***Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Death***

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**Introduction**

In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified the five stages of dying in her groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*. As a psychiatrist, she saw that patients who were dying appeared to go through common experiences or stages. Her work captured the world's attention and would forever change the way we talk and think about death and dying.

Decades later, I was privileged to have been her protege and friend, and to have coauthored with her a book entitled *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living*. In the second book we wrote together, *On Grief and Grieving*, which was her last, Elizabeth asked me to help adapt the stages she had observed in the dying to account for the similar stages we had also observed in those who are grieving. The five stages of grief are:

**Denial**: shock and disbelief that the loss has occurred

**Anger**: that someone we love is no longer here

**Bargaining**: all the what-ifs and regrets

**Depression**: sadness from the loss

**Acceptance**: acknowledging the reality of the loss

The five stages were never intended to be prescriptive, and this holds true for both dying and the subject of this book, grieving. They are not a method for tucking messy emotions into neat packages. They don't prescribe, they describe. And they describe only a general process. Each person grieves in his or her own unique way. Nevertheless, the grieving process does tend to unfold in stages similar to what we described, and most people who have gone through it will recognize them. I've experienced a great loss myself, and I can confirm that the five stages really do capture the feelings we experience as we grapple with the death of loved ones.

The fifth of Kubler-Ross’s five stages is acceptance. At this stage, we acknowledge the reality of the loss. We take some time to stop and breathe into the undeniable fact that our loved ones are gone. There's nothing easy about this stage. It can be extremely painful, and acceptance doesn't mean that we are okay with the loss, or that the grieving process is now officially over. However, there's been an assumed finality about this fifth stage that Elizabeth and I never intended. Over the years I came to realize that there is a crucial sixth stage to the healing process: meaning. This isn't some arbitrary or mandatory step, but one that many people intuitively know to take and others will find helpful.

In this stage we acknowledge that although for most of us grief will lessen in intensity overtime, it will never end. But if we allow ourselves to move fully into this crucial and profound sixth stage- meaning- it will allow us to transform grief into something else, something rich and fulfilling.

Through meaning, we can find more than pain. When a loved one dies, or when we experience any kind of serious loss- the end of a marriage, the closing of the company where we work, the destruction of our home in a natural disaster- we want more than the hard fact of that loss. We want to find meaning. Loss can wound and paralyze. It can hang over us for years. But finding meaning in loss empowers us to find a path forward. Meaning helps us make sense of grief, as you will see from the many stories in this book from people who have gone through this sixth stage.

What does meaning look like? It can take many shapes, such as finding gratitude for the time they had with loved ones, or finding ways to commemorate and honor loved ones, or realizing the brevity and value of life and making that the springboard into some kind of major shift or change.

Those who are able to find meaning tend to have a much easier time grieving than those who don't. They're less likely to remain stuck in one of the five stages. For those who do get stuck, this can manifest in many different ways, including sudden weight gain (or loss), drug or alcohol addiction, unresolved anger, or an inability to form or commit to a new relationship out of fear of experiencing yet another loss. If they remain stuck in loss, then they may become consumed by it, making *it* the focus of their life to the point where they lose all other sense of purpose and direction.

Ultimately, meaning comes through finding a way to sustain your love for the person after their death while you're moving forward with your life. That doesn't mean you'll stop missing the one you loved, but it does mean that you will experience a heightened awareness of how precious life is. Whenever it ends- in a few days or in extreme old age- we rarely think that life is long enough. Therefore we must try to value it every day and live it to the fullest. And that way we do the best honor to those whose deaths we grieve.

When I began writing this book, I had spent decades writing, teaching, and working with those in grief. I was well into my fifties by then and considered myself to be deeply acquainted with grief, not just as a professional, but also in my private life. Anyone who has reached that age will have experienced grief. Both my parents had died, along with a nephew who was like my brother. However, nothing in either my personal or my professional life as a grief specialist had prepared me for the loss I experienced when I embarked on this book- the unexpected death of my twenty-one-year-old son.

In the year 2000, I had adopted two wonderful boys from the Los Angeles County foster care system. David was four years old and his brother, Richard, was five. By that time the two of them had been in five different foster homes and had one failed adoption. Addiction and their family background had hindered their permanent placement, as had the fact that David had been born with drugs in his system. When I heard that, I feared that it might mean something was wrong with him that would not be fixable. But it only took looking at the faces of those two little boys to tell me that love conquers all. The adoption went through, and the years that followed, my belief in the power of love appeared to be confirmed.

Unfortunately, the trauma of David's younger years came back to haunt him when he became a teenager. At around seventeen, David began experimenting with drugs. Luckily, he came to me not long afterward and told me he was addicted and needed help. In the next few years, our lives were filled with rehab and twelve-step programs. By the time he was twenty, however, he was sober, in love with a wonderful woman who was a recent social work graduate, and entering his first year in college. But then a few days after his twenty-first birthday, he made some typical relationship mistakes and he and his girlfriend broke up. That was when he met up with a friend from rehab who was also having a tough time and they used drugs again. The friend lived. David died.

My friend Dianne Gray, who headed the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross foundation at the time and is a bereaved parent herself, told me, “I know you're drowning. You'll keep sinking for a while, but there will come a point when you'll hit bottom. Then you’ll have a decision to make. Do you stay there or push off and start to rise again?”

What she said felt true. I knew in that moment that I was still in the deep end of the ocean, and I also knew that I was going to have to stay there for a while. I wasn't ready to surface. But even then, I felt I would continue to live, not only for the sake of my surviving son but for my own sake as well. I refused to allow David's death to be meaningless or to make my life meaningless. I had no idea what I would do to wrest meaning from this terrible time. For the moment, all I could do was to go through Kubler Ross’s stages and allow them to unfold as slowly as I needed. Still, I knew I couldn't and wouldn't stop at acceptance. There had to be something more.

At first I was not able to find any consolation in memories of my love for my son. I had a lot of anger at that time- at the world, at God, and at David himself. But in order to go on, I knew I would have to find meaning in the grief I was feeling. In my deep sorrow, I thought about a quote I share at my lectures: grief is optional in this lifetime. Yes, it's true. You don't have to experience grief, but you can only avoid it by avoiding love. Love and grief are inextricably intertwined.

As Erich Fromm says, “To spare oneself from grief at all costs can be achieved only at the price of total detachment, which excludes the ability to experience happiness.”

Love and grief comes as a package deal. If you love, you will one day know sorrow. I realized I could have skipped the pain of losing David if I'd never known and loved him. What a loss that would have been. In the moment when I really began to understand that, I found gratitude from my son having come into my life and for all the years I got to spend with him. They weren't nearly long enough, but they had changed and enriched my life immeasurably. That was the beginning of my being able to see something meaningful in my grief.

As time goes by, I have been able to keep finding deeper meaning in David's life as well as in his death. Meaning is the love I feel for my son. Meaning is the way I have chosen to bear witness to the gifts he gave me. For all of us, meaning is a reflection of the love we have for those we have lost. Meaning is the sixth stage of grief, the stage where the healing often resides.

**PART 1- Every Loss Has Meaning**

**Chapter 1: What Is Meaning?**

The person who sees death as sacred has found a way to find meaning in it. Viktor Frankl’s cornerstone work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, is a beacon for those who wonder how meaning can emerge from tragedy. His insight was born out of the years he spent in Nazi concentration camps. Frankl wrote that each of us has the ability to choose how we respond to even the most terrible of circumstances. “We who have lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” Frankl suggested that when we are faced with a situation that is hopeless, unchangeable, “we are challenged to change ourselves.” When we make the choice to do that, we can turn tragedy into an occasion for growth.

Some people will find meaning in belief in afterlife.Others will find meaning in the memories of their loved ones. Still others will find meaning in simply being able to be present for their loved ones’ last hours. Pain, death, and loss never feel good, but they’re unavoidable in our lifetime. Yet the reality is posttraumatic growth happens more than posttraumatic stress. That is consistent with what I've seen in my work with those who are grieving and also my work with the dying in palliative care and hospice. Wherever you find it, meaning matters, and meaning heals.

**Chapter 2: Grief Must Be Witnessed**

Grief should unite us. It is a universal experience. If I'm talking to someone with a physical ailment, I can listen and empathize, but I may never have that particular problem. When I'm with someone whose loved one died, however, I know I'll be in their shoes someday and I try to understand what they are feeling. Not to change it- just to acknowledge it fully. I feel privileged when someone shares their pain and grief with me. The act of witnessing someone’s vulnerability can bring the person out of isolation if the witnessing is done without judgement.

Too often outsiders who may have the best of intentions will suggest to a bereaved person that it's time to move on, embrace life, and let go of grief. But grief should be a no-judgment zone. Those who understand what you're going through will never judge you or think your grief is out of proportion or too prolonged. Grief is what's going on inside of us, while mourning is what we do on the outside. The internal work of grief is a process, a journey. It does not have prescribed dimensions and it does not end on a certain date.

When people ask me how long they're going to grieve, I ask them, “How long will your loved one be dead? That's how long. I don't mean that you'll be in pain forever. But you will never forget that person, never be able to fill the unique hole that has been left in your heart. That is what I call the one-year myth- we should be done and complete with all grieving in one year. Not remotely true. In the first year of your loss, you're likely to mourn and grieve intensely. After that, your grief will probably fluctuate. It will seem to lessen, then something will trigger it, and you'll find yourself back in the full pain of loss. In time it will hurt less often and with less intensity. But it will always be there.”

That's about as specific as I can get in answering the question. As vague as it is, it still doesn't cover all the possibilities. Over many years of grief work, I've come to realize that if I've seen *one* person in grief, I've only seen that *one* person in grief. I can't compare one grief to another, even if they're in the same family. One sister cries a lot and the other one doesn't. One son is vulnerable and raw. The other just wants to move on. Some people are expressive. Others shy away from their feelings. Some have more feelings. Some have less. Some are more productive and practical in their grieving style. They have a “buckle down and move on” mentality. We can mistakenly think that people who show no visible signs of pain should be in a grief group, getting in touch with and sharing their feelings. But if that is not their style in life, it won't be in grief, either. They must experience loss in their own way. Suggesting otherwise will not be helpful to them.

