

shipwrecked

A MEMOIR OF WIDOWED PARENTING
AND LIFE AFTER LOSS

JEANETTE KONCIKOWSKI

Copyright 2023

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

ISBN: 979-8-35093-559-2 (print)

ISBN: 979-8-35093-560-8 (eBook)

*For Grace, Milo, and Brian, whose love carried me to shore and
Mark, whose heart, songs, and stories anchor me still.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	1
Introduction	3
Part I Drowning	7
1 Before We Entered the Eye of the Storm	9
2 Shipwrecked	27
3 A Family Gone Overboard.....	33
4 Saying Goodbye.....	41
Part II Treading Water	51
5 Our First Days in the After	53
6 Overthinking Grief: Mine and Theirs	67
Part III Reaching Dry Land	83
7 Something Resembling Self-Care	85
8 Surviving the First Year as a Family	99
9 Ripple Effect: Coping with Secondary Losses.....	121
10 Solo Parenting: Impact on Body, Mind, and Spirit.....	129
Part IV Charting A New Course	149
11 Making Peace with the Loss of My Marriage.....	151
12 Building a Life to Love	165
13 Facing Fears and Befriending Death.....	175
Part V Sailing Out Again	193
14 My Children's Grief Over Time	195
15 The Treasure at the Bottom of the Shipwreck.....	217
16 A Song from the Sea	227
Acknowledgements	233
About the Author	237

P R E F A C E

When I first surfaced after my husband died, I found myself in our local bookstore. Ever the bookworm, I had convinced myself that surely there was a handbook that would tell me how my children and I would survive now that life as we knew it had been wrecked. The staff took me to the self-help section where I found memoirs on the hilarious adventures of being widowed. Then I tried the parenting section where I found a picture book full of grieving dinosaurs who could relay the idea of an afterlife to my school-age children. Then the spirituality section, where I found daily meditations on grief, as if I needed help ruminating any harder on what the actual hell we would do now. The book I wanted wasn't there. There was no manual that could help me figure out how to survive this mess my life had become. This solitude and immense loneliness that was already settling into my bones, despite being pretty sure I was still in shock. This BIG oceanic unknown. This place where I was left a widow at only thirty-six; left to parent two grieving and heartbroken children; a place where my own grief, guilt, shame, and anger threatened to consume and overwhelm me to the point of a breakdown. I went home empty-handed.

In the beginning, I was convinced I might drown more often than not in this dark ocean of grief. In the end, I gathered all my strength and got myself and my children to shore. It was no small feat. My body was scarred and bruised along the way. My mind would succumb to the cold. My spirit almost broke. I found myself observing what our experience was like and about two years into our loss, I decided to apply my skills as a researcher and former trauma counselor to write this teaching memoir and its companion workbook. I had a few goals in mind: first, to make sense of what happened to my family; second, to collect the stories and wisdom of other widowed parents; and third, to be that resource on the shelf for someone else in need.

INTRODUCTION

I was looking at the long line of visitors at my husband Mark's wake when I remembered it was Sunday Funday; the one day of the week when my broken family was to be made whole and spend a few hours together and perhaps even have some fun. As I watched my poor, beautiful, brave little girls running through the crowd, new dresses twirling and tights pulled high, I erupted into a fresh stream of tears. Next to me were the remains of their father now encased in marble. I wasn't paying attention to the line of 400 people waiting to talk to me about him. Instead, I mumbled to my husband as if he wasn't in an ash pot now, "How could this be Sunday Funday, Mark? How? How? Goddamn it!"

The next morning, just hours after the Irish wake that had followed the formal wake, I bought tickets to an indoor water park for the following Sunday. In the year preceding his death, Mark and I had often talked about driving the ninety miles to the water park for Sunday Funday. Feeling too unsteady to drive still, nor believing I could handle a full day alone with my children yet, I asked my brother and his son to join us for the trip. It was a quiet drive down that day for the adults, while the kids were giddy in the backseat, wondering where the long mystery ride would end. I was determined that Sunday Funday would continue, even if the "fun" parent was gone. I'd have to be both now; the "heavy rock," as my nine-year-old daughter Grace called me, and the "good-time Dad."

