

IT'S
OK
THAT YOU'RE
NOT
OK

Meeting Grief and Loss
in a Culture That
Doesn't Understand

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sounds True

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PART I

THIS IS ALL JUST AS
CRAZY
AS YOU THINK IT IS

1

THE REALITY OF LOSS

Here's what I most want you to know: this really is as bad as you think.

No matter what anyone else says, this sucks. What has happened cannot be made right. What is lost cannot be restored. There is no beauty here, inside this central fact.

Acknowledgment is everything.

You're in pain. It can't be made better.

The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside. There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of.

You don't need solutions. You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life.

Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

THE REALITY OF GRIEF

When out-of-order death or a life-altering event enters your life, everything changes. Even when it's expected, death or loss still comes as a surprise. Everything is different now. The life

you expected to unfold disappears: vaporized. The world splits open, and nothing makes sense. Your life was normal, and now, suddenly, it's anything but normal. Otherwise intelligent people have started spouting slogans and platitudes, trying to cheer you up. Trying to take away your pain.



This is not how you thought it would be.

Time has stopped. Nothing feels real. Your mind cannot stop replaying the events, hoping for a different outcome. The ordinary, everyday world that others still inhabit feels coarse and cruel. You can't eat (or you eat everything). You can't sleep (or you sleep all the time). Every object in your life becomes an artifact, a symbol of the life that used to be and might have been. There is no place this loss has not touched.

In the days and weeks since your loss, you've heard all manner of things about your grief: They wouldn't want you to be sad. Everything happens for a reason. At least you had them as long as you did. You're strong and smart and resourceful—you'll get through this! This experience will make you stronger. You can always try again—get another partner, have another child, find some way to channel your pain into something beautiful and useful and good.

Platitudes and cheerleading solve nothing. In fact, this kind of support only makes you feel like no one in the world understands. This isn't a paper cut. It's not a crisis of confidence. You didn't need this thing to happen in order to know what's important, to find your calling, or even to understand that you are, in fact, deeply loved.

Telling the truth about grief is the only way forward: your loss is exactly as bad as you think it is. And people, try as they might, really are responding to your loss as poorly as you think

they are. You aren't crazy. Something crazy has happened, and you're responding as any sane person would.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Most of what passes for grief support these days is less than useful. Because we don't talk about loss, most people—and many professionals—think of grief and loss as aberrations, detours from a normal, happy life.

We believe that the goal of grief support, personal or professional, is to get out of grief, to stop feeling pain. Grief is something to get through as quickly as possible. An unfortunate, but fleeting, experience that is best sorted and put behind you.

It's that faulty belief that leaves so many grieving people feeling alone and abandoned on top of their grief. There's so much correction and judgment inside grief; many feel it's just easier to not talk about what hurts. Because we don't talk about the reality of loss, many grieving people think that what's happening to them is strange, or weird, or wrong.

There is nothing wrong with grief. It's a natural extension of love. It's a healthy and sane response to loss. That grief feels bad doesn't make it bad; that you feel crazy doesn't mean you are crazy.

Grief is part of love. Love for life, love for self, love for others. What you are living, painful as it is, is love. And love is really hard. Excruciating at times.

If you're going to feel this experience as part of love, we need to start talking about it in real terms, not as pathology, and not with some false hope of everything working out alright in the end.

GRIEF BEYOND "NORMAL" GRIEF

Everyday life carries losses and grief. There is immense work to be done in our culture around giving everyone a voice,

around validating and honoring all the pains we carry in our hearts, all the loss we encounter. But this book isn't about those daily losses.

There are wounds in this life that hurt, that hurt immensely, that can eventually be overcome. Through self-work and hard work, many difficulties can be transformed. There really is gold to be found, as the Jungians say, at the bottom of all the heavy work of life. But this is not one of those times. This isn't a hard day at work. This isn't simply not getting something you deeply, truly wanted. This is not losing something beautiful just so something more "right for you" can come along. The work of transformation does not apply here.

There are losses that rearrange the world. Deaths that change the way you see everything, grief that tears everything down. Pain that transports you to an entirely different universe, even while everyone else thinks nothing has really changed.