**The Light and Dark of Grief**

In our modern world, our grief is often witnessed online. When I post quotes about grief on social media, I notice different kinds of responses. If I post hopeful, optimistic quotes about healing, they give hope to many people, but don't resonate with others. Those who are in a dark place aren't ready to hear about hope, often because they're at the beginning of the grieving process and their grief is too acute to allow for any other emotions. They just want the darkness of the grief to be seen and acknowledged. If I post something like, “Today it feels like the pain will never end,” or “Grief feels like a dark cloud that encompasses the whole sky,” that will resonate with them. It mirrors and validates their feelings, which can be far more consoling than trying to find something positive in the situation.

Some grieve with darkness, some with light, some with both, depending on where they are in the cycle of grief. It would be a mistake to conclude that one is better than the other or that there's a right way to grieve.

Sometimes I meet someone in grief who tells me that a family member or friend said something terrible- which often turns out to be some variation of “time heals all” or “be happy your loved one is at peace now.” Such statements can make the bereaved think that their feelings have not been witnessed. Most of us want to say something helpful, but we may not realize that our timing and delivery are off. If the griever needs to remain in a dark place for a while, then trying to offer some kind of cheer will be very hurtful. We must really *see* the person we are trying to comfort. Loss can become more meaningful- and more bearable- when reflected, and reflected accurately, in another's eyes.

**Unwitnessed Grief**

Sometimes people can't bring themselves to be with the person who is grieving. Perhaps they fear they won't be able to find the right thing to say, or they think it will be too hard on them to show up.

Life gives us pain. Our job is to experience it when it gets handed to us. Avoidance of loss has a cost. Having our pain seen and seeing the pain in others is a wonderful medicine for both body and soul.

In one of my lectures, a counselor said, “I have a client who can't go to funerals because she finds them too sad. What's the clinical term for that?”

I responded, “selfish, self-centered.” I wondered when people started to think they couldn't go to a funeral because it was going to be too sad. Life has peaks and valleys. It's our responsibility to be present for both.

**The Practical Griever**

Some grievers don't talk about their loss, they don't cry a river of tears. They get back to “normal” as soon as they can. They appear too strong. Perhaps disconnected. Since they don't publicly or privately cry or share their feelings with friends and family, they are often misunderstood. We mistakenly think this relates to how much they love the person. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such people may be labeled as having “delayed grief.” It's assumed that one of these days, when the pressure of denying their feelings builds up, their grief will come flooding through. I've learned that some people are what I think of as “practical grievers.” If you ask why they’re not crying they are likely to say something like, “I'd cry if it would bring them back, but it won't.”

We must witness grief as it is. Practical grievers often complain that everyone is trying to change and fix them. They don't need to be fixed. They need to be seen and respected for their own way of dealing with loss.

Robert and Joan had been married for twenty-five years. One day, Robert answered the phone and learned that his brother, Corey, had died of a massive heart attack. He knew his parents and Corey’s widow were too broken hearted to take on the responsibility of planning everything, so he went right into “doing what needed to be done” mode. He was the point person for all the arrangements. His sister-in-law says to this day that she can't imagine how she could have gotten through this difficult period without Robert’s help.

There were whispers at the funeral about how wonderfully Robert had stepped in, but had anyone seen him cry? No one had. Family members approached Joan privately and asked, “Has Robert cried with you?”

Joan had not seen him cry and she began to get worried. Over the next couple of weeks, she kept asking him how he was doing. “Do you miss Corey?”

“Of course I do,” he said.

“I just want you to know it's OK to be sad.”

“I know that and I am.”

After about six weeks, Joan suggested that her husband go to a therapist. He was taken aback by the comment and asked her, “What's wrong? Is something going on?”

“Well, Corey died, and I'm worried you're not feeling it.”

“I am feeling it. I don't cry like you, but I’m feeling it. I'm not sure what there is to say. He's gone. It's tragic. I'll miss him for the rest of my life. Nothing I say is going to bring him back.”

She came to me because she felt Robert might be blocked. I suggested that although it was natural for her to grieve openly and expressively, he might be a practical griever, and he was probably dealing with his loss in the way that was natural to him. I asked her to imagine how she would feel if someone were to say to her, “Stop grieving,” or, “You're grieving too much.” Just as that would interfere with her natural way of processing loss, I explained, doing the opposite with Robert, telling him to show more emotion, was disrespectful to his way of grieving.

Joan realized she had to acknowledge Robert’s way of grieving was as legitimate as crying a thousand tears.

**Chapter 3: The Meaning of Death**

Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete. – Victor Frankl

**Meaning Making through Stories**

I often teach that in grief, *pain is inevitable*, but suffering is optional. In my lectures, I make the distinction because most of us think of them as interchangeable. They are not. Pain is the pure emotion we feel when someone we love dies. The pain is part of the love. Suffering is the noise our mind makes around that loss, the false stories it tells because it can't conceive of death as random. Death can't just happen. There must be a reason, a fault. The mind looks for where to lay the blame, perhaps on ourselves, perhaps on someone else.

We blame another for the death of our loved one rather than the terminal illness she'd been sick with for two years. Our own version of our loved ones death- the story we tell ourselves about it- can either help us heal or keep us mired in suffering.

In a way, meaning both begins and ends with the stories we tell. Storytelling is a primal human need. The meaning begins with our own version of the story of our loved ones death. We all have a stock of stories that explain who we are, what we think, what we dream about, what we fear, what family has meant to us, and what we've accomplished.

Having those stories to tell is part of being human. In my grief workshops and retreats I often ask people to write about their loved ones’ deaths. This practice has been inspired in part by the work of social psychologist James Pennebaker of the University of Texas. He knew that people who experienced a traumatic event were more depressed, emotionally volatile, and died of cancer and heart disease at higher rates than those who had not experienced a traumatic event, which didn't surprise him. What did surprise him was that people who kept their trauma a secret experienced significantly higher rates of death than those who had spoken about it. This made him wonder whether sharing secrets would improve their health. It turned out that they didn't even have to share their secrets with others to benefit. Simply writing them down had a positive effect. His research showed that they went to the doctors less often, lowered their blood pressure, and had better (lower) heart rates. They also had fewer feelings of anxiety and depression.

I can testify from my personal experience how helpful this can be. As I've often recounted at my workshops and lectures, I've used storytelling to guide me through the grief work I've done over the death of my mother. The pain I felt from her death lasted many years because there was so much unresolved anger and hurt complicating my grief. I told the story of her death many times over, which simply reinforced my longstanding feelings of victimhood. But eventually I decided to write about it instead in the voices of the other two people most central to the story: my parents.

First I wrote about it in the voice of my father. I had always judged him harshly for how poorly he handled my grief. Late one night, not long after my mother died, I got out of bed and went into his room. “Dad,” I asked, “Do you think mom still exists and she could still be around us?”

“It's late,” he said. “Go back to bed.”

I didn't know what to make of that response. Maybe he just wasn't grieving like I was. Maybe he hadn't loved her. Or maybe I was asking the wrong questions. I couldn't understand why we weren't talking about my mother. But we never did, so I was left to grieve in isolation. I realize now that my father was not a man who trafficked in the world of feelings. I never heard him talk about his grief or anyone else’s. He was a problem solver who was always trying to figure out how to do the next thing. Grief, however, was not something he saw as a problem that might deserve attention.

Years later, when I decided to write his side of the story, I imagined for the first time what it must had been like for him to lose his wife and become a single parent caring for a thirteen-year-old child. My mom had always been the hands-on parent. He was the provider. Now he had a whole new role to play on top of everything else he was dealing with. I could see what an overwhelming situation this must have been for him. I thought of him overworked, in deep grief at the end of a long day, and then being awakened from sleep by his son asking him strange hypothetical questions that he had no idea how to answer. Instead of judgment, I found compassion for him.

Then I wrote the story from my mother's point of view. She had spent so much of her life in and out of hospitals, frequently in intensive care units. I wasn't told much about what was happening, and my only recollection of those hospital stays was that she occasionally left for a few days. From my viewpoint, it was like having my mom go on a business trip. Now I can only imagine what that must have entailed. I never thought about how frightening that must have been for her.

When she did come home, I never asked her about where she'd been and she never said. What could it have been like for her to know she was dying and leaving behind her husband and her son? I realized how painful it must have been for her. The shift in the story also enabled me to understand for the first time that my mother hadn't abandoned me. My mother had died, but abandonment was how my young mind had interpreted it. The story I'd been telling myself about my mother's death had been my prison for years. When I retold it through the eyes of my parents and realized how hard her sickness and death must have been for them, and how much they loved me and tried to protect me from being hurt, it became my freedom. I felt a deep gratitude to them.

**Death Be Not Proud**

“Death be not proud” is the first line of the seventeenth-century sonnet by John Dunn, which has been used to comfort mourners for centuries with the idea that death is only a portal to eternal life. This is one way of not allowing death to be seen as some kind of triumph over us.

One of the most important lessons I learned in writing my first book, *The Needs of the Dying*, is that the way we view death reflects how we look at life. If death is simply an enemy that triumphs over us in the end, a horrible trick of nature that defeats us, then our lives are meaningless. Too often the language we use about death reinforces that idea. In our modern society, death is spoken of as a failure, as though it were optional, and if only we fought hard enough against it we could defeat it- despite the fact that our mortality rate is 100 percent.

Apparently, no matter how great our life, we are destined to fail in the end. That doesn't have to be our understanding of either life or death, however.

If we allow ourselves to live with the consciousness of death, it will enrich us by making us understand how precious life is. Confronting the reality that we are born, we flourish, and when our time comes, we die, we will live our lives from a meaningful place and live our deaths in a meaningful way.

The Saints and poets may know how to see the gift of our days, but most of us do not. We are devastated when our days with someone we love comes to an end. We don't appreciate those days until it's too late. But painful as it is, if we can view the approach of death as a reminder to us to value every moment, we can find new sources of meaning.

**The Love That Lives On**

Everything that lives must die. But while life has to end, love doesn't. As the sun sets on the final days of someone we love, we may indeed want to “rage against the dying of the light.” But it's worth reflecting on the fact that although we perceive the sun as setting, that's only because the earth is rotating, turning away from the sun. Soon it will turn back, and we will begin a journey toward another day. Is that also true for our loved ones?

How you answer that may depend on your religious and/or spiritual views. If you believe in an afterlife, then you will believe that your loved one will indeed live on. But even if you have no such belief in which to find comfort, the end of your loved ones life is not the end of your relationship, since your love lives on. Just as my relationship with my mother has continued to evolve in a half century since she died, all of us have the potential not just to hold onto the love we had, but to nourish and grow it.

