were more spiritual, more grounded, more in touch with yourself and with the world, this wouldn't have happened. Maybe you're working out some past karma. Maybe you're storing up good karma for a future self. In some bigger realm, you agreed to this "life lesson." If you really actually were on the path to enlightenment and doing good self-work, and something bad happened anyway, the most enlightened response is to rise above it. Practice nonattachment. Don't let it stress you out. Find the good in it.

Somehow, we are meant to both accept suffering as a gift that we needed in order to become better people *and* refuse to let loss shove us out of our normal, happy, rosy, optimistic demeanor. Painful emotional states aren't meant to last—they're short-term pit stops on the way to a brighter and better (or at least more "normal") *you*. Suffering makes you grow.

It's all part of that cultural storyline that glorifies transformation, while staunchly avoiding the reality of pain in the world.

SPIRITUAL BYPASS AND THE MYTH OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The culture of blame and the epidemic of shutting down grief gets especially convoluted when we look to spiritual, meditative, or other tools of self-reflection and growth.

We've got this idea that being a "spiritual" or "evolved" person means we aren't upset by anything. We hide out in claims to be above pain, or decide we're skilled in Eastern ideas of "nonattachment"; therefore it's unevolved to be upset about anything worldly. Remaining calm and unaffected in any situation is a sign of our spiritual and emotional development.

We've also got this idea that spiritual practices, in and of themselves, are meant to take away our pain, and put us in a place of equanimity. We believe that's what those tools are for: to make us feel better.

No matter how much our culture insists on it, spiritual and meditative practices are not meant to erase pain. That's a symptom of our pain-avoidant culture, and not an accurate portrayal of the practices themselves.

It's a misuse of so many beautiful teachings to force them into roles they were never meant to play.

Spiritual practices in any tradition, including mindfulness in its many forms, are meant to help you live what is yours to live, not make you rise above it. These tools are meant to help you feel companioned inside your grief. They're meant to give you a tiny bit of breathing room inside what is wholly unbearable. That's not at all the same thing as making your pain go away.

Rather than help us rise above being human, teachings in any true tradition help us become *more* human: more connected, not less attached.

So much of what we now call *spiritual bypass* is the age-old split between the head and the heart—trying to surpass being human by becoming more intellectual. We do this because being human *hurts*. It hurts because we love. Because we are connected to those around us, and it's painful when they die. It hurts when we lose what we love. Being a spiritually minded person makes you more open to pain and suffering and hardship—which are all parts of love.

Rising up into our intellectual spheres, trotting out spiritual aphorisms, is just one more way we try to safeguard against *feeling*. It's one more way we try to protect our attachments by denying we have them. We may claim it as higher thinking, but it's our survival instinct brain stem running the show. What we need is our limbic system: our capacity to see ourselves in the other, and respond with love.

The way to get through the pain of being human is not to deny it, but to experience it. To let it exist. To let it be, without stopping it up or holding it back, or in our newer, more modern forms of resistance, by claiming it isn't "evolved" to be in pain. That's garbage. It's elitist. By the same token, you don't "allow" pain so that you can go back to a normative baseline of happiness.

You allow pain because it's real. Because it is easier to allow than to resist. Because being with what is is kinder, softer, gentler, and easier to bear—even when it rips you apart. Because bearing witness to pain, without shutting it down or denying it, *is* enlightenment. Your emotional

resilience and intelligence has to be quite secure to be able to hold your gaze on the reality of loss.

Whatever faith or practice you claim, it shouldn't force you to rise above your pain, or deny it somehow. If anything, practice often makes you feel more intensely, not less. When you are broken, the correct response is to be broken. It's a form of spiritual hubris to pretend otherwise.

> Spiritual bypassing—the use of spiritual beliefs to avoid dealing with painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs—is so pervasive that it goes largely unnoticed. The spiritual ideals of any tradition, whether Christian commandments or Buddhist precepts, can provide easy justification for practitioners to duck uncomfortable feelings in favor of more seemingly enlightened activity. When split off from fundamental psychological needs, such actions often do much more harm than good.
>
> **ROBERT AUGUSTUS MASTERS, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters***

Please know that you are not failing to be a "spiritual" or "emotionally intelligent" person because you are so upset. The fact that you're upset makes perfect sense, and your desire to bear witness to your own pain is a sign of your emotional depth and skill. Empathy—feeling with yourself, feeling with others—is the real hallmark of development.

> "I am angry at the Buddhist priest I desperately consulted early on to make myself be "mindful" in my grief. He told me about the Four Noble Truths—that my suffering is all in the mind, and that I needed to let go of my attachment. Those were the cruelest words I ever could hear. He kept saying "it's all in the mind, it's all in the mind." And when I rocked back and forth through my tearstained pain and asked him, "But what about the heart?" he had no answers for me.
>
> **MONIKA U. CURLIN, Writing Your Grief student, on the accidental death of her husband, Fred**

THE COST OF AVOIDING GRIEF

I know all this talk about the historical roots of pain avoidance can make me sound like a cranky curmudgeon, bitching about the state of the world. And in some ways, that is exactly what I am. But here's the thing: I spend all day listening to the pain grieving people carry *on top* of their actual grief. I hear, over and over again, how painful it is to be judged, dismissed, and misunderstood.

The cult of positivity we have does everyone a disservice. It leads us to believe we're more in charge of the world than we are, and holds us responsible for every pain and heartbreak we endure. It sets up a one-false-move world, in which we must be careful not to upset the gods, or karma, or our bodies with our thoughts and intentions. It co-opts tools of comfort and liberation by forcing them into the service of denial and self-deception. It makes us speak useless platitudes to those in grief, harping on some glorious imagined future reward while ignoring their very real and current pain.

How we come to grief is how we come to so much of life. Harvard Medical School psychologist Susan David writes that our cultural dialogue is fundamentally avoidant. As we start to unravel our language around grief and loss, we see how completely true that is—and how many other areas of life it touches.

If we're going to get better at this, if we're going to change things not just for grieving people, but for everyone, we have to talk about the high costs of denying grief in all its forms.

On a personal level, repressing pain and hardship creates an internally unsustainable condition, wherein we must medicate and manage our true sadness and grief in order to maintain an outer semblance of "happiness." We don't lie to ourselves well. Unaddressed and unacknowledged pain doesn't go away. It attempts to be heard in any way it can, often manifesting in substance addiction, anxiety and depression, and social isolation. Unheard pain helps perpetuate cycles of abuse by trapping victims in a pattern of living out or displacing their trauma onto others.

Our foundational inability to tolerate pain, hardship, and horror also keeps us paralyzed in the face of global heartbreak. The amount of pain in the world is staggering, and we work hard not to see it. Our rampant avoidance of feeling-with-each-other requires us to distance ourselves from environmental devastation, from human suffering, from child abuse

and sex trafficking, from global wars, from hate crimes of all kinds. When we do see suffering, we throw ourselves into outrage, rather than collapse into grief. Activist and author Joanna Macy speaks of the unrecognized, and unwelcome, pain in the hearts of most activists. It's as if we are afraid the full force of our sadness would render us mute, powerless, and unable to go on. That unacknowledged pain results in burnout, disconnection, and a distinct lack of empathy for others who hold seemingly opposing views.

Our cultural avoidance—and denigration—of our very human losses and pain creates so many problems, it wouldn't be a stretch to say we have an epidemic of unspoken grief.

So while we're largely focused on the broader, cultural refusal of grief as it relates to your personal grief, it's important to recognize how pervasive the problem really is. The gag order on pain is everywhere. Everyone has a role to play in overcoming our pain-averse culture.

> There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep,
> and still be counted as warriors.
>
> **ADRIENNE RICH, *Sources***

ATTACHMENT IS SURVIVAL

Pain has to be welcomed and understood, given actual true space at the table; otherwise we cannot do the work we do, whether that is the personal work of showing up and staying alive, or the wider global work of making the world safe, equitable, and beautiful for all beings. We have to be able to say what's true without fear of being seen as weak, damaged, or somehow failing the cultural storyline. We need to make it just as normal to talk about our pain as it is to talk about our joy.

There is no need to rush redemption.

Hard, painful, terrible things happen. That is the nature of being alive, here in this world. Not everything works out; everything doesn't happen for a reason. The real path here, the real way forward, is not in denying that irredeemable pain exists, but by acknowledging that it does. By becoming a culture strong enough to bear witness to pain, when pain is what is. By sticking together inside what hurts. By opening ourselves

to one another's pain, knowing that this, too, could be us the next time around.