When I talk about loss, when I talk about grief, I am talking about things beyond what we consider the natural order of things. I am talking about accidents and illnesses, natural disasters, man-made disasters, violent crimes, and suicides. I'm talking about the random, atypical, unusual losses that seem more and more common as I do this work. I'm talking about the underground losses, the pain no one wants to talk about—or more, no one wants to hear about: The baby who died days before his birth, with no known cause. The athletic, driven young man who dove into a pond and came out paralyzed. The young wife who saw her husband shot in a random carjacking. The partner swept away by a rogue wave. The vibrant, healthy woman whose stage-four cancer was discovered during a routine checkup, leaving a husband, young son, and countless friends within a few months of hearing the news. The twenty-year-old kid struck by a bus while working a humanitarian mission in South America. The family vacationing in Indonesia as the tsunami hit.

The community reeling after a hate crime claimed their friends and families. The young child taken down by a mutation in her bones. The brother, alive and well at breakfast, dead by lunch. The friend whose struggles you did not realize until they were found dead by their own hand.

Maybe you've come here because someone is dead. I'm here because someone is dead. Maybe you've come because life has irrevocably changed—through accident or illness, through violent crime or act of nature.

How random and fragile life can be.

We don't talk about the fragility of life: how everything can be normal one moment, and completely changed the next. We have no words, no language, no capacity to face this, together or as individuals. Because we don't talk about it, when we most need love and support, there's nothing to be found. What *is* available falls far short of what we need.

The reality of grief is different from what others see or guess from the outside. Platitudes and pat explanations will not work here. There is not a reason for everything. Not every loss can be transformed into something useful. Things happen that do not have a silver lining.

We have to start telling the truth about this kind of pain. About grief, about love, about loss.

Because the truth is, in one way or another, loving each other means losing each other. Being alive in such a fleeting, tenuous world is hard. Our hearts get broken in ways that can't be fixed. There is pain that becomes an immovable part of our lives. We need to know how to endure that, how to care for ourselves inside that, how to care for one another. We need to know how to live here, where life as we know it can change, forever, at any time.

We need to start talking about *that* reality of life, which is also the reality of love.

SURVIVAL

If you've found yourself here, in this life you didn't ask for, in this life you didn't see coming, I'm sorry. I can't tell you it will all work out in the end. I can't tell you things will be just fine.

You are not "OK." You might not ever be "OK."

Whatever grief you're carrying, it's important to acknowledge how bad this is, how hard. It really is horrendous, horrifying, and unsurvivable.

This book is not about fixing you, or fixing your grief. It's not about making you "better" or getting you back to "normal." This book is about how you live inside your loss. How you carry what cannot be fixed. How you survive.

And even though that thought—that you *can* survive something as horrifying as this—is unsettling and horrifying in its own right, the truth is, you will most likely survive.

Your survival in this life post-loss won't follow steps or stages, or align with anyone else's vision of what life might be for you. Survival won't be found, can't be found, in easy answers or in putting your lost life behind you, pretending you didn't really want it anyway.

In order to survive, to find that life that feels authentic and true to you, we have to start with telling the truth. This really is as bad as you think. Everything really is as wrong, and as bizarre, as you know it to be. When we start there, we can begin to talk about living with grief, living inside the love that remains.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

It's OK That You're Not OK is divided into four parts: the reality of loss, what to do with your grief, friends and family, and the way forward. Throughout this book, you'll find excerpts from students in my Writing Your Grief courses. Their words, often

even more so than my own, illustrate the challenging and multifaceted aspects of grief lived honestly and openly.

While the book progresses in a somewhat linear fashion, jump around however you see fit. As with grief, there's no right way to explore this. Especially in early grief, there's only so much you can absorb. Even if you had a deep attention span before your loss, grief has a way of shortening that considerably. Take things in manageable chunks. (I discuss more on how grief affects your brain and body in part 2.)

The first part of the book is about the culture of grief and how we come to pain like yours. It dives into the historical roots of emotional illiteracy, of our deep aversion to facing the realities of pain. It's the wide view of grief, the view of what grief—and love—looks like when seen through a much longer lens.

If your world has just imploded, why should you care about the wider view? Why should you spend any time at all reflecting on how emotionally illiterate this world is?

