

# Transforming Grief

*Insights and Practices  
for Moving through Loss*

Marilyn Schlitz, PhD

Excerpted from the book  
*Death Makes Life Possible:  
Revolutionary Insights on Living, Dying,  
and the Continuation of Consciousness*

SOUNDS TRUE  
Boulder, Colorado

# Contents

Introduction

Transforming Grief

Notes

About the Author

About Sounds True

Copyright

# Introduction

death *noun* \ˈdeth\: the end of life: the time when someone or something dies. Christian Science: the lie of life in matter: that which is unreal and untrue.

life *noun* \ˈlɪf\: the ability to grow, change, etc., that separates plants and animals from things like water or rocks.

WHAT IS DEATH? What happens after we die? And how do our answers to these questions impact how we live our lives?

My encounter with these timeless questions began before I can even remember—and before I was able to formulate the queries. I was an inquisitive, precocious, eighteen-month-old toddler, wearing pink pajamas and exploring the world around me. In a careless moment, my father had left a can of lighter fluid on the yellow Formica kitchen table. I grabbed the can and put the opening in my mouth. For months after, my small body wrestled and rested in a hospital as my lungs sought the affirmation of breath, and I struggled in the gray zone between living and dying. After several rounds of intensive care, I survived. I feel sure that this experience planted within me the seeds of respect and appreciation for the art of healing. And knowing that I'd survived such a harrowing experience as a young child gave me a curiosity about the semipermeable membrane between life and death.

I grew up in Detroit in the 1960s and '70s, a time when the United States was at war with itself. It was a war of race, of class, and ultimately of consciousness and worldview. Coming of age in such a complex time and in a setting that fueled my rebellion at individual and social levels, I was alive with confusion, anger, and a desire for change.

One night, when I was fifteen, I was on the back of a motorcycle with the wrong person at the wrong time and in the wrong place. A drunk driver pulled out of the parking lot of a bar, without his car lights on, and hit the motorcycle. The impact threw my body into the air. During what I now understand was an out-of-body experience, I watched my physical being tumble through the sky and crash to the ground. I clearly recall feeling my awareness transcend my body and look down on it from a higher vantage point.

I was taken to the emergency room with a deep, wide cut in my left leg. Waiting for my parents, who were hours away, I heard talk of possible amputation. The emergency medical team

did their best, putting sixty-six stitches below my knee and eventually sending me home with question marks about my leg's recovery.

Lying on the couch in my family's home during the following week, I somehow got the idea that I could and should visualize my immune system healing my leg. I lay there for long periods of time, feeling the tingles of healing. I didn't come from a medical family, and I have no memory of having heard about mind-body medicine before that time. Now I can see that I had a direct, intuitive understanding about what I needed to do to bring about my own healing.

Over the years, my worldview has expanded to accommodate a greater range of human possibility. Today, I have two well-positioned feet on the ground and an awareness that some aspects of myself are more than just physical. I have also been at the bedsides of family and friends who have crossed to the other side. This has helped deepen my own understanding of mortality. I have felt the pain of loss and the transformational potential of finding peace in grief.

## DOORWAYS TO DIALOGUE

Pursuing answers to questions of consciousness and worldview has become the defining work of my life. For decades, I have researched the hidden dimensions of being human. I have conducted myriad experiments exploring the subtle reaches of mind and the existence of consciousness beyond the body.<sup>1</sup> I have addressed fundamental questions about the healing potentials that lie within our ability to change and transform. I have questioned many thousands of people, including average folks, children, accomplished scientists, and acclaimed wisdom holders who represent many traditions and worldviews.

I have worked with teams of colleagues, including psychologists Cassandra Vieten and Tina Amorok, to develop a model explaining how our worldviews transform. That worldview transformation model draws on the nature of experiences that cross the distance between our physical and our metaphysical knowing and being. We published our preliminary findings in the 2008 book *Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*.<sup>2</sup> Left out of this earlier work was the role that death awareness plays in how we live and how we transform. In my own process of exploration, I have sought to understand the role of death in our personal growth, healing, and spiritual awakening.

