The Power of ‘And’: How One Word Changed the Way I Grieve

By Rachel Whalen

Five weeks after Dorothy died, my nephew was born. I remember going to our weekly therapy session and sharing this news with our therapist. Of course, she wanted to know how I was feeling about his arrival. I replied that I was so happy that he was safely here but I was also happy that he lived across the country so I didn’t have to see him yet. “And,” she replied. I looked at her puzzled. She continued, “And. You are happy he is here AND you are happy that you don't have to see him right now. Rachel, you don’t have to choose.”

After we left our session that day, I couldn’t stop thinking about that one little word. Ever since Dorothy’s death, I had found myself trying to separate my reemerging feelings of happiness from the steady depression I was in. Much like a child trying to keep their peas from touching their mashed potatoes, I wanted my feelings of devastation to be untouched by any glimmers of joy I might be feeling. I didn’t think it was possible for them to co-exist. Three simple letters changed that.

I began testing out this powerful little word. Whenever I had been feeling differing emotions, I had used the word ‘but’ to keep them distant. What if I used ‘and’ to bring them together?

It’s a beautiful day outside AND I just can’t face the world today.

That new picture of my nephew is so adorable AND it reminds me of how much I miss Dorothy.

I’m looking forward to seeing my family AND I’m anxious to be around them.

I want to talk about Dorothy AND I’m nervous about what others will have to say about her.

‘And’ was slowly changing my world. That one word was giving me the freedom to experience the storm of emotions that had been quietly raging inside. I didn’t have to wait for each feeling to pass over me completely, I could start feeling them in connection. Before ‘and’ there had been so much guilt about the happiness that was sneaking it way back into my life. Now, I had permission to let happiness start to color the darkness of my grief.

Over the next weeks and months, I exercised the power of ‘and.’ With the recent birth of my nephew, I found many opportunities to use my new magic word.
I'm so happy that my sister-in-law is a mother AND I wish that was me.

I want to send my nephew this cute new outfit AND I wish I could be buying clothes for my own child instead.

I want to be included in my nephew's life AND sometimes it's just too hard.

I'm so excited to be an aunt AND I'm so worried that Dorothy is going to be forgotten.

It wasn't a solution or a remedy, but it was a tool. The burden of Dorothy's death was a heavy one. I was struggling under the weight of the emotions I had been trying to ignore and I needed help. My grief for Dorothy was never going away, but I needed something to help me carry the load throughout my life. Without a tool, I was going to be crushed. 'And' helped alleviate some of the pressure. I felt like I could breathe again. I felt like I was remembering how to live AND love.

THE SACRED TASK

By Lexi Behrndt

Sometimes, life is about perspective, about the lens with which we view our stories and our circumstances.

In the world of parents who have outlived their children, we have to learn quickly about perspective. In order to truly keep living after the breath has left our children's lungs, we are forced to choose the lens with which we'll see their life, their story, and our lives and our stories when everything is seemingly broken.

This world of parents who have outlived their children— it's both a heartbreaking and extraordinary world. In it, you are in the presence of warriors, of men and women who have been given one of the most sacred tasks and missions. You are in the presence of men and women who were chosen, not chosen for pain, but chosen to be the only people in the world to parent their precious children. Parenthood, in and of itself, is a sacred task. It's true. But parenting a child, parenting children, when you can no longer reach out and touch their faces, hold them in your arms, watch them grow, that is one of the greatest, most sacred tasks you can be given.

Out of every person in this world, you were chosen to be their parent. Out of every person in this world, you are the ones who were chosen to know them, better than anyone, to be theirs, to have your souls tied together for eternity. Out of every person in this world, it was you, it is you, and it always will be you.

We can choose to view our circumstances strictly through the lens of sorrow, of sadness, of pain, or we can look at it through a different lens, one that acknowledges the pain but doesn't see exclusively through it. It notices the broken places, but it holds fiercely to hope. It aches and it hurts at times, but it holds ever more tightly to purpose, to good, to redemption.

You, your children, their stories did not end. They continue to be written every single day that breath is held in your lungs. This is your sacred task.

