Grief is one of the most feared emotions along the spectrum of being human. It is often ostracized instead of welcomed as an inevitable, human experience.

One of the isolating and difficult things about grief can be feeling like other people don’t get us or our multilayered feelings around our loss, especially as time goes on.

I recently posed this question on social media: *What do you wish the world understood about your grief?*

I received the following 23 responses from humans who have lost young children, adult children, husbands, wives, mothers, or fathers to suicide, cancer, accidents and more.

1. *That it’s always there, and pretty close to the surface. And it’s weird because sometimes I want to talk about it and sometimes I don’t. I don’t expect anyone to know which way I’m feeling on any given day, but I want to be okay with the awkwardness and I want others to be okay with it too.*
2. *That it’s harder and longer than I could have ever expected.*
3. *I wish that people, especially family members, knew that grief is not a switch that you can just turn off because it’s time to move on. Yes, we try to move on because our loved one is resting in peace and we have the right to enjoy the rest of our life as much as we can. But, something triggers a memory and the grief is back. So, we need to work through it again. It’s easier said than done unfortunately.*
4. *You miss the love that filled up that space.*
5. *That it becomes your shadow. Forever present even when not visible to all eyes. Most of all to acknowledge that it’s okay to talk about it. And, no, you won’t remind me of it if you bring it up. My grief is who I am now. The new me. I wish that everyone was more comfortable with my grief. It reinforces the fact that I lost my beautiful daughter and that will never change.*
6. *I don’t want their husbands. And being widowed is not contagious.*
7. *It has changed the whole dynamics of our family and I am no longer the person I used to be. I’m not quite sure who I am any more.*
8. *That it feels like an amputation and that it has no timetable.*
9. That there is no right or wrong way to grieve. That everyone’s timeline is different. That it will reopen many times throughout your life and you have to work through it again when it is retriggered, but this does not mean you are stuck or not getting on with your life.

10. How heavy is empty.

11. That watching my children grieve is almost worse than my husband’s death. That I wish there was more talk about older teenagers losing a parent and that their friends’ parents knew more about helping their kids support my girls during this terribly hard time.

12. That it’s changed me in every way.

13. I wish the world knew that my grief has touched every emotion from sadness, anger, guilt and unbearable heartache. In the early months I felt off balance, out of control and lost. With time I have forgiven myself and my father for his death by suicide. There are still days it all feels like a nightmare that I just can’t wake up from. The sorrow comes in waves, then subsides into acceptance. Sometimes worry and anxiety take over and I wonder how I can possibly survive the loss of another loved one.


15. That it doesn’t go away. I always feel it. I am changed because of it. But I don’t think others feel comfortable knowing that I still hurt and that I always will. That I want to talk about how much I miss my mom, but I suck it up because I don’t think others feel comfortable with my grief. That it doesn’t mean I’m crazy or need “help.”


17. That it hurts like no other pain you can possibly describe and yet no other person will experience this. Because even though they will experience grief, their pain will be different. All grief is unique and individual like snowflakes. No two are the same. I wish it was talked about more. I wish it to be acceptable, that’s it’s okay to not be okay. I wish for all grievers to be heard and not tried to be fixed.

18. That we don’t choose grief. The mind cannot turn off and on what the heart and soul feel just because “they” want the old you back.

19. That it softens but it’s something I will carry with me the rest of my life.

20. That they are the same as they always were and I am not. My life did not go on after my loss as theirs did. And my life will stay in this realm unknown to them forever. I would like them to know that they will never truly feel profound loss like this until it happens to them.

21. That I will never stop grieving my losses.

22. I wish people knew that the grief parents feel about their child with special needs is something they have to carry and honor and process their whole lives.

23. That even a year later there are days where it hurts just as bad as it did the moment I found out; that even when the number of years reaches fifty, there will still be those crippling days.