Death is the ultimate change, the ultimate end. It is a change we think we can't understand and an ending we think we can't survive. But although the change happens whether we want it or not, we can find freedom in accepting it, and in understanding it as a prelude to something else.

When people go to a hospice or a nursing home, many of them don't know why there are butterflies painted on the walls. Shortly after the end of World War II, when Elizabeth Kubler-Ross visited different concentration camps, she saw pictures of butterflies etched in the walls everywhere she looked. She found it very strange that people who were dying would draw butterflies. She said it wasn't until many years later, when she began working with dying children and noticed that they, too, would draw butterflies, that she finally understood why. She realized that for the dying butterflies were a symbol of transformation, not of death, but of life continuing, no matter what. Although your relationship with your loved one will change after death, it will also continue, no matter what. The challenge will be to make it a meaningful one.

**Chapter 4: The First Step in Finding Meaning**

The first step in finding meaning is the fifth stage of grief: acceptance. We don't like loss. We will never be OK with it, but we must accept it, even in its brutality and, in time, acknowledge the reality of it.

Acceptance doesn't happen all at once. You accept *some* of the reality that your loved one is gone when you make arrangements at the funeral home. But the acceptance is only partial. The death still isn't real to you. You'll be cycling back and forth between the various stages of grief for some time to come, perhaps spending long months in one stage, only brief days in another. Acceptance grow slowly in us.

In the first months after my son's death, I stood over his grave and yelled, “Is this going to be the rest of my life, standing over your grave?” I turned to the skies in search of God and asked, “How could you let an accident like this happen?” I was traumatized, grief-stricken, and in rage.

In my mind I fast-forward to images of years to come, picturing myself stuck forever in that moment, my son David still missing, my pain never-ending. I kept my gaze on the heavens, walking back and forth as I said, “Really, David? Really, God? This is going to be it?”

This is what acceptance looked like from me early on. I visited David's grave and I accepted that he was dead. My limited acceptance was only because I saw his body go into the ground. Otherwise, I couldn't believe he was gone. But that early acceptance was also mixed with anger, and in my anger I thought my pain would always be that enormous.

Three years later, the scene looked very different. I lay quietly at David's grave, looking down at the grass and up to the heavens and saying, “This is it, David. This is our life.” For me, it was a moment of deep acceptance. With a lot of help and support, I had moved beyond anger and found some peace.

To find that peace, we cannot skip over the challenging stages of acceptance. It's not unusual for me to see people early on in their grief trying to jump into meaning prematurely. They find a temporary rush of purpose. Perhaps they’re speaking out about a cause that was important to their loved one, or they’re starting a foundation. Or raising awareness about the circumstances of their loved one’s death. I often see these people a year later, after they have given the speeches or started their foundations, when they find themselves newly overwhelmed with grief. Often they will sound like I did early on at David's grave. “So this is going to be my life now? Giving speeches and running a foundation? That's it?”

They have to recalibrate their grief. I tell them, “I'm so glad you were able to move forward so fast and find so much meaning, but you might need to go back and revisit some of the earlier stages, like anger or acceptance or both.”

In my workshops I ask people to write down what parts of their loved ones deaths they have accepted and what parts they haven't. This exercise guides them to the areas of their grief that have not yet been resolved. It leads them to the feelings that still need to be expressed. That is where their work and healing lie- in those feelings.

I love the quote, “If I had my life to live over again, I would find you sooner so that I could love you longer.” Whoever wrote it wrote from a place of acceptance, and understanding of the inevitability of death.

I was sitting with a grieving woman who was telling me how painful her life was without her husband. I listened patiently and recognized the pain she was feeling in the moment, but I was listening for something else. She looked at me in tears and said, “This pain will never end.” When I hear this from a person in grief, I understand why she is suffering so deeply.

“Your pain will not always be like this,” I told her. “It will change.” This is a message that the grieving needs to hear, and in the moment of saying that, I often observe a shift. The person looks at me and says, “It will?” and he or she suddenly becomes lighter.

When I do this with someone in front of an audience, they are shocked at the visible change they witness. They want to know what I did that brought about the shift. It all goes back to letting the person know that while pain from loss is inevitable, suffering is optional. I tell the person, “I cannot take away your pain. It's not my place to do that. Your pain is yours. It's part of the love you feel. What I can do, however, is to let you know that if you look for meaning, your pain will change, your suffering will end.”

When the voice in someone's mind is whispering that they will always feel what they are feeling, now I can interrupt that voice by offering the possibility of a way out, a future- through meaning.

The mind can be cruel and grief. Concentration camp survivors often talk about the horrific situations they had to endure. The physical suffering was unbearable. But they also talk about the internal suffering they experienced when they were unable to picture a future. The torture of not knowing when they would get out, if ever, was even worse than their other tortures. The thought of a future without a release date deprived them of any sense of purpose and condemned them to the horrors of the present. But as long as you are alive you have a future, and the promise of release from your current pain.

To bring this idea to life, on the first day of retreats, I often ask people to write a letter to their past. They usually write something about how wonderful life was when their loved ones were still alive and how terrible it is without them. They write about past losses, the horrible wounds of yesterday, and all their losses.

On the second day, I ask them to write letters to their future selves. They write sympathy letters, such as, I'm sorry you still hurt so much. Then we talk about the fact that their future lives may be very different from what they have imagined. As hard as it is to understand this now, the future doesn't have to be- and probably won't be- the way they think it will be.

On the last day, I ask them to write another letter about the future they envision for themselves. I ask them to write in all caps on the top, MY FUTURE. Then I sit. They wait awkwardly for further instructions. I remain quiet until someone eventually asks, “Are you going to tell us what to write or give us some direction?”

“Sure” I respond. “Look at your paper. What do you see?”

Someone shouts out, “A blank piece of paper.”

“*Yes*. That is your future,” I say. “Blank. It isn't written yet. You are the writer. Not your past, not your losses, not death. But you. You are the creator of your future. Don't let your mind tell you otherwise. Your future is blank as of now. As the saying goes, *Don't let your past dictate your future*.”

**The Meaning of Our Thoughts**

How do our minds create the future? What role do your thoughts play in all of this? After loss, do you have any control over anything, much less your mind? Can you do anything to shape the meaning you attach to what has happened?

The answer is yes, you do have control. Your thoughts create meaning. Meaning guides the story in your mind, the story you tell yourself as well as the story you tell others. I'm healing versus I'm stuck. I will never live again versus I will live a life to honor my loved one.

The story you tell yourself repeatedly becomes your meaning. Just as the story I told myself for many years about the past- about my mother's death- kept me imprisoned in pain, the story I began to tell myself from other points of view freed me. So, too, can the stories you tell yourself about the future help to free you from the pain you are feeling now.

When you notice your interpretation of a story, notice your tone and your perception of the past and future. Think about the meaning you are bringing to it:

**Original Meaning** **New Meaning**

This death happened to me. Death happens.

I’m a victim. I am a victor because I have survived this loss.

This death was a punishment. Death is usually random.

Why did this happen to me? Everyone gets something in this lifetime.

It happened because of something. There was nothing I could have done.

My story is the saddest one. My story had very sad parts.

Along with having people examine the way they perceive and tell their stories, I asked them to remove two words from their vocabulary: *never* and *always*. When someone says they'll never be happy again, I tell them it may be true, but research shows it doesn't have to be true. They will often respond with, “Not after this horrible event has happened to me.” I tell them about a study years ago in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that compared lottery winners to people who were paralyzed in accidents. It seemed to show that we have an internal baseline for happiness. In the long-term, winning the lottery didn't increase happiness as much as others thought it would, and a catastrophic accident didn't make people as unhappy as one might expect. Your life will never be the same, but happiness again is still also possible. Never being happy again is a statement about the future. But no one can predict the outcome. All they can know for sure is that they are unhappy today. It helps to say, “I'm unhappy today,” and leave it at that.

**The World Outside Our Loss**

Sometimes after we have reached acceptance and fully felt our pain, we may need to step outside of it and look at it from another perspective, to see how other people make meaning from their losses. Realizing that you're not alone in pain can be helpful.

**Changing the Meaning**

How does the search for meaning help those who have endured some of life's worst events? What kinds of stories can they tell themselves that will be true to what they have experienced and also to their healing?

I talked to a colleague, Duane, who works with people who have been through terrible situations that often contain traumatic grief. How does he help them find meaning from such experiences? “I look at the meaning the person is giving the event,” he said, “and then I helped them change the meaning, not the event. The event is not going to be any different, but the meaning can be, and this can help them to deal with the loss.”

Changing the meaning of an event is not easy, and often it's too challenging to do on our own. Sometimes friends can help, sometimes counselors and therapists may be necessary.

The reality is that no two people will react to an event in the same way. How you respond will depend upon the meaning you see in it. And like all perceptions of meaning, this will be influenced not just by the event itself, but by your cultural background, your family, religion, temperament, and life experience. Meaning comes from all that has made you who you are.

Trauma expert Janina Fisher tells patients, “You won't feel hope for a long time- hope comes after we begin to feel safer and better.” Finding a sense of hope about the future is important in grief, because people continually replaying negative memories signifies that they are stuck in the past.

Allowing yourself only to focus on the past, however miserably, can seem easier, more comfortable, than deciding to live fully in a world without your loved one. The negative can be comforting in it's familiarity, while deciding to move forward can be frightening because it makes you feel like you're losing your loved one not once, but twice. It's also scary because it requires you to move into the unknown, into a life that is different without that person. Many of us know someone who lost a loved one and refused to build a new life afterward. They may have held on to their loved ones possessions, turned the loved one’s bedroom into a shrine that can never be altered, held fast to all the old routines. At the other extreme they may remove all traces of the loved one’s presence. Neither one is healthy. We must move slowly into the unknown of life after death. Underneath the reluctance to live or love again is fear. Pain seems safer. This reminds me of a quote by John A. Shedd: “A ship in harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.”

When we are grieving, we want to stay in harbor. It's a good place to be for a while. It's where we refuel, rebuild, repair. But in the same way ships are meant to sail, we are meant to eventually leave our safe harbor, to take the risk of loving again, to find new adventures, to live a life after loss, and maybe even to help another.

**The Parable of the Long Spoons**

I tell people who feel stuck in grief that the way forward is to help another person in grief. As the Buddha says, if you are a lamp for someone else, it will brighten your path.