Their story is not over. We carry them. But listen here: your story, my story, our stories are not over either. No matter how much you wished you could have stopped breathing when the breath left their lungs, no matter how hopeless your life seems, no matter how deep down in the pit anxiety or depression or PTSD have taken you. No matter how weak, how small, how fragile you may feel, you are not.
You are brave. You are fierce. You have been given a sacred task, and you are the person for the job. Your story is far, far, far from over.

Few people in this world meet someone who so intricately and radically changes their lives simply by entering it. Few people have their lives split into such a powerful before and after. And while it may be so easy to look at our before and afters through the lens of deep pain and sorrow, you have been given a sacred gift: to know a love so pure, so raw, that it extends across world, through time, and death cannot even touch it. You’ve been given a sacred gift, a second chance, an invitation to never be the same from this point forward simply because they existed, you were chosen to be theirs, and you are tied together, eternally, your love a force greater than life itself.

You are theirs. They are yours. For eternity. Press on.

SIBLING LOSS

Will I Ever Get Over This Grief?

Nearly four years after the death of her sister, a reader says her pain has only become more pronounced.

By Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond
Aug. 21, 2018

Dear Sugars,

My sister died of a rare and aggressive disease. She was sick for 10 years, but the disease progressed quickly in the end and I never really got to say goodbye to her. By then, she couldn’t speak, so I’m not sure if she understood what we were saying to her. She was my best friend and the best person I’ll ever know.

It’s been nearly four years since she died, and I’m still completely grief stricken. I miss her every day and waves of intense sadness strike often, even when I’m at work or out with friends. I cry myself to sleep most nights. I’ve seen two therapists, but it hasn’t helped because there’s nothing I can do to change my problem. My sister is gone.

I have good parents and friends, but it isn’t enough. There’s a hole in my heart. My grief hasn’t lessened or gotten easier to deal with over the years, it’s only become stronger and harder. Sometimes I pretend my sister is still alive and I call and text her even though her phone is no longer in service. I’m not suicidal, but I honestly don’t know how to continue on in this way. Everything feels wrong. My heart aches. Will things ever get better?

Stuck in Sadness

Cheryl Strayed: I’m sorry for your loss, Stuck. I know precisely what you mean when you say that nothing can be done to change your problem, because the only thing that would change it would be for your sister to be alive again. There’s a stark truth in that. You’ll never stop being sad your sister died. You’ll always want her back. But the other stark truth is that you have to find a way to thrive again, even if your heart aches while doing it. In the years after my mother died, I had to accept the upsetting reality that I’d never get her back. You’d think that would have been clear from the moment she was gone — and of course, in a rational sense, it was — but grief isn’t rational. I think you haven’t truly let go of the idea that if you love and grieve your sister hard enough, she’ll be given back to you. You’re stuck in your sadness because it’s better than being stuck with the idea that you’ll have to live the rest of your life without her.
Steve Almond: You don’t specify this in your letter, but I sense that your sister died relatively young, in her prime, and the 10 years she was sick constituted a significant portion of her lifetime. Part of your struggle, therefore, beyond having to live without your sister, is living with the feeling that you were the lucky sister, the healthy one. My hunch is that you’ve felt intense guilt about that for a long time, especially given your intimacy. So maybe the problem isn’t just that your sister is gone, Stuck, but that you’re still here. Guilt often takes the form of doomed loyalty: If you allow yourself to take pleasure in life that means you’re moving on, which is a betrayal of your sister. This may be why you feel these waves sadness when you’re at work or with friends — because you’re at the greatest risk of finding meaning and joy in these settings. It’s as if your guilt has installed an alarm system of sorrow. I wonder if it might help to think a bit more about what your sister would have wanted for you. Would she have wanted you to cling to her loss so ardently that you feel stuck? Or would she have wanted you to embrace life?

CS: What Steve and I know without having met your sister is that she surely wanted you to embrace life — even if that life is one that includes profound loss. This is why it’s so important to practice acceptance. Acceptance allows us to stop resisting what’s true — in your case, Stuck, that you’re tremendously sad that your sister died. What if you didn’t try to change that? What if you simply accepted that right now deep sorrow is your response to the loss of someone who was essential to you? What if you decided that the hole in your heart isn’t evidence that you’re stuck, but rather that your sister’s horrible death blew your life apart? What if you interpreted your grief not only as proof of your loss, but the power of your love? Your question about whether things will “get better” speaks directly to the backward values many of us have internalized about loss — that to heal we must turn away from sorrow and avoid negative emotions and at least appear to be moving on. But the way we truly move on isn’t to unburden ourselves from the weight of our grief; it’s to learn how to bear it and eventually carry it. It doesn’t happen in a day or a year. It happens over time. And it happens only after we accept that it can.