When we humans trust our capacity to hold other humans, to let unfold and be told our deepest layers of humanity, rich with heartache and love, something powerful happens. In the pause before we reach for a way to fix someone, that moment where we choose to sit with what is uncomfortable and unfixable, we find a sweet spot of being human, where all that is required is showing up to listen, see, hold, and honor another person’s truth or pain.

To the mother with a child in heaven:  
I see you. I am thinking of you. 
Today on Mother’s Day, 
I honor your courage and sorrow.
An Open Letter to Bereaved Parents and Others
By Dr. Joanne Cacciatore

If your child has died, I am so sorry.

I am not "so sorry" in the politely cliché or automatonic way: I am so sorry in an unspeakable and “there really aren’t words for this” way.

In the beginning after catastrophic loss, many will show up in ways that feel hopeful. They will send flowers and cards, meals and hugs. We may not remember much about this part. Our system has endured a tremendous shock. Nothing inside us wants to stay where it is: not our hearts or our minds or our bodies. It’s too painful, too terrifying to live in a world where something so very precious can die. We may get glimpses of the hospital, funeral, or food train but those memories may feel unreal, intangible, and so - understandably- the ‘thank you’ cards collect dust on our desks.

Days and weeks and months may pass where large swathes of time are unrecollectable. Our entire existence has shifted. Even the image in the mirror is unfamiliar. Our own sensory experiences of the world change- sound, taste, touch, sight, proprioception feel altered - time has a completely different and irrelevant quality. We may feel as if we’re living in a liminal space between the living and the dead, an alternate reality from which there is no escape. And yet in quiet moments when we notice our own irregular breathing and contemplate all we’ve irretrievably lost, it’s simply too much grief to bear and too little mercy to spare for our shattered open hearts.

Mostly, there is this fog of disbelief that lingers as we move in and out of consciousness wondering if this is a nightmare from which we can awaken.

Day by day - sometimes minute by minute- the grief will strike and bring us to our knees. It will surprise us in grocery stores and libraries, at work and at public events. Our minds may begin to tell stories that might or might not belong to us: stories about our goodness as a parent or person or about what we could’ve or should’ve or would’ve done differently. We may feel the relentless sting of shame, guilt, and regret. Our minds may start to question whether we loved our child enough or it may ask if he or she knew that love. Some days we will feel frenetic, desperately discursive and ungrounded. Other days we may resign ourselves to the lethargy and complacence of this unsolvable tragedy.

Our bodies hurt. Our brains stop working. Our hearts feel heavy, laden with the weight of loss. Few things, if any, matter anymore, not the mortgage or the rotting leftovers or the pool algae or the missed calls and texts. Every relationship in our lives changes, for better or not, and every relationship to inanimate objects and the universe and animals and trees and our past and future will change too. This unsteadiness will puzzle others.

And a visually specific “what the hell happened?” film will loop through our minds, it’s unremediable ending is the unsatisfactory same, over and over, until it feels like we’ve descended into madness. Yet every bit of this enactment - all this emotional rising and falling- is normal. The only wrongness, the only madness or pathology, is that our beloved died.

Months will pass and ever-so-slowly our memories may begin to re-emerge with shreds of trauma and terror and disappointment and hopelessness. The imperfectly beautiful life that was once ours doesn’t exist in the same way, and we try to find steady ground from which to be reborn.

Just around this time, when the permanence of our child’s absence begins sinking into our marrow, other people, because they’ve been taught this myth, will think it’s time for us to move on - to get over it- to reconcile the irreconcilable. Fundamentally, these directives don’t make sense because they are nonsensical. The intimation that our child’s death is akin to the loss of something replaceable, something to be healed with a iodine and a band aid or a prayer and prescription, feels even more isolating. Our hearts, then, may begin to question its own inherent wisdom: “Should I move on?” “What does ‘moving on’ even mean?” “Am I grieving too much? Too little? Too openly? Too privately? Am I crazy?”
But others don’t know, even when they are well-meaning. They cannot know this bottomless grief. Still, their expectations may cause us to mistrust our own wise hearts, our own authentic emotions. And because everything in our world has drastically changed and has been unapologetically stolen from us, there is now no poverty of doubt, fear, and suffering for us. Only at this point, the experience may feel even more like solitary confinement.