I'm not suggesting anything radical. It could be as simple as posting a kind word online to a newly bereaved person or taking a casserole to a grieving family or donating to a charity after a natural disaster. This is for your sake as much as for the other person as we help them heal.

There is something about collaboration for the greater good that is programmed into our DNA. If you've had a year of grief and know how the worst possible pain feels, you also know the comfort of a kind word or a loving gesture. If you can find it in yourself to give to someone else, it will help two people- the recipient of the kindness, and you. It will also help you become unstuck without you even realizing it.

The parable of the long spoons illustrates this point. A person is ushered through the gates of hell where he is surprised to find that they are made of finely wrought gold. They are exquisite, and as is the lush green landscape that lies beyond them. He looks at his guide in disbelief. “It's all so beautiful,” he says. “The site of the meadows and mountains. The sounds of the birds singing in the trees and the scent of thousands of flowers. This can't be hell.”

When the tantalizing aroma of a gourmet meal catches his attention, he enters a large dining hall. There are rows of tables laden with platters of sumptuous food, but the people seated around the tables are pale and emaciated, moaning in hunger. As he gets closer, he sees that each person is holding a spoon, but the spoon is so long he can't get the food to his mouth. Everyone is screaming and starving in agony.

Now he goes to another area where he encounters the same beauty he witnessed in hell. He sees the same scene in the dining hall with the same long spoons. But here in heaven the people seated at the tables are cheerfully talking and eating because one person is feeding someone sitting across from him.

Heaven and hell offer the same circumstances and conditions. The difference is the way people treat each other. Choosing to be kind creates one kind of reality. Choosing to be self-centered creates another.

**Chapter 5: The Decision**

Each of us has a decision to make about how to heal from a loss. Before you make it, it's important to understand that not making a decision *is* a decision. Healing does not allow for neutrality. It's an active process, not a passive one. Each of us must decide whether or not we want to live again. The decision is a subtle yet most powerful one. Living is different from being alive. We come out of loss alive, but we're not living yet.

I was fortunate to spend a little time with Mother Teresa at her Home for the Dying Destitute in India the year before she died. Although she was old and frail, she seemed like the happiest person I had ever met. She told me, “Life is an achievement.” When I point that out to people who are feeling helpless, they begin to understand that they can find strength and meaning by making a conscious decision to continue to live. When people show up at my grief support groups, I tell them I'm there to help them grieve and to help them live. I thank them for coming and tell them I know how much courage it must have taken for them simply to walk in the door. They'll tell me, “But I hurt so much, and life is so hard.” I remind them that finding meaning will help them deal with the pain and that meaning is everywhere.

The decision to live fully is about being present for life, no matter how hard life is at the moment. It's about what you are made of, not what happens to you.

If I want a life with no loss, I also get a life with no love, no spouse or partner, no children, no friends, and no pets. Avoiding the prospect of loss also means avoiding the joys of life. C.S. Lewis said in his book *The Problem of Pain*, “Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself.”

Many readers will think, “It's too late for me. I'm past the point of being able to live again.” There is a Chinese proverb that asks the question, “When is the best time to plant a tree?” The answer is twenty years ago. When is the second-best time? Now. People say to me, “I'm trying.” I tell them, “There is no trying. Living again is a decision. It's also a declaration. The intent precedes the action and the result.”

You can't just wake up and see if today is the day you'll act. Yoda from *Star Wars* was correct: “Do or do not, there is no try.” Even a small decision makes a difference.

**Disloyalty**

I often see in people who were married or people who were in long term relationships that they are concerned about starting to date again or doing anything that would translate to being disloyal to their loved one. There is an unspoken belief that to enjoy life after the death of someone dear to them will mean that they didn't really love that person.

I believe that this uneasiness comes in part from the fact that for most of us, there is no defined period of mourning. Whenever I hear someone who is concerned about disloyalty, I gently tell them that their marriage contract ends at death. It is done. No one’s vows include the afterlife.

Sometimes it has even been the spouse who has paved the way for this return to live and love. Years ago I worked at a hospice where a woman named Marjorie was sitting with her dying husband, Luke. “I don't know what I'm going to do after you’re gone,” she told him. “I don't know how I'll live again.” He said to her, “Miss me, but love again.” “How can I love again? I don't know what to do with all this love I have for you.” “Spread it around,” he said. “Give it to your friends and family. If you meet another man, give it to him. It was my honor to have it for this long and I'll take a part of it with me.”

My nephew, Jeffrey, was a well-loved TV comedy writer. He and his wife wrote for successful shows like *The Nanny* and *Third Rock from the Sun*. When he was in his forties, he was diagnosed with leukemia. He fought cancer with his wit and wisdom. When the medical team was getting him ready for a bone marrow procedure, he had a massive brain bleed and died. His death was quite unexpected, since he'd been doing so well. And yet, he'd prepared for it.

After his death, his wife was going through his things and found a letter he had written to her just in case something went wrong. He knew that at some point the question of her dating again would have to come up and he wanted to make sure she knew his views on this. He wrote:

*My love, this will sound crazy in light of what's happened, but you should do whatever you need to be happy in this life. Despite what you may think, you deserve to be happy. If you find someone else to be with someday, no matter who it is, if they make you happy that's what I want for you. You still have your whole life ahead of you. Make the most of it. I did.*

*Love forever,*

*Jeffrey*

Of course not everyone who loses someone they loved deeply will believe that they have been given this kind of permission. When two people are in love, it can be difficult for either of them to imagine their sweetheart in love with someone else. The fiancé of a friend of mine was killed in a car accident when she was twenty-two. He was twenty-four, in deep grief, and he swore he would never love again. He spent the next few years mourning her death.

He asked me to lunch one day and said, “I’ve never loved anyone the way I loved Shannon. But in a couple of years, I'm going to be thirty. I've been wondering if I'm prepared to spend the rest of my life alone.”

I asked him what he thought Shannon would have wanted. “She would have hated the idea of my being with someone else.”

This was not what I expected to hear. But after a minute I said, “Do you believe in an afterlife?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Your grief has brought you a lot of wisdom. When I asked you what Shannon would want, you thought about that sweet, innocent, twenty-two-year-old girl. I believe that her death has matured you and made you wiser. And I have to believe it has done the same for her. A wiser Shannon in the afterlife might say something completely different now. Wherever she is and whatever she's doing, I'm sure you wish her love. And why wouldn't you expect the same kind of generosity from her?”

Another reason for being reluctant to live again is that we don't want the finality of a goodbye. Sometimes we need help making the decision to say our goodbyes to them in life and move our loved ones into our hearts in death.

A woman in one of my retreats was grieving the death of her fiancé, Evan, who had died during the war in Afghanistan. She told me it was the anniversary of their engagement that night.

“Earlier in the day,” Tina said, “I went to my safe deposit box at the bank to get my engagement ring. It's been nine years since he died, but there are moments, like today, when I'm still in the throes of my grief for him. There are times when it feels like it's hitting me like a brick.”

I asked her what her goal was at the retreat.

“To find peace and fully grieve Evan, so I can move forward.”

“What would you like to have in your life now?”

“Love,” she replied. “I want to fall in love again. I don't understand what the problem is. It's been nine years but I just can't seem to forget Evan.”

“Tina,” I said gently. “You don't need to forget Evan in order to make room in your life for someone else. It's not about forgetting him. But you do need to let him go.”

“What makes you think I haven't let him go?”

“Tina, at the same time that you're telling me you want to find love, you're also telling me you went to your safe deposit box today to retrieve your engagement ring. Doesn't that suggest that you're still holding on to the past?”

Tina laughed, but countered: “What does that have to do with my love life now?”

“Don't you think that that ring represents a connection that might get in the way of forming a relationship with a new man?”

“I just tried on a ring, that's all. I don't usually wear it. I have a hope chest of his things, like his uniform, his medals, a yellow ribbon, and some journals that I kept while he was gone. I put the chest in the attic, since I knew it wouldn't be a great thing to have in my bedroom if I decided to bring another man into my life. But the flag is still in my living room.”

“What flag?”

“The flag from his casket, she replied. “I'd like to think that I can find a balance between remembering Evan and creating another life for myself.”

“Tina, I have great respect for Evan and the sacrifice he made for his country. And I certainly understand your desire to honor him for it. My mother also had a flag on her casket, because she served in the Coast Guard. It's in my closet with a few other special possessions from her life that I really treasure. Her memory occupies space in my heart but except for a couple of photos of her, not in my living room. You've created space to honor Evan’s death front and center in your living room. There's nothing wrong with that. But if you want another man to occupy that space someday, you might consider how that would make him feel.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I don't want you to get rid of the flag from Evan’s casket, but you could move it to a much less conspicuous place. Somewhere that wouldn't make a date feel as though he was intruding on another deceased soldier's turf. Or you could just put it in the chest with all your other memorabilia and take it out every once in a while when you are really missing him.”

She said, “That's interesting. I'll think about that.”

“One more thing,” I said. “If the roles were reversed and it was you who had died, what advice would you give Evan if he had your flag in his living room and had invited a date over for dinner?”

“I would say he should give the girl a fighting chance! Move the flag. It's not me. You can remember me without having to see me every day.” She looked down. “Okay, okay, maybe I'm still hanging on a little.”

Tina, like everyone who is in mourning, has many layers of acceptance to move through. If she had come to me sometime in the first year or two after losing Evan, I would never had told her to move memorabilia that related to him to a less prominent place in her home. However, when we spoke it was nine years after Evan’s death, and she was clear about the fact that she wanted to find love again. I don't think Evan would have wanted to sentence Tina to years of loneliness. Although I'm sure he would want to be remembered, as all of us hope we will be, that needn't mean that she can't find space in her heart-and her home- for another man.

No matter how long you work together, it's not enough time, but the love you shared is not gone. The experience of love that you had can never be destroyed or changed by a new love. That love will exist forever in its own time, in its own way, in your heart. But more love can be available to you if you desire. Your heart can have many loves in its lifetime. And new love can grow out of the same soil without diminishing a past love. You still have a life. It was one you didn't prepare for and you didn't want. But this road is still worth traveling. Your story is still in the making, waiting for you to find it.

A man in his late forties told me after a lecture, “My family wanted me to talk to you. I haven't cared about living since my wife died five years ago.”

I asked for an example of what he meant.

“I don't care about going to family weddings. I don't care what's going on with the kids or the grandkids.”