## THE COSTS OF NOT TALKING ABOUT DEATH

The topic of death is both timely and relevant to all of us. As the demographic facts reveal, we're an aging population. There is an unprecedented increase in the average age of people throughout the world. In 2008, the number of people worldwide who were sixty-five and older was estimated at 506 million; it is calculated to hit 1.3 billion by the year 2040. The population of the United States is predicted to reach 400 million by 2050; approximately 20 percent of people

will be sixty-five years old or older. The baby boomers, of which I am one, are finding ourselves at retirement age, despite our best efforts to stay young; more than ten thousand baby boomers reach the age of sixty-five every single day in the United States. Indeed, this group represents the fastest growing segment of the US population.<sup>3</sup>

Cornell University social psychologist and boomer Daryl J. Bem told me, “Given my own age—I’m now in my seventies—I have shifted, the way that many older people do, from the thought of one’s life up until this point, and instead, [to] the thought of one’s life until death. And that shifts one’s perspective in many, many ways.” Like Bem, boomers are starting to think about their own death and what may lie beyond this life.

America’s boomers have long been characterized by their individualism. Today this vigorous autonomy is challenged as we are confronted with the care of aging parents and ill or disabled children or spouses, as well as with our own mortality. We are looking for innovative ways to redefine our changing identities, roles, and responsibilities. As we age and confront our own existential issues, many of us are seeking new sources of meaning and purpose. Many of us are pursuing a self-reflective quest for wholeness, exploring diverse practices and approaches that allow us to forge our own truth system, alone and in the company of others. Some are returning to their faiths of origin. Others are embarking on a new spiritual path that may help them to live more authentic lives. For boomers and beyond, there is an expectation that old age can be better, and so we are open to developing new skills and new ways of aging gracefully.<sup>4</sup>

Despite how relevant the topic of death is for everyone, many of us do not like to think or talk about it. If we are healthy, we may be less likely to prepare for its inevitability. If a member of our family is terminally ill, we may be reluctant to bring up the subject because it means acknowledging the truth of the situation or offending our loved ones. Many of us hesitate to talk about death due to our own fear or our culture’s taboo about discussing death. But by not talking about this potentially charged topic, we miss the opportunity to share with our family and friends about our wishes and hopes. We give up our autonomy, decision-making power, and personal authority. In this process, we all deserve better.

Unfortunately, our reluctance to contemplate death is creating significant problems. According to a recent survey by the California Healthcare Foundation, six out of ten people say they don’t want their family burdened by end-of-life decisions.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, nearly 56 percent of the 2009 survey respondents have never communicated their end-of-life preferences to family members. For example, most Americans want to die at home, yet only 24 percent of people over sixty-five are able to fulfill this wish. Many people find themselves in nursing homes or hospitals in their final days. End-of-life care in hospitals may translate to high-cost, dramatic, and aggressive treatments that erode the quality of life. A 2010 Dartmouth study found that more than 40 percent of elderly cancer patients were treated by ten or more physicians during their last six months alive.<sup>6</sup> This same report found that many of these patients had some

intrusive, life-prolonging procedure in the last month of their life. According to a 2010 article in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, only 15 to 22 percent of seriously ill elderly patients had their wishes recorded in their medical records.<sup>7</sup> The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality reports that as many as 65 to 76 percent of physicians were unaware that their patients had recorded their end-of-life plans.<sup>8</sup>

In America, one out of every four Medicare dollars is allocated to those who are in their last year of life. Out-of-pocket expenses exceed the families' financial assets in 40 percent of households, according to a Mount Sinai School of Medicine survey.<sup>9</sup> Valiant efforts are made to delay what is often inevitable. For many families confronted by a medical crisis, heroic measures are a price worth paying in order to reduce the suffering of our loved ones. Unfortunately, our loved ones may not suffer less. In some cases, treatments may lead to greater harm and suffering, and the best possible care may be no treatment at all. In the light of these challenges, more and more people are seeking to help their dying loved ones end their lives through dignified, peaceful, and compassionate means.

## HEALING OUR COLLECTIVE WOUNDS

We need to address and heal the great denial we hold over what is an inevitable truth. This means diving into our worldviews about mortality. Any discussion about how we'd like the end of our lives to unfold raises questions about what we think may be coming after death. What death means for living and what happens after are big questions that unite everyone. People from all ages and walks of life are seeking answers to these same questions.