Because of this, some will abandon us. In the aisle between the Cheerios and applesauce, they turn and run. Some will try, clumsily perhaps, to abbreviate our grief with their platitudes: “All things happen for a reason,” “You’re young, you can have more,” “At least he’s not in pain,” “God has a plan,” “She’d want you to just be happy,” “Just let go,” and “Time heals all wounds.”

And some, thankfully, will show up with their unassuming hearts open and climb with us into the abyss. Those are the best kind and we will soon learn who is safe and who is reckless with our fragile hearts.

And this is where it gets tricky because the mind sometimes internalizes toxic cultural fiction about grief that is dangerous.

Sycophantic messages from within a culture that avoids and pathologizes grief - within medicine, religion, education, and social life - will urge us to question ourselves and our righteous emotional experiences after loss. Some of those messages will even confront and challenge our desire to remain connected to our child. Abandoning grief, they say, is necessary for the promise of being happy again.

These same sideline speculators will assert that grief is to be loathed and avoided because it comes with ugly machinations that scare us and others. Understandably, there is a draw to resist the spiral into this darkest night of our soul, and the resistance comes with - often unconscious - distractions. Distracting temptations to avoid our grief are cleverly disguised and endless: work, food, television, gambling, drugs, alcohol - anything that takes us away from our grief feels like relief.

No doubt these may be a welcome respite from the pain, even if only momentarily. But these short-lived and superficial attempts to palliate grief simply prolong the inevitable. Grief will come, one way or another, even if it is forced to change and hide its real form.

The tempter’s promise is a trap that will fragment and chronically constrict our entire world. The only way to stop feeling grief is to stop feeling.

Right in the center of our very wise hearts is the realization that we feel extraordinary grief because of extraordinary love. If we can become still enough, if we can listen to our hearts, it knows that grief is not the enemy. The sagacious heart knows that grief is just an innocent outcome of a most unnatural loss. What we really hate, the real enemy, is that our beloved died. That is what we wish we could conquer, undo, overcome, beat, negotiate, and avoid. Grief is a clean and honest product of the worse day of our lives.

Even as years pass, some will say that it’s unhealthy to remember. Some will castigate us for regrieving. Some will say to choose happiness instead of grief. But happiness and grief are not competitors. That is a myth perpetrated by a culture that is foolishly obsessed with pursuing one and dangerously avoiding the other.

Yes, years later, decades later, we will still carry with us this consummate grief. We will carry it as long as we are alive and willing to live honestly and fully. And when the tsunamis of grief crash down upon us, we become more adept at navigating them. We trust the process. We trust ourselves.

So the invitation for us - from the genesis of loss - will be to mourn openly with our fists raised high, standing strong against those who would try to, again, take what is justifiably ours.

Haven’t we already lost enough? Need we lose our truth, too?

This is the one thing we can control; we do have power here.

With the compassionate support of safe people, when we are ready, we can rise up, holding our grief in one fist and our love in the other. “This is mine, and you have no right to take it!”
We can reclaim our power in grief, taking back what is ours. And we can fight to keep safe what has been and will always be the most holy parts of us: our beloved ones who died and for whom we will grieve as long as we are separated.

And we should all know there will likely be peripheral losses along the way.

Many of us will have to make hard decisions. We may be stuck in a meaningless job. Losing our beloved one certainly augments our perspective. Our faith communities may not meet our needs, and we may choose to worship elsewhere. And relationships may crack under the stress of death’s fallout. The question: "Is this relationship worth saving?" may be one we often visit.

Because when we are living grief honestly, some people will fall away, like leaves from a mighty oak in a winter storm. They are not ready. Perhaps, they don't have the capaciousness for our reluctant and painful transformation.

Let them fall softly.

Shed the judging stories that are not our own and that do not serve us.