All these years later, my memory of that day has stayed with me. Within ten minutes of arriving, the children were already careening on the slick floor.

"Don't run, G!" I shouted.

"Race you to the top, Mama!" Grace yelled back, barefoot with her swim goggles swinging.

"Don't run at a water park, for the love of all things holy!" I panted, after catching up to her. I grabbed her hand, my other hand already full of five-year-old Veda's fingers, and up the stairs we three climbed to the top of the water slides. Veda and I smooshed into the double inner tube, while Grace readied to race us as a single rider. As we barreled through the twists and turns, the water smacked my cheeks red. Then we plunged under the water. I panicked when I felt for Veda's hand and realized she was not there. I quickly surfaced and found her sitting on top of the tube, peering into the water, looking for me. "Silly Mama, you fell off the tube." I pulled her into me. I breathed. I laughed. I was alive. She was alive. For just a few moments, I forgot why we came to that place. It's possible the girls had forgotten, for almost a whole hour, why we were there. "Let's go!" they shouted, and we ran off to conquer another slide. So began the days, weeks, months, and years of figuring out how to parent through widowhood.

To me, this small snapshot in time of my family at the water park, broken and bereft while simultaneously finding joy in our shared laughter, in our touch, in our time together that felt so bittersweet, would become the epitome of resilient parenting through widowhood. I felt like we were survivors of a shipwreck who had gone overboard. Searching for each other, grabbing onto whatever was floating by to create moments of connection and joy, all the while the larger questions and abyss of *what now* and *what's next* swirled around us in the fast-moving water.

The grief came in waves. I'd cry until I literally couldn't force my body to make more tears in one sitting. There was a dark abyss within my grieving, as deep as the sea, that seemed to hold me down and was unrelenting. That first year, time often felt like it was standing still. Months after my husband's death felt like decades since I had held him. Then, just when I was sure I was going to drown in the ocean of tears that had come once again, a ripple of light on the surface beckoned. Just like the plunge at the end of the waterslide, I surfaced. I breathed. I began again. I swam to shore, with my children in tow.

In this teaching memoir, I share the story of my family—our scars and our strengths. I've also included the lessons I've learned along the way at the end of most chapters. These practical tips and strategies are written with the intention

SHIPWRECKED

to help pull you from wave to wave until you make it to shore, and rebuild your life after loss. You can also read the stories from the widowed parents I've interviewed and learn more from experts in the field of grief by reading the companion workbook to this memoir, *Stronger Than The Storm: A Guidebook for Widowed Parents on Surviving and Thriving After Loss*. The workbook includes assessments, worksheets, and even more practical advice to help you process your own loss experience, needs, and desires for your life in the "after."

I want you to know that the "after" does not have to be tragic, even though it will often feel that way. Losing your spouse and caring for yourself and your children through your grief will likely be the hardest thing you will ever go through. Trust yourself. Trust the process. Trust other people to help you because you cannot do this alone. Grieve your person and grieve hard. Surrender to your pain, because it is only in knowing your pain, holding it, letting it come in wails, fits, and sobs that it will break you open and be released. You will not die from your grief, even though some days you think you might. Your voyage will not be easy. It will take its toll on you and your kids. It will shake you to your core. But, if you let it, it will transform you all so that you can move forward into your new life with peace; a life where your loss becomes a tender place, a soft patch of ocean-kissed sand, where you and your beloved will always live. It is in this place where you can find the strength and sense of calm you need to begin again.

Peace to you and your children,
Jeanette

SIX

Overthinking Grief: Mine and Theirs

Upon our return from Boston, I decided a new year meant it was time to take baby steps in answering the question: *What's Next?* Firstly, it was time to return a semblance of normal to bedtime. The girls weren't ready to leave my bed yet, but I told them no more television until all hours of the night. I pulled out some of Mark's favorite childhood books from his boxes and read them *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Swiss Family Robinson*. This description of the shipwreck in *The Swiss Family Robinson* stayed with me and was the inspiration for the title of this book:

*The nearer we approached the land, the more gloomy and unpromising we thought its aspect appeared. The coast was occupied by barren rocks, which seemed to offer nothing but hunger and distress. The sea was calm; the waves, gently agitated, washed the shore and the sky was serene; in every direction we perceived casks, bales, chests and other vestiges of shipwrecks, floating around us.*⁴

⁴ Johann David Wyss, *The Swiss Family Robinson: The Journal of a Father Shipwrecked with his Wife and Children on an Uninhabited Island* (London, Blackie and Son Limited; Translated from the German of M. Wiss, 1905) 17.

