

# *In a time of loss...*

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## ***Introduction***

Over 25 years ago, my beloved died, after a ten-year illness. During those years, we had explored dying (and living) from every angle. We cried a lot, quaked in our shoes, loved, lost and lived as deeply as we could manage, squeezing out every precious drop of juice we could taste. We raised a child, became guardians to another, and were separated from a third. The loss of that child, resulting in the most profound grief I have ever experienced (even considering numerous deaths in my life since then) brought me to my knees more than any other.

For that entire time, we explored our relationship, both as a couple and as individuals, to death and grief. Many friends died who had been quite well when Joanne, the sweetheart I had known since I was 16, was first given the terrible news of her cancer. And we saw that, amazingly, she lived. Those of us who loved her called her the energizer bunny, going on when it seemed impossible or, at least, highly improbable.

I could not have predicted how much I would value the long period I had to prepare for her death. For, while we can't be prepared, we can prepare. We can consider how we want to step through grief. We can try on the many decisions we'll have to make at a time when it will feel impossible to make even one.

I believe I was so very fortunate to have that time, both because of the wonder of loving each other through it, but also because I changed so radically in those years. I became surer of myself, less anxious, braver and more able to open my heart. In short, I learned to love; others, yes, but also myself.

And so, when Joanne died, I already knew how to love myself through it. There was no betrayal in her death. I was infinitely aware how hard she had fought to stay alive, to stay with me. There was only the pain of living in a world she no longer inhabited. And I set about newly committed to life. Strangely, her death did not make me want to die. In fact, her zest for life had taught me that I wanted to live.

This guide is a glimpse into what helped me to face my loss and find a new life beyond her death. I invite you to dive into what speaks to you and skip the pages that don't. And on the worst days, I invite you to

skip this and every book about grieving and simply give yourself up to whatever you are feeling. Follow your own breadcrumbs! Look for suggestions that touch you. Ignore the rest.

***Let your own grief tell you what it needs, then do your best to give it.***

While my wife was ill, I tried to imagine what it would be like after she died. I wasn't feeling morbid; I didn't assume she *would* die. But I couldn't help "practicing" for that potential day. I tried it on, over and over.

Sometimes I imagined where I would put her dresser. I wondered if I would continue to sleep in her room or move back into mine. Would I hate to be around her things? Would I want to get away? Or would I drown in the ocean of her presence, unable to climb to shore?

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After too much time spent wondering, I began to live more comfortably in the not knowing. How could I imagine what I might experience in the unimaginable event that she would really, actually, finally, die? I told her I *couldn't* accept it, and she said I didn't have to until I had to. That would be when she really, actually, finally, died. As it turned out, that was over 8 years beyond her original prognosis of 6 months to a year.

When her body did, inevitably, quit on her, I stopped imagining and began experiencing. I couldn't have become prepared, but I had prepared. I had built my confidence in my own capacity to face tremendous difficulty. I had watched the people I knew who were already dealing with loss. I absorbed what they said and did. I tried to convince myself that, if they could do it, even if I didn't know how, I could.

The most important thing I did was to make a deal with myself that when she died, I would give myself whatever I wanted for at least a year, assuming I could beg, borrow or steal a way to do it and assuming I could find childcare. That was the most comforting thing I could come up with. It was also radical, because I had always had a bit of a problem making myself that important. The idea that I would face the loss by wrapping myself in the blanket of my own care, while not completely new, deepened my relationship with myself. I'd been in therapy and learned that I needed to take good enough care of myself so that I wouldn't fizzle (concerned about the effect on other people), which certainly got me part way there, but now I was planning to treat myself

well just because I thought I needed and deserved it. This was a new game.

The decision to give my grief what it wanted led me in some incredible directions. I wasn't much of a gardener, but I went out in the yard every day and felt the dirt, planted plants and pulled weeds. I wish I could say this led to a new relationship to gardening, but that wasn't really the point. It was something I needed right then, and I gave it to myself. I had no interest in how long I would do it, or why it mattered. I just did it. Because I wanted to. Because it felt good. Because it comforted me. I played the piano and sang every day. Not to make a career as a musician, as I'd wanted to when I was younger, but just for the effect on my body of giving voice to the depth of my experience. Over time, I developed a group of 4 or 5 songs that I sang every time because they brought me into deep contact with my loss and soothed the empty space left by my wife's death.