We can immerse ourselves, instead, in the sacred grief shared by others across space and through history who know and who, too, raise their fists and stand tall in their truth.

It may take time to find our tribe but when we do, there will be mutual recognition and wordless knowing in the others’ eyes. Few things are as simultaneously comforting and painful as this meeting.

We can learn when to rest our weary bodies and put down the weight of grief for awhile, always returning to it, or allow someone else to help us bear the unbearable until we’re strong enough. We can turn toward it when it asks to be seen. It will call us, and if we don't answer for a very long time, it will come in the side door and bring other, even undesirable, guests who aren't connected to our truth.

We can reach deep into the center of our core and summon the courage to live in this truth: Our grief is part of us now. This path will make our lives bigger not smaller.

We can practice fully inhabited grief, letting it move cellularly through our being. It will transform us for sure. Remember that we are already being warily transformed, no matter how much we resist. Things will change; it's a matter of direction and tenor now. Grief, especially when traumatic, can shut us down and disconnect us or it can shatter our hearts into a million pieces of fierce compassion in the world. One way or another, we change.

We can remind ourselves that even on days when it doesn't feel like it, there is strength in weakness and there is power in surrender.

The energy of grief is endowed with more vital force than the destructive energy of avoidance. And that force will, one day, be the very movement that saves our own lives and maybe the very worthy lives of many others.

And no matter what, no one and nothing can take from us what is ours, once we trust it.

We will not cease to exist if we grieve our truth. We will cease to exist if we do not.
This month of January marks two years since I lost my brother. Some days I think I’ve adjusted to this new normal in my life, and I have a sense of bittersweet grace and acceptance. Other days it’s a horrible jolt where I’m reminded all over again that he is gone, and I find myself reverting back to the girl from January 2016 who had just heard the news and couldn’t begin to make sense of a broken timeline that made no sense.

While no two grief experiences are ever alike, there are common themes. So much of the time we feel alone in our experience of loss, and yet grief is universal. We are not alone in what we feel, and if we want to entreat with life with an open heart and conscious intent, it is important we make space for the whole of our experience. And so, I thought I’d share a few observations on grief in the hopes that they help support others who are also in their own grief journey.

**Grief has No Borders**
Loss knows no bounds. I liken grief to a strange land that exists on another plane, a surreal space separate from everyday reality. Grief plucks us up and out of the normal stream of life and deposits us there—without our consent—and we are forced to navigate and find our way through. Jagged mountains are plenty, long stretches of barren desert frequent, a deep sea that ranges from angry to sorrowful to numb often comes along and sucks you into its waters, and you don’t know when it will release you and deposit you back on the certitude of shore.

At first, when you are at the heart of your grief, you can’t help but exist almost full time on this plane. As time goes by, you may find you travel here less, though you will still be pulled in for visitation. Be gentle with yourself when you find yourself here. You are allowed to be in this space for as long as you need, so you can process your pain and eventually find the hidden treasures of deeper heart knowledge that can only be found by those who travel here.

**Grief is Disorienting**
When somebody you love is suddenly gone, your entire life turns sideways, everything gets jumbled, and it takes awhile to sort through the pieces. Spaces they once filled now sit blank and empty, and that experience wrecks havoc on our mind, spirit, body, and heart. Sometimes we don’t even realize all the spaces somebody occupied in our lives until they are gone, and as such it will take time for the whole of your being to heal.

Your mind will need to establish new neural networks, your nervous system will have to re-set and find a new balance, your emotional center will need a lot of sorting and clearing. And your heart is going to feel like a bomb went off; it takes a while before you’ll have a sense of life returning to that space and see the wildflowers that have begun to grow.

Be patient with yourself in this process; the mind, body, spirit and heart have a wisdom, timing, and divine intelligence all their own.