Sixty days of treading water was exhausting. If I had learned anything about myself in my life, it was that staying stagnant would not help. I needed to re-root myself, starting with a new house. Everyone (and I mean *everyone*) that I shared my thoughts with about moving repeated the same words to me: *Do you think it's wise to make such a big decision so soon, Jeanette? I hear you really shouldn't make life-altering decisions like that until you're at least two years on.* Was there a hidden record about how to grieve that all of these people not immersed in the murky waters of deep grief were listening to? It is highly likely that you, like me, not only heard such a phrase but also, well intentioned people in your life probably recounted the five stages of grief to you, too. *Denial, Bargaining, Anger, Depression, Acceptance.* They seem to be a universally accepted paradigm, at least in America. One of them must include the instruction not to make big decisions in the first two years. I sighed. Murky waters = big emotions; I got that part. But were there really *stages* to how I would move through my grief? I hadn't experienced them during my other losses. Maybe I hadn't had time to process each one before the next loss had happened. Perhaps with this one, I'd feel differently.

With nothing but long wintry nights stretching out ahead of me, I spent a lot of time house hunting on Zillow and a lot of time thinking about my own grief process. Even though I had a graduate degree in Human Development and Psychology, the only grief model I was really aware of when I was widowed were these five stages of grief, first theorized by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. Kübler-Ross had based her model on her observations and interviews with terminally ill people who were preparing for their own deaths. She wrote of the five stages that they were an attempt to share "what we have learned from our dying patients in terms of coping mechanisms at the time of a terminal illness."⁵ As one of the co-founders of the Hospice model and the death with dignity movement, her expertise was essential in pushing back on the western ethos, fueled by Sigmund Freud and the two world wars, that death is something to be hidden away and not talked about. That said, her famed book does not discuss in any depth the experience of the

⁵ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Scribner; Reissue edition for 50th anniversary, 2014), 35.

bereaved; at best, it examines the reactions of family members to news of a loved one's terminal illness. As I went through early bereavement, the stages popped up again and again, usually in the words of people who tried to comfort me and in my own attempts to make sense of what was happening to me.

"*You're in shock,*" more than a few of the women who attended Mark's memorial said to me, as they leaned in to give me a too-long hug. After the third or fourth time hearing it, I remember wanting to scream: *No shit, Sherlock. My husband just died! That's him, right there, a pile of ash in a fucking urn!* Instead, I'd reply with, "Thank you for coming. You meant so much to Mark." As I stood there next to his ashes, I was completely aware and accepting of the fact that Mark was dead. Wasn't acceptance supposed to be the last stage? While I was not in denial about his death, it was true that my body and mind had experienced shock. So much so that just 72 hours before the services, at his apartment that morning and then later when telling the girls about his death, I had dissociated.

Could shock and acceptance co-exist?

Where did anger factor in?

"You might feel angry, honey," said the nurse at my doctor's office. I had left the Marital Status check boxes blank. She prodded and I explained my husband had died. As she took my blood pressure, her face soured and she continued, "When my cousin died, I was so mad that the good Lord took her so soon. She was 72 years young. I don't think I've ever really gotten over it. I know what you are going through."

Do you, though? Did you love your cousin the way I loved my husband? Did you leave your cousin the way I left my husband? Have you cried until your body cannot make more tears? My body would bristle, and my chest would tighten whenever people started to tell me of their losses when they struggled to know what to say to me about my own. The five letters that made up the word 'anger' were not sufficient to describe the rage that was lying just under the surface of my skin in the first half of 2015. I would experience many breaking points of my anger during the next few years, but none that my children would remember as much as the first one.

