Helping grieving parents and their families rebuild their lives following the death of a child.

SELF PRESERVATION AFTER LOSS by Rachel Whalen

Rachel Whalen is a mother, wife, and Kindergarten teacher from Barre, Vermont. Her life’s work is to keep the memory of her daughter, Dorothy, alive through words both spoken and written. Rachel shares her family’s journey through loss and all that has come after on her blog: An Unexpected Family Outing.

I used to pride myself on being the kind of person who would do anything for anyone. I regularly put the needs and wants of others before my own. I thought I was being such a nice person if I considered the people around me at the sake of ignoring myself. I’m different now.

Gone are my altruistic tendencies, and in their place is a penchant for cautious kindness. I still want to do unto others, but not until I consider myself.

You might think this sounds selfish. I used to feel that way too. But I was wrong. I’m not being self-centered, I’m simply engaging in the art of self-preservation. Losing my daughter has showed me the fleeting and fragile nature of our existence. It is my responsibility to take care of myself and preserve the life I’ve been blessed with.

My first act of self-preservation occurred about an hour after we found out that Dorothy was gone. I was being prepped to deliver her and I was asked about an epidural. I didn’t hesitate. I wanted it. There was no doubt in that decision; I was already so broken that I was worried the pain of childbirth would completely destroy me. This wasn’t about anyone else. This was about me.

More moments like this would arise over the next few weeks. In the thick, choking smog of early grief, my moments of clarity came from the decisions I made to put myself first. Every time I thought of myself, it was like lifting a thin and filmy layer from the smog. Thinking about myself was the only time I felt alive again.

It was difficult to think about myself then. Even though everyone was desperate to care for me, they were not taking any direction from me about what I needed or wanted. Anytime I would push back against any support that didn’t feel right, the reply would be “You need to let us do this.” So, I let them. Not because I wanted to, but because it was the nice thing to do and I was a nice person. It would be unkind of me to rebuke their love and care at a time when I so desperately needed to be loved and cared for.

Then, one day, while eating a casserole that had been dropped at our doorstep, I realized that I was hungry for a grilled cheese. But, wait. That would be rude. Someone had made this casserole for us and it would be unkind of us to waste it. I lifted my fork for another bite and then I put it back down. I wanted grilled cheese. Why would I keep eating something I wasn’t hungry for when I knew what I was craving? I went into the kitchen, made a grilled cheese, and I devoured it. With each bite, I felt more and more fulfilled. Not just because of my delectable sandwich, but because of my act of self-care.
Over the next weeks and months, more and more acts of self-care would exist. Each time I took care of myself, I was working to preserve what was left of me after my loss. I started to piece myself back together and each moment that I loved myself was another stitch keeping me intact.

It may sound like I became completely self-absorbed and that I stopped thinking of others. This was not the case at all. Actually, I found my moments of kindness to be greater. Instead of scattered, unconscious acts of kindness I was helping others in a deeper and more genuine manner. I wasn’t helping for the sake of helping. I was helping because I cared. I cared about myself and that gave me the ability to truly care for others.

I observed myself being more deliberate in my actions towards others because it felt good to be helping them. By making sure my needs had been met, I knew that I had the ability to also take care of those around me. If I wasn’t capable of being authentic then it wasn’t worth pursuing. Pouring from a diminishing vessel wouldn’t offer much and it would leave me empty.

Putting myself first is not something I expect everyone to understand. It goes against the culture of our society to think of yourself before you think of others. To some, what I have described may seem selfish. I’m not looking to change people’s opinions, I’m just trying to protect myself the best way that I know how. Ultimately, I know that it’s very possible to lose those I love. I am my only guarantee in this life.

It has been over 20 months since Dorothy left my arms and the heartache has remained. I will never stop hurting from losing my baby but taking care of myself has allowed me to better carry my pain. Dorothy’s memory and her legacy live inside of me. As long as I live, she will survive in this world. I can think of no better reason for self-preservation.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON GRIEF AND CONTROL by Kristen Wood

Kristen Wood is a mother of six, including her son, Luke, who was stillborn on Christmas Eve of 2010. She is also a writer, a reader, a student, and an aspiring librarian. She desperately needed hope after the loss of her son, and she wants to offer that to others through her words. She can be found on her Facebook author page, https://www.facebook.com/authorkristenwood/.

Grief has many faces. Perhaps there are tears or anger or breakdowns. But grief is intensely personal. I am the face of grief that is considered stoic and strong. After the intensity of the new pain, I grew a steely resolve that does not often succumb to public weeping. My vulnerability is saved for those I think I can trust.

One of the most surprising facets of mourning to me was that it opens you to criticism and debate. One must not be out of control, but one must also never be too cool. That makes you unfeeling. Not unaffected, but not dramatic. Not perfectly stable, but not hysterical. Perform for the audience the way they expect, or your performance will be faulted.

Let me clarify. The appearance of emotion does not reflect the depths of my grief. I am not indifferent to the loss of my son. I am not removed or detached or completely in control. Grief is incoherent and unsettling, and loss and shock can cause an unraveling. Grief is not rational, but it can appear so. A placid surface can hide a chaotic vortex. I am not steel. I enter emotional lockdown for my own functionality while I am under extreme stress. It is a way of coping.

But I am also a realist. I recognize that death happens, and we keep living. I can live in fear because I know it can all end suddenly, or I can live in appreciation because I know it can all end suddenly. I am not a professor or a preacher or a pundit – I am a traveler. I can only show you that healing is possible. I am a pragmatist. Death is coming. We may be reluctant to talk about the inevitable, but that does not prevent it. The loss of control is terrifying. There are days when my perceptions are different and I spiral, watching this fact that we deny swirl around me and I am dizzied by its force.

That force throws me into the depths sometimes because I hate unanswerable questions, and what is death but the ultimate unanswerable question that we like to convince ourselves we have the answer to?
I write. I am a storyteller. I like to control the narrative with neat endings and well-worn paths. But even when I try to write those stories, the characters meander away from the script in my head and toward the truth of messier tales. I like to control the story, but I don’t. I can’t. I didn’t control my own story, but I still had to live it. I am not an illumination of grief and loss – I am just a person who tried to recalibrate to the best of my ability when the plans I made forced me onto an uncharted route.

As I sat down to write this piece, it meandered from my plan as well. It began as a piece about how you cannot tell the extent of a person’s emotions by looking at them, and that the expectations of wounded people should be tempered by the knowledge that loss is different for different people. It became a stream of consciousness about how we can be more open to talking about death, the elemental loss of control, and ultimately, how we live with death. Because that is what we must do – live with death. Embrace your end, and you embrace existence. The person you mourned existed, and that is a beautiful thing. The emptiness they left is a testament to their place in the beautiful mess that is life. It matters.

AN EXCERPT FROM DAVID GROSSMAN'S MEMORIAL DAY SPEECH TO BEREAVED ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS  Read Full Text Here

April 17, 2018

Grossman's own son Uri was killed in combat in the Second Lebanon War in 2006

“… My family and I lost Uri in the war, a young, sweet, smart and funny man. Almost twelve years later it is still hard for me to talk about him publicly.

The death of a loved one is actually also the death of a private, whole, personal and unique culture, with its own special language and its own secret, and it will never be again, nor will there be another like it.

It is indescribably painful to face that decisive ‘no.’ There are moments when it almost sucks into it all the ‘have’ and all the ‘yes.’ It is difficult and exhausting to constantly fight against the gravity of loss.

It is difficult to separate the memory from the pain. It hurts to remember, but it is even more frightening to forget. And how easy it is, in this situation, to give in to hate, rage, and the will to avenge.

But I find that every time I am tempted by rage and hate, I immediately feel that I am losing the living contact with my son. Something there is sealed. And I came to my decision, I made my choice...

And I know that within the pain there is also breath, creation, doing good. That grief does not isolate but also connects and strengthens. Here, even old enemies — Israelis and Palestinians — can connect with each other out of grief, and even because of it.

I have met quite a few bereaved families over these past years. I told them, in my experience, that even when you are at the heart of the pain you should remember that every member of the family is allowed to grieve the way they want, the way they are, and the way their soul tells them to.

No one can instruct another person how to grieve. It’s true for a private family, and it’s true for the larger ‘bereaved family.’

There is a strong feeling that connects us, a feeling of a joint fate, and the pain that only we know, for which there are almost no words out there, in the light. That is why, if the definition of a ‘bereaved family’ is genuine and honest, please respect our way. It deserves respect. It is not an easy path, it is not obvious, and it is not without its internal contradictions. But it is our way to give meaning to the death of our loved ones, and to our lives after their death. And it is our way to act, to do — not to despair and not to desist —
Editor's Note: The following three articles were submitted by AJT readers Mary O'Grady, Michael's mom; Persis Oberreither, Amy's Dad and Tim Soolzer, Christopher's brother and member of the BP USA Advisory Board. We are always grateful and privileged to publish sharings from the hearts of our fellow travelers on this journey of grief. KC

GRIEF: MEMOIR OF A BEREAVED PARENT
By Mary O’Grady, Michael’s Mom

Parental grief knows no closure. Grief is a silent, lonely thing. Grief is painful. Grief upsets everything in your life. Grief is a bottomless pit. Grief has taken up a permanent place in my heart and at times feels like a dagger through my heart.

Grief, for a bereaved parent, enters your life suddenly, violently and for many of us, inexplicably. It is an unwanted constant companion. Grief entered my life on February 20, 2017. My beloved son was only 24 years 5 ½ months old. Not only was he my youngest child, he was my good friend. What a profound loss that there are no words for. He was much too young to leave this world. A life cut short for no valid reason. A sweet, kind person taken away. It’s just so tragic.

I now know how fragile life can be and that it can end in an instant.

The bereaved parent experiences tremendous and never-ending grief. Compared with our grief, everything else can seem frivolous and mundane. There is no escape from this black cloud called grief. My son’s passing is the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning. Moments of busyness at work places it in the background at times, only to have it come raging back with full force. Grief never takes a day off.

While it is difficult to describe the intensity of my grief, I have come to realize that the more you love someone, the stronger your grief and that the level of grief is certainly affected by our relationship with the deceased. My son was kind, sweet, funny, smart . . . just a nice guy. I struggle to understand why God would take my beautiful child from me. Why did he need to be removed from my life, causing me such excruciating and unrelenting grief? Why? That is the question for which there is no answer. Why me? Why my child? Why my family? I imagine all bereaved parents cycle through those same questions in their minds.

Dodging grief, however temporary, is the ultimate challenge. I escape and visit the cemetery several times a week, I find some solace there. I plant, feed and water Michael’s garden. Sometimes I sit quietly at the grave, sometimes I speak to Michael, and sometimes I cry uncontrollably. I never really know which emotion will surface until after I arrive at his spot.

Milestone dates are always particularly challenging. On Christmas, instead of buying my son a gift, I purchase a wreath for his grave site. On his birthday, instead of buying him a birthday gift and cake, I buy flowers and a small balloon for his grave site. It just all seems so unfair.

As the weeks and months go by, you realize just how much your child is missing. Their age is frozen in time while the rest of the world continues moving on. With life there is hope . . . a future to look forward to. Death is so final, it removes all element of hope for the parent and for the future of their child. Adventures and experiences that we should look forward too will no longer happen. This is difficult to come to terms with, as any parent or sibling who has lost a child, brother, or sister, will attest. After 65 weeks, I can only admit that it does not get easier. The first year was so terribly difficult, but unfortunately, I imagine that all the years to come will be just as difficult.
The weight of sorrow is enormous and unyielding, my heart is broken. I look forward to the day when my Michael and I are reunited in heaven, it will be a joyous occasion. At that point the albatross of grief will be removed from my heart at long last.

Rest in peace my dear Michael, I love you and miss you so. ❤️

GUARANTEES
By Tim Soelzer (Christopher’s brother)

I always felt safe with Chris. There was always a guarantee that I would be taken care of because of him. I knew that he had my back and would move mountains for me. There was always guarantees when he was in my life. He got me. He loved me. He believed in me. He was my guarantee in life. Chris was always going to be there, cheering me on, giving me advice, laughing with me, fighting for me. There was nothing that prepared me for the day when the guarantee was no longer there, when Chris died. There was no longer a guarantee that I had another birthday with him, another Christmas, another wrestling match in the middle of the living room floor which always ended with him winning.

Now, with the guarantees that I had gone, I was left with a mess. The remaining members of my family were working through their own grief so there I sat, alone. For some reason, I was put in this position. Everyone in my life was wearing headphones, and I was invisible. I would speak and no one would listen, I would try to have the same type of conversations with my parents as before but it just wasn’t working. Nothing worked anymore. Everything was broken. I just wanted to laugh again! So, I had a choice to make. I made the choice to create my own, new guarantees. I had to be there for me. What Chris’s death taught me was there are no tried and true guarantees in life. Life is going to change. Life is going to evolve. People are going to leave us, and people are going to die. I had to change my relationship with my parents, and other living siblings. I had to love me, cheer myself on and give myself advice. I had to fight for me!

My brother, Captain Christopher Frank Soelzer, was an amazing man. He was too big for this world. He lived every day as if it were his last. His laugh and his spirit could fill a stadium. I am eternally grateful to my parents for giving me such a wonderful human being to grow up with. I am blessed to know what unconditional love is. The world lost an incredible piece of the puzzle that Christmas Eve in 2003, but I have the guarantee of knowing that heaven gained an angel that day.

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION
by Persis Oberreither, Amy’s Dad
Author, Pinky Swear: Honoring My Daughter’s Right to Die

It was 3:30 on a sunny, summer afternoon when I noticed that the modem powering the TV, the Internet, and the phone had a flashing red light. I picked up the phone receiver and, sure enough, it was dead. I tried turning on the TV. Nothing. I fired up the computer, but the screen would only display a big box that read “No Broadband Connection.”

My cell phone, designated for emergencies, had only a few minutes left for my disposal. This was definitely an emergency. I called AT&T, navigated the ten-minute recorded maze to get an actual person on the other end of the line, and then explained to the customer service representative my predicament. A technician would come out to my house to fix the problem, I was told...tomorrow.
As I sat in Amy's easy chair that evening, listening to the Cardinals game on a little transistor radio, feeling the stress-sweat drip down the front of my shirt, I tried to figure out just what about this loss of technology and connection to the outside world was causing me to react this way. Watching a movie in the evening was something I always looked forward to, but was hardly a necessity; an evening with no TV every now and then can do a mind good. The Internet loss was a bit of a problem, as I was expecting an e-mail regarding the recent distribution of my book to a group of fellow bereaved parents. But, again, this wasn't a piece of information that I absolutely had to have right away. It could wait a couple of days.

But the phone was another matter. What if somebody were trying to get a hold of me to tell me that another family member had died? What if a doctor’s office had tried leaving me a message about an upcoming appointment? And what if, what if, the house was to catch fire in the middle of the night and I wouldn’t be able to call 911 because I had used up all of my emergency minutes trying to get the damned AT&T technician to come out to the house to fix everything?

That was it—it was the loss of the phone service—the potential loss of my dead daughter’s pictures and clothes and possessions in a house fire—that was pushing my already fragile mental state close to the breaking point. You see victims of natural disasters on the nightly news, people who lost their homes and everything in them when a tornado swept through their town, and you always hear them say the same thing: “Devastating. But we’re lucky. We have each other. Many of our things can be replaced. It’s just stuff. We still have each other.”

It’s different for a bereaved parent.

A technician arrived shortly after noon the next day. He messed around with the box on the outside of the house for awhile, then left for awhile, then came back and climbed up the pole and messed around up there for awhile, then came into the house and messed around with the modem for awhile; all to no avail. He said the problem must be on the main line and that another technician would come out later that day to fix the problem. Hours later, another guy did show up, messed around with the outdoor box, messed around with the wires in the basement, messed around with the modem, and then, speculating that the modem must be on the fritz, told me he’d put in a work order for a technician to come out to the house the next day to replace the modem.

That evening, I sat in Amy’s chair and listened to the ball game on the radio again, and all I could think was what if the house catches fire tonight? It would burn to the ground, taking with it the old answering machine: the only recording I have of Amy’s voice. It would destroy all of my pictures of her beautiful face; her clothes, her perfume, her stuffed animals; the recordings of her hockey games. All because I still don’t have phone service.

They’re not just stuff. Their existence is the reason that I can manage to still exist. They are my history with my daughter: nineteen years of our lives lived together in this house, on this planet. I remember how shocked I felt when I read Joan Didion’s The Year of Magical Thinking: how Joan decided to get rid of her late husband’s old tennis shoes when, a year after his death, she had come to terms with the fact that he wasn’t coming home. That’s hardly the point. Those were the shoes she watched him lace up time and time again. Those were the shoes he wore in her company. Those were the shoes he left in a place on the floor to where her gaze might drift as she and John sat together in the evening, reading. Those shoes were history. Their history.

“What To Do With Your Child’s Things” is often a topic discussed in bereaved parents’ workshops and groups. I can tell you what to do with them. Look at them. Touch them. Smell them. Dust them. Wash them. Leave them where she left them. Hold on to them. Because she is there. She is in those things as surely as she continues to exist in another dimension. She is in those things as surely as she is in your heart and mind. She is in those things as surely as she is in your life forever.

Tomorrow I think I’ll wear Amy’s brown t-shirt – the one with the big decal of a bunch of cigars, all brightly wrapped in different colors and fanned out to look like a Native American headdress. Seventeen years ago, it was her lucky shirt. Tomorrow I’ll wear it, and then afterward, I’ll wash it, and hang it back in Amy’s closet; alongside other irreplaceable moments in history.
There are things that you get over in life. For example a cold, your first breakup, or an argument with a good friend. More often than not, these things happen, they cause temporary misery, maybe you learn from it, and then you let bygones be bygones. Many experiences follow a similar pattern and with good reason. There are things we can and should leave in the past for the benefit of everyone, just imagine how much pain and negativity we’d all carry around if we could never forget and move on.

That said, it is a mistake to think that all painful experiences can and should be gotten over. There are times when such a shift simply isn’t possible – people can’t always change the way they think, feel, and behave simply because they want to. It’s common to think that, in these instances, one can go to therapy or take medication and be cured of these problems, but many people who’ve experienced things like serious hardship, trauma, addiction, and psychological disorder will tell you that healing isn’t about putting these experiences in the past, rather it’s about changing their relationship to the related thoughts, memories, behaviors, and emotions that exist in the present.

There are also times when ‘getting over’ something or ‘forgetting’ isn’t even desirable, such as getting over or forgetting about a deceased loved one and their ongoing absence. Still, many people mistakenly think that grief is something that can and should end at some point. Those who understand grief in hindsight may think this is a foolish mistake, but I would argue it’s common and understandable considering how little people know about grief before experiencing it. Especially those who live in societies where people are quick to believe that grief runs a linear and finite course and, as a consequence, encourage grieving people to push forward and let the woes of the past disappear like water under the bridge.

The reality of grief is that it often stays with you until the day you, yourself, die. For those who think of grief as being all negative emotion, I can see where this may seem unmanageable, but rest assured the impact of grief changes over time. As you change your relationship with grief – by changing how you respond to, cope with, and conceptualize grief – you will likely also find hope and healing. If you think about it, grief is one instance where there is a strong benefit to accepting its ongoing presence in your life because doing so creates more room for comfort, positive memories, and an ongoing connection with the person who died.

I understand this progression because I’ve experienced it, but I’m sure it can be difficult to believe if you haven’t. Initially, I thought about writing a post titled something like ‘5 Ways Your Relationship With Grief Changes Overtime’, but then I changed my mind. Grief is unique, relationships are unique and so your relationship with grief and with the person who died will evolve in a complex and nuanced way. So, instead of generalizing and categorizing, I’m going to share how my relationship with grief changed over time:
At first I tried to outrun, wait out, hide from, and ignore grief.

Eventually, I realized my grief wasn’t going anywhere so I could either run from it forever or give in and experience it. Once the cloud of grief consumed me, it was hard to see or feel anything else. This sucked (but only slightly more than the running).

In the early days of grief, it felt like all the light had been drained from the world and everything was dark. But as the fog of acute grief thinned, a little bit of light crept in and things started to look a little less scary and a little more manageable.

I grew less intimidated by my grief and increasingly confident in my ability to handle its ups, downs, twists, and turns. Once I was able to look grief head on, I realized it’s made up of both good things and bad. Grief grows from the same seeds as love so after someone dies, one seldom exists without the other.

Over time my relationship with grief has changed. I see it now as something as nuanced, complex, and beautiful as my relationships with those who have died. Though its ongoing presence is sometimes challenging, I embrace it because it’s a source of love and connection with those who have died.
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