**Grief Changes Everything**
Grief will fundamentally change you, and when you go through internal change, your relationship to everything around you changes. You develop a different lens on how you see the world. You are cracked wide open and are forced to put your pieces back together again. You may find that some of your old pieces still fit; you may find that some of them don’t, and you need to go in search of new pieces. Grief rearranges us, and we don’t always know how we’ll come through that rearranging. Self-compassion is key in this process, for we are not here to stay the same but to experience soul growth. And soul growth isn’t linear, it can be challenging, confusing, and disorganized. But know the end result will always meet our own requirements of soul— and you can always trust your soul.

**Grief has no Shortcuts**
Grief will take you through a full range of chaotic, messy emotional experiences. While personal spirituality can bring perspective and comfort in grief, I have found that you can’t spiritually bypass grief. There are no shortcuts. No easy fixes. No bail outs. Grief is simply something we have to make space for. In fact, trying to skip the grieving process robs our heart center of massive opportunities for growth.
Please know you are not doing anything wrong when those very dark human moments trample over your peace, love, and light. In fact, you are doing something very right by making room for your humanity. You are allowing yourself to experience the full spectrum of what it means to be human, and in allowing yourself to do this shadow work, you will find an even greater connection to the beauty in life, when it is time to emerge from the shadows and step back into the light.

**Grief is a Doorway**

Grief can be a doorway when we allow it space in our lives. A doorway to a deeper self. A doorway to a more meaningful life. A doorway to a greater compassion for ourselves and for others. A doorway to greater authenticity. A doorway to other realms and a heightened relationship with spirit and the universe. A doorway to soul. And most of all, grief is a doorway to love. We grieve, because we have loved, and part of healing is realizing we still carry that love inside of us. And so we are not broken beings after all, but containers of love walking around, sharing our light wherever we go.

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**THE ART OF PRESENCE**

*By David Brooks*

Tragedy has twice visited the Woodiwiss family. In 2008, Anna Woodiwiss, then 27, was working for a service organization in Afghanistan. On April 1, she went horseback riding and was thrown, dying from her injuries. In 2013, her younger sister Catherine, then 26, was biking to work from her home in Washington. She was hit by a car and her face was severely smashed up. She has endured and will continue to endure a series of operations. For a time, she breathed and ate through a tube, unable to speak. The recovery is slow.

The victims of trauma, she writes in a remarkable blog post for Sojourners, experience days “when you feel like a quivering, cowardly shell of yourself, when despair yawns as a terrible chasm, when fear paralyzes any chance for pleasure. This is just a fight that has to be won, over and over and over again.”

Her mother, Mary, talks about the deep organic grief that a parent feels when they have lost one child and seen another badly injured, a pain felt in bones and fiber.

But suffering is a teacher. And, among other things, the Woodiwisses drew a few lessons, which at least apply to their own experience, about how those of us outside the zone of trauma might better communicate with those inside the zone. There are no uniformly right responses, but their collective wisdom, some of it contained in Catherine’s Sojourners piece, is quite useful:

**Do be there.** Some people think that those who experience trauma need space to sort things through. Assume the opposite. Most people need presence. The Woodiwisses say they were awed after each tragedy by the number of people, many of whom had been mere acquaintances, who showed up and offered love, from across the nation and the continents. They were also disoriented by a number of close friends who simply weren’t there, who were afraid or too busy. Anna and Catherine’s father, Ashley, says he could detect no pattern to help predict who would step up and provide the ministry of presence and who would fumble. Neither age, experience nor personal belief correlated with sensitivity and love.

**Don’t compare, ever.** Don’t say, “I understand what it’s like to lose a child. My dog died, and that was hard, too.” Even if the comparison seems more germane, don’t make it. Each trauma should be respected in its uniqueness. Each story should be heard attentively as its own thing. “From the inside,” Catherine writes, comparisons “sting as clueless, careless, or just plain false.”

**Do bring soup.** The non-verbal expressions of love are as healing as eloquence. When Mary was living with Catherine during her recovery, some young friend noticed she didn’t have a bathmat. He went to Target and got a bathmat. Mary says she will never forget that.