When we're afraid of loss, we cling to a system of right and wrong, of well and unwell, to safeguard our connections to those we love. We think barricading ourselves against pain and suffering will help us survive.

Our deeply embedded aversion to pain and hardship—to acknowledging pain and hardship—keeps us from what we most want: safety. Safety in the form of love, connection, and kinship. We defend ourselves against losing it, but in doing so, we keep ourselves from living it.

The tricky thing is, true survival never exists in a world where we have to lie about our own hearts, or pretend we're more in control than we are. It just makes us desperately more anxious and more rabid in our attempts to make everything work out in the end.

The most efficient and effective way to be "safe" in this world is to stop denying that hard and impossible things happen. Telling the truth allows us to connect, to fully enter the experience of another and *feel with them*.

Real safety is in entering each other's pain, recognizing ourselves inside it. As one of my oldest teachers used to say, poignancy is kinship. It's evidence of connection. That we hurt for each other shows our relatedness. Our limbic systems, our hearts, and our bodies are made for this; we long for that connection.

That you see your own potential for grief and loss in someone else's grief? That's beautiful. Poignancy is kinship.

When emotion comes up, we can let that poignancy run through us. It hurts, but it hurts because we're related, because we're connected. It should hurt. There's nothing wrong with that. When we recognize pain and grief as a healthy response to loss, we can respond with skill and grace, rather than blame and bypass. We can respond by loving one another, no matter what happens.

Finding safety means to come together, with open hearts and a willing curiosity about everything we experience: love, joy, optimism, fear, loss, and heartbreak. When there is nothing we can't answer with love and connection, we have a safety that can't be taken away by the external forces of the world. It won't keep us from loss, but it will let us feel held and supported inside what cannot be made right.

The real cutting edge of growth and development is in *hurting with each other*. It's in companionship, not correction. Acknowledgment—being seen and heard and witnessed inside the truth about one's own life—is the only real medicine of grief.

5

THE NEW MODEL OF GRIEF

Having traveled down into the cultural roots of grief avoidance, how do we find our way back out? How do we become, not only people, but a whole wider culture, comfortable bearing the reality that there is pain that can't be fixed? How do we become people who know that grief is best answered with companionship, not correction?

Ignoring, for the moment, this whole wider culture thing, and turning instead to you, inside your own pain, what do you *do* about grief? If no one talks about the reality of living inside unbearable pain, how do you live here at all?

We have to find a new model. A better story to live into.

We've got this idea that there are only two options in grief: you're either going to be stuck in your pain, doomed to spend the rest of your life rocking in a corner in your basement wearing sackcloth, or you're going to triumph over grief, be transformed, and come back even better than you were before.

Just two options. On, off. Eternally broken or completely healed.

It doesn't seem to matter that nothing else in life is like that. Somehow, when it comes to grief, the entire breadth of human experience goes out the window.

There's a whole middle ground between those two extremes (as there is for everything else in life), but we don't know how to talk about it. We don't know how to talk about grief if we step outside that pervasive cultural model of entirely healed or irrevocably broken.

It's such a narrow band of options. I can't work inside that space—it's not real. I don't operate in the transformation model. I can't give a

happy ending to things. I can't tie things up in a pretty bow and say, "Everything's going to be OK, and you're going to be even better than before," because I don't believe that and it's not true.

At the same time, I can't leave you with no message to live into. I can't just say, "Sorry, this is going to suck forever and ever, and you'll never feel any different." I can't leave you, or anyone, down in that basement rocking in the corner. That's not appropriate either.

What I'm proposing is a third path. A middle way. Not on, not off. A way to tend to pain and grief by bearing witness. By neither turning away, nor by rushing redemption, but by standing there, right there, inside the obliterated universe. By somehow making a home there. By showing that you can make a life of your own choosing, without having to pick one thing over another: leave your love behind but be "OK," or retain your connections and be "stuck."

Finding that middle ground is the real work of grief—my work, and yours. Each of us, each one of us, has to find our way into that middle ground. A place that doesn't ask us to deny our grief and doesn't doom us forever. A place that honors the full breadth of grief, which is really the full breadth of love.

> The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance. Our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant, and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door.
>
> **DAVID WHYTE, *Consolations***

MASTERY VERSUS MYSTERY

There isn't much written on the early parts of grief, that close-to-impact zone where nothing really helps. We're so terrified of intense grief, and the feelings of helplessness it engenders, most resources don't speak to it at all. It's much easier to focus on later grief, months and years down the

road, where “rebuilding your life” is a more palatable approach. But early grief is when we most need skill, compassion, and connection. It’s where a change in our cultural and personal approaches to grief have the most power and create the most lasting good.

Grief no more needs a solution than love needs a solution. We cannot “triumph” over death, or loss, or grief. They are immovable elements of being alive. If we continue to come at them as though they are problems to be solved, we’ll never get solace or comfort in our deepest pain.

In discussing ambiguous loss and the West’s foundation of unspoken grief, psychologist Dr. Pauline Boss brings up Western culture’s “mastery orientation”: we’re a culture that loves to solve problems.[1] That mastery orientation is what lets us find cures for diseases, gives us cool technology, and generally makes a lot of life better. The problem with mastery orientation is that it makes us look at everything as a problem to be solved, or a challenge to be vanquished. Things like birth and death, grief and love, don’t fit well inside that narrative of mastery.

It’s that intention of fixing, of curing, of going back to “normal” that messes with everything. It stops conversation, it stops growth, it stops connection, it stops intimacy. Honestly, if we just changed our orientation to grief as a problem to be solved and instead see it as a mystery to be honored, a lot of our language of support could stay the same.

We can’t wage war on the “problem” of grief without waging war on each other’s hearts. We need to let what is true be true. We need to find ways to share in the shattering experience of loss—in our own lives and in the larger world. Shoving through what hurts will never get any of us what we most want—to feel heard, companioned, and seen for who we are, where we are.

What we need, moving forward, is to replace that mastery approach to grief with a mystery orientation to love: all the parts of love, especially the difficult ones.

Bowing to the mystery of grief and love is such a different response than fixing it. Coming to your own broken heart with a sense of respect and reverence honors your reality. It gives you space to be exactly as you are, without needing to clean it up or rush through it. Something in you can relax. The unbearable becomes just that much easier to survive.

It seems too intangible to be of use, but finding the middle ground of grief happens only when we turn our gaze to face it directly. When we

allow the reality of grief to exist, we can focus on helping ourselves—and one another—survive inside pain.

A BETTER WORLD

The new model of grief is not in cleaning it up and making it go away; it's in finding new and beautiful ways to inhabit what hurts. It's in finding the depth of love necessary to witness each other's pain without rushing in to clean it up. It's in standing beside each other, offering companionship.

Changing the way we come to pain creates a new world, one based on sovereignty and kinship, on poignancy and grace. When we stop resisting that which hurts, we're freed to make real changes, changes that help us align with a world where suffering is reduced and love is our primary medicine.

That new model of grief allows us to bring compassion to ourselves and to others. It lets us join each other in all parts of life. It calls us into our best, deepest selves.

I can make it sound so poetic, but the truth is—who knows what kind of world we might create when we turn to fully face all the ways our hearts get broken? What things might change? What kind of world might we create? When the full expression of what it means to love—which includes losing that which we love—is given room to unfold?

We can never change the reality of pain. But we can reduce so much suffering when we allow each other to speak what is true, without putting a gag order on our hearts. We can stop hiding from ourselves, and hiding from each other, in some misguided attempt to be "safe." We can stop hiding what it is to be human. We can craft a world where you can say, "This hurts," and have those words simply received, without judgment or defense. We can clean out the backlog of pain that keeps us trapped in shallow relationships and cycles of disconnection. We can stop making the other "other," and instead protect and support each other as family.

It won't be a world with less grief. But it will be a world with so much more beauty.

> Self-compassion is approaching ourselves, our inner experience with spaciousness, with the quality of allowing which has a quality of gentleness. Instead of our usual tendency to want to get over something, to fix it, to make it go away, the path of compassion is totally different. Compassion allows.
>
> **ROBERT GONZALES, *Reflections on Living Compassion***

THE PERSONAL IS GLOBAL; THE GLOBAL IS PERSONAL

The more we speak of the reality of grief, the easier it becomes. The more people tell the truth about how hard this is—how hard it is to be alive, to love, and to lose—the better this life becomes for everyone. Even for those who think that grief is a problem to be solved.

Our friends, our families, our books, our cultural responses, are most useful, most loving and kind, when they help those in grief to carry their reality, and least helpful when they try to solve what can't be fixed.