These are just two of the things that emerged as important touchstones for me. There are infinite ways to express our loss, to learn to listen to it and honor it. We can write our thoughts and feelings down, or create art, or walk in the woods. There are as many ways to invite yourself into your own heart as there are hearts. The crucial thing is that you tell that aching part of yourself that you are listening.

***Surround yourself with people who love you.***

Before my wife's illness, I was essentially a shy person, more comfortable with a one to one conversation than a group. Except for the necessary requirements of work, I had an anxious relationship to others, especially in my private world. I was the person at a party sitting in the corner, leaving early. I was not gifted at friend making or even what is called networking. Home was my safety zone.

Her illness changed me. Since she was a very outgoing person and because we needed so much help, I realized early on that I would need to let people in. Over those long years of illness, I grew to love having so many people around me. I depended on their practical help, but I depended on their loving presence more. I eased into it at first, because I could tell myself they were doing it for her. But somewhere during the course of all those years, I finally took it in that they loved me, this huge community of people who contributed to my well-being every day. After my wife's death, I held that love within me to help me remember that this life was still beautiful and worthwhile.

If you have these kinds of relationships, the kind that are developed over a long period of time and deepen because you've faced hard times together, cherish them. Even if you don't reach out, make a list of everyone who cares even a little for you and call the names to mind.

***Avoid people who insist you should feel better.***

Living after loss leaves us exposed and vulnerable. Even before Joanne died, we could feel the rough edges of the people around us. We could feel their fear or anger or uncertainty. We thirsted for people who came in with a question mark and simply paid attention to where we were that day. Sometimes, because we loved someone very much, we had conversations with them when they were trying to fix us or assume they knew how we felt or what we needed. And by the time she died, she had taught a whole community how to be present, even in the worst times, and how to allow that even in the worst times, some days are the best.

Most grief friendship does not have such a long time or so much help to develop. Most grief drops the one who has lost someone precious (or something) into a deep abyss of pain. And the special few people in your life who are able to simply sit with you and be curious will become like gems in your life. Notice who makes you feel that you can be real, that whatever you are going through is accepted. That is what will give you solace and comfort. That is what will help you, in your own good time, to build a life around your loss.

## ***Cling to people who let you feel bad.***

My best friend's sweetheart died the year before mine. She was infinitely capable of witnessing, hearing about and accepting whatever sadness, or anything else, I was feeling. Not once did she try to change me and that was part of why I trusted her, at moments, to suggest what might help. She did not offer fixes for my state of mind, just travel tips from someone who had walked a similar road.

If your friends can't do that for you, perhaps you'll have to look for someone who can. And even if they can, you may want someone who is not personally affected by the loss that is shared by many people in your life. Most of us did not take a grief course in our elementary school (wouldn't that be the most important class of them all!?! ) so our experience is what teaches us. You may find that the friends you have who have grieved deeply are better at accepting your grief. You may notice that the one who has been through it leaves you feeling witnessed and comforted, even though they cannot change the impact of your loss.

You can choose who you spend time with. Take a break from the friends who can't accept the pain you are in, only because they haven't had any training! And if there is someone you don't want to let go of, there may come a day when you are ready to let them know what you need.



## ***Give yourself time to do "nothing."***

One thing I discovered in that year of allowing my grief to matter, to take my attention, is that I did better with lots of unstructured time. I was fortunate to have that time, since I was working a part time schedule, my children were in school and I didn't live with other adults. Sometimes the hours would go by and it would be time to pick up the kids before I knew it. Time sometimes seemed to lose meaning to me, except for the demands of external needs. That kind of time, to just do what came to my mind or do nothing, always seemed to help.

If you have heavy demands from the outside, try making just a little time to do nothing. You may not always be feeling the most painful parts of grief, since that comes on its own schedule, but these quiet moments will give you a platform to accept whatever you're going through with a bit more ease.

Some people are very active in grief, driven to write, or run, or do. Still, just a little nothing time can, over time, teach you to show up for yourself, no matter what.