Sometime after the holidays, I had to return a pair of expensive jeans that had been gifted to Veda. They were too big and while the receipt wasn't provided, they still had the tags on them. I simply wanted to exchange the jeans for the correct size and was relieved to find the right size on the rack. As we waited in line behind a number of other customers, I watched the young cashier argue with every person in front of me, also apparently making returns. I grew more and more agitated. When I reached her and tried to explain my situation, she stopped me quickly and said she couldn't help if I didn't have the receipt. "Look," I said, "they were a gift for Christmas. I don't have the receipt, but you can see the tags are still on them. They are in the original bag and they clearly haven't been worn. I just want to trade down a size."

"Listen, lady, I told you we can only take a return with the receipt. You'll have to come back another time," she countered.

"You listen," I said, my heart rate and voice rising. "I'm already late for dinner. I am a single mother. I don't have time to come back here on a different day and the person who gave them to us as a gift can't find the receipt. Could you please just help me out and let me exchange them? I'm not asking for cash back; I just want to trade this pair for that pair." She glared at me and waved her hand dismissively.

"Next!" she said, looking through me. Something snapped. Suddenly, all the anger I had been suppressing since Mark died fell out of my mouth. A voice I didn't recognize as my own bellowed, "Just give me the fucking pants! God damn it!" I screamed as I threw the pants across the counter, and they landed on the cashier.

The parents behind me took their children's hands and backed up. My children stood there with their mouths agape. The cashier's mouth was, too. I grabbed the girls' hands in mine and now that my anger was out, I couldn't put it back in. I continued my tirade, as I dragged the children behind me, stomping out the door.

"Fuck you!" I screamed behind me at the cashier, the racks of clothes, and the stunned families. "You are not helping me. I'm sick of this shit. Everywhere I go, I have to do everything myself. Fuck you and your stupid fucking store. I will never come back here. You hear me, bitch?" I hurriedly put the kids in the

car and drove off, tears streaming down my face. I kept checking the rearview mirror, as if the cashier was going to call the police and start a crazed widowed-woman hunt. I had never in my life acted out with such anger, or such language, in public. The girls didn't say a word the whole way home as my anger turned to embarrassment and then eventually to laughter. I wondered if my children thought I cracked as I pulled into the driveway, laughing with tears rolling down my cheeks. Today, whenever my kids sense my temper coming on now, one of them will surely say, "Let's hope this isn't going to turn into another pants incident." I never did set foot in that store again.

In the first year, I could have these moments like the one described above. Little things would trigger rage, seemingly coming out of nowhere. I would occasionally allow myself to admit I was angry with Mark for dying. Later in 2015, when the autopsy results finally came in, it showed there was no evidence of medication in Mark's body at the time of his death, but his toxicology report was positive for marijuana and alcohol. When I stopped crying, I left the house and drove straight to the cemetery. Stomping through the snow, I let all the heat rise in me as I yelled at his grave, "How could you! How could you! Why would you do that and leave me here? Didn't you know this could happen? Why did you lie to me about the medication and the seizures? Why didn't you take care of yourself?"

Mostly, I felt sad and lost in the weeks and months that followed. Inevitably, my anger at him would turn to guilt: Why hadn't I forced him to come home that night? Why hadn't I checked his medication? Why had I left him to deal with this illness on his own? Why had I been such a bad wife? I'd explode and then stuff it back down so I could function.

In Kübler-Ross' model, bargaining, with depression on its heels, would come after the anger. It seemed for me, though, that bargaining went hand-in-hand with depression and anger, generally also accompanied by a medical crisis. I remember how, on the way to the emergency room, steering with one hand while I held my other hand with the blue finger high above my heart, I whispered, "Please God, don't strike me down with a heart attack or stroke right now. Let Google be wrong. Please don't let me lose my finger. Please God, I will

stop being angry at Mark if you just let me live through this and not orphan my children."