“Would your wife have cared about the children or the weddings?”

“Oh yes.”

“What would she have thought about your decision not to engage with anyone in your life? Your decision not to live?”

That stopped him. “No, I didn't make that decision!”

I asked him to think about the reality that on some level he did.

We often don't realize that the decision to live is an active one that requires our participation. There will be a period when it's too painful to consider life again. Then there comes a time when, coasting along, we’re almost shocked to notice that life does continue. All around us it's happening. That's when we must actively decide whether to join it. We're capable of more love throughout our lives than we realize.

As a bereaved parent, I, too, have wrestled with the concept of disloyalty. After David's death, I only allowed myself to laugh after telling a funny story about him. A smile or a laugh felt okay if it was connected to him, but not otherwise. I don't remember exactly when it happened or what it was about, but at a certain point, I just laughed at something. I was startled, because it was the first time my laughter didn't relate to David, and I was immediately flooded with tears and self-judgment. What kind of parent was I to be able to laugh again when my son was dead? I could not have imagined that this was possible, and now that I had done it, I didn't think it was right.

I sat in that lost place for a while. Life continued around me. Focusing on others helped. My other son, Richard, still deserved to smile. The young kids in my family still looked for a laugh when they did something funny. Day by day, I had to beat down the belief that living again was a dishonor to my son who had died. I had to create a new image in my mind of what loyalty to David would look like. Loyalty would mean a full life, not ever forgetting, but putting his love into everything I did and everything I am.

**The Shattered Vase**

Stephen Joseph is a psychologist and professor in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham in the UK. He tells a story he calls “The Shattered Vase.” “What if you accidentally break a treasured vase into small pieces?” he asked. “What do you do? You have a choice to try to put the vase back together, but it will never be the same. The other choice is to pick up the beautiful colored pieces and use them to make something new. Perhaps a colorful mosaic heart could be created.”

What do you do after the familiar life you loved gets broken, like the vase? You can try to put your life back together exactly as it was, but it will remain fractured, vulnerable. Those who accept the breakage and build themselves anew become more resilient and open to new ways of living. I remind people that *broken crayons can still color*, and while our lives may feel broken, we still have the potential to create something beautiful.

I'm not asking you to be an optimist about what happened. I'm not asking you to see the glass half full. There is nothing half full about your loved one dying. I'm asking you to be optimistic about your future, to hope that you can still create a life worth living. If you're reading this book, you're probably not there yet. I wasn't there when I started writing it. But the fact that you *are* reading this book is a small statement of hope.

After David died, I could not find my footing. It was as though I was no longer on solid ground and I felt myself falling, falling, into a bottomless pit of pain. But I had learned a lot from the losses of my mother and father as well as the countless people in grief with whom I've had the privilege of sitting. I understood that the pit of pain could become the place into which I could pour the concrete for a new foundation in my life- a foundation on which I would be able to stand in the future. I can't undo what happened. David’s death will never be okay, and I'm never going to forget David. That's not going to happen. But I am hopeful about what I can make of my life in the future, and that is my form of optimism.

**Part II- Challenges in Grief**

**Chapter 6: Finding Meaning in Why**

There are many variations of the *haunting Why question*: Why did my child die? Why was my loved one murdered? Why did my husband die in a car accident the day after we got married? Why did tragedy strike us? Why him? Why her? Why them? There must be a reason. Life can't be that cruel and random.

Many people spend years looking for a why answer that will never come. But finding meaning is still possible. You can find meaning in why your loved one *lived*. What did your loved one get out of being here? And what did you get out of knowing him or her? Did anything good come from their relationship? Did anything good come out of the death?

People often have a knee-jerk reactions to that question, assuring me that no good could possibly come of their loss. But it can. Perhaps you are a more compassionate person now. Perhaps the tragedy helped change the way you deal with other people who have suffered losses. Maybe your loved ones death shed a public light on violence or brought attention to a deadly disease. Even in the worst tragedies, people are often surprised to find some good.

There's also the *why me question*, which I hear a lot in my work with grieving people. The answer may be hard to hear. In my workshops, we don't deal with this until the second day because the answer *is* so challenging. I guide people gently into it. I begin by asking each person in the room to state something bad that has happened in his or her life. It may not be the loss that brought them there. It could be something else. All kinds of answers arise. One person tells about being bullied, the next person about being raped. Someone’s brother died when he was young. Someone else's house just burned down. A person was molested as a child. Another had an alcoholic father or a bipolar mother. The litany of losses and griefs goes on and includes everything from death to betrayal, miscarriage to chronic disease.

After we go around the room, I say, “Everyone has something. My guess is that many of you have more than one thing. Does anyone have nothing? Is there anyone here whose life has been perfect? No loss? No pain?”

No hands go up.

“So no one has had a perfect past,” I continue. “Do any of you see a future without pain or loss?”

Still no hands.

Then I ask them what they got out of hearing about other people's losses. Did it affect their question of *why me*? Someone will say some version of, “I guess the real question is, Why not me? Why did I think I was going to get through this life without sorrow, pain, or grief?”

That's the deal in this life, the good and the bad. No one gets just the good.

When you consider how to find meaning in your life, you probably think only the big moments count. But they *all* do. Whether you're donating a million dollars to a worthy cause or saying a kind word to the checkout person at the grocery store, volunteering at the local soup kitchen, or just being considerate to the driver trying to enter the lane in front of you, everything you do has the potential for meaning.

I remember a meeting I went to with my son, David, when he needed health insurance. I'd made the plan for the meeting even though he was totally uninterested in getting insurance. This just wasn't something he thought was important. Because he had resisted going, I imagined a tense meeting where he would roll his eyes at every suggestion the agent threw out. But that isn't how the meeting went.

The insurance agent wasn't anyone I knew- just someone whose name I'd pulled from a local listing- so I had no idea what to expect. It turned out she wasn't like any insurance agent I'd ever imagined. When Talley entered the room, it was as if she had walked on stage. With short blonde hair that had a pink streak running through it, she looked far too hip to be selling insurance. She was funny, sarcastic, and a bit irreverent. But she was not putting forth any special effort. For her, this was just another business meeting, we were just two of her many clients, and she was simply being herself. Because of who she was and how she interacted with David, however, what could have been a stressful, unpleasant meeting turned out fine. At the end of the meeting, David reached out and shook her hand to thank her and we walked out, both of us happy that he now had health insurance. We hugged goodbye. That meeting was the last time I would ever see David alive.

Tally will forever be meaningful in my life. She helped create a memory that I will always cherish. She didn't know that this would be the last encounter I would have with my son. She wasn't trying to create a big moment, but as it turned out, because of her, a completely routine meeting became something that will forever mean the world to me. This is how life works. We affect others in ways we will never know, often by simply being ourselves.

**Survivor’s Guilt**

When someone has survivor’s guilt, they may believe that they should be dead and the loved one should be alive- perhaps because the person died while doing something the survivor was supposed to do. It may be that the survivor thinks they could have done something to prevent the death. Or maybe the person who died was young and the survivor is old and feels that he or she should have gone first in the natural order of things. Whatever the reason, when there is guilt, there's a demand for punishment, so survivors will often punish themselves or attract people who will do it for them.

**Playing God**

When we don't have a *why*, we tend to jump in and play God. We tell ourselves, “I could have prevented his death,” or “It should have been me.” This means we are attributing to ourselves a power that we don't have. We don't get to decide who lives and who dies.

Archie's wife, Stella, had died of cancer about a year earlier. Although he was still deep in grief when we met, he didn't seem to have any bitterness or survivors guilt. The story he told me was that when they met and fell in love, Stella had a wonderful son, Jake, from her first marriage. After they got married, Archie and Stella had another child together, Nick. During her pregnancy with Nick, Stella found a lump in her breast. Her doctor told her it wasn't unusual to have swollen glands in preparation for breast-feeding, and she felt reassured. Although she hadn't planned on having another child so soon after Nick, shortly after he was born Stella became pregnant again. And again she found a lump in her breast, which the doctor reassured her was normal during pregnancy. Their second son, Tyler, was born, and all seemed well. Jake loved his two younger brothers, and Archie and Stella felt their family was now complete.

Soon after, however, Stella had a checkup, and test results revealed that the lump had been cancer all along. She has stage IV cancer. She and her family had a strong faith in God and they believed that she would be healed. But after a few years of multiple rounds of chemotherapy, it was clear that her life was winding down. One evening toward the end three-year-old Tyler climbed into bed with his parents. As Stella gently stroked his hair, Archie told her that a coworker of his had said that God really got this one wrong. Stella looked up at him and said, “We can't play God.”

After Tyler fell asleep, Archie said, “Honey, if I'd pushed you to get this checked sooner, you'd be healthy now.”

Stella looked at him and said, “All I know is that if I had been checked for cancer and it was found, I'd have had chemo and wouldn't have been able to have kids after that. Sweet Tyler wouldn't be here now, and neither would Nick.”

Archie agreed, but he still wished she had gotten the lump checked sooner. Stella grabbed his hand and said, “Sweetheart, nothing in me regrets having done what I did, because the result is we have these two children. I'm telling you this because I don't want any of you to feel guilty later. Or blame God. I don't know how God figures out who lives or who dies. Or if it's random and God is there with us in the randomness. I do want you to know that it means the world to me that if I have to leave, I leave knowing that my boys will have each other for their whole lives, and you will have them.”

Stella's wise words helped Archie avoid both survivor's guilt and God blaming. To begin to heal, you must give the power back to God, the universe, fate, or whatever you believe in. That might mean you begin to acknowledge your anger at God. I believe that God is big enough to handle your anger and rage. You may have to talk to a spiritual leader, scream in the car, do grief yoga, pound on a pillow, find some other form of emotional and physical release. When you do begin to release some of that anger, you start to recognize that if your loved one died, and you didn't, it was *not supposed* to be you. How do you know? Because if it was supposed to be you, it would have been. Since you are alive, you need to think about what you intend to do with that life. The *why* you must answer is not why your loved one died, but why you lived. Why are you here? What meaning can you bring to the rest of your life? What meaning can you find in those who are living?

**No Useful Moves**

The moves of the past have been played, but for the survivor, the future has many possibilities. When I work with someone suffering from survivor’s guilt, I often begin with the little moments. The survivor thinks, “I should be the dead one.” I bring them into this moment and say, “But you can see you're still here. This moment when you and I are connecting and talking about your pain has meaning. Sharing your pain always has meaning.”