## ***Put your hands in the earth.***

It was a big surprise to me when I found myself gardening in grief. Although I had a yard, I had never done much gardening. The weeds were high and very few plants survived my erratic style in the outdoors. But in grief, I felt a primal urge to put my hands in the dirt.

When we were explaining that Joanne would die to our 2 1/2 year old, we told her that now, she would have someone always loving her but never seen, a kind of guardian angel. In the way that new talkers do, she heard garden angel instead and so at the memorial, we asked people to bring plants. At first, I thought this was why I suddenly had such an impulse to plant, plant, plant.

It was only years later that I discovered that there is a property in soil that acts as an anti-depressant. *Mycobacterium vaccae* mirrors the effect on neurons that drugs like Prozac provide. And I can attest to the fact that there was something about my hands actually touching the dirt (garden at least a little with no gloves) that helped me. I came in from time in the garden soothed, at least a little. It didn't hurt to be outside and to let my tears spill into the ground, either.

***Find someone who has experienced a loss and talk to them.***

Grievers often find each other, because we need to be seen in our loss. It doesn't always need to be the same loss, but that is worth seeking out. A grief group may be too much at the beginning, when you don't have much room for anyone else's sorrow, but at some point, knowing that other people have felt something similar to what you feel is both comforting and moving.

Even decades later, I resonate with other people who have lost a spouse. I feel we have something deeply precious in common, especially if they are able to talk about how the experience changed them. Often, people who have not had a deep experience of life changing loss can't understand why I want to spend so much time with others who have similar experiences. But for me, there is nothing so meaningful as sharing stories of loss. Over time, I have found ways to reflect that fact in the work I do and the friendships I have. But it comes down to this; I am moved by the power of human beings to make meaning from loss. It is one of our most potent superpowers.

Most western cultures want our grief to leave us quickly. This is ironic since we also think of losses as something we can't survive! In fact, loss is both survivable and livable. But what is also true is that we will always carry our losses with us, throughout the course of our lives. Other grievors are often the ones who understand this.

## ***Cry when you need to cry.***

In the practices of Burkina Faso (thank you to Maladoma Some and Francis Weller for sharing these teachings) tears are thought to be food for the ancestors. If we don't cry for those we've lost, the elders in that culture believe we are starving the ones who have gone before.

But in western culture, tears are often thought to be a sign of weakness and an indicator that we are not doing well. In grief, it is the opposite. We need to cry. When my wife died, I cried every day for months. But because I had practiced an acceptance of whatever I was feeling, it didn't trouble me. I cried and then I was done, and the day went forward. What a relief to simply give voice to all that was in me!

I don't cry as much these days (although there has been an uptick during the COVID-19 pandemic) but I also don't deny my tears. I welcome them when they come. And so, I have noticed how many different kinds of tears we are capable of- sadness and grief, yes, but also these; moved to tears, tears of joy, tears of relief. Tears are just a natural release of whatever is going on in us. Over time, notice what happens if you welcome them, and let them out until they are done. There is a reason we have the expression "I had a good cry."

## ***On a day when you feel better, let yourself.***

In three decades as a grief counselor, one of the things that has made me the saddest is the guilt grievers feel when they begin to feel joy again. Some of us even feel it right away!

I remember at my wife's memorial. She had many friends who were performing artists and the day was full of song, and dance, and poetry. It was deeply moving and, yes, joyful, to share these gifts together. And then there was comedy.

My parents, who loved her so much, showed up dressed to the nines. So did many of our friends, but the dress was quite different. Joanne was African-American, and many of our friends came to the service in African garb.

My father, a Baptist minister and also one of the kindest people I've ever known, stepped up to the mic with my mother. He wore a black suit, and my mother wore a plaid wool skirt and jacket. He began,

“My wife told me not to say this, but I'm going to anyway. After careful consideration, we decided to attend today's service in our native garb.”

The place broke into the kind of laughter that can't be stopped until it plays itself out. It was the laughter of relief as well as humor- that we could still share the joke together. That we still had all the capability we'd had before this terrible moment.