SA: The only honest answer we can give to your ultimate question (“Will things ever get better?”) is to turn it back on you. Will things ever get better, Stuck? Your sister’s illness and untimely death were events nobody could control. As Cheryl suggests, you will have to bear the weight of that loss for the rest of your life. But you do get to decide how to carry that weight. Can it be a form of ballast rather than a millstone? That’s what your sister was to you when she was alive. In a sense, she’s still alive, which is why you talk to her. Don’t stop doing that. Instead, ask her for help in answering the questions that have lodged so painfully in your heart. Is it O.K. that I survived? Can I let myself off the hook? Can I enjoy my life without letting you go? Listen to her answers, Stuck. I sense they’ll be the right ones. Emerging from a period of grieving doesn’t mean that you pitch grief overboard. It means, simply, that you create the space for a truth of equal weight: You aren’t betraying your beloved sister’s death by remaining fiercely, even joyously, alive — you’re honoring her life.

Hi, my name is Kjerstin Davies and my husband and I recently launched a charity in honor of our son. The charity provides a special gift or experience to a child who loses a sibling. We are trying to reach friends and family members who may know someone who is affected by this devastating loss. That person can fill out a referral form and then we create a gift or experience based on the child’s interests. We’ve already given away 16 gifts/experiences to children and are trying to continue our momentum. When our son passed away, we found that when others gave him gifts and special experiences it helped him feel loved in the midst of his loss. It created some new, positive memories. We’re not trying to take away anyone’s pain, we just hope that our gifts can fill some mental space with something other than sorrow.

Our website www.charliesguys.org and our Facebook page is “Charlie’s Guys”.

Providing bereaved siblings with special experiences and gifts so they feel loved and not forgotten.
In the early days I didn’t know how I was ever going to go on.

The plans for my life, our life together were shattered and just like that ::poof:: all those hopes and dreams were lost.

It took lots of soul searching, introspection, honesty, creativity, and vulnerability to come out of the depression and realize that the road didn’t actually end, it was just curving in a different direction.

Sometimes I do still wonder who I would be if she was here.

Especially on the days where I run into old friends at the mall, and they unknowingly ask where my other older daughter is. <<<she’s dead>>>

Those are the moments where I usually reply, “Oh I only have this one (our rainbow).” and then pause and ask myself “If only”.

Would life be better, or worse. Would I be a different kind of mom or live a different kind of life. Would we live in this house? Have this dog? Would I have a different job? Or car? Would I be happier? As grateful? As anxious?

Fortunately, these days the internal questions land a lot softer. With the passage of time, and designated space made for healing I’ve come to the conclusion that the loss of our Bella has enriched my life and I’m better because of it.

But, If you’re still in that raw, open, and super vulnerable place of depression and sadness I want to offer up my biggest virtual hug and encourage you to keep taking steps around that bend to rediscover who you are after your loss(es).

Because at the end of the day, joy is a choice, and it’s up to you to find it.

One of the best ways I’ve found to rediscover my happiness is through both photography and the writing process. Using my imagination and creativity and introspection as a tool for healing.

Today I’d like you to grab a pen and paper. Set a timer for 10 minutes, and pick from one of the 35 prompts below. Pick the one that is speaking to you the most right now Write. This process might bring up ‘stuff’ but let all the feelings flow. It’s only 10 minutes. Be honest. Be raw. Be real. Be you. You might even surprise yourself with the answers.