Different cultures, worldviews, and belief systems offer different perspectives on mortality and the nature of human existence. In my own search for answers, I have found myself at many doors. These included the majestic carved doors of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the simple wooden doors of a Sufi mosque in inner-city Oakland, the gilded doors of a Buddhist monastery in Taiwan, the screened door of the primate habitat at the Oakland Zoo, the automated doors of a high-tech surgery room in Tucson, and the daunting steel door to a two-thousand-pound, electromagnetically shielded brain-monitoring laboratory in Petaluma, California. I conducted hundreds of hours of interviews. I convened focus groups, participated in ceremony and ritual, and collected data and stories. Each step of the way, I sought to identify core threads in the complex, multidimensional tapestry of life, death, and what may lie beyond.

Poignant insights have arisen for me as I've learned how people from a variety of backgrounds embrace the challenges of their own impending deaths and the deaths of their loved ones. I have been inspired by how they have grown from such experiences. Moving into the mysteries of our mortality, I have come to see the ways in which death connects us to all of life. Through intimate and tender conversations, I have been moved from tears to awe to deep belly laughs, all in a

matter of moments. I have witnessed my own personal transformation and healing in the process.

My goal in this labor of love has been to see beyond any one approach to death. Instead, I've focused on common elements that emerge when we look across a rich variety of worldviews, belief systems, and cultural perspectives. These elements are the glimmerings of a cosmological pattern. At the same time, my goal has been to affirm, support, and respect the diversity of religious, spiritual, scientific, academic, and social points of view. My focus has been on the natural and inherently cyclical process of life and death. I've sought to make the myriad teachings accessible, without diminishing their complexity.

In the pages to come, we will take a penetrating look into diverse views of death and the afterlife and explore how these views can inform and heal us from grief, individually and as a global society. We will meet people who are of different ages and come from diverse walks of life.. We will consider the great tableau of death and the terror that people experience when they deny the questions surrounding it. We will hear about how people's direct personal experiences, which suggest broader realms of existence beyond the physical world, have helped them overcome this fear. We will learn about ways in which materialist scientists are approaching questions of consciousness beyond death and why the topic matters for our understanding of reality beyond our individual embodiment. We will ponder patterns that help illuminate new answers to age-old questions—and raise new questions from age-old answers. We will explore the realizations that are embedded in evocative questions about consciousness, death, and beyond.

Along the way, each of us has the opportunity to map our own place on the transformative path. Such a journey takes us from our own physical being to our connection to a broader reality and an interconnected whole. On our own, each of us will be able to examine our worldviews and become the cartographer of our own lived experience, as informed by a panoply of beliefs, myths, stories, and scientific discoveries. As we delve into a wide array of alternative worldviews about grief, we have the opportunity to broaden and deepen our own perspectives about consciousness and our unique human existence. We can reflect on what gives our lives meaning and purpose, what moves us beyond extrinsically oriented goals involving material gain toward intrinsically oriented goals that connect us to something larger and give us a more expansive view of life. We may expand our worldviews by learning from our own experiences and those of others along the way.

As we consider how death makes life possible, we may become happier, healthier, and better citizens. Likewise, we may begin to renew our sense of purpose in the context of our rapidly changing times. We will lay the groundwork for a new way of understanding ourselves in the light of our own mortality and that of our loved ones.

I invite you to join me in a transformative process that may help us all to find the healing potentials that lie in our relationship to death. Let us come together in a continual learning

laboratory as well as in what Jerry Jampolsky, founder of the Center for Attitudinal Healing, described during an interview as “an unlearning laboratory, to unlearn some of the things we’re attached to.”

I will share with you what I have gleaned, from many experts and wisdom holders, about the transformative potential of death and grief, and how our fears of death can evolve into an inspirational life value. My hope is that this ebook, the book, *Death Makes Life Possible*, and documentary film by the same title will help you to embrace the challenging experiences of your life, including the deaths of loved ones, your own mortality, and the endings (and, in turn, the beginnings) that emerge within your own steps along the magnificent and mysterious journey of life. In this dynamic process, we may find that our own individual transformations may help catalyze changes in our society that are more joyful, just, compassionate, and sustainable.



# Transforming Grief

In order to really negotiate this path, the first thing that a person has to do is commit to doing the work. Then people have to have humility enough to let go of what has served them in the past and be willing . . . to be open and innocent again to what is coming. There's a lot of hard work in transforming yourself.