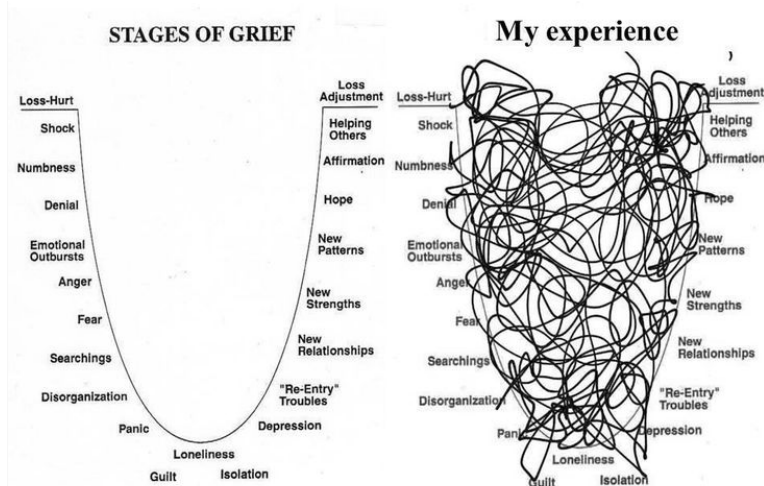
Anger turned to bargaining turned to acceptance seemed to move through me quickly. One night, I had to rush Grace (during another blizzard, of course) to the emergency room for an asthma attack. I bargained with God all night. The next morning, as Grace rested on the couch and her sister played quietly next to her, I lost my shit again as I tried to start the gas snow blower for the first time ever on my own. After several attempts of it not starting, I directed another "Fuck YOU!!!!" at it. Then I screamed at the snow. "Fuck YOU!!!! I fucking hate Buffalo! And fuck you too, Mark, for not being here to do this. Fuck all of YOU!!!!" I screamed into nothingness. I gave the start one more strong pull and the blower roared to life. I cried as I ran the machine all the way down to the end of the driveway where it promptly pattered out of gas.

"I hate all of this," I muttered to the snow, as I plopped myself down in it and cried and cried. When I got up, the girls were standing in the doorway, looking frightened at the sight of their mother, forlorn in the snow pile. As I had done so many times before, I brushed away my tears and went in to take care of them.

Was that acceptance or just giving up? Could I cycle through the five stages so quickly while just attempting to snow blow the driveway? I'm pretty sure I accepted the fact that my husband was dead the day I chose the marble urn that would hold his remains for eternity. I accepted that he wasn't playing a game with me or off on a business trip. He was dead. I had seen it with my own eyes and had tried to save him with my own hands. I couldn't change the fact that Mark was dead. All I could do was accept it. But what of my life and the girls' lives? Was I supposed to accept this is how we would stay? A distraught mother, cursing at everyone and everything that didn't go her way? Children who were going along for the ride, worried that it was only a matter of time before something happened to her, too? Clearly Kübler-Ross hadn't been a widow. If she had, exhaustion would have been a sixth stage.

When I could think about my grief from a somewhat detached perspective (was this numbness?), I could see that I was experiencing each of the five stages as emotions, or states of being, but there were a lot of other big emotions as

well. Certainly what I was feeling felt nothing like a stage with a finite beginning and ending. If anything, I felt like I was experiencing them all, all of the time. One night, someone in one of my grief support Facebook groups shared this image:



The squiggle seemed to be an Internet meme, with no known origin⁶. That didn't make it any less real to me. If anything, the squiggle felt more like my experience of grief than the linear Kübler-Ross model. My grief squiggle was probably done in an angry red crayon.

What else is there outside of Kübler-Ross' model to help us create a frame or structure for understanding how we will process our grief? One of them was, literally, right in front of my face. Early in that new year after Mark's death, I was at work and observing one of our foster care caseworker training programs.

⁶ Anonymous as seen in Bluffview Counseling Services. "We Have A Right to Grieve Losses Big and Small." (March 31, 2017). Retrieved October 18, 2023. URL: <https://www.bluffviewcounseling.com/we-have-a-right-to-grieve-losses-big-and-small>

That morning, as I was chatting with the trainers and helping to set up the room, I looked up and stared at the statements on the wall that one of them had just posted on a large sheet of flipchart paper.

1. Accept the loss
2. Acknowledge the pain of the loss
3. Adjust to a new environment
4. Reinvest in the reality of a new life

Of course! I recognized these statements in our training as the Tasks of Separation, which, over the course of ten years as a curriculum developer, I had written into countless training manuals. But at that moment, I was seeing them with new eyes. For our purposes in child welfare work, we had reframed them as tasks of separation but the reference reminded me that they came from William Worden's theory on the tasks of mourning.