Grief is not depression; it is not a blanket covering everything. It is full of feeling! It goes in every direction. It sometimes results in gratitude and joy. Make room for it all.

And if you are able to welcome everything but still feel dull months later, perhaps you are also depressed. Only then might you consider anti-depressants or other medical interventions. At the start ask yourself if you can simply welcome all you are feeling as a direct result of the power of loss to take us to our knees.

***Read grief books if it helps. Don't read them if it doesn't help.***

For months after Joanne died, I was unable to read much. I read a memoir written by a woman who had lost her spouse and I read grief poetry. For me though, it was song and dirt that got me from day to day. And I am a grief counselor!

It was important that I not make myself read. In the decades since, I've read many wonderful books about grief, and books by griever, but I couldn't back then.

On the other hand, I have met dozens of people who couldn't get their hands on enough books about grief. Reading was a lifeline they needed and clung to. To each our own! If reading calls you, read. If it doesn't, don't. And be sure to notice what kinds of book seem to soothe. I have written this short pamphlet because a page was about all I wanted back then. Those who want chapters and chapters can readily find so many books. Just go to any preferred book seller and type "grief" in the search bar.

***Talk to your lost loved one; assume they can hear anything you have to say. Listen for the echo of an answer.***

When Joanne first died, it was hard for me to feel that she was dead. She seemed to be everywhere. I had been a very analytic and rational person before this but, thanks to my commitment to accept myself no matter what, I was able to let that go. I found myself talking to her constantly, throughout the day, and I had a sense of being heard, that she was listening. I didn't care if that was really true or if my clever mind was making it up- what worked was working.

Eventually, I felt the utter loss of her. Her body, her smile, hugs, the way she parented our kids, her funny habits and quirks. Even the things that made her irritating seemed like losses in a world where she no longer was.

But through all of that, I kept talking. Our relationship was still a living, breathing reality, even if only within me.

Although our relationship has evolved over time (especially since I married again) we have continued a sort of spiritual dialogue. If I am working and unclear what to do next, I ask her for guidance. When occasions that would have included her come (as they do in life) I share them with her. Often, I just have a sense of her close by, observing how life has unfolded for all the people she loved so well.

If you can, refrain from trying to understand what "the truth" is. I stopped caring long ago about answering the great existential questions; what is life's meaning, who or what is God (if there is a God), why do we suffer, are they still somewhere? I have become satisfied with the mysteries inherent in life. It is enough to feel connected, in love, with her and every person who has left this life. And one of the things that connects us is the ongoing conversation I cultivate.

## ***Make a refuge of your home.***

When I met my second wife, it was only a year and a half since Joanne's death. She would later tell me that the first time she came to my home it felt as if she had entered an altar to Joanne. Fortunately, she was not jealous.

One of the ways I held my own hand during that time was by making my home a peaceful and soothing place. I'm sure this helped my kids too. It wasn't about the physical space so much as just removing things that disturbed my calm and adding things that promoted it, to the limits of my finances. It could be a picture, or something I'd write about her, or a song on a playlist. As much as I could, I tried to make home a place that could contain my experience.

Some people need to remove the person who has died from their environment to create that- I never felt that need. When my father died unexpectedly, for instance, my mother felt compelled to move his chair to a different corner. She needed her environment to reflect her new reality.

Whatever brings about a sense of peace in your home, though not in you, has value. You must feel your way through it; what brings the calm may not be what you would expect. This is just one other place to feel your way through. As my teacher Stephen Levine used to say, "Grief must be held by the braille method- feeling your way along."



## **Create.**

Why is it that so many people feel compelled to create after loss? The particular form of creativity can be very surprising, but over time I have learned that encouraging grievors to engage in creative activity has a power that can't be overestimated.

What matters the most is that the impulse to create, in whatever form, is honored. For me, it is often music that calls me. For some people it is visual art, or performance or writing. For me, writing tends to come later. Early grief in my heart is short on words.

There is no wrong way to create. Even a scribble can express what we're going through and give voice to it. The important thing is to do what feels right for you!

Over time I have come to believe that grief, itself, is a creative process. We are inventing ourselves through accepting that grief changes us and invents us newly. You may do things differently just in grief or you may change for good. Either way, allowing ourselves to try things and see what feels good ultimately expands us into the people we're becoming.