Well, it's true: cultural understandings of grief don't really matter in the early days. What does matter is knowing that you aren't alone in feeling like the world at large has failed you. Discussions of the way we deal with grief in this culture can help you feel less alone. They can validate the crazy dissonance between your reality and the reality others foist on you.

That difference between what the outside world believes and what you know to be true can be one of the hardest aspects of grief.

I remember my own early days after my partner drowned—shoving myself out into the world, frazzled hair, sunken cheeks, mismatched clothes, looking for all the world like a homeless woman, babbling on to myself. Trying to keep moving. Doing what was reasonable, expected, ordinary: groceries, dog walks, meeting friends for lunch. Nodding back at people who told me everything was going to be OK. Holding

my tongue, being polite, when therapist after therapist told me I had to progress through the stages of grief more quickly.

All the while, beside me, inside me, was the howling, shrieking, screaming mass of pain, watching this normal and ordinary person being reasonable. Polite. As though anything was OK. As though what I was living was not that bad. As though horror could be managed through acceptable behavior.

I could see the fault lines running through everything, knowing that all these reasonable people talking to me about stages of grief, about pushing myself through the pain to some exalted vision of “getting better,” all the books that pointed toward getting out of pain by simply rising above it somehow—I knew it was crap. Saying so only got me labeled as “resistant.”

What I would have given to see my reality reflected back to me. Grief support is kind of like the emperor’s new clothes of the relational world—those in pain know that what passes for support is truly nothing at all, while well-intentioned support people continue to spout off empty encouragement and worn-out platitudes, knowing in their hearts that those words don’t help at all. We all know this, and yet no one says anything.

How irrelevant it is to talk about grief as though it were an intellectual exercise, something you can simply use your mind to rise above. The intelligence that arranges words and dictates stages or steps or reasonable behavior is on a wholly different plane than the heart that is newly smashed open.

Grief is visceral, not reasonable: the howling at the center of grief is raw and real. It is love in its most wild form. The first part of this book explores our cultural and historical reluctance to feel that wildness. While it won’t change anything inside your loss, hearing your personal experience set against the wider, broken culture can help shift things somehow.

The second part of this book is what you can actually do inside your grief—not to make it “better,” but to help you

withstand the life you are called to live. Just because you can't fix grief doesn't mean there is nothing you can do inside it. When we shift the focus from fixing your pain to simply tending to it, a whole world of support opens up. Validation and frank discussion of the realities of grief makes things different, even when it can't make things "right."

Part 2 explores some of the most common, and least discussed, aspects of grief, including the mental and physical changes that come with intense loss. There are exercises to help you manage unnecessary or unavoidable stress, improve your sleep, decrease anxiety, deal with intrusive or repetitive images related to your loss, and find tiny windows of calm where things aren't all better, but they are somewhat easier to carry.

In part 3, we explore the often frustrating and occasionally amazing support from friends, family, and acquaintances surrounding you. How is it possible that otherwise intelligent, insightful people have no idea how to truly support you inside your loss? While we can't fault those with "good intentions," it's simply not enough to say they mean well. How do you help those who want to help you? My hope is that you'll use the third part of this book to do just that: hand it over to those who truly want to be of help, and let this book guide the way. There are checklists, suggestions, and first-person essays to help your support teams be more skilled in how they come to your pain. And just as important, part 3 helps you figure out who simply can't be there for you, and how to cut them from your life with at least *some* skill and grace.

The last part of this book looks at ways we move forward after devastating loss. Given that your loss is not something to be fixed, what would "living a good life" even look like? How do you live here, in a world that is so completely changed? It's a complex and complicated process—carrying love with you, moving forward as opposed to "moving on." Part 4 dives into

the ways we find true support and companionship inside loss, and the ways that pain—and love—get integrated into a life lived alongside loss.

And that's the truth about grief: loss gets integrated, not overcome. However long it takes, your heart and your mind will carve out a new life amid this weirdly devastated landscape. Little by little, pain and love will find ways to coexist. It won't feel wrong or bad to have survived. It will be, simply, a life of your own making: the most beautiful life it can be, given what is yours to live. May this book help you find the thread of love that still exists, following it forward into a life you didn't ask for, but is here nonetheless.

I'm so sorry you have need of this book, and I'm so glad you're here.