



EXPLORATION

Grief

Readings

Grief does not expire
like a candle
or the beacon
on a lighthouse.
It simply changes
temperature.
Anthony Rapp

Photo by Tucà Bianca on Pexels

1. *They Are Not Helping*

by Megan Devine

Things like “Everything happens for a reason” and “You’ll become a stronger/kinder/more compassionate person because of this” brings out rage in grieving people. Nothing makes a person angrier than when they know they’re being insulted but 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 subtext in those statements about becoming a 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.

Source: *It’s OK That You’re Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn’t Understand* by Megan Devine

2. *Wisdom Of Grieving*

by Terry Patten

...Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s famous five stages of grief...denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—describe the process of psychologically responding to the prospect and reality of any catastrophic loss.

Denial can be said to be a defense against suffering and grieving. If reality is too painful, don’t face it. ...Turn off the new, doubt its veracity, change the channel.

...Anger easily becomes a habitual defense against feeling loss, sadness, and fear. There are very good reasons to be angry. Anger is the energy to change what needs to be changed. But healthy anger rises and falls, rather than becoming a chronic state, and it stays in touch with grief.

The next stage is bargaining, an attempt to regain lost equanimity, perhaps by imagining alternative scenarios that mitigate the sense of loss. Whereas true equanimity is based on opening up to all of reality, including its darkness, bargaining seeks to keep painful realities at bay. It is a more sophisticated form of denial.

The fourth stage is depression. When it is clear that heartbreaking loss cannot be avoided, the being is at least temporarily shattered.

...Mature, responsible adults are charged with staying intelligently related to the realities of our lives. But that requires us to pass through all the harrowing stages of grief into acceptance.

True acceptance recognizes the reality of our situation and accepts responsibility to arrive in basic equanimity and a capacity to act. We find a way to choose life.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2287>

3. *Kaddish for Uncle Manny*

An instance of meaningful ritual was portrayed in an episode of *Northern Exposure*, a television series in the 1990s set in a small town in Alaska. Joel Fleischman’s uncle had died. Because his uncle had been so important in his life, Joel, a doctor, wanted to honor him by saying *Kaddish*, which is a prayer said by mourner’s. Talmudic law requires a minyan for this observance, which consists of ten adult males over the age of thirteen. Newspaper owner and businessman Maurice Minnifield organized the townsfolk to scour Alaska to find nine other Jews and bring them to Cicely to form a minyan. As one after another Jew is located and brought to town, Joel became increasingly distressed. Although he would be able to satisfy the letter of the law, the spirit of the law was lost because these people were strangers to Joel and had no appreciation for him or his uncle, no understanding of his love or his grief. In the end, the search was disbanded. Joel called the townspeople together to explain how meaningless the ritual would have been if shared with strangers, even though they were Jewish. He realized that the spirit of the law compelled him to share the ritual with his own community, that is, with the people of Cicely, Alaska. With that, he proceeded to recite the *Kaddish*.

Source: Touchstones

4. *More Meaning Than You Know* by Dean Koontz

Grief can destroy you—or focus you. You can decide a relationship was all for nothing if it had to end in death, and you alone. OR you can realize that every moment of it had more meaning than you dared to recognize at the time, so much meaning it scared you, so you just lived, just took for granted the love and laughter of each day, and didn’t allow yourself to consider the sacredness of it.



Photo by Carlos Felipe Ramirez Mesa on Unsplash

But when it's over and you're alone, you begin to see that it wasn't just a movie and a dinner together, not just watching sunsets together, not just scrubbing a floor or washing dishes together or worrying over a high electric bill. It was everything, it was the why of life, every event and precious moment of it. The answer to the mystery of existence is the love you shared sometimes so imperfectly, and when the loss wakes you to the deeper beauty of it, to the sanctity of it, you can't get off your knees for a long time, you're driven to your knees not by the weight of the loss but by gratitude for what preceded the loss. And the ache is always there, but one day not the emptiness, because to nurture the emptiness, to take solace in it, is to disrespect the gift of life."

Source: *Odd Hours* by Dean Koontz

5. *Take Time to Feel to Heal* by Russell Kennedy

Have you ever tried to think differently than how your body feels? You can do it for a while, but in general, it's like Sisyphus endlessly pushing a rock up an incline.

...Healing trauma has more to do with embracing the feeling in the body than holding on to the thoughts of the mind. Human beings are being driven into their heads as a way of avoiding emotion, especially grief.

Grief is constantly pushed aside in our society. So much of our psychopathology is due to unresolved grief over the losses we've sustained, especially in childhood. It is not so much grief over deaths of loved ones (although that is certainly a significant cause) as grief over a parental divorce, childhood abuse, neglect, or other great losses.