There is no making sense of the death, but I help them find a little control in their *why* question.

I ask them these questions:

* How can you honor your loved one?
* How can you create a different life that includes them?
* How can you use your experience to help others?

It is in your control to find meaning every day. You can still love, laugh, grow, pray, smile, cry, live, give, be grateful, be present. You can take the other moments as they come. That can be the meaning. In the end, no matter how hard it is, if we allow ourselves to spend time searching for the meaning in our loss, it will appear because of our search and the healing will happen.

We may not know *why* a loved one died, and we remain, but that is the reality. The life that was lost was precious. If we have been granted more time, shouldn't we believe that our life is also precious?

**Chapter 7: Suicide**

Never is the torment of self-blaming more acute, or the if-only thoughts more tormenting, than in the aftermath of a death by suicide. We don't talk much about suicide if it's something that has affected us personally. Too painful, too taboo, too laden with unresolved feelings.

**If Only**

When people grieve a death by suicide, they are inevitably haunted by their failure to have stopped it. Having talked to countless people who have lost a loved one to suicide, I can tell you that our minds can be very cruel. Our thoughts betray us and beat us up. One of the first things I say to such people is that when someone is intent on harming themselves, we may be powerless to prevent it. We should always try, but we cannot blame ourselves after the fact. Suicide is often an impulsive act, undertaken in a moment of despair. It can happen after years of psychotherapy, antidepressants, hospitalizations, and even shock therapy. Several recent celebrity deaths have driven that point home.

Death by suicide is not a selfish act or even a choice. It's a sign of a mind that needs help. It's a horrific outcome to a tragic situation. We know from countless people who have survived a suicide attempt that they weren't looking to die. They felt they just couldn't continue to live in so much pain. Some suicides are driven by external circumstances- people are in overwhelming debt or they've lost the person they most loved or they have a serious chronic illness, or legal issues or substance-abuse problems. But many who died by suicide lived lives that can only be described as ideal, at least from the outside. They had families and friends who loved them, plenty of money, beautiful homes, professional success, yet they were tormented. Why? I think that for those of us without suicidal tendencies, it is almost impossible to imagine what it's like for those who do have them. Clinical depression itself is a serious illness, which can lead to suicide.

**The Stigma of Suicide**

Even if people are sympathetic, the stigma attached to suicide remains. It's difficult to speak about it in normal conversation or in mainstream discourse. You can go to a health center and easily get information about causes of cancer or disease, but not much about the causes of suicide.

People who lost a loved one to suicide often think that this doesn't happen in good families, or to good people. They may feel that suicide is a rare and shameful event and try to keep it quiet. But once they start to talk about what happened, they will almost certainly discover others who have gone through it, too, because it's actually the tenth most common cause of death in the United States. They may be shocked to find out how many of their acquaintances have had a death of someone dear to them through suicide.

Nonetheless, the stigma remains. Studies have shown that a family grieving after a death by suicide receives much less support than if their loved one died of cancer. Fewer people attend the funeral and the family receives fewer sympathy calls because of the false belief that the dead brought this upon themselves and therefore the death is not as worthy of being warned. The family members themselves may feel this way, too. Since shame is part of the loss, some may invent a false story about the death, saying that their loved one died of a sudden heart attack or a stroke or whatever.

**Routes to Freedom**

Finding some kind of meaning in a death by suicide may seem impossible. The same feelings of hopelessness that caused a person to take their life may overwhelm the survivors. When I counsel people who have had a death by suicide, I tell them first that they have to separate the pain from the suffering. Pain is a natural reaction to death, whether it's by suicide or any other means, but suffering is what our mind does to us. Although this is something I often say to those who are grieving, it's particularly critical in these circumstances, because the mind often goes into overdrive to create hurtful, self-blaming stories about why suicide occurred.

The path to freedom from the suffering caused by our minds is through finding meaning. It's not an easy path. People grieving such a death may find that meaning in their own time. One path many have taken is through involvement in organizations that help educate people about suicide. In fact, most suicide prevention organizations were founded by someone hoping to find some kind of meaning after a suicide.

Here's the hard truth: people who die by suicide don't die because of anything we did or didn't do. They died because they were mentally compromised, and their suffering mind told them that was the only way to escape excruciating pain.

We can live our life in a way that honors them and brings hope to their struggle. All life has meaning, no matter how it comes to an end.

**Chapter 8: Complicated Relationships**

Be kind, for everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about.

In grief, you want to feel that your closest friends and family members are sensitive to your feelings, that they understand your sadness. Many do. And then there are the people who always seem to disappoint. You can rail against them as you have every right to do, or you can simply accept them for who they are. That's a choice you have to make, and in my opinion, either is valid. However, hoping they will be different than they are only leads to more turmoil.

**Finishing Our Unfinished Business**

It would be nice if all our relationships would be wrapped up in a bow with all our lifetime issues resolved before death comes. Unfortunately, that is not how real life works. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross Talked about this as our “unfinished business.” After the death of a loved one, we are often left with unfinished business-complications that leave us with anger and guilt, regret and recriminations. Our feelings may stem from something as recent as yesterday's argument, or as old as something going back to childhood. The relationship simply could be strained, or there could be a longtime a permanent estrangement.

**Forgiveness**

Forgiveness can be a difficult area for all of us. We build up blocks that bind us for many years. It can be very tricky to deal with in grief. First of all, not all can be forgiven. There are just some dragons we can't slay in this lifetime.

Forgiveness is a wonderful gift for those in grief who are consumed by unhappiness and resentment toward another person.

There have been many models and types of forgiveness. I usually discuss these three possibilities:

1. Indirect forgiveness: you do it all inside yourself.
2. Direct forgiveness: the other person comes to you for forgiveness and you forgive them. The problem is that they rarely come to you.
3. Conditional forgiveness: the other person ask for forgiveness and you may or may not give it, depending on many factors. Did you think they were sincere? Was it timely? Do they understand the pain they caused?

Of these three, I find that indirect forgiveness is the one that works most often. No one else is needed, living or dead.

We can learn to forgive ourselves and those who have hurt us by not letting someone’s actions define us. Even though forgiveness after murder is rare, it does come up. I was working with a woman who was consumed with the murder of her sister a decade earlier. It had destroyed her life. The murderer was locked up for the rest of his life, but she was in prison also. She was looking for a way out of her pain, and I asked her about the possibility of forgiving him. She responded with “Never! There's no way.”

I explained that forgiveness was not about condoning what he had done.

“I could never, I hate that word,” she said.

Some have a negative history with the word “forgiveness.” If that is the case, I might substitute the words “letting go.”

I told her, “It's a tragedy that he took two lives.”

“No. It was only my sister.”

“Yes,” I said, “but he took your life, too. What if you're not giving him a pardon but letting go of him? He doesn't deserve a place in your soul or psyche. He lives there all the time without contributing or paying any rent. He doesn't deserve the space.”

“I never thought about it like that,” she said.

“What if the word ‘forgiveness’ also means disconnection?”

I said, “What if forgiveness was about disconnecting from the murderous actions? You deserve to be free without giving him another moment of your life.”

She sat silently for a long time period then she said with the new strength, “That changes everything.”

Forgiveness opens our hearts when we are stuck in the prison of resentment. We get to be right, but we never get to be happy.

When we're talking about lesser infractions by our family and friends, you may disagree and say, “But you don't know what they did to me; it's unforgivable.” If you are unwilling to forgive, it can be a terrible thing to do to yourself. Bitterness is like swallowing a teaspoon of poison every day. It accumulates and harms you. It's impossible to be healthy and free when you keep yourself bound to the past.

**Chapter 9: Child Loss**

Tennessee Williams stated “A wife who loses a husband is called a widow. A husband who loses a wife is called a widower. A child who loses his parents is called an orphan. There is no word for a parent who loses a child. Lose your child and you’re… nothing.”

A child's death is one of the most challenging experiences anyone can live through. After my son David died, I thought about all the grieving parents I'd counseled. They're excruciating losses had brought tears to my eyes and I had had great admiration for the courage they found to keep going after such a devastating loss. I had sat with them in that pain and heard it described so often I thought I really understood it. But when I felt the pain of my own son's death, I wanted to write a note to each and every one of those clients saying, “I'm so sorry, I had no idea how much pain this hurts.”

**The Question of Fault**

The question of blame- very often self-blame- comes with particular urgency when a child has died. Parents feel responsible for everything that happens to their children. Any grieving parent is likely to have haunting, guilt-ridden, late night thoughts that boil down to, “If I had been a better parent, my child would still be alive.” The truth is that 99 percent of them were wonderful parents. Still, they feel like they didn't do enough. They think they should have recognized the symptoms quicker or taken their child to the doctor sooner or found the miracle drug that will cure the disease. If their child died by suicide or because of a drug addiction problem, they probably did do everything they could- therapy, counseling, rehab, maybe even hospitalizations- over the years to try to deal with what was troubling their child, but still they think they should have done more.

It's hard for us to accept that early deaths just happen. But despite our best efforts, they do. The most stellar parents have children who die young and it isn't anyone's fault. But because we are so accustomed to take our responsibility for everything that happens to our children, we can't help but wonder what we could have done differently to change the outcome. There will never be a satisfying answer to this question.

If your child has died, you can honor your child's life in time, at your own pace, by not allowing the loss to consume you. Instead of withdrawing from the world in bitterness and grief, you can use all that love to reengage with your partner, your other children, and your family members and friends. Then look into your heart to see how you can find meaning from your loss. Many grieving parents have told me that is how they survived, and now I can testify to that from firsthand experience.

Sometimes people say they don't want to find meaning in their loss. They just want to call a tragedy a tragedy. To find meaning in it would be to sugarcoat it and they don't want to do that. I think they are afraid that if they let go of the pain, they will lose the connection to their loved one, so I remind them that the pain is theirs and no one can take it away. But if they can find a way to release the pain through meaning, they will still have a deep connection to their child- through love. Just like a broken bone that becomes stronger as it heals, so will their love.

**Marriage and Child Loss**

The death of a child breaks hearts and, because the pain is so hard to withstand, it can end marriages. We've all heard the dire statistics about some marriages that don't survive the loss of a child. But I don't actually think that marriages end because of the death of a child. I think they end because of how the parents judge each other for not sharing the same feelings they have and not expressing them in the same way.