LUISAH TEISH

ONE WINTER DAY IN 1998, I sat in a large circle on the carpeted floor of a studio in Northern California. It was the office of Angeles Arrien, a transformation teacher who had donated the space. We were a diverse group that included religious and spiritual teachers from omnifarious traditions. There was a subgroup of scientists recording the event.

I'd assembled these people. I wanted to learn about consciousness transformation from them. I was examining the art and science of transformation in everyday life. I hoped to learn what triggers life-enhancing change, what sustains it, and how it impacts the ways we understand living and dying. I was humbled by all who showed up. Many were from the San Francisco Bay Area. Some curious colleagues traveled great distances to join this confederation of wisdom holders and spiritual seekers. As it turns out, even the teachers of life's transformations can be lonely. Being in community offers a source of vital healing.

We shared the stories that defined our lives. All of us were eager to find truth and insight from each other's lived experience. Even when our worldviews differed and conflicting views emerged, these bridge people sought common paths across great divides while sharing their own unique life stories.

When it was her turn, Luisah Teish explained that her calling as a teacher really began when she conceived a child. Birth was a portal into something profound, as all mothers know. For her, it was "primal and ancient and common to everything." In carrying this child, she was dedicated to a life she couldn't see, holding tightly to a deep and powerful mystery. She described the experience of laboring for twenty-three hours, working for something to be born. Twelve hours after the baby was born, she watched her beloved child die. "I often think: one hour short of a day to birth it, half a day of life, and then it dies."

In the process of living with the death of her child, Teish experienced a deep shift in her worldview. The shift was not easy. The catalyst was pain. Something in her died with the baby, she explained. But in the process, something new was born; she became a teacher and guide for others.

"In order to really negotiate this path," she reflected, "the first thing that a person has to do is

commit to doing the work. Then people have to have humility enough to let go of what has served them in the past and be willing to listen to the message of spirit, to spend time out in nature, to let go of and be open and innocent again to what is coming. There's a lot of hard work in transforming yourself." She laughed.

## THE PRACTICE OF GRIEF

Like Luisah Teish, most of us have lost loved ones at some point in our lives. One of my interns, a twenty-two-year-old undergraduate, said, "I guess I've been to more funerals than weddings." As our lives unfold, we lose more and more loved ones when the aging process takes its toll. Confronted with the death of someone we care for, we can be overtaken by myriad emotions that rock our world and our worldview. Our bodies, minds, and souls feel the loss. Certain events or times of year can remind us of someone we miss. And depending on their worldview, some people report the feeling of excitement for what they perceive as a grand adventure for their departed loved one and ultimately for their own encounters beyond death.

The worldview transformation model (discussed in depth in chapter 1 of *Death Makes Life Possible*) emphasizes the role of transformative practices to help us live deeply and fully. These practices can take many forms, from a formal meditation practice to a mindful approach to gardening or walking in nature. As I discuss in *Death Makes Life Possible*, transformative practices include intention, attention, repetition, guidance, and acceptance. These five elements can also be applied to grief as a transformative practice.

First, we can bring our intention to learning and growing from our pain or loss. We can also shift our attention to our inner noetic experiences and how we may stay connected to our loved ones in our hearts and minds. By engaging in transformative practices in a systematic and repetitive fashion, we can build new habits or responses to our own fear and grief. We may discover the inherent resilience we have within us to overcome grief. We can learn to trust the hardwired capacities we have for survival—and for flourishing through our grief awareness. As Teish noted, it can take hard work to transform yourself, but in the end it is worth it. Ultimately, the gift of acceptance allows us to experience life on its own terms. Transformation is not so much about shifting the outer world, although that is part of the model. First, it's about changing the ways we respond to the complexities of life, just as they are.

## PHASES OF GRIEF

There are various models of the grief cycle. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in her classic book *On Death and Dying*, identified five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.<sup>1</sup> This conventional model, now widely accepted, may not be the full story. In his 2009 book *The Other Side of Sadness*, psychologist George Bonanno notes that this model neglects our inborn capacity

for resilience.<sup>2</sup> He argues that we don't graduate through static phases of grief. Instead, the majority of people are actually hardwired with a capacity to begin again. While grief is painful, it may also be short-lived. The process of grief may be both cathartic and transformative. According to Bonanno, it is like an oscillation, involving a range of emotions and ways of expressing our loss.