There are plenty of therapists who will help you with those losses, but how many let you sit in it without the need to compulsively add an explanation?

... "Spiritual Bypassing" was a

term coined in the 1980s by Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist John Welwood. He explains it as a "Tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks."

Cognitive Bypassing is the practice of avoiding feelings by detouring into cognitive ideas or beliefs.

...Some emotions need to be left alone and felt.

Sure, understanding the source of your grief and trauma is important, but there must be some time to simply sit with it and feel it without automatically and compulsively adding thought to it.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2528>

6. *The Grief Liberation Front* by Jerusha Hull McCormack

In becoming bereaved, you will find you have inadvertently joined an underground organization.

The ...invisible sufferers ...who have lost someone through any manner of catastrophes. ...In our "happy" society, it is simply more comfortable and convenient that we not be reminded of them.

Nobody seeks to be a member of this club.... What counts now is ... [asserting] your rights to grieve in a manner, and at a time, which is appropriate to you....

- ◆ You have a right to remain silent.
- ◆ You have a right to cry, anytime and anywhere.
- ◆ You have a right to express your grief in ways that seem appropriate to you.
- ◆ You have a right to talk about your dead spouse/child/sibling/parent/friend as often as you would wish and on whatever occasions you wish to do so.
- ◆ You have a right to negotiate for time out from the usual schedules and obligations, so that you may honor your grief — and heal.
- ◆ You have a right to complete your grieving in your own time and in your own way, without being subject to the 'schedules' and expectations of others.

- ◆ You have a right to assert the centrality of the experience of grieving, within your own life and as it affects the lives of others.

...Perhaps the greatest burden that the grieving carry is that of educating others to the meaning of grief—which is nothing less than educating them to the meaning of their own eventual death.

...Every loss is unique. Each person grieves in his or her own way. Perhaps nothing draws as deeply on individual creativity as grief does.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/15375>

7. *The Liminal Space* by Heather Platt

What do you do when a friend has lost a child and you can't ease their grief? Or when your partner loses her job and you can't resolve it for her?

...Though you feel invested..., the outcome ...is outside of your responsibility and control.

The best that you can do is hold space for the people involved.

It all begins in the liminal space...

...In liminal space we are between identities, between who we once were and who we are becoming, like the chrysalis stage between caterpillar and butterfly.

Grief, transition, loss, birth, divorce, trauma, job loss, bankruptcy, marriage, betrayal, relocation, graduation, conflict — nearly every human experience has within it some element of liminal space. The liminal space is a space of open-heartedness, when we are raw, vulnerable, and exposed. In order to survive without further wounding, we need a container that will hold us with gentleness and strength, without short-circuiting the process or forcing us into the wrong outcome.

Holding space isn't easy and it can make us feel powerless. We want to fix things, give good advice, control the outcome, or avoid the conversation all together.

In order to hold space for others in our lives, we have to learn to hold space for ourselves first.

...Holding space is what we do in

the liminal space when we walk alongside another person (or ourselves) on a journey without judging, fixing, belittling, or shaping the outcome. While supporting their boundaries and protecting our own, we offer unconditional support, compassion, and gentle guidance.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2346>

Wisdom Story

Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed, adapted

The story is told of Kisa Gotami, a young woman who married and gave birth to a beautiful baby. Misfortune came her way when the baby became seriously ill and died. Kisa Gotami was grief-stricken. She refused to believe that this death was final. Instead, she carried the body throughout the village asking anyone and everyone to bring her child back to life.

The villagers treated her with great sympathy, yet told her that it was best to accept what had happened, hold a funeral, and enter into a time of mourning for her child. Kisa Gotami could not hear what they were saying. All she wanted was for her child to wake up. Finally, an elder took pity on her and told her that she should approach the Buddha with her request.

She hurried to the Buddha's dwelling and asked for his help. The Buddha told her, "Kisa Gotami, I can bring your child back to life, but to do so I need you to bring me a mustard seed from the household of a family who has never lost a loved one to death, who has never experienced grief.

Overjoyed by the Buddha's words, Kisa Gotami began going from one house after another in the village to find a mustard seed. At the first house, a woman offered to give her some mustard seeds. When Kisa Gotami asked if she had ever lost a family member to death, the woman began weeping. She told Kisa Gotami that her grandfather had died two months earlier. At the second house, Kisa Gotami learned of the death of a husband. At the third house, they told her stories of a beloved aunt who had died a year ago. Un-

deterred, Kisa Gotami continued her search, but at every house there were stories of death and grief. Slowly, Kisa Gotami understood that everyone had experienced the death of a loved one and that they had grieved the loss. Everyone. Despite her own grief, she was deeply moved by all that she had been told.