Worden first posited these tasks in 1982 in his seminal book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*. In an interview in 2013, Worden said that these four tasks of mourning are the things that need to be accomplished by the bereaved after the loss of a loved one. Next, the interviewer asks Worden how his tasks are different from Kübler-Ross' stages. He notes that Kübler-Ross was studying the dying and that her staged model was created for how dying people experience grief in relation to their death. It was never intended by her to be a model for the bereaved. He knows this, as he had conducted research in collaboration with her in his earlier days.

"By using the task model, which comes from developmental psychology, the tasks have a certain fluidity, they can be worked and reworked. Some are very easy to accomplish and others can cause some people some problems. But it's a good model. Because if someone is stuck in their grief, it gives you (speaking to grief counselors) an overlay to figure out how they're stuck and why they're stuck and how to help them move on."

⁷ Worden, J. William. "William Worden: The Four Tasks of Mourning." June 6, 2013. Springer Publishing, 2 hours, 2 minutes.

Worden's task model is also called the TEAR Model of Grief. T=To accept the reality of the loss. E= Experience the pain of the loss. A=Adjust to the new environment without the lost person. R= Reinvest in the new reality. Did the TEAR model apply to me? I felt that I had accepted the loss as well as one could, just a few months into it. I was daily acknowledging the pain of that loss while adjusting to life without him. There were two major ways in which this was happening for me. First, the parenting of our children changed overnight. I had gone from having my weekends to fill as I pleased the year before to suddenly being a solo parent. Although he struggled to give 100% as a parent due to his physical and mental health issues, Mark was always there for the girls when they needed him. Even when it was difficult to talk to each other, he and I made decisions together about the girls. Our world, whether we were together or apart, moved around the axis of our children's needs. Now he was gone and I was with them, 24/7. I had never been more scared of getting something wrong. I knew from the first morning that how I handled Mark's death and our bereavement, for good or bad, would have life-long implications for our daughters. Secondly, I had to adjust to the Mark-sized hole in my heart. I had not only lost him as my co-parent but I had lost the person I loved for twenty-one years—who had given me the validation and care that I had needed but not received; who had taught me there could be beauty and joy in sexual pleasure; who had loved me when I thought I was not worthy of such things and who, I, in turn, loved when he thought he was not worthy of such things. And I would also have to grapple with this same man being the one who I resented for his failures as a partner; who could hurt me as much as he could hurt himself; who had spent our life together predicting he would die young and now here I was, alone. What would my reinvestment in the reality of a new life look like?

There is one other older model of grief that I learned about in researching this book that I found applicable to my own life at the time. It is Lois Tonkin's model of growing around grief. Tonkin, a grief counselor from New Zealand, had observed that, for many of her clients, their grief did not end; they simply adapted to it. In her brief publication on her model in 1996, Tonkin noted that most theories of grief had a culminating point; an end after a series of steps or

stages were completed by the bereaved.⁸ But this wasn't holding true with what Tonkin witnessed as a grief counselor. She reported that some of her clients never achieved "resolution" of their grief. In her theory's publication, Tonkin recalls attending a workshop with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. She tells the story of one bereaved mother in Kübler-Ross' workshop. The mother, who had lost her child, said that the size of her grief had stayed the same. It did not lessen over time, as some expected it to. What happened instead was that she realized she grew around her grief.

Discussion of Tonkin's model is often accompanied by an image of a stone in a series of mason jars, in which the size of the jar (representing your ability to cope with the grief and transform your life) changes, even though the stone in the jar, representing your grief, does not. This made sense to me. In the beginning, my grief felt all-consuming. I couldn't get through an hour without crying. Somehow, just eight weeks or so later, I was crying only once or twice a day. I wondered if my tears would stop soon. Then what would happen? And even more important to me, what would happen to my children if we just outgrew our grief?