In an essay entitled "The Transformative Power of Grief," John Schneider offers his observations about grief and resilience.<sup>3</sup> The first phase of grief, he says, is discovering what's lost. How did we ever get by without having this person in our lives? How are we going to cope with them not being here? We hold on, Schneider observed. Or sometimes we let go in ways that are about escapism or lovely denial. We tend to define our grief by what we no longer have, rather than by what the departed loved one has given us.

The second phase of grief involves discovering what's left. Healing and growth may come when we allow ourselves to risk again, to continue growing, and to invite in transformation. The third phase involves discovering what's possible. Out of loss or separation comes a shift in our perspective or worldview. We can find a connection to something broader than the physical aspects of our being. As we move from "me" to "we," we may find a realm of love and interconnectedness. This process of developing other-regarding virtues can lead to both our personal understanding and a deepening of our relationships with others.

## FINDING THE WISDOM PATH

At the start of the journey, grief is painful. For Karen Wyatt, her personal pain became an opportunity for growth. Wyatt is a leader in the area of whole-person healthcare and a family medicine physician who has worked in hospices with dying patients for years.

I found my way to hospice after the very tragic death of my father by suicide. I was still fairly young in medical practice at that time. But I really found myself overwhelmed with grief and guilt because of his death. I wasn't able to recover from that, and ultimately it led me to start volunteering for hospice, thinking that maybe if I exposed myself to death and dying and grief and sadness, I would find my way through and out of my own grief. . . .

In many ways I was numb, just going through the motions of life every day, even as a mother and a wife and a doctor. And I so desperately wanted to change. I wanted to grow. I wanted to heal the grief. I wanted to get to the place I saw those hospice patients in, a place of reverence and gratitude and appreciation for life.

So I set out to learn what it was that they understood about life that somehow I was missing. And I did manage to do that. I found a path for myself to transformation, a path that ultimately healed the grief and the pain that I was in, but

also helped me wake up to life . . . and to appreciate the joys and beauties of life, as well as to manage the suffering and the pain of life. The path that I found I think of as the wisdom path. . . . Indeed, what I found was a life-changing experience.

Over time, Wyatt became a seeker of wisdom and insight about the nature of self, the meaning of existence, and the essence of living and dying. Her process of grief became a path to self-realization.

I was in a situation where I had plenty of knowledge, from all of my medical studies. I'd done lots of reading. I'd attended workshops and gone to counseling, and then yoga. I had plenty of knowledge to heal my grief, but I didn't have the wisdom that I needed at that time, and that's one of the reasons that I hadn't been able to heal. So working with dying patients who had faced their own mortality and were at the end of their lives gave me the wisdom I needed to heal my grief and change the way I lived in every moment of my life.

Wyatt's experience confirms the process that is described in the worldview transformation model. Her first-person, noetic experience of pain led to a time of opening. She was forced to reevaluate her life and what gave her meaning. She pursued a process of exploration and discovery. It was not until she began to work in earnest with her dying patients that she found a transformative practice that shifted her from the "me" of her own suffering to the "we" of connecting to a greater whole. She explores what she has learned in her book *What Really Matters: 7 Lessons for Living from the Stories of the Dying*.<sup>4</sup>

## WHILE DEATH IS INEVITABLE, HOW WE APPROACH IT IS NOT

It is important that we are able to transform our grief and see it through its various phases. In chapter 1 of *Death Makes Life Possible*, I interview Margaret Rousser, who works at the Oakland Zoo in California. In our interview, she told me about Nikko, a male gibbon, who was showing signs of grief at the loss of his mate of over twenty-six years. He had a noticeable reduction in activity. For a time he stopped singing, an activity that is characteristic of gibbons in the wild, because his duet partner was gone. Rousser acknowledged that grief is a natural part of dealing with loss. But out in nature, grieving too long is a profound disadvantage that threatens an animal's survival. This is why animals, from gibbons to humans, are hardwired to move beyond grief and loss, or in Rousser's words:

It's important for animals to move forward just as it is important for us to move forward. Animals who grieve too long and have that loss of activity for too long are putting themselves at risk for predators. So I think in many ways animals are