She returned to her home without a mustard seed. Kisa Gotami buried her child in the forest, and remained at the grave for two days weeping in sorrow. She finally understood the reality of impermanence. Filled with compassion, Kisa Gotami arose, returned to the Buddha, and became his faithful follower.

Source: Touchstones

Snippets

"I was tired of well-meaning folks, telling me it was time I got over being heartbroke. When somebody tells you that, a little bell ought to ding in your mind. Some people don't know grief from garlic grits. There's somethings a body ain't meant to get over. No I'm not suggesting you wallow in sorrow, or let it drag on; no I am just saying it never really goes away. (A death in the family) is like having a pile of rocks dumped in your front yard. Every day you walk out and see them rocks. They're sharp and ugly and heavy. You just learn to live around them the best way you can. Some people plant moss or ivy; some leave it be. Some folks take the rocks one by one, and build a wall."

Michael Lee West

"Another facet of our aversion to grief is fear. Hundreds of times in my practice as a therapist, I have heard how fearful people are of dropping into the well of grief. The most frequent comment is "If I go there, I'll never return." What I found myself saying one day was rather surprising. "If you don't go there, you'll never return." It seems that our wholesale abandonment of this core emotion has cost us dearly, pressed us toward the surface of our lives. We live superficial lives and feel the gnawing ache of something missing. If we are to return to the richly textured life of soul and to participation with the soul of the



Grief offers a wild alchemy that transmutes suffering into fertile ground. Francis Weller

Photo by ArtActiveArt on Pixabay

world, we must pass through the intense region of grief and sorrow."

Francis Weller

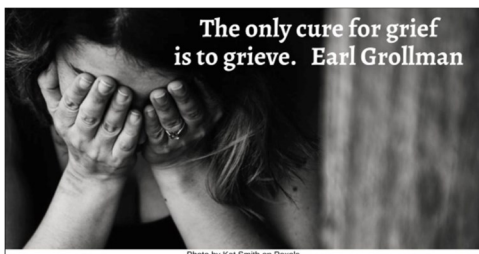
"Every widow wakes one morning, perhaps after years of pure and unwavering grieving, to realize she slept a good night's sleep and will be able to eat breakfast, and doesn't hear her husband's ghost all the time, but only some of the time. Her grief is replaced with a useful sadness. Every parent who loses a child finds a way to laugh again. The timbre begins to fade. The edge dulls. The hurt lessens. Every love is carved from loss. Mine was. Yours is. Your great-great-great-grandchildren's will be. But we learn to live in that love."

Jonathan Safran Foer

"The lotus is the most beautiful flower, whose petals open one by one. But it will only grow in the mud. In order to grow and gain wisdom, first you must have the mud—the obstacles of life and its suffering. ... The mud speaks of the common ground that humans share, no matter what our stations in life. ... Whether we have it all or we have nothing, we are all faced with the same obstacles: sadness, loss, illness, dying and death. If we are to strive as human beings to gain more wisdom, more kindness and more compassion, we must have the intention to grow as a lotus and open each petal one by one."

Goldie Hawn

"Heartbreak comes with the territory called being human. When love and trust fail us, when what once brought meaning goes dry, when a dream drifts out of reach, a devastating disease strikes, or someone precious to us dies, our hearts break and we suffer—but there are two quite different ways for the heart to break. There's the brittle heart that breaks apart into a thousand shards, a heart that takes us down as it explodes.... Then there's the supple



heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life.” *Parker Palmer* “Grief reunites you with what you’ve lost. It’s a merging; you go with the loved thing or person that’s going away. You follow it as far as you can go. But finally, the grief goes away and you phase back into the world. Without him. And you can accept that. What the hell choice is there? You cry, you continue to cry, because you don’t ever completely come back from where you went with him—a fragment broken off your pulsing, pumping heart is there still. A cut that never heals. And if, when it happens to you over and over again in life, too much of your heart does finally go away, then you can’t feel grief any more. And then you yourself are ready to die. You’ll walk up the inclined ladder and someone else will remain behind grieving for you.” *Philip K. Dick*

“But you can’t get to any of these truths by sitting in a field smiling beatifically, avoiding your anger and damage and grief. Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. We don’t have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not go in to. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in—then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home.” *Anne Lamott*

“Sometimes when the bottom falls out of life, we are set free. We attain enlightenment, or an enlightenment of sorts: some perspective, some clarity, some sense of reality, some sense of dealing with things as they are, some relief from

something profound has happened. When that profound thing happens, we can expect to go through a process, sometimes a long process, a painful or at least uncomfortable process, in which we slowly let go of something and slowly learn how to live again. This is true no matter what we lose: a loved one, a work, a hope, a vision, an image of ourselves, a part of ourselves. Loss makes artists of us all as we weave new patterns into the fabric of our lives.”