One of my most prominent worries after Mark died was how the children would cope with his death. Would such a profound loss at a young age forever change the trajectory of their lives? William Worden produced some of the earliest research on children's bereavement and grief process. Applying his TEAR model, Worden believed that children, like adults, must go through these tasks of mourning a loss: accept the reality of the loss, experience the pain or emotional aspects of the loss, adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing and relocate the dead person within one's life, and find ways to memorialize them.⁹ He also noted that children will have to re-attend to these tasks at different points in their development and reexamine their relationship to the deceased parent during significant developmental transitions. Worden and other researchers on children's bereavement suggest that there are no "typical" ways

8 Lois Tonkin, "Growing around grief—another way of looking at grief and recovery," *Bereavement Care*, Volume 15: 1, 1996.

9 J. William Worden, *Children and Grief: When A Parent Dies* (Guilford Press, 1st edition, 2001), 12-15.

children grieve as there are a number of factors that also influence this process for kids such as the child's age and cognitive stage, cultural background, religion, and cause of the death.

I knew enough about general child development to know that school-age children, like my own, generally comprehended death as permanent even though the idea of an afterlife could be elusive. I also knew that Veda, being on the younger side of school-aged, might still engage in some forms of magical thinking. Even Grace, at almost ten years old, might regress into such beliefs if it would comfort her.

When Mark first died, some of the most touching tributes we received came from the kindergarten and fourth-grade students at Veda and Grace's elementary school. They said things like "I didn't know your dad, but I know you and you are special, so he must be too" or "My heart hurts for you, my friend" with a drawing of one weeping child holding hands with another. While the children in their classrooms provided care and empathy to my children in the immediate aftermath of Mark's death, these children really didn't know what to say or how to relate over time to my children's experience. More often than not, the kids were coming home feeling more and more isolated.

During this time, I continually asked myself, "What do Grace and Veda need right now?" Tuning in, I'd watch Veda startle when fire trucks rushed down our street, on the way to another family's emergency. Each morning, Grace would visibly shake for a few seconds while we neared the side of their school closest to Mark's apartment complex, which you could see situated behind the school parking lot. I could tell they were pulling in on themselves, emotionally.

I was relieved when our appointment with Elizabeth Davis finally rolled around. The blizzard and its subsequent cleanup had pushed everyone's schedules back. While the kids enjoyed her office's play therapy room, I sat sobbing in the tiny room adjacent to it, telling her what I was observing in Grace and Veda's behaviors since Mark's death. We also talked at length about our marital separation and what the kids may or may not have witnessed on the day Mark died. After spending a little time with each child, Elizabeth agreed that Grace needed more help than the school social worker could provide to process what

happened—not only to Mark, but to her, on the day he died, and as our family moved forward. She would start seeing her in the new year. Given her younger age and that Veda was already connected to a therapist, Elizabeth recommended that Veda stay with the therapist she had just started seeing.

Before leaving her office, Elizabeth reminded me of the old adage I knew about getting through a crisis. *What do you do if your plane is on fire and starts to go down? When the oxygen mask dangles in front of you, you secure your own first. Then you focus on others.* According to Elizabeth, for the newly bereaved to care for their children, they had to first start with self-care. As I bundled the children back up, she asked me who I was seeing for therapy. I assured her I was still seeing my therapist weekly.

"Good," she said. "Give yourself a heaping amount of grace." She advised me to whittle our lives down to meeting the bare minimum needs. Eat. Sleep. Cry. Go to school. Work. Therapy. Make the move. Eat. Sleep. Cry. Go to school. Work. Therapy. Ask for help. Accept help. So that would be the plan. A whittled down life until we all felt like more could be possible again.

It sounded easy enough; often, it was not. I found that what helped me most when I fell down, down, down into the cold, dark ocean of my grief was to simply surface, take a breath, and pause. When I had collected myself, I could reach in the dark and pull the children to the surface too. In the beginning, all we could do was sputter and cling to the remnants of the boat: the lives we once lived. I recognized immediately that the pieces could never go back to the way they were constructed before. I remain grateful that after the initial day of dissociative episodes, my faculties came back and my adult brain mostly functioned. Even when adrift, I could pull us forward by relying on what I knew from my training in crisis intervention and child development to help me navigate what to do next to keep us afloat. I knew that this knowledge was a blessing. I was luckier than many parents who did not have such resources. I also found that I started immediately tuning into my intuition in a deeper way than I ever had before, as you'll read in the next chapter. From the first day forward, I asked myself the same questions the experts did: what do I need right now? What do my children need? Then breathe. Then pause. If the answer that

came wasn't going to help us survive, I let it sink back into the bottom of the abyss. All we could do at that time was survive day-to-day.