It's so confusing, because two people in a marriage are sure they know everything about each other. They assume they know how the other person will grieve, and they are shocked at how different it is from what they expected. Maybe the grieving goes on for too long a time, or too short. Maybe they need to talk for hours on end about the child, or maybe they don't want to talk about the death at all. One parent may find comfort going to a group with other bereaved parents. The other parent may be overwhelmed and not want to hear about anybody else's grief.

I remind them that their only job right now is to handle their own grief. They can't really tell their spouse how to deal with their grief. It helps to remember that grief is on the inside and mourning is on the outside. Even though we desperately want to help them, only they can do their inner work. Just as parents have different relationships with each of their kids and different emotional styles, they will have different experiences of grief. No way of dealing with grief is less legitimate than another.

**Being A Parent Never Ends**

As parents, we talk about our children all the time. We brag about them, complain about them, and make them a focal point of our lives. If you are so unfortunate to have a child die, you may want to continue to talk about that child all the time- and about your grief for the child. Your friends and family will listen to you for a month, three months, or perhaps even a year, but after a while, they're likely to say that you have to move on.

Moving on is scary because it can feel like you're losing the child all over again. How do we put a time limit on grief? We don't. Most bereaved parents don't understand how many treacherous landmines there are after this kind of loss.

There are support groups that focus specifically on bereaved parents, providing a place for them to share stories about their child's life and death. When I attended one of these groups, I saw how openly people were able to talk about their pain without having to rein in it. There was no attempt to question the depth or the duration of the grief because the parents in that room all understood it.

**Growth by Design**

The idea of growth, the sixth stage of meaning, often feels impossible if not unlikely after the death of a child. Yet the reality is that your body, your soul, and your psyche are designed to live again. Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun of the University of North Carolina coined the term *posttraumatic growth* in the mid 1990s. “We'd been working with bereaved parents for about a decade,” Tedeschi said. “I observed how much they helped each other, how compassionate they were toward other parents whose children had died, and how in the midst of their own grief, they often wanted to do something about changing the circumstances that had contributed to their children's death. Not just for their own satisfaction, but to prevent other families from suffering the kind of loss they were experiencing. These were remarkable and grounded people who were clear about their priorities in life.”

They identified five specific ways that people can grow after a tragedy:

1. Their relationship grew stronger.
2. They discover new purposes in life.
3. The trauma allows them to find their inner strength.
4. Their spirituality is deepened.
5. They renew their appreciation for life.

**Chapter 10: Miscarriage and Infant Loss**

Miscarriage and infant loss are often minimized. Since there are a lot of different beliefs about when life actually begins, the loss is complicated by how our society views pregnancy loss, stillbirth, and infant death. On an emotional level, the mother begins a connection with her unborn child the moment she knows she's pregnant- or, as we say, that she's “expecting.” The same emotional connection is true for the father. When something goes wrong, they are faced with the reality of loss. How can they say goodbye when they've never had a chance to say hello? They are grieving for what could have been. But those around them are often insensitive to the depth of their feelings.

**The Medical World Is Changing**

Few people, even those in the caring professions, have grasped how important it is for parents to have the bond with their babies honored. But in recent years this has begun to change. Naomi, a nurse who was attending one of my lectures, shared how her hospital now deals with late miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant deaths. It used to be that the body of a baby who was stillborn or died shortly after birth was removed immediately, as if the sooner forgotten, the better. Today, hospitals like Naomi’s are adopting protocols that allow mothers and fathers to spend time with their dead child, for hours or sometimes even days, in order to make memories. This may sound odd. But when parents are left with no evidence that they ever had a child, the grief that follows such a death can be very complicated. All the labor, delivery, and neonatal intensive care units and the units at her hospital have cameras for the parents to take pictures.

**Chapter 11: Illnesses of Our Mind: Mental Illness and Addiction**

Why do I put mental illness and addiction in the same chapter? Because they're both illnesses that occur in our minds, and because they often occur in the same person. Those with mental illnesses are twice as likely to develop a substance abuse problem. The medical term used is “dual diagnosis.” While they may manifest differently, they are both progressive illnesses that will get worse if untreated and may result in death.

**Fighting the Stigma**

Addiction should no longer be seen as a moral failing or a lack of willpower. It is a medical problem, an illness that leads to a progressively worsening chronic condition, and one that is particularly hard to fight, because the drugs involved attacked the brain of abusers, the very organ that helps us fight other dangers to our survival. The same can be said for mental illness. We can't tell a person who is mentally ill or addicted to use his brain to help himself recover, because his brain *is* the diseased organ. Addiction and mental illness are afflictions that last a lifetime. Dealing with them will be an ongoing battle.

Mental illness and addiction are present in all walks of life. People who have suffered trauma from any number of causes including sexual abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence are among those particularly at risk. So, too, are the men and women who have fought in this country's wars.

**Part III- Meaning**

**Chapter 12: More Love Than Pain**

Anne Frank wrote, “I don't think of all the misery, but of all the beauty that remains.” The common belief is that grief is all about pain. Anyone who has been in grief would certainly agree with that. But I believe there is more. There is love. Why do we believe that the pain we feel is about the absence of love? The love didn't die when the person we love died. It didn't disappear. It remains. The question is: How do we learn to remember that person with more love than pain? This is a question, not a mandate. I am the first to say that there is no getting around the pain. We have to go through it because it is an inevitable result of the separation we are experiencing. It's a brutal, forced separation.

The word “bereaved” has its origins in the Old English words *deprived of*, *seized,* and *robbed.* That is how it feels when your loved one has been taken from you- as excruciating as if your arm had been ripped from your body. You've been robbed of what is dearest to you. The pain you feel is proportionate to the love you had. The deeper you loved, the deeper the pain. But you will find that love exists on the other side of the pain. It's actually the other face of pain.

**Getting through the Pain**

You can't heal what you can't feel. If you can allow yourself to feel the pain and all of its depths and cry it out, you might feel very sad, but you would not be overwhelmed by it. Instead, that feeling will move through you and you will be done with it. I'm not saying that you'll never again feel pain over the death of your loved one. You will. But you gave that particular moment of pain its due. You didn't resist it and you won't have to keep reliving it.

However, that's not how it happens for most of us. We fear the gang of feelings because we never let ourselves experience the entire emotion. Instead, we have emotions about our emotions. We begin to feel sad, and then we feel guilty that we're sad, which snaps us out of the sadness before we feel it completely. Or we’re angry and we judge our anger, so we move into self-recrimination. Or we're sad but we think we should be grateful. And so on and on.

Ignore the comments your mind is making about your feelings. Otherwise the pain remains intact. If you have a hundred tears to cry, you can't stop at fifty. The secret to remembering with love begins with accepting the pain, not trying to deny it or ignore it.

**The Spiritual vs. the Human**

There is a delicate balance that exists between what I think of as our immediate, human experience of loss and our spiritual experience of it. For many, our religious beliefs and our feelings of connection to God, or to some transcendent spiritual realm, can help get us through some of the toughest times. But no matter how deeply religious or spiritual we are, sometimes we want to be left in the humanness of our pain. There will be times when a grieving person does not want to be told that their loved one has gone to a better place or has gotten their heavenly reward or is with Jesus. For some people such words may be comforting whenever they are spoken. For others, never. And for still others, only at the right moment.

I understand that our friends and family want us not to be in pain, that it hurts them to see us that way. But sometimes when I would hear somebody say, “You're son is still with you in spirit,” I wanted to say, “If I felt that instead of the pain, would you be more comfortable?” I didn't say it because I knew they meant well. They simply didn't understand where I was in the process of grief. Admittedly, it's very hard to know what's going on in someone else’s mind. But if I'm asked my advice on this subject, I always suggest erring on the side of restraint and using the human response. Unless you feel very confident that a religious or spiritual reassurance will be well received, don't offer it first.

**Facing the Storm**

In five weeks after a loved one dies, there is no finding a way around the pain, no “getting over it.” Feeling that pain is a necessary part of remembering the love. The pain is a part of the love. We can't love someone and lose them without feeling pain. Not only do we have a need to feel the pain, we also need to have it witnessed by others, not pushed away.

The avoidance of grief will only prolong the pain of grief. Better to run toward it and allow it to run its natural course, knowing that the pain will eventually pass, that one of these days we will find the love on the other side of pain.

**Moving into the Love**

When is it time to move into the love? When you feel that you have fully felt the pain. Even when you do, it will hurt again. It will just hurt less, and less often. Moving into love begins with realizing the love was always there. It was there in the good times, in the illness, in the death, and in the grief. It was never absent, even in the worst moments, and it is there still. Death is not strong enough to end love.

People whose loved ones died terrible deaths will sometimes object by saying, “Love wasn't there when he was murdered, or when she died alone, or when they went down in that plane.”

My response is, “I don't believe that you stopped loving them in that moment.”

“No, but my loved one didn't feel it.”

How do you know? We are made up of love. We are the sum total of love. If I’ve felt one moment of real love in my life, that can be with me in my most terrifying moments. Love is a cushion in our tragedies. Love never dies. In our darkest moments, love remains. When everything else is gone, love continues.

Psychologist Rick Hanson says, “The brain is very good at learning from bad experiences, yet very, very bad at learning from good experiences. Neuro processing is privileged for negative stimuli. When a bad thing happens, we give more attention to the negative.” He describes our minds as Velcro for the bad experience (everything sticks), and Teflon for the good (nothing sticks).

We are wired to *not* smell the roses. Negative moments, what year held in both short-term and long-term memory, become deeply wired and burned into our psyche. The same is not true for the positive ones, which are less likely to make it into the long-term memory bank. This is why you might quickly forget many of the wonderful moments with your loved one, but the negative ones will live on in endless repetition. It's thought that our minds are wired this way because of the survival benefits it offers: “Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes but less urgent [attention] with regard to good ones,” according to Roy F. Baumeister, a professor of social psychology at Florida State University.

**Love Bursts**

When we move through pain and we release it, we fear there will be nothing, but the truth is, when the pain is gone, we are connected only in love. Though much of my work is about giving people permission to grieve fully after a loss, I also want to give them permission to keep loving.