Rev. Greta Crosby

“We are all damaged. We have all been hurt. We have all had to learn painful lessons. We are all recovering from some mistake, loss, betrayal, abuse, injustice or misfortune. All of life is a process of recovery that never ends. We each must find ways to accept and move through the pain and to pick ourselves back up. For each pang of grief, depression, doubt or despair there is an inverse toward renewal coming to you in time. Each tragedy is an announcement that some good will indeed come in time. Be patient with yourself.”

Bryant McGill

“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. Survival in grief, even eventually building a new life alongside grief, comes with the willingness to bear witness, both to yourself and to the others who find themselves inside this life they didn’t see coming. Together, we create real hope for ourselves and for one another. We need each other to survive.”

Megan Devine

“For the most part, grief is not a problem to be solved, not a condition to be medicated, but a deep encounter with an essential experience of being human. Grief becomes problematic when the conditions needed to help us work with

grief are absent. For example, when we are forced to carry our sorrow in isolation, or when the time needed to fully metabolize the nutrients of a particular loss is denied, and we are pressured to return to “normal” too soon. We are told to “get on with it” and “get over it.” The lack of courtesy and compassion surrounding grief is astonishing, reflecting an underlying fear and mistrust of this basic human experience.”

Francis Weller

Questions

1. In reading #1, Megan Devine focuses on the words that people say in response to a person’s grief that hurt rather than help. Has this ever happened to you? If yes, what was its effect on you? Since this happens often, do you understand why? Devine’s concern is that somehow people think that grief makes a person realize what is “truly important in life” when many things contribute to that realization. In your experience, what has helped you recognize what is “truly important in life?”
2. In reading #2, Terry Patten recounts Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. How do you think that stages help people understand grief? How might they get in the way? What helps in eventually arriving at acceptance? What gets in the way? Is acceptance more partial than final? Which? Why? Patten concludes, “find a way to choose life.” Is this the goal of grief? Why or why not?
3. In reading #3, in an episode of *Northern Exposure*, Joel Fleischman has people in Cicely, Alaska, try to find nine Jews to join with Fleischman to form a minyan so he can honor his uncle Manny by saying *Kaddish*, the mourner’s prayer. Several Jewish men are identified and brought to town, but Fleischman realizes that in trying to abide by the letter of the law, he is failing the spirit of the law. In the end, he forms a minyan with Cicely’s people, who make up his community. In grief, what communities could you/would you turn to for support and comfort? Why these? Are there some groups from whom you would not seek understanding or help?



Grief is like a moving river, it's always changing.
Michelle Williams

Photo by 12019 on Pixabay

Why?

4. In reading #4, Dean Koontz writes, "Grief can destroy you—or focus you." Do you agree? Why or why not? He contends that the death of a loved one can help reveal "the why of life." How might this be true? In this vein, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." What are some of the whys of life for you? How have these whys helped you navigate some of the "hows" of life? Koontz concludes, relative to grief, that "the ache is always there, but one day, not the emptiness..." Do you agree? Why or why not? For Koontz, the emptiness is replaced by the "gratitude for what preceded the loss." What do you now hold as gratitude when you consider loved ones lost? He concludes, "to nurture the emptiness, to take solace in it, is to disrespect the gift of life." Do some people get stuck in the emptiness of the loss? If yes, why do you think this happens?

5. In reading #5, Russell Kennedy is concerned about how grieving gets derailed by fleeing how we feel to take refuge in our thoughts. He writes, "Some emotions need to be left alone and felt." What emotions would you put in this category? Why? Considering the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, which stages seem to be feeling-based and which seem to be thinking-based? Further, which appears to facilitate grief and which might get in the way? Why?

6. In reading #6, Jerusha Hull McCormack suggests that those grieving often become part of an underground organization, "the Grief Liberation Front," to liberate their grief from the expectations of people who have not experienced grief. The goal is to demand their rights to "grieve in a manner and at a time" that serves their needs. What rights do you feel that people who are grieving should have? In addition, McCormack

writes that grieving people carry the burden "of educating others to the meaning of grief." How have you learned about grieving? From others? From your own experience? What was the difference in your learning between the two?