1) What brings you the most joy in life?
2) What is something that really bugs you?
3) What is something that makes you really angry?
4) What is your favorite time of day?
5) What is your most indispensable possession?
6) What is something you do well?
7) What is something you dislike about yourself?
8) What is the best advice you ever received?
9) Describe the perfect vacation.
10) What do you think about when you can’t sleep?
11) What do you think makes a good friend?
12) What do you think makes a happy family?
13) What things do you think are beautiful?
14) What do you think your friends say to each other when you’re not around?
15) What do you like most about yourself?
16) What do you like to do in your free time?
17) What makes your feel safe?
18) What makes you laugh?
19) What would you invent to make life better?
20) What talents do you have?
21) How do you feel on a warm sunny day?
22) How do you feel during a thunderstorm?
23) I wish I could see... because...
24) I wish I never... because...
25) I wish I could go to... because...
26) I wish I could give... because...
27) I wish I could learn... because...
28) When are you happiest?
29) When do you feel proud?
30) What quality do you like best about yourself?
31) What makes your best friend your best friend?
32) What is something you are pessimistic about?
33) What is something you are optimistic about?
34) Describe your favorite room in your home. Why is this your favorite?
35) Describe something that makes you feel peaceful.

It’s my hope that something here might just be the spark that leads you around the corner and back to yourself. To that new version of you. One who can see the light at the end of the tunnel and go after it.

ASK DR. NIEMEYER

Robert A. Neimeyer, Ph.D. is one of the foremost authorities on grief and bereavement. He is a Professor of Psychology at University of Memphis where he also maintains an active clinical practice. He has published 27 books, including Techniques of Grief Therapy: Creative Practices for Counseling the Bereaved and Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning. He also serves as Editor of the journal Death Studies. The author of over 400 articles and book chapters, and a frequent workshop presenter, he is currently working to advance a more adequate theory of grieving as a meaning-making process. Dr. Neimeyer served as President of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) and Chair of the International Work Group for Death, Dying & Bereavement.

Dear Dr. Neimeyer,
I lost my daughter, a 12-year-old, Melissa three weeks ago today. Earlier this summer she was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder but was in good health—at least we thought. But when she got her first treatment, within a week she was in the CVICU and then we had to make the heart-wrenching decision to take her off the machines two weeks later, because her heart was severely damaged. My question is this: I have read about the steps of grieving, but I am so all over the place. I feel guilty, like I failed her as a Mom. I'm sad, and have difficulty eating and sleeping. Is this normal for sudden loss and since it just happened? I do not even know what to do or how to grieve. I'm just so confused!
Felicia

Dear Felicia,
First, throw out everything you’ve read about “the steps of grieving.” Your steps will be your own, not the idealized progression that begins with denial, advances to bargaining, shifts to anger, collapses into depression, and then progresses toward acceptance. As you say, you “are all over the place,” and the map you might draw of your grief journey will surely contain many strong emotions (like guilt, but also yearning, anxiety, despair, and more), all in a confusing and unstable tumult of feelings. Your world has been violated, your daughter tragically taken from you, and all others who love her. Profound grief is an appropriate response to such a loss.

So, the immediate question is what you need now to weather this hurricane-force storm of anguish. To begin with, very basic self-care may be an early priority: eating even when you don’t feel like it, getting some temporary help from your doctor to get some restorative nightly sleep, striving to find your way back to basic routines. In addition, many parents in the throes of anguish over losing a child find solace in one another’s company, as they wrestle with similar questions and feelings, and seek the companionship of the only people who really “get it”—one another. Groups like The Compassionate Friends, Bereaved Parents of the USA, and similar mutual support groups that can be found readily on the Internet can provide a great deal of tangible assistance and information that can reduce the confusion and sense of aloneness that mothers and fathers contend with this uniquely hard loss face. And if you find after some months that you seem to be heading in the wrong direction, in the sense of falling apart rather than gradually pulling yourself together, or if family relationships begin to suffer serious damage as a result of different ways of coping, then these same bereaved parents are often a good source of referral information to mental health professionals who can help you with the hard challenges of making sense of this tragedy and your life in its aftermath.