Our approaches to ourselves, in our own grief, are most useful, most loving and kind, when we find ways to keep our hearts open in the midst of the nightmare, to not lose sight of love amidst the wreckage.

If we're going to live here, if we're going to get through this together, if we're going to "get through it" at all, we need to start being more comfortable with pain. We have to let it go all the way through us, without looking for reasons or outcomes or placing blame. We have to stop other-izing one another as a ward against loss. We have to let the knowledge of our tenuous, fleeting, beautiful existence be a real part of our lives, not some story that only happens to other people.

We have to find ways to show our grief to others, in ways that honor the truth of our own experience. We have to be willing to stop diminishing our own pain so that others can be comfortable around us.

Things can be made tangibly different for people in pain—we can change things. We can love each other, standing in the full knowledge that what we love will die. We can love each other, knowing that feeling the other person's pain is a sign of our connection, not our doom. It's terrifying to love one another this way, but it's the way we need to love. Our own personal lives and our larger, global, interconnected lives call

us to love in this way. The middle ground of grief, the new model of grief, allows us to love each other that way. It's the only way forward.

BACK TO YOU . . .

We're creating the new model of grief, right now, with these words. I know you didn't mean to be part of the revolution. I know you'd gladly give all this up just to have your old life back. It isn't a fair trade. And we need you. We need you to claim your right to be supported in ways that honor the person you are, the person you were, and the person this loss will have you become. Finding your own middle way helps you, and helps all those who enter the world of grief behind you.

Discussions about the culture of grief are important. It helps to locate yourself inside the larger sweep of cultural emotional illiteracy. It helps knowing you aren't crazy, you aren't wrong, and you aren't broken. The culture is broken, but you? You're fine. That you're in pain doesn't change that fact.

Continuing to show up, continuing to look for support inside your pain, when all the world tries to tell you it's a problem, is an act of fierce self-love and tenacity. Grief is not a sign that you're unwell or unevolved. It's a sign that love has been part of your life, and that you want love to continue, even here.

You are here now, and here sucks.

There aren't a lot of tools for early grief, but there are tools. There are ways to come to yourself with kindness, to build on what you already know of yourself, to help you survive.

My hope is that the tools and practices in this book help you map your own third way, find your own middle ground, neither hopelessly doomed nor forced into a faux positivity that asks you to abandon your own heart.

I don't mean for this book to remove your pain. In telling the truth about grief, I want you to see your own pain reflected back to you. I want you to feel, in the reading, that you have been heard.

As the poet and activist Joanna Macy writes, that your world is in pain is no reason to turn your back on it. The next part of this book leaves the wider culture and returns to your personal grief. May the

words you find there help you stay close to your heart, and carve your own path in the wilderness.

PART II

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR GRIEF

ON RIGHT TIMING: A NOTE BEFORE WE GET STARTED

I devoured books on grief and loss when Matt first died. I hated most of them. I would flip to the back of a new book to see if the widowed author had remarried. If they had, I wouldn't read the book—clearly, they did not understand what it was like to be me. I would get all excited reading the first few chapters of a new book on loss, only to hurl it away in disgust when subsequent chapters started talking about rebuilding my life and all the great things I might do as a result of this loss.

The problem wasn't always in the books themselves. There are plenty of good books out there. The problem was that most of those books spoke to later grief. They spoke to a time when the world had stopped tilting so violently, when all the dust had settled, and the immediacy of grief was not so sharp. That's a great time to talk about rebuilding—or building—a new life. But when your life has newly exploded? That is not the time for books on how to build a great and glorious future.

So there's something important here about right timing: thoughts about how you'll live inside this grief need to match what you are currently living. If something (even in this very book) feels offensive to you, it's probably not a good match for where you are: there's a timing mismatch. In the early days, survival is different from survival over the weeks, months, and years to come. As you're looking for things to help you survive your loss, you might ask yourself what you most need, and look for those resources that can speak to that place.

What I've outlined in this book is not about fixing your grief, nor is it about the future that awaits. It's meant to help you survive—right here, right now. May you find something useful in these words.

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LIVING IN THE REALITY OF LOSS

The only way I know to start talking about the reality of grief is to begin with annihilation: there is a quiet, a stillness, that pervades everything in early grief. Loss stuns us into a place beyond any language. No matter how carefully I craft my words, I cannot reach where this lives in you. Language is a cover for that annihilated stillness, and a poor one at that.

But words are all we have, all I have, to reach you in this place. Please know that I'm aware of how impossible this is, how none of my words will really change anything.

Acknowledgment is one of the few things that actually helps. What you're living can't be fixed. It can't be made better. There are no solutions. That means that our course of action inside grief is simple: helping you gauge what's "normal" and finding ways to support your devastated heart. This part of the book is about helping you survive the bizarre territory of intense grief.

Naming the craziness of this time is powerful: it helps to know what's normal when nothing *feels* normal.

In this chapter's short sections, we cover some of the most common questions, concerns, and challenges inside grief. It's a bit of a crazy quilt, jumping from one weirdness to the next, but there's just so much to juggle inside grief—it really is all over the place. When there's a tool to use to manage the crazy, I've included it. Where there is no tool, acknowledgment is the best medicine.

I haven't addressed all the challenges of grief, or the questions about what's normal: there are simply too many. If there's something you want

answered, please be in touch.

> "You would say—why do people need to keep ashes? Can't they just let go? Yes. Yes, babe. Eventually, I will take those bones and those teeth and that body I love to the river and to the woods. I will release that vessel I've loved so much, in so many different ways. But right now, your remains remain—safely sealed in a plastic urn inside a plastic bag inside a cardboard box sealed with tape and a sticker bearing your name. To take them out is to see you, to see the body I have loved, reduced to a permanent state of ash. Right now, I can't let go. I can't let this in. I can't accept this in any way. I cannot swallow this truth, that you are gone, that the life we planned is done. If I try to look directly at that fact (that I refuse to let be fact), I feel the explosion start inside of me, the world cracks and my lungs fill, and I cannot breathe. All I know is that I cannot do that. I cannot look directly at this. Everything inside me will explode, and I cannot bear the tearing. It's too big. It's too severe. I'm being beaten by all this—the packing and the moving, your truck in my driveway that will be sold in the next two days, the bed in pieces in my room, waiting to be rebuilt, your photos, your ashes, the people clamoring for pieces of you, all of our things piled in various rooms. You are gone, and I can't know that now. That you were here, that moment, just a regular moment, and then you were gone.
>
> **From my early journals**

FOR ALL YOU'VE HAD TO DO . . .

The sheer number of things you need to do when someone has died is mind-boggling. Somehow, things get done. You sit down with your kids, or your partner, or your parents and say the words you should never have to say. You call everyone on the phone list: reciting the facts over and over again, simple, direct. You talk with reporters and doctors and search teams. You shop for the best price on cremation or burial. Call landlords,

organize memorials, locate someone to take care of the dog. Eulogies are written, or quiet, personal prayers are said.

There isn't enough paper in the world to write down all the minute details that death brings into your life. Again, I circle back to acknowledgment as the only form of medicine that helps: for everything you've had to do, love—I'm so sorry.

It's OK to let people help where they can, if that relieves some of your burden. For some people, taking care of these details is the last tangible, intimate act of love they can do for the person who's died. There's no one right answer. Delegate what feels overwhelming, and wherever possible, don't let anyone take over acts of intimacy that feel important to you.

> "Everything is over.
>
> It was probably my mom who answered the phone. She would have screamed when she heard the news. My dad would have come running from another room, and my god he would have seen her crying, and then she had to tell him, she had to open her mouth and say the words even when she didn't understand them. They are in pain, because this hurts them, but they are somehow going to ask the woman on the phone to tell them where I am. And my god, they are going to want to protect me, and my god it's going to torment them that they can't, but my god they are going to get me on the phone anyway in spite of all of this to tell me that they love me and to tell me that they are getting in the car and that they are coming, they are coming, they are coming, they are telling my brother, and they are all coming three hours to be with me now.
>
> Later that night back in the hospital, when I could breathe enough to speak again, I fumbled for my phone and began the long process of letting people know that she had died. She was extremely popular and loved by a sprawling and complex network of friends. There were so many calls to be made, each one setting off a new shock wave.
>
> **ERIC W, widowed at age thirty-seven, writing on the accidental death of his fiancée, Lisa**

TELLING THE STORY

You might find that you tell the story of your loss again and again, even (or especially) to random strangers, or people you've just met. Or, in your mind, you rehearse the events that led up to this loss again and again.