7. In reading #7, Heather Platt writes that while your ability to support a person in grief is limited, "you can ...hold space for ...people" who are grieving. Platt compares this "liminal space" to "the chrysalis stage between caterpillar and butterfly." How might grief be like the chrysalis stage? As another person grieves, what is hidden from our view? What changes in a person might grief create? For Platt, "nearly every human experience has within it some element of liminal space." When have you been in a liminal space in terms of growth, change, illness, loss, etc.? She writes, "The liminal space is a space of open-heartedness, when we are raw, vulnerable, and exposed." Do you agree? Why or why not? Instead of "judging, fixing, belittling, or shaping the outcome," Platt asks that "we offer unconditional support, compassion, and gentle guidance." Why do people default to the latter? Is "fixing" our go-to strategy when we feel powerless? Have you held liminal space for yourself in the face of life's challenges? For others? How? With what result?

The following questions are related to the Snippets

8. Michael Lee West writes, "Some people don't know grief from garlic grits." Is this true? Why? He compares death to "a pile of rocks dumped in your front yard" that you must confront daily. He continues, "Some people plant moss or ivy; some leave it be. Some ... build a wall." What did you/would you do? Why? Would different losses result in different actions?

9. Francis Weller writes that a "facet of our aversion to grief is fear." What causes people to fear their grief? What causes others to fear another person's grief? He compares fear to falling into a well. Dark. Bottomless. Unknown. And yet, as he writes, the only way out is "through the intense region of grief and sorrow." If the death of a loved one is a wound to the soul, how might the fail-

ure to grieve and thus heal, affect a person over the long term?

10. Jonathan Safran Foer writes that eventually, "grief is replaced with a useful sadness." What do you think he means by this? He concludes, "Every love is carved from loss. ...But we learn to live in that love." How are love and loss connected? While love will make loss more intense, can it also eventually help heal the experience of loss?

11. Goldie Hawn reminds us that the beautiful lotus flower grows in mud.

What is the mud of your life made of? What are the petals of your life? How are your petals connected to the mud?

12. Parker Palmer writes, "Heartbreak comes with the territory called being human," "but there are two quite different ways for the heart to break." The brittle heart breaks apart into a thousand pieces while the supple heart breaks open to hold more love. In this metaphor, what makes a heart brittle? Supple? Palmer concludes, "Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life." So how can we hold suffering rather than being broken by it?

13. Philip Dick suggests that the consequence of grieving, again and again, is to prepare us for our own death? Do you agree? Why or why not? Can "good" grief help us love life more? How? Can loving life more help prepare us for death? Why or why not? Has your love of life changed throughout your life? How? Why?

14. Anne Lamott writes, "Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth." How might this be true? She continues, "We don't have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not to go into." But, per Goldie Hawn, this is a different kind of mud. So how might Lamott's approach help us deal with our grief?

15. Greta Crosby writes about the bottom falling out of life. Has that happened to you? As a result, she writes, "We attain enlightenment, or an enlightenment of sorts: some perspective, some clarity, some sense of reality, some sense of dealing with things as they are, some relief from anxiety and perplexity

because something profound has happened.” What profound things have happened to you? How did you respond? Crosby concludes, “Loss makes artists of us all as we weave new patterns into the fabric of our lives.” Has loss forced you to become an artist? What “weaving” did you do?

16. Bryant McGill writes, “We have all been hurt,” and therefore, “All of life is a process of recovery that never ends.” Does this make sense, or is he overstating the reality? Or is it true for some and not for others? Despite this somewhat dark view, he believes these negative experiences have an inverse that results in renewal. Have you had experiences of renewal? How did they affect you? Were they related to a painful or negative experience?

17. Megan Devine writes that in loss, “You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it.” How might that affect a person? Although we seem to live in a “fix it” society, Devine writes, “Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.” Does this make sense? Why or why not? Devine suggests that carrying and bearing witness to grief can lead to survival. She concludes, “We need each other to survive.” In your experience, how do people survive grief?

18. Francis Weller writes, “For the most part, grief is not a problem to be solved, not a condition to be medicated, but a deep encounter with an essential experience of being human.” In what ways is grief essential? Do, as Weller suggests, people “fear and mistrust” grief? Why or why not? What are the consequences of grief being interrupted by being “told to ‘get on with it’ and ‘get over it?’” Are these reactions a response to grief or anxiety about death? How, at least in our congregations, might we promote courtesy and compassion?

Music isn't just a pleasure, a transient satisfaction. It's a need, a deep hunger; and when the music is right, it's joy. Love. A foretaste of heaven. A comfort in grief. Orson Scott Card



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