All that is hard to grasp at first. It's hard to accept that we are suddenly different, unable to return to where we were before loss. But if nothing else, allow yourself to be different in the early days after a loss. Why would you still be the same?!?

## ***Let the future take care of itself.***

Of all the crushing blows in grief, the idea that the future will be miserable, and empty is, perhaps, the most difficult. Heavy states convince us that we will always feel this way, it will only get worse and there is nothing that will come out of it. Even though this has never been true, it is a very compelling belief; that our future is a bleak landscape, devoid of anything good.

There is always a turning point in my work with grievors when they say, "O.K. I may never feel better. But since I am still alive, can I make my life meaningful, right now?" Letting go of trying to fix or change the future is the doorway to a present we can live with. It introduces possibility in the present moment and helps us begin to find a way from moment to moment.

The more difficult the moment is, the more tempting it is to rail against a terrible future and the harder it is to stay right here, right now. Wisdom teachers spend their lives encouraging us to stay in the moment, to be present, but the hardest times in our lives leads to the most challenge in being here, now.

Start small. Ask yourself, "Can I bear what I'm feeling in my body right now? Can I let it be true that I am (fill in the blank) sad, angry, bereft, hopeless, scared?" In just this one moment, see if you can be kind to what you're feeling, allowing it to catch your attention for just a moment.

***Remember you are the expert when it comes to your own grief.***

We live in a culture full of advice, most of which falls on deaf ears when we are hurting most acutely. One of the hardest things to do is to gently let the people in our lives know when we don't want advice or help, but just want to feel what we feel.

Because most of us aren't too comfortable with the intensity of grief to start with, other people having ideas about our grief can take us off balance. Learning to say, "that may be true for you and it may be true for me later but right now..." can bypass others' need for us to just cheer up and move on.

What I have learned over decades of working with grieverers is that following our own way leads us forward. A majority of what I do with clients is to affirm that whatever they are going through, they have a right to it. We each have a right to do grief our own way.

I never worry about grief as long as it is, ever so slowly, moving. And what interrupts that movement more than anything is other peoples' judgements (or our own) that we are doing it wrong or for too long!

## ***Listen to the whispers in your heart.***

I like to say that grief knows what it's doing, and our job is to help it along. In my own grief, listening to the messages that seemed to move up from deep within me, without even a thought, have never gone wrong.

Most grievers struggle with negative thoughts in our minds; "I'll never..., I'll always..., I can't..., I have no future..." But these whispers from within almost always supply a sense of direction. Like the impulse I had to put my hands in the dirt or sing songs, following those inner suggestions always led to something good and meaningful and true.

Since most of us have no training, it can be difficult to hear the wisdom we have deep inside. At first, we may ask a question and get no answer. "What is it I need right now, what would comfort me, what would I value?" For many people, these open-ended questions lead to a blank where nothing arrives.

If we continue to ask the questions that don't have answers, there is a profound possibility that answers will begin to arrive. Allowing ourselves to be present to what we don't know leads us forward into new territory. And, if terrible loss is something we're unable to avoid, the changes that may come out of these times hold the promise of making meaning out of suffering.

Listening to our own inner whispers is the path that leads to our new future.

## ***Before we go.***

Even decades after the death of my love I am profoundly stunned by the changes her illness, death and my grief brought about in me. Who would I have been if I had never known her, or loved her, or lost her?

It is an unanswerable question and one I feel comfortable leaving right where it is. I am an intricate interplay between my genetic makeup, my experiences, and my capacity to continue to explore my own life. So are we all!

If we live long enough, losses are inevitable. What we must choose is whether to grow and change; whether we will (over whatever time it takes) find meaning in every experience, both beautiful and tragic. At first, we must accept that a loss may be so immense we will never recover. Then we are free to make of life whatever we're able to. And one day, sooner or much later, we may discover that life has become more than we ever imagined it could be.

Gratitude, in the end, has the potential to become a part of grief as long as we don't demand it happen on a timeline.

May you have all you need to hold you in your losses! And may you find your own peace in your own time.