That's all normal. Humans are storytelling creatures: it's why we have cultural mythologies, creation stories, and movies. Telling the story of this loss over and over—it's like we're looking for an alternate ending. A loophole. Some way the outcome might have changed. Could still change. Maybe we missed something. If we can only get the story right, none of this would be happening.

It doesn't matter that that's not "logical." Logic means nothing.

Telling the story feels both necessary and torturous. It *is* both necessary and torturous. We'll talk about this more in the section on grief and anxiety, but for now, please know that this is a normal part of grief. Repetition of the story is a safety mechanism, one way the creative mind tries to reorder the world when it's been dissolved. We tell the story again and again because the story *needs* to be told—we're looking for some way this makes sense, even if it never can.

If you can't tell your story to another human, find another way: journal, paint, make your grief into a graphic novel with a very dark storyline. Or go out to the woods and tell the trees. It is an immense relief to be able to tell your story without someone trying to fix it. The trees will not ask, "How are you *really*?" and the wind doesn't care if you cry.

LITTLE LAND MINES

How many times have people encouraged you to take your mind off this for a while, or they've avoided speaking your person's name so they don't "remind" you of what you've lost? As if you could forget, even for a moment.

We all need a little respite. You can't keep staring at loss every single second; your physical organism simply can't withstand it. The tricky thing is, especially in early grief, pain is everywhere. There is nothing that isn't connected to loss. Taking a break from pain often backfires miserably.

Going to the movies can be an especially cruel experience: you go for a non-sad movie, only to find the main character is widowed, or you realize, halfway through, that you can never crack jokes with your sister about this movie, or that your child will never see it.

Innocuous, everyday things become loaded: The first time you have to fill out a form and choose "widowed," or you're asked how many children you have. When you get to the "emergency contact" part of a form, and realize you can no longer put down the name of the person who has held that spot for years. Dragging yourself to a party, thinking you need to get out more, only to have every single small-talk question point to only one answer: death.

And it's not just when you go looking for distraction: everyday life is full of reminders and grief land mines that the non-grieving wouldn't even think of. When someone you love dies, you don't just lose them in the present or in the past. You lose the future you should have had, and might have had, with them. They are missing from all the life that was to be. Seeing other people get married, have kids, travel—all the things you expected out of life with your person—gone. Seeing other children go to kindergarten, or graduate, or get married—all those things your child should have done, had they lived. Your kids never get to know their brilliant uncle; your friend never gets to read your finished book. Whatever the relationship, seeing evidence of those same relationships going on in the rest of the world is brutal, and unfair, and impossible to withstand.

Especially in the early days, the effort to join the world again is Herculean and monumental. Those densely scattered grief land mines are hard to face. Human interaction is often exhausting. Many people choose to shrink their world down considerably, refusing invitations to anything and everything. Even staunch extroverts find that they need a lot more time alone and quiet than they ever did before.

Please know that if the outside world feels too harsh or too saturated with all things grief, you aren't being "too sensitive." The world *is* full of things connected to your grief. If there is anything that gives you even a moment's relief or respite, move toward that. It makes no difference what it is. Finding a break in grief is nearly impossible, but those occasional breaks are necessary. A day (or more) inside a blanket fort of your own choosing is healthy.

GRIEF AT THE GROCERY STORE

It comes up often enough as a stressor that one task of everyday life needs to be addressed on its own: the grocery store. In early grief, a "simple" trip to the grocery store is anything but simple—you could run in to any number of people who want to know, "How are you *really*?"

Those well-meaning, yet intrusive, questions into your inner emotional state can come at any time, no matter how much you may not want to talk about it.

It's funny, whenever I talk about the specific difficulties of grocery shopping, almost everyone has their own story to share—some shop only after 10:00 p.m. to avoid any people they might know; others drive an hour out of their way just to be able to shop anonymously.

That's yet another thing people outside grief wouldn't normally think about: how, especially if your loss was out of order or unusual, it becomes a topic up for public discussion. Anytime you are out in public, people feel the need to come close, to ask, to check on you. It doesn't often matter whether you are friends with the person or not. In fact, the more distant the relationship, the more probing you might receive while hovering over the produce bin.

I know I stopped shopping at a certain store because a friend of a friend worked there; if she saw me, a long, drawn-out inquiry would begin, with questions about my emotional health, my plans for the future, and requests for intimate details about what actually happened at the river that day. I realize I could have told her to stop, but that took energy, interest, and skills I did not have in me at that time. Shopping somewhere else made more sense.

No wonder grief is so exhausting. It's not *just* the intense actual pain of loss. It's the sheer number of tiny things that need to be avoided, endured, planned for. Impossible to tell from the outside, but those of us in grief absolutely understand. We all have our stories of exhaustion, avoidance, and the need to just not talk.

It's OK to avoid people. It's OK—even healthy—to drive an hour out of your way just to get groceries in order to buy yourself some anonymity. You deserve that distance. You deserve the right to tell your stories when and where you see fit, with a vast, invisible shield of protection for you, as you move in the world without wanting to talk to anyone at all.

Whatever you need in order to feel that protection, that's the thing to do.

And one more thing about the grocery store: many people get overwhelmed with all the things they no longer need to buy for the person they lost—there is no need for their favorite cookies or their morning tea. Abandoned shopping carts are quite common in the world of grieving hearts. Other than home grocery delivery (a great thing, by the way), there's really no way around that one. Rules around self-kindness apply here: pace yourself, allow yourself to leave the store when you need to (no matter how full your cart is), and give yourself some time after the trip to breathe into how hard this all is. "Normal" life tasks often bring your loss into the sharpest contrast.

WHEN IS IT TIME TO . . .

Because there's so much unsolicited advice and opinion floating around the grief world, it's easy to lose track of what you actually want for yourself. Many people write to me wondering when is the "right time" to remove their wedding rings, or convert their child's bedroom into a guest room, or stop referring to their brother in the present tense.

The answer is simple: there is no right time.

You can't wait for the time to feel right, because it likely never will. None of this is something you would ever *choose*. When you're trying to make a decision, you can't wait until it feels *good*.

I like the vomit metric for making decisions: If taking off your wedding rings makes you feel sick, it's not the right time to take them off. If you start to panic at the thought of moving anything in your child's room, then don't move anything. If someone has told you it's time to donate your sister's clothes and you break out in hives, immortalize her closet.

You don't have to change anything until you're ready. There are weird family politics to contend with at times for sure, but for the most part, what you do with things in your home or on your body is up to you. When you make larger life decisions—like when (or whether) to date, sell your house, or change careers—is entirely up to you. No time is the right time. Nothing is too early or too late.

Along these same lines, it's perfectly normal to leave things exactly as your person left them. Evidence that they were here, that they lived, that they were part of you is important. When your life has evaporated, those touchstones become the whole world.

A friend whose husband drowned the year after Matt died told me she kept a bottle of his hot sauce with her through two different moves. She couldn't bear to see the refrigerator without it, even though she would never open the bottle again. I kept the container of ice cream Matt and I bought two nights before he died right up until I moved across the country—four years later.

It was nearly a year before I changed the sheets on the bed where we last slept.

You will do what you need to do when you need to do it. Not a moment before. It will never feel *good*. But if it makes you feel sick, now is not the time. Use the vomit metric for any decisions you have to make and for the ones you feel like you're *supposed* to make.

ON ANNIVERSARIES AND MEMORIALS

What do we do on his death date? Am I supposed to celebrate our wedding anniversary, or their birthday, even when they're dead? Do they have birthdays when they're dead?

Both my mother and my mother-in-law wanted me to be excited about, and involved in, their projects to memorialize Matt's life, an excitement I did not have in me at that time. Every time they went on about this tree or that garden, and how I needed to be involved, or choose, or attend, I had to fight back the words: "I don't want a stupid tree. I want him back!" "I don't care what kind of flowers you put there; it's your garden, not his." And, oh, the number of times I had to bite my tongue and use my grown-up words when some distant family member insisted on a hyperreligious memorial that would have made even Matt lose his temper.

In the end, of course, no one could truly win: no matter what got planted or who gathered in his name, my love was still dead. He was still not coming back.

There is no one right way to honor someone you love. Each relationship leaves its mark; each mark is yours alone. Your way of

memorializing a life is right *only* for you.

One of the best things someone said to me as I approached Matt's one-year date was, "You always have the right to leave, even if you just got there, even if you planned the whole thing. No one else has to live this like you do. Leave whenever you need." Just having that permission to leave made it easier to stay.

No matter what you've planned, you can change your mind at any time. It's also OK to not plan anything, instead waiting to check in with yourself when that special date comes. Often, the lead-up to a big date is harder than the date itself. Maybe you want to do something, maybe not.

You might ask other family members and friends how they'd like to plan the day. Encouraging conversation, leaving room for resistance and refusal, is an elegant way to gauge how the people in your life are feeling about these dates. For your own close family unit (or, to be blunt, what is left of it), incorporate elements of each person's vision into the day.

While others may join in your plans, remember that they will have their own expressions, too. They deserve the right to decline, to pull away, to not participate. Everyone grieves differently, and everyone has a different way they memorialize or acknowledge the person who is gone. To the best of your ability, offer respect to other ways of doing this, while honoring your own needs.

Remember that no one is likely to be 100 percent happy. In fact, memorials and anniversary events are often a hot spot: tempers flare, old issues resurface, social skills erode. Whatever you choose to do, or not do, do your best to pace yourself. Keep checking in with your heart about what you might need in any given moment. None of this is easy, even if what you've planned goes beautifully.

KIDS AND GRIEF

It might also be true for you that it's not just yourself you need to think about. No matter what their ages, your children will be affected by grief —whether it's their loss directly, or they're living with the effects of grief on you.

My stepson turned eighteen the day after his father died. Not super young, but in many ways still a child. The outside world saw him as an

adult that day. He was called to make decisions no child should have to make.

He'd always been rather quiet about his own internal feelings, and living through his grief was no exception. In the weeks and months that followed, we talked *around* what had happened. We talked about the inner world of grief, and how different people process it differently. His tendency to be more private, plus his natural teenager-ness, meant he didn't say very much about his dad. He said even less about himself.

Given that my stepson was older, and struck out on his own soon after Matt died, I didn't have the same worries that many of you have as you parent your children through loss. I didn't have the heartbreak of seeing a very young child grow up with few to no physical memories. I didn't worry about how other kids would treat my stepson at school, or how the teachers would handle his loss. I worry about his life unfolding without his father's guidance, but I know he had eighteen years of soaking in his dad's presence and influence. I can only hope his father's love infuses him, holds him up, helps him—even now.

Someone asked me the other day if I thought my stepson had "processed" his dad's death, or if it continues to affect him. How can it not continue to affect him? His dad is still dead.

I think we're always looking for evidence that our kids are OK. So much of any emotional process is on the inside. A loss like this will grow and change inside our kids' hearts, changing not just with the passage of time, but also with their changing capacity to absorb and respond to their parent's, or a sibling's, death.

I think all we can do, all any of us can do, is continue to be open about pain, death, grief, and love in age-appropriate ways. We can let our kids know that they can ask us anything. We can let them see our own grief in a way that says, "This hurts, and it's OK to feel it." We can ask, knowing that they may not be willing—or able—to voice what they feel.

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to be able to say what you've lost, to see the many ways a family member's death shaped and changed you. I hope for my kid, and for yours, that our love stays beside them. That the love of the one they've lost stays with them. That they learn to tolerate their own pain, open their heart, and listen for their own voice. Even if they never tell us a word.

Note: Given that I did not have young children at home, I'm not an expert in the effect of loss on kids. The best place I know for resources

on how to help grieving kids—in fact, whole grieving families—is the Dougy Center in Oregon. Though their headquarters are in Portland, they are an international agency, and they can point you in the right direction as you navigate loss inside your family.

SPEAKING OF FAMILY . . .

Sometimes families really do stick together and cooperate after a death or catastrophic event. Those are the exceptions, not the rule. Nothing brings out the crazy in a family quite like death.

Arguments over what is done with the body (especially if there was no legal document outlining the person's wishes), whether or not there should be a permanent memorial, what anniversary events should look like—in the best of worlds, these things would be negotiated with skill, compassion, and understanding. The best of worlds, however, doesn't often exist.

Death throws a monkey wrench into family dynamics. Strained relationships that had found a relatively happy level of mutual tolerance flare into knockdown fights. Opinions and needs all jockey for space; everyone needs to be seen and be heard. Old conflicts get brought up. Relatives who were distant in life come out of the woodwork; people you think have your back disappear into their own wounded silence.

Death shakes everyone up.

In my own experience, and in the stories I've heard, it seems that however someone behaved pre-death, they will be more of that in the aftermath of death. The people who tend to be calm and rational remain calm and rational. Those who try to include varying viewpoints, coming to an argument with compassion and patience, tend to do more of the same. And those who argue, blame, and generally act with poor skills . . . do that.

There are so many different ways family conflict shows up in these situations; I can't cover all of them. Maybe what's more effective than coming up with a solution for each scenario is to give you one way to respond to all of them. In all interpersonal challenges—death related or otherwise—my usual advice is to behave in such a way that you can look back on the experience and feel you used good, healthy skills of

negotiation, compassion, and self-advocacy. The way you behave under this kind of stress is really the only thing under your control.

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If you've found yourself arguing over what goes where and how, please be gentle with each other's hearts—including your own. There's really no winner in these situations. No matter who wins the battle over memorials or possessions, the person you love is still dead.

This really is a time to ask yourself which of these battles feels most important to you, and place your energy there. It's not necessary—or helpful—to fight every battle, or respond to every challenge. Sometimes ignoring poor behavior or bratty demands is the wisest action. Do your best to maintain healthy boundaries, voice your needs, and step away from battles when you can. If something is important to you, advocate for yourself and your family, and remember that no matter what the outcome, your love and connection to the person you've lost can never be taken away.

HAS GRIEF ENDED YOUR FRIENDSHIPS?

Normally, when dealing with intense family dynamics, I'd encourage you to lean on your sane, dependable friends for a reality check about the way healthy people interact. My hope is that you have at least a few of those beautiful people in your life.

And—it's one of the cruelest aspects of intense loss: at a time when you most need love and support, some friends either behave horribly or they disappear altogether. There are disappointments and disagreements. Old grudges resurface. Small fault lines become impassable distances. People say the weirdest, most dismissive and bizarre things.

Grief changes your friendships. For many, many people, it ends them. We'll talk more about this in part 3, but for now, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention how common, and how painful, this aspect of grief can be. Your loss intersects with often hidden or especially painful heartbreak in the people around you. Your pain bumps up against their pain. We may not call it that directly, but that's often what's happening when people behave poorly or fail to understand the immensity of your

loss. And even when your friends want to support you, we don't often have the skills—no matter how skilled we truly are—to witness and withstand another's pain. Feeling helpless in the face of loss makes people do strange things.

No matter what the deeper reasons are, the loss of friends you thought would stand by you through thick and thin is an added heartbreak. The injustice of these second losses makes grief itself that much more difficult.

THE ONE THING PEOPLE REALLY DON'T LIKE TO TALK ABOUT: RAGE

I can't end this chapter without talking about anger and rage. There are a million other things that belong in this chapter, and there simply isn't room. But anger? It deserves a place here. The reality of anger never gets any positive airtime in our culture. You're not supposed to be angry. No matter what's happened, showing anger is . . . unseemly. Much like grief, anger is met with deep discomfort: it's fine in short doses, but it needs to be moved through quickly, without much noise.

This boycott on anger is ridiculous.

All emotion is a response to *something*. Anger is a response to a sense of injustice. Of course you're angry: whatever has happened to you is unjust. It doesn't matter whether "fairness" is logical, or whether there's a reason something happened.

Contrary to pop-psychology and the medical model, anger is healthy, normal, and necessary. As with most things, if it isn't given recognition and support, it gets turned inward, where it can become poisonous. What we don't listen to (or refuse to listen to) doesn't go away—it just finds other ways to speak. Shushed anger joins a backlog of disallowed emotion, popping up in health issues, interpersonal challenges, and mental torment. Those negative images we have of rage actually come from anger that isn't allowed to exist: repression creates pressure, which creates toxic behaviors set atop what used to be a healthy response to injustice.

Anger, allowed expression, is simply energy. It's a response. Allowed expression, it becomes a fierce protective love—for yourself, for the one you've lost, and in some cases, gives you the energy to face what is

yours to face. Shown respect and given room, anger tells a story of love and connection and longing for what is lost. There is nothing wrong with that.

All of this is to say that your anger surrounding your loss is welcome. It's healthy. It's not something to rush through so you can be more "evolved" or acceptable to the people around you. Find ways to give your sense of injustice and anger a voice. When you can say you're angry, without someone trying to clean it up or rush you through it, it doesn't have to twist back in on itself.

Touching your anger can be scary. If it feels too big, lean on a trusted friend or therapist. This is one place having an ally is really useful. It's OK to ask people how they feel about hearing your anger—it lets them be prepared to really listen, and allows you to know whether they can hear what's true without trying to rush you through your anger before it's had its say.

AND EVERYTHING ELSE?

This chapter is meant to give you a sense of normalcy inside a wholly abnormal time. I can't possibly touch on everything here, but the underlying reality of anything you're facing in your grief is that everything is . . . normal. Acknowledgment of your reality is powerful medicine. It's often the only thing that helps.

The following chapters go into more detail about specific challenges inside grief—the places where there are concrete tools to help manage what can never actually be fixed.[1]

7

YOU CAN'T SOLVE GRIEF, BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO SUFFER

Living inside grief, you know there is nothing to be fixed: this can't be made right. While most grief support (and well-meaning friends and family) encourages you to move through the pain, that's simply the wrong approach.

The way to live inside of grief is not by removing pain, but by doing what we can to reduce suffering. Knowing the difference between pain and suffering can help you understand what things *can* be changed and what things simply need your love and attention.

Being allowed to tend to your grief, without feeling like you need to fix it or clean it up, makes grief, itself, easier. Reducing suffering while honoring and supporting pain is the core of this book and the focus of this chapter.

> "This is the recurring theme: Quick! She's in pain! Let's talk her out of it. Let's tell her things will be better someday. Let's remind her to be grateful for what she had. Let's tell her how smart and funny and kind she is. And let's be sure, because we know it's weighing her down, to reassure her that someone other than the man she loves will eventually be beside her, snoring softly, waking up to kiss her good morning, rolling back over to have five more minutes while she gets up to walk the dog so he can sleep. Great. Bring it

on. Thanks so much for your kind words. You've really relieved my suffering, with all this trying to talk me out of it.

The people I love, the ones I will go to again and again, are the ones who do not in any way try to "solve" this for me, or fix it, or fix me. They do not make any attempt to cheer me up, or shame me into feeling thankful that I had as much love as I did, and so should be happy with that. They do not tell me things will be better "later," and that I have so much to live for. They do not remind me I am part of the cycle of life. As though that matters, all that pandering, condescending crap.

Excerpted from "Ask, Don't Tell: How to Help Someone in Grief" on refugeingrief.com

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

The first weeks and months after an out-of-order death are a world unto themselves. At that initial time of impact, few things bring comfort. Things that brought comfort in the past become flimsy under the weight of this kind of grief. Words of intended comfort just grate. Encouragement is not helpful. Platitudes never help.

Survival in early grief has a very small circumference. It's not an ordinary time, and ordinary rules do not apply. In grief, especially early grief, you have little energy to use any "tools" whatsoever. And tools used in the service of making things *better* often feel more offensive than helpful.

Platitudes, "self-help," well-meaning advice, and suggestions—they're *all* about getting you out of pain. Whenever we talk about how much we hurt, someone is right there to help make that pain go away. In this model, pain is a bad thing, and it must be removed. But your pain is valid. It won't just go away.

In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes that the body needs to express itself when exposed to stimuli. It *has* to. It needs to. When the body and mind experience pain, we have a biological need to express it. Pain that is not allowed to be spoken or expressed turns in on itself, and creates more problems.

Unacknowledged and unheard pain doesn't go away. One of the reasons our culture is so messed up around grief is that we've tried to

erase pain before it's had its say. We've got an emotional backlog sitting in our hearts.

You can't heal someone's pain by trying to take it away from them. You can't gloss over pain as though it were in the way of some "better" life. That grief is painful doesn't make it wrong. Pain is a normal and healthy response to loss. The way to survive grief is by allowing pain to exist, not in trying to cover it up or rush through it.

Rather than erase pain, we might tend to it as though it were healthy and normal, in need of our kind, compassionate, simple honesty and care. We might, instead, companion ourselves inside pain. Only in tending to it can we bear what is unbearable.

PAIN VERSUS SUFFERING: ONE GETS TENDED; ONE GETS "FIXED"

And this is where we come up against our need to fix things, our need to take positive action on our own behalf. If we don't "fix" pain, if we don't solve grief, are we just doomed to relentless torture for the foreseeable future?

For our purposes here, it's useful to separate pain and suffering. Pain is pure and needs support rather than solutions, but suffering is different. Suffering *can* be fixed, or at least significantly reduced. To differentiate the two, we need to define some terms.

There are teachings on suffering in a lot of different traditions, both secular and religious. No discussion of pain and suffering, for me, can happen without at least a nod to Buddhism and its language of suffering.

When we say that the Buddha taught, "All life is suffering, and the way to escape suffering is to embrace impermanence," he wasn't saying, "Please pretend you see no suffering; please pretend you aren't in pain." He wasn't saying, "If you'd just let go of your attachments, nothing would hurt." He saw suffering. He saw pain. He wanted to find a way to stay present and respond. To respond without flinching. Without turning away from the abyss of pain present in the world.

The Buddha saw pain. He asked: "What can I do to not lose my mind and my heart, here? How can I keep both eyes and heart open without being consumed by this? How can I keep my gaze steady on that which cannot be fixed?"

His response—in my mind anyway—was love. Love with open hands, with an open heart, knowing that what is given to you will die. It will change. Love anyway. You will witness incredible pain in this life. Love anyway. Find a way to live here, beside that knowledge. Include that knowledge. Love through that. Be willing to not turn away from the pain of this world—pain in yourself or in others.

The practices and tools we have from Buddhism and other traditions are meant to help you withstand the pain of life, to keep your eyes on the broken place without being consumed by it. They aren't meant, as pop-psychology might have us believe, to remove all pain so that you can remain "happy."

They're meant to reduce suffering in the face of pain, not remove pain itself.

Suffering and pain are not the same thing. And that distinction is the beginning of true healing and support inside your grief.

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As we've said, pain is a healthy, normal response when someone you love is torn from your life. It hurts, but that doesn't make pain *wrong*.

Suffering comes when we feel dismissed or unsupported in our pain, and when we thrash around inside our pain, questioning our choices, our "normalcy," our actions and reactions.

Suffering comes with being told to not feel what you feel. Suffering comes with being told there is something wrong with what you feel. Suffering comes with all the crap that gets loaded on us by friends and colleagues and random strangers who, with the best of intentions, correct, judge, or give advice on how we need to grieve better. Suffering also comes when we don't eat, don't get enough sleep, spend too much time with toxic people, or pretend we're not in as much pain as we're in. Suffering comes when we rehash the events that led up to this death or this loss, punishing ourselves for not preventing it, not knowing more, not doing more. Suffering brings with it anxiety, and fear, and isolation.

If we want to make this better for you, your *suffering* is where we need to look for change.

THE GREAT GRIEF EXPERIMENT

Once we've made the distinction between pain and suffering, we still need to answer the questions of what we *do* about any of this. The broad answer is simple: pain gets supported; suffering gets adjusted. There is no one way to do either of these things. Your grief is as individual as your love. Your way through this will be made by you, in ways that are unique to your mind, your heart, your life.

It helps if you think of it not as something you can do correctly or incorrectly, but instead as an ongoing experiment. No matter how many times pain or grief has entered your life, this time is the first time. This grief is unlike any other. Each new experience gets to unfold—and be tended—in the ways that best suit what hurts.

You'll need to find out what those best ways are, in order to withstand your loss. You'll need to identify what is pain and therefore needs support, and what is suffering and can therefore be changed. You'll need to ask yourself questions and experiment.

THIS IS NOT A TEST

You might hear that whatever has happened is a test, whether that's meant as a test of your faith, or your practice, or your emotional stability. I think that sets you up. A "test" implies that the universe is cruel, that you've been thrown into an impossibility and are being watched to see if you can figure it all out. Watched to see how much pain you're in and how you're handling it. Watched to see how well you address your own suffering. Watched to see if you can do this right.

This is not a test.

Your grief is not a test *of* love; it's an experiment *in* love. There's a huge difference between the two. Experimental faith, experimental relationship with yourself, with this life, with grief, with pain, with love, with suffering—it's all an experiment. It's not a test. You can't fail. You haven't failed.

The point of any practice, the point of this experiment, is to be the strongest, most whole vessel you can be to hold what is, to live this life that's asked of you. Whether we're talking about pain or about suffering, the underlying orientation is the same: allow yourself to experiment, to find what helps, to find what makes things just a little easier. Not

because doing so will make this OK, but because doing so makes this gentler on you.

There is no one correct way to live this. Others have come before you, and others will come after, but no one carries grief—or love—in the same way you do. Grief is as individual as love. There's nothing to do *but* experiment.

It's all a work in progress.

GATHERING DATA

Experimenting in grief means looking for things that bring even the tiniest amount of relief or peace in your heart, or your life. We're talking micro-distinctions here: What gives you the strength or the courage or the ability to face the next minute, the next five? Does it feel better to write out your pain, or does that make you feel worse? Are you more inclined to sleep through the night if you go for a walk, or not?

Honestly, thinking about my own grief, choosing experiments in those early days was not a conscious thing. But thinking of grief *as* an experiment helped me. It let me know that there was no right way or wrong way, even for me, even inside myself.

One of the first things you can do inside your grief is to start paying attention to subtle shifts in how you feel. There are times that tears leak out at inopportune moments, times when the screaming inside you can't be held in, situations where holding yourself together is an entirely impossible task and rabid mind-loops keep replaying the events of your loss. These levee-breaking moments don't just happen—they build. The effects of both pain and suffering are cumulative.

While we might think that grief erupts without warning, there are always early warning signs. Gathering data helps you recognize those signs.

The first concrete practice, then, is to start a log of what you notice. At first, this will be an exercise in deconstruction after the fact. If you take a recent experience of feeling completely overwhelmed in your grief, can you look back over the week before it happened and see signs that the load was getting too heavy? Where were the additional stressors, the things that eroded your capacity to find rest or stability? What were some smaller eruptions that happened leading up to the larger one?

For me, an early warning sign was increased irritation with humans, animals, and inanimate objects. Simple things going wrong had a huge effect on me: as I got more overwhelmed, smaller and smaller things upset me. When I felt more stable, I had a much easier time brushing off swirling, annoying things.

Using this example, irritation was a sign that I needed to step back from arbitrary stressors in my life. It meant I probably needed more sleep, more food, and less contact with humans. The more I noticed these smaller indicators, the better I was at caring for myself. I could see them as cues that I needed to step back, make my world smaller and more care focused, rather than push myself.

If you think of your stability, your capacity to be present to this grief, as a bank account, every interaction is a withdrawal. Every stressor is a withdrawal. Recognizing the signs that your account is getting low is one big way of preventing—and soothing—both meltdowns and grief overwhelm.

Gathering data also helps you make micro-comparisons of better and worse: Are there times you feel more stable, more grounded, more able to breathe inside your loss? Does anything—a person, a place, an activity—add to your energy bank account? Are there activities or interactions that make this feel just a little softer or gentler? What's going on before and during those times? Conversely, are there activities or environments that absolutely make things worse? What elements contribute to making things suck even more than they already do?

Check in with yourself; note how you feel at different times of day, under what circumstances. Map your social interactions, how much sleep you've had, what you're eating (or not eating), and how you spend your time. You don't have to be obsessive about this; broad sweeps can be as useful as minute detail.

If you're unsure how to get started, you might ask yourself questions, like: How do I feel after I see this person? Do I feel supported and centered, or crazy and exhausted? Are there times of day I feel calmer and more grounded? Are there certain books, or movies, or places that take the sharp edge off my mind, if only for a little while?

Your log might look something like this: *Went to the grocery store. It was crowded. Saw so and so. Felt horrible, overwhelmed. Too many memories in that place. Felt exposed. Protective, defensive. Went to N's party, was able to stay in the kitchen and do things to help: felt OK. Felt*

good to be around people, but not with them. Talked with my mother-in-law—as long as we talked about logistics for the memorial, I felt supported. Talking about anything else just devolved into craziness (note: avoid talking about feelings with her!). Went to the beach this morning. Felt companioned by something, like the water could hold everything. Ate sugar cereal for breakfast. And lunch. Felt like shit.

Be sure to note what things gave you even the tiniest bit more peace of being or calm. Especially in very early grief, nothing is going to feel amazing. The weight of immoveable pain is simply too much. However, there might be moments where you feel steadier, less anxious, or are able to be gentler with yourself. Remember that we're aiming to reduce suffering and find ways to tend to pain. If you find *anything* that feels less bad (in early grief) or, eventually, even a little bit good (whenever that happens), pay attention to that.

Gathering this data helps you figure out your own personal distinction between pain and suffering. Remember, suffering is arbitrary. Mapping those subtle distinctions of what helps and what doesn't is mapping your own suffering: It lets you know what can be changed or avoided. It lets you know where you *do* have some control in your grief. Whenever possible, choosing to avoid those "things that don't help" decreases your suffering, making you more available to tend to your own pain.

GATHER GENERAL DATA

For the next week, keep a log of how you feel throughout the day, under different circumstances, in various places, and in various social situations. What do you notice?

EVIDENCE: THE OUTCOME IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE ACTION

How do you know when you're doing well, versus really floundering or suffering in your grief?

Because our metric can no longer be the cessation of pain, figuring out your relative wellness inside grief can be tricky. How do you know when you're emotionally stable, given the fact that you cry all the time? How can you tell if the pain you feel is because of the actual loss, or because you're stuck in a loop of blaming yourself for everything?

The data gathering you did in the last exercise assists you in recognizing your early warning signs and lets you see more clearly what helps and what doesn't. But in intense grief, it can be hard to actually tell the difference between "doing well" and making things worse. It can be hard to separate pain from suffering.

In that case, it's helpful to look at the outcome of certain actions, identifying the signs of suffering, and the signs of comparative calm.

Even though every grief is unique, there are several broad indicators:

Evidence of suffering: poor sleep, no appetite, excessive appetite, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, anxiety, self-judgment, emotional reactivity (reactivity is different from grief or pain), short temper, sense of guilt disproportionate to actual responsibility, inability to breathe through intense emotion or to compartmentalize intensity enough to care for yourself, feeling victimized by your own pain or by the responses of others, a sense that your pain is too large to be contained or survived.

Evidence of relative calm: emotional evenness, self-kindness, sense of being held or companioned inside your pain, validation, feeling somewhat rested, eating enough for your body's needs, feeling an acceptance of your emotional state (no matter what that state is), ability to respond to others' poor behavior with clear redirection or correction, taking things less personally, ability to compartmentalize intense emotion or remove yourself from a situation in order to tend to that emotion, sense of connection to self, others, and those you've lost.

NOTING THE EVIDENCE

As part of your experiment in grief, it can be helpful to make a list like this for yourself: On one side of the page, make a list of signs you're really suffering. On the other side, a list of signs that you're caring for yourself well. What is evidence of suffering for you (for example, not sleeping well, feeling extra irritable, etc.)? What evidence shows that you're doing the best you can to tend to your pain (for example, feeling rested, able to more easily ignore or shrug off small annoyances, etc.)?

WELLNESS VERSUS WORSENESS

One of the biggest causes of suffering in grief is the self-harm we do to ourselves with our thoughts.

(Did you just say, "OMG, yes!"?)

We'll talk more about specific mind-related challenges like anxiety, memory problems, and intrusive thoughts in other chapters, but now is a good time to bring up self-judgment, scrutiny, and blame.

In times of stress, your mind can get really ravenous and start eating itself. I know mine does. Insightful, self-reflective people tend to be far harder on themselves than other folks. In this instance, a sharp mind is not necessarily your friend. Especially in out-of-order or unusual death (but in many other losses as well), we rehash the events, and our roles in them, over and over and over. We process everything: every nuance, every word, every choice. I wrestled not only with what happened that day at the river, but also with the intractable mind-loops I got into nearly every day around how well or not well I was doing, whether or not Matt would think I was doing this well or not, and how unfair it was that I felt I was being judged by his invisible ghost in my mind, given what I had just gone through.

The mind. Not so much a happy place.

It's true what they say in many spiritual traditions: the mind is the root of suffering.

Even if some of what your mind tells you is true (and 99.9 percent of it is not one bit true), there is no reason to increase your suffering with an unrelenting series of cruel and judgmental thoughts. Imaginary unwinnable battles are not a kindness.

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So how do you sort the not-useful thoughts from the useful thoughts? The language is a little clunky, but I think of this as a practice of discerning wellness thoughts versus worseness thoughts. "Worseness" thoughts take your pain and grind more stress into it, increasing your suffering. You're going to have your own particular way of mentally tormenting yourself, but it's really just a manufactured anxiety about what might happen in the future or stressing about what happened in the past. What did I miss? Why didn't I do something differently? How am I supposed to live with this now? Did I cause all this? Those are the kinds of thoughts that shut you down and shut you off. They're not useful. They create suffering. They make things worse.