I'll revisit grief theory in the later chapter on how my children coped with grief over time including new research on the multidimensionality of grief, and even a model for transforming personal tragedy into community protection, like superheroes do. What all of these models of grief have in common is that, in order to adapt, both children and adults have to grow around our grief. We have to behave in different ways than we have before. We have to accept the change that has met us in an ambulance bay, or in the middle of the night, whether we least expected it or waited with bated breath and a watchful eye for our loved one's final breath. Grief is a process. It has big emotions that will wash over us, ready to cope with the tidal wave or not. We have to go, as the Buddhist nun Pema Chodron has written in one of my favorite self-help books, to the place that scares us. We must answer this question in our bereavement: "Do the days of our lives add up to further suffering or to an increased capacity for joy?"¹⁰ At the heart of our mourning, we have to choose whether and how to begin again.

¹⁰ Pema Chodron, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 9.

Lessons Learned: Getting in Touch with Grief

Sometimes we feel numb from our grief. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by it. Sometimes we want to hold it at bay, as long as we can, to keep the dam from breaking. These tips were created by me, for me (and others, who asked me for help), when I was thinking hard on the process of grieving. I hope they will help you answer some of your own questions about your grief.

1. **Assess where you are with your emotions.** Try to get outside of your own head. What would your best friend say about how you are doing with your grief? What would your deceased partner say? What would another widowed person say? Take a hard look at your behaviors. Have you been numbing your grief with alcohol, drugs, or sex? Have you been avoiding it with busyness? It's okay if you have, so long as you aren't hurting yourself, your kids, or someone else. Be gentle with your assessment but be honest.
2. **Assess what's working well for you and your kids right now.** Write all of these things down. Who are the people helping you? Combined, these are your strengths and assets.
3. **Ask yourself what's not working so well for you and your kids right now.** Write them down. How are these things connected to your loss? Write that down, too. For example, if one of the things not working well is that you are working too much because your finances have been stretched without your partner's income AND your kids are having problems because you can't give them the attention they need right now, note this. You don't need to do anything about it now but recognize the loss. Take stock of the challenges really facing you. This may seem counterintuitive to detail ALL of your struggles and problems but it's important to really recognize how much your life has been impacted by the loss of your partner and co-parent. Each of us is struggling with the primary loss of our person but also losses that result from that person's absence.

4. **Pick one thing from your list of what's not working well. Maybe it's the most pressing need. Can you give yourself some space to sit with it?** To focus on it. To let it putter around in your head unabated. Maybe you can take it to therapy this week. Or talk about it with a friend or a trusted relative. Name the emotions you are feeling. Let them sit on your tongue. Let the tears come if they need to come. Try not to turn it off prematurely. Lean into the discomfort, even if it causes further anxiety. If it feels too overwhelming, reach out to one of your resources for support. Let yourself grieve this piece of your loss. Then do it again with another piece of your loss. And again.
5. **Assess where your body holds your grief.** It took a two-week fever for me to tune into the fact that I had exhausted my body. You don't have to do anything right now but notice where and how your body is holding your grief. When you feel up to it, consider trying yoga, stretching, reiki, or massage to tap into the pain your body is holding and help to let it go.
6. **If you are missing your person, write down all the things you wish you were doing together; the things you will miss out on in the future; the pieces of your past with them that haunt you.** Sometimes when we look deep at the pain, we are afraid we will be swallowed whole by it. It's easier to avoid. But we can hold our truth before us and let the feelings ripple over us like the tide. They will lap and recess. Lap and recess. Each time, the feeling will be felt and released.
7. **Try not to avoid the situations or triggers that make you feel vulnerable.** Dig out your wedding album. Put on the mix tape and listen to the old love songs. Pull up the good memories and talk to friends about the bad ones. Give yourself permission to look at the reality of the person you lost. What were their best parts? What parts were not the best?
8. **Some people find it helpful to revisit places that were special to them or their person; and/or to visit the grave or other**

- memorial site.** Sometimes we need to face the reality