**Do not say “you’ll get over it.”** “There is no such thing as ‘getting over it,’” Catherine writes, “A major disruption leaves a new normal in its wake. There is no ‘back to the old me.’”
**Do be a builder.** The Woodiwisses distinguish between firefighters and builders. Firefighters drop everything and arrive at the moment of crisis. Builders are there for years and years, walking alongside as the victims live out in the world. Very few people are capable of performing both roles.

**Don’t say it’s all for the best or try to make sense out of what has happened.** Catherine and her parents speak with astonishing gentleness and quiet thoughtfulness, but it’s pretty obvious that these tragedies have stripped away their tolerance for pretense and unrooted optimism.

Ashley also warned against those who would overinterpret and try to make sense of the inexplicable. Even devout Christians, as the Woodiwisses are, should worry about taking theology beyond its limits. Theology is a grounding in ultimate hope, not a formula book to explain away each individual event.

I’d say that what these experiences call for is a sort of passive activism. We have a tendency, especially in an achievement-oriented culture, to want to solve problems and repair brokenness — to propose, plan, fix, interpret, explain and solve. But what seems to be needed here is the art of presence — to perform tasks without trying to control or alter the elemental situation. Allow nature to take its course. Grant the sufferers the dignity of their own process. Let them define meaning. Sit simply through moments of pain and uncomfortable darkness. Be practical, mundane, simple and direct.

Ashley and Mary went to Afghanistan a few months after Anna’s death. They remember that as a time out of time. They wept together with Afghan villagers and felt touched by grace. “That period changed me and opened my imagination,” Ashley recalls. “This thing called presence and love is more available than I had thought. It is more ready to be let loose than I ever imagined.”

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**My Little Angel** (excerpt from *Not a Blueprint: It’s the Shoe Prints That Matter*
By Nina Norstrom

My Little Angel, you’re gone now
Gone to a place where other Angels will show you the ropes
Learn all you can from ‘em to quickly earn your wings
Sure, this old world was a destructive place to have lived
But you’re free, as free as an eagle, the sky, the moon, and the sun
No more worries, no more meds, no more fighting the toxic diseases
And all those ugly things that living here does to one.

My Little Angel, you’re starting life freshly anew
You have an eternal life and such a glorious life
You’re back home, from whence He sent you to me
When we were introduced, I was known as a Mommy figure
I named you, raised you, and gave you all my love
Mommies don’t really know it all, but I did the best I knew.
My Little Angel, now that you’re back home, remember
I’ll always embrace your existence on this earth and cherish its memories
I couldn’t have prayed for a greater child than you
Our paths have parted, but that which we shared lives forever.

My Little Angel, life on earth doesn’t remain the same
Your life was short-lived, and that gave us such little time to grow
For now, I’ll learn to be brave and begin to relive
‘Cause I know we’ll reunite in the Hereafter
My Little Angel, just know when I get there, our bond shall forge again.

Mommy

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Nina Norstrom, author and bereaved mom, will be a workshop presenter at our 2018 National Gathering Conference in Memphis TN, August 3-5. REGISTER ONLINE TODAY!

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Depression and Complicated Grief
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Coping with the Stigma of Grieving an Overdose Death
Grief in the Workplace
Love In Motion Signing Choir
Alan Pedersen Angels Across the USA Tour
Denise Ganulin Music and Lyrics
Open to Hope Interview with BPUSA Vice President Delain Johnson
Join us for an incredible weekend where bereaved families like us (who often feel isolated in our grief) can connect and create lasting bonds with each other and experience a safe space to remember and speak openly about our children, siblings or grandchildren and express our true grief emotions.

Meet our speakers and workshop presenters -- all amazing grief survivors who will share wisdom and insight about the grieving process and courage, perseverance and grace under the most devastating of circumstances.

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They will be offering their expertise covering the following topics: Grief Coping Skills; Hope and Spirituality; No Surviving Children; Signs, Dreams and After Death Communication; Men’s, Women’s and Family Issues; Emotional Health and Self Care; Sibling Grief; Expressive Arts Therapy and more!