Above all, remember that you did not rob Melissa of the life she deserved; a rare and random medical condition did that. Your task now is to carry on for your family and for her, keeping her close in a heart that mends and enlarges to contain both life and loss, while still making a place for her.
WEBSITE DONATIONS
Slawson, Brenda ~ In Memory of Matthew D. Slawson
Singer, Susan ~ In Memory of Alex
Harry Singer
Flowers, Phyllis ~ In Memory of my son
John Flowers
Lodd, Shubhangi ~ In Memory of Ria
Lodd
Mancuso, Donna ~ In Memory of Bryan
Edward Mancuso
Immersi, Donna ~ In Memory of my son
Jerry
Lindholm, Bruce ~ In Memory of Alexander Nels Lindholm
Felix, Bluma ~ In Memory of my son
Levi Felix
Morris, Joan and Michael ~ In Memory of Michael Corrigan
Bevington, Kay and Rodney ~ Alive
Alone
Sieps, Roger ~ In Memory of Duane
Crisp Family
Johnson, Larry and Letitia ~ In Memory of Duane
Crisp
Norman, Jodi and Kelly Norman ~ In Memory of Gordon Grinaker
Norman, Jodi and Kelly Norman ~ In Memory of Barbara Blanchard ~
(BPUSA Tampa Chapter)
Dalia Gonzalez
Anonymous
Anonymous

S. KENT ROCKWELL FOUNDATION

IN MEMORY OF AL SANZA
Beloved husband of Cheryl Sanza (BPUSA Treasurer)
Horsham, Arthur and Anne
Piazza, Emanuel and Kathleen
Boenig, Elizabeth
Toffel, Gale
Maiden, Diane
Allar, William and Andrea
Maiden, Victoria
Kujawski, Paula and Evan
Moore, Francis and Dara
Norman, Jodi and Kelly Norman
Hayes, Geraldine and Edward

IN MEMORY OF THOMAS D. MAHAR
BPUSA Legal Advisor and
Beloved husband of Nancy Mahar
Rottkamp, Cyril
Bloese, Robert & Nancy
Contelmo, Nicholas and Christina
Wall, Thomas and Pegeen
Whitney, Richard and Ethel
Burmeister, Mary and Richard
Kudzia, John and Deborah
Sawall, Elisa & Bill
Husted, Gerry & Mimi
Gunn, David and Bethann
Kasin, Ann
Gallant, Laura
Brauer, Carolyn
Sutherland, Danny
Ferenz, David
Devine, Jack and Beth
Murphy, Donald and Suzanne
Feron, Mary
Mcintyre, William
Pedersen, Thomas and Charlotte
Nelson, James
Mangold, Harold and Marjorie
Murphy, Peter and Carol
Gardner, Rosemarie
Carione, Frank and Mary Ann
Skovan, Joseph
Maclaughlin, Donald and Patricia
MacLeod, Roderick and Karen
Buckey, Karmen

DELAINE JOHNSON’S BIRTHDAY
Beckie Geffre
Sara Ruble
Tim Soelzer
Jason Malizia
Galina Panaev
Kathy Corrigan
Candy Martin
Peggy Brown
Lisa Slater
Jodi Norman

PAT ROZA’S BIRTHDAY
Carol O’Donnell
Matt Alexander
Karen Meyer
Kathy Corrigan
Willy Auchmoody
Megan Lemay
Ellie Snyder
Dana Dorio Casey
Jane Ann Pomarco
Cathy Molinelli Mannese
Georgette Zimmerman
Christine Frank Paquette

LORI SCRAGG’S BIRTHDAY
Patty Hamilton
Chuck Scragg
Dave Scragg
Richard Scragg
Gordon Clark

HANNAH FRANCE’S BIRTHDAY
Angela Behm Gocker
Masha France
Beth Scott France
Ryan Clardy
Rita Clardy

MEAGAN FOSTER’S BIRTHDAY
Cindy Foster
Kimberly Elswick
Dave Noel
It's not too early to start making plans to attend the 2019 National Gathering Conference. We hope you will join us for an uplifting and inspiring weekend.

Our Annual Gathering Conference provides an opportunity to hear some of the best speakers and workshop presenters in the nation who are experts on many topics related to grief and loss. They will inspire you with their messages of HOPE. They will offer you the tools you need to continue to HEAL as you transition from mourning to living again after the loss of your child, sibling or grandchild.

The camaraderie and connections created, as you get to know parents and siblings from across the United States who have experienced similar losses, will touch you in a profound way. You will benefit from sharing stories, tears, hugs, laughter and more as you bond during workshop sessions, shared meals, remembrance ceremonies and creative activities. Let the “Spirit of Love” fill your heart in 2019.

NATIONAL GATHERING 2019

Bereaved Parents USA
August 2–4 ❤ St. Louis, Missouri
www.bereavedparentsusa.org