"Wellness" thoughts have the opposite effect: your pain still exists, but your sense of calm or stillness is increased. Wellness thoughts are the stories, ideas, and inner images that bring you closer to yourself. They bring you just the tiniest sense of peace or rootedness, increasing your capacity to withstand the pain you're in.

WELLNESS VERSUS WORSENESS

Drawing from some of what you identified in the last two exercises, create a side-by-side list of what makes you feel saner and what makes you feel crazy. What are the thoughts, ideas, or images that are on the worseness side of the equation? You can also add the activities from your earlier

lists—things like spending time with certain people, spending too much time online, eating poorly. Basically, anything that pulls you away from love, pulls you away from kindness to yourself, or makes you feel completely nuts.

On the other side of the page, list wellness thoughts, ideas, images, and the activities that help you feel more rooted and calm. I'm not going to make any big guesses about what your list would look like. You know it when you feel these things. You know when you're in your own core. You know when things feel right in you.

Write these things out during a time of relative calm or quiet—that way, when your pain gets too large, you'll have something solid to refer to for help. Rather than court more suffering, you can redirect your thoughts toward wellness and gentleness or choose different actions from your list of things that don't make this worse.

What things increase suffering? Which allow you to hold your pain more gently?

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

The reason I have you spend time gathering data is so that you can identify the times your suffering increases and the times your suffering is more quiet or manageable. Differentiating pain from suffering helps you understand the connection between certain activities and their impact on your grief. Recognizing which thoughts make this easier and which thoughts make this worse lets you more easily redirect your mind away from arbitrary suffering.

We can take the previous exercises—mapping your activities and interactions, evidence of suffering and tending this well, and wellness versus worseness—and create a compass of sorts, your guide to survival. Life coach Martha Beck calls this finding your own North Star. It's a way to both recognize your own evidence of suffering and give yourself a road map for how to decrease said suffering, especially when you're so lost in pain that you don't know what to do to help yourself.

As a composite document, it's a way to recognize when your pain is getting too heavy, too hard to bear: evidence of suffering is clear. It gives

you a starting point of ideas for how to help yourself when your suffering is too much: choose activities that have helped induce a state of relative calm in the recent past. Not sleeping well? Your data may show you that reducing your sugar intake and staying off the computer late at night help you sleep a little better. Feeling consumed by rage and a sense of injustice? Your data might show that your justifiable anger gets much larger when you've spent time with "friends" who judge or dismiss your grief. To soothe that torment, you might spend time in the natural, nonhuman world, where you don't feel judged. You can choose to spend more time doing things that have even the slightest chance of inducing more calm or peace in you, and see how that goes.

THIS IS STUPID

All this talk of gathering data and creating a compass can start to seem like a ridiculous, cerebral exercise. And in some ways, that's exactly what it is. But here's the thing: you aren't meant to, nor are you made to, withstand pain like this with absolutely no tools and absolutely no way to help yourself. The only way to know what is likely to reduce your suffering is by becoming curious about it. Mapping the territory.

The best list in the world isn't going to actually fix anything. I know. Remember that this is an experiment. Creating a list of things that help and things that make this worse gives you a compass. It gives you a tangible point of orientation when the reality of life and loss gets too big for one person to contain. It won't fix anything. And it might help, if even just a little.

What we're trying for here, what I hope for you, is that you can find some peace in this for yourself, in this moment. That your suffering can be reduced. That you can tend to your pain, come to yourself with kindness. That you can hold your gaze on what is broken, without falling into the abyss of suffering that always makes things worse.

As you gather data and start to observe what makes things worse or even slightly less bad, you might see patterns begin to emerge. There are times you feel calmer and times you feel whipped around like a tetherball. One is not more right or more "emotionally evolved" than the other. One just feels better, and the other feels like crap. Sometimes you

choose the crap because you don’t have it in you to care for yourself. Totally valid. Do what you can.

Sometimes, with the small amount of energy you have, the only thing you can do is heave yourself in the direction of wellness. Heave yourself in the direction of gentleness-to-self. You don’t have to do any more than that. Just turn toward it. Turn toward wellness—that’s enough. It counts.

8

HOW (AND WHY) TO STAY ALIVE

Using tools to reduce your suffering is one of the few concrete actions to take inside grief. Reducing suffering still leaves you with pain, however, and that pain can be immense.

Surviving early grief is a massive effort. Forget getting through the day; sometimes the pain is so excruciating, the most you can aim for is getting through the next few minutes. In this chapter, we review tools to help you bear the pain you're in, what to do when that pain is too much, and we explore why kindness to self is the most necessary—and most difficult—medicine.

GRIEF AND SUICIDALITY: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Grief takes a toll on your mind, your body, your relationships—everything. The thought of endless months and years without the one you love is overwhelming. The thought of everyone else going back to their lives while you're still sitting there in the wreckage is overwhelming. The reality is just too big to let in. For many people, continuing to wake up each morning is a disappointment: *Damn, I'm still alive*. Thoughts like that make perfect sense.

Feeling like you'd rather not wake up in the morning is normal in grief, and it doesn't mean you're suicidal. Not wanting to be alive is not the same thing as wanting to be dead. It's hard to tell non-grieving people that, though, as people understandably get worried about your safety. And because people tend to get upset when we talk about not

wanting to be alive, we just stop talking about it altogether. That's dangerous.

There's a reality here, inside intense grief, that we need to talk about directly. Sometimes you do not care one bit whether you live or die. Not because you're actively suicidal, but because you simply *do not care*. There are moments inside grief when it seems easier to just be reckless, let death happen, a sort of daring the universe to pick you off. Sometimes you do not care one bit about your own "safety." I know. All those encouragements from others about having so much to live for, that there's still goodness to come in your life—they feel irrelevant. They kind of are irrelevant. You can't cheerlead yourself out of the depths of grief.

Survival in early grief is not about looking toward the future. It's not about finding something that lights you up, or gives you a reason for living. It just doesn't work like that. Because those ordinary encouragements about the value of life are irrelevant, you'll need other ways to navigate those extra-intense times when grief threatens to overtake you.

My most intense moments of rather-be-dead feelings usually came while I was driving on the highway. What kept my hands on the wheel in those cannot-care-about-myself moments was knowing I did not want to create another me. I kept driving, or stopped driving, because I did not want to risk harming someone else. I would not chance creating another widow. I did not want to mess up someone else's life, or cause anyone else any pain, by creating an accident scene they had to clean up. Not wanting to create more pain for someone else was a strong enough motivation to make safer choices.

I also had a pact with a fellow widow: When we had those moments of overwhelming pain, we drew on the promise we made to each other to stay alive. To not be reckless. Not because the future was going to be so much better eventually, but because we didn't want to cause each other more pain. We needed each other. We needed to know that the other relied on us. Our love and commitment to each other got us through some truly terrible times.

There's a range inside grief from simply not wanting to be here to being seriously tempted to stop being here.

Feeling less than psyched about being alive is normal. It's important to have at least one person in your life to whom you can be honest about

your disinterest in survival. Telling the truth can take some of that pressure off. And no matter how intense it gets, practice safety first. Please stay alive. Do it for yourself, if you can. Do it for others if you must.

Please note: Feeling like you'd rather not wake up in the morning is very different from thinking about actually harming or killing yourself. If you're thinking about harming yourself, please reach out for help. There are people who have been where you are. Survival can be one minute at a time. If you need help to make it through, please contact the suicide prevention help line in your local area. Most countries have national support lines, and help is always available anywhere there is Internet access.

> "I'm not going to kill myself, but I can tell you that if a piano were falling from the roof of this building I'm walking past, I wouldn't rush to get out of the way.
>
> **DAN, after the death of his husband, Michael**

SURVIVING PAIN: KEEPING YOUR EYE ON THE BROKEN PLACE

For physical issues, we have an entire pharmacopoeia of pain medicine. For the actual pain of grief, we have . . . nothing. It's always seemed so bizarre to me that we have an answer for almost every physical pain, but for this—some of the most intense pain we can experience—there is no medicine. You're just supposed to feel it.

And in a way, that's true. The answer to pain *is* simply to feel it. Some traditions speak of practicing compassion in the face of pain, rather than trying to fix it. As I understand the Buddhist teaching, the fourth form of compassion in the Brahma Viharas, or the four immeasurables, describes an approach to the kinds of pain that cannot be fixed: *upekkha*, or equanimity. Upekkha is the practice of staying emotionally open and bearing witness to the pain while dwelling in equanimity around one's limited ability to effect change. This form of compassion—for self, for others—is about remaining calm enough to feel everything, to remain calm *while* feeling everything, knowing that it can't be changed.