I often talk about grief bursts. Even though someone may think they've put the worst of their grief behind them, they have moments when, seemingly out of the blue, they burst into tears, overwhelmed with feelings of loss. These moments are all the more painful because they are so unexpected, and people are often caught off balance by them. But there are comparable experiences that I call love bursts- these moments when suddenly, for no reason at all, we feel a surge of emotion for someone and tell them how much we love them. There will be times when you will suddenly well up with love for the person you lost. You may feel that the love has nowhere to go because you can't hold your loved one, but the love continues. If you allow yourself to feel it, you will find great meaning.

Sometimes I encourage people who are trying to comfort a bereaved person to ask about a favorite memory. Work to share one of their own. “I was just thinking about your mother’s smile the other day,” they might say. “What joy she brought to all of us!” Or “Your son gave the best hugs.” Or “Going places with your husband was always so much fun because he made everyone laugh, even the person in the ticket booth at the movie theater and the waitress in the coffee shop.”

Don't be afraid that these memories will bring pain. They are deep sources of comfort to those who are in mourning. How often do we talk about regrets and forget to remember all the good we felt in the relationship? Many of us can remember only the negatives. Be sure to remember the love.

**Chapter 13: Legacy**

**The Legacy of Things**

This is a place for a little more practical advice. The items a loved one left behind are part of their legacies. They are deeply meaningful because of whom they belong to and the memories they call up. Which is why we may find it very difficult to part with any of them. Everything our loved ones touched- from their clothes to their jewelry, their house and everything in it, their car, their music collection, their books and their art- is the physical evidence of how our loved ones lived their lives, what they enjoyed, how they spent their time, what they valued, and what they found beautiful and meaningful.

Family members are often challenged by wanting to keep everything, which is usually impossible or impractical. But getting rid of things, whether by passing them on to family and friends or donating them or simply throwing them away, feels like we are being asked to shrink the evidence that they lived. Even taking practical steps like closing their bank and credit card accounts and having their phones turned off seems to make their footprint here on earth smaller. It was brutal enough to have to part with our loved ones and now we have to let go of their things, too? It seems too hard. I understand this feeling very well because I had many of the same issues when I had to dispose of my son’s things.

Ultimately, however, our belongings can become a trap when we find ourselves unable to part with them. I often hear people say in my lectures, “I'm struggling. I can't let go of even the smallest things.” What I have learned from my work is that as we decrease the outer evidence that our loved ones lived, we must increase the evidence inside of us.

Sometimes when people tell me they are having trouble letting go of their loved ones possessions, I try to help them find ways to bring continued meaning to these possessions, even as they are saying goodbye to them. They might bring them in so we can talk about them before they give them away. Sharing them with me is sharing a part of their loved ones. I might explain that they're not just getting rid of their father's suit. It's going to someone who needs a job so he can give his family a better life. Or they're not losing their husband’s watch. They'll be seeing it on their son's wrist for years to come. All of these things can become part of a legacy that continues to serve and give pleasure to others long after your loved one is gone.

**Chapter 14: Grieving to Believing the Afterlife**

One of the reasons Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and I wanted to formally adopt her stages from dying to grief was because so many people misunderstood them. They saw them as a map of a relationship that would end when they finally accepted the death of their loved one. But the five stages of grief were never meant to be an end unto themselves, and completion of them wasn't supposed to signify the ending of the relationship or grief. Kubler-Ross herself felt connected to people who had died and did not believe the death was an ending. I hope that by offering a sixth stage of death, I can encourage people to understand how the continuing evolution of their relationship with the person who died will help them find their way to meaning.

When someone dies, the relationship doesn't die with them. You have to learn how to have a new relationship with them. You can still keep learning from them in your everyday life. An instant will come up and remind you of something that happened between you and your deceased loved one, and now that he or she is gone, you can see it from a different point of view. As I get older, I understand my mother better because I have now lived the same number of years- and more- that she did. I can see things from her side more than I could ever when she was alive, since I was too young to be able to do that then.

I carry my mother with me. She lives within me. When a subject comes up, I might say something about what I think she would have thought about it. I bring the past into the present. I feel that I am still learning from her, which helps me to go back and see the past differently. That is how our relationship continues to evolve and grow. That is how our relationship keeps gaining in meaning.

In our last book together, *On Grief and Grieving*, Elizabeth and I wrote that we didn't believe in the concept of closure after death. When we speak about grief, there are two closures that come to mind: The first is the unrealistic wrap-up we expect after a loss. It has become an added burden not just to mourn and grieve the loss, but to find that closure, and find it quickly, so you can move on.

The second kind of closure involves doing things that help put the loss in perspective, such as reviewing what happened and why- we're looking for missing pieces of the stories and filling in the gaps. It can range from finding the killer of a loved one to finding a way to say goodbye after a loved one died at the end of a long struggle with illness.

You're not closing the door on a relationship with the person who died. You don't ever bring the grief over a loved one to a close. You're opening the door to a different relationship. Remaining connected to your loved one in grief is not “unhealthy grieving.” It's normal. In death, our attachments continue, as does the love. Research regarding continuing bonds speak to what I've seen in decades of work with bereaved people. Their connections continue to evolve.

In the face of our great losses, life goes on. The world keeps spinning. The seasons change, the dead of winter gives way to the rebirth that occurs every spring. Every storm gives way to a clear new day. Despite our losses, we continue. We keep moving, taking in another breath. If we are still here when the new day dawns, it is an opportunity to explore the life that our loved ones had to leave behind. Love and life remain within us, and the potential for meaning is always there.

**Chapter 15: Everything Has Changed Forever**

**Broken Heart Syndrome**

There is a phenomenon called broken heart syndrome, which is a temporary disruption of your heart's normal pumping function, often brought on by a surge of stress hormones triggered by a serious event, such as the death of a loved one. Experts agree that within hours or sometimes days of the event, our hormones can cause a temporary ballooning of the left ventricle of the heart, which interferes with the capacity of that chamber to pump blood throughout the body. Women are more likely to have broken heart syndrome, but anyone over fifty-five is at higher risk.

The symptoms of broken heart syndrome are very similar to those of a heart attack, but they are usually temporary and cause no permanent damage. However, on occasion the disruption of the pumping function is so severe that it can result in death. We often hear about spouses who have been in long marriages who die shortly after the death of their partner. We find it bittersweet, saying that the living spouse died of a broken heart, which is literally the case. This is one of the clearest possible examples of a mind-body connection.

One day after Barbara Bush's funeral, her husband, George H.W. Bush, was hospitalized. I was interviewed in the media by reporters wanting to know if he was suffering from broken heart syndrome. My answer was how could he not have his heart broken after his wife of seventy-three years had died? President Bush recovered, though he died little more than half a year later.

How do you mend a broken heart? By connection. Since we know that human contact and touch can help our blood pressure go down, it's not a major leap to think that human connection can and does actually help with broken heart syndrome. Perhaps being witnessed helps us physically as well as emotionally. Our heart longs for connection. Anyone who is going through deep grief can tell you that grief affects your mind, your heart, and your body. Having our pain seen and seeing the pain in others is a wonderful medicine for our body and soul.

**The Three P’s**

As I considered the factors that could help me heal, I remembered the three P’s, the mental attributes that according to renowned psychologist Martin Seligman are what shape our views of the world and determine how well we will be able to deal with setbacks:

1. Personalization- whether your attribute an event to internal or external causes, that is, whether you blame yourself for it, or feel like the only one who has ever suffered such a tragic loss.
2. Pervasiveness- the belief that a negative event will destroy everything in your life.
3. Permanence- the belief that the effects of the loss or a disaster will last forever.

When I thought about how I was going to apply the three P’s to the loss of my son, I knew I would have to acknowledge, in terms of personalization, that though his loss had happened to me, it was not because of me. And I was not unique in my suffering, either; had not been singled out by God or fate or whatever to undergo this ordeal. I had spent enough time with the brave parents and other survivors of loss I had met in my lectures and retreats to know not to personalize my loss. Many others had experienced something like it, and I had counseled them not to blame themselves. Thinking about this helped me feel less alone in the world and in my loss.

Thinking about the second P, pervasiveness, I knew that my life would not be destroyed by David's death. Nor would my work. Because of the tragedy, my work would if anything become deeper, and perhaps I would grow in wisdom. My heart grew lighter at the thought that David could somehow help me help others. The helper in him could live on in me.

As for the last P, permanence: I knew there would be a permanent hole in my heart, but I also knew that the pain would not last forever. I would change, transform, and become different in ways I cannot yet imagine.

**Rebuilding with Meaning**

In grief, we are faced with the question of how we will find meaning in the rest of our lives. Though we cannot help thinking that what would be most meaningful would be to have our loved ones back, we know that is not possible. Faced with the reality that we didn't get enough time together, we must ask ourselves, “What would best honor the years they didn't get?” That could be one way of bringing meaning to our lives without them.

People often think there is no way to heal from severe loss. I believe that is not true. You heal when you can remember those who have died with more love than pain, when you find a way to create meaning in your own life in a way that will honor theirs. It requires a decision and a desire to do this, but finding meaning is not extraordinary, it's ordinary. It happens all the time, all over the world.

Before one of my lectures, a participant approached me and said with enthusiasm, “I'm looking forward to hearing you speak. Is this a talk about your son's death?”

“No,” I said. “I'll be speaking about helping people who are experiencing grief.”

My work is not about my son's death. This book is not about his death. But his death has clearly deepened my work. I want his life to be more than the way he died. Some of the meaning I have found is that life doesn't owe us. We owe it. There are people who walk this earth in awe of the life around them. They are not people who have had a perfect life. The truth is they are often the ones who have had a lot of tragedy. They are not on TV or posting on Facebook or Instagram about how wonderful their life is, they are living it. I know if you're reading this, awe may be a stretch for you, just as it is for me. But if Viktor Frankel and his fellow prisoners could be awe struck while watching a sunset on their way from one concentration camp to another, we have to think that we will be able to find that capacity in ourselves.

There are magical moments to be had with our living loved ones now. Our job is to find them and cherish them. Through them, we can find a sweetness in the world.

There are challenges to find meaning. Every moment we are making choices- whether to move toward healing or to stay stuck in pain. Like all the other stages, the sixth stage of grief requires movement. We can't move into the future without leaving the past. We have to say goodbye to the life we had and say yes to the future. My son's death will always be a part of me, and one of my goals is to figure out who I am in this future without him. That is how I will begin to rebuild.

Ask yourself, “Who would I be if I changed and grew with this loss?” More important, who will you be if you don't? I am a grief specialist who tries to make meaning out of the worst moments of our lives. Now that your loved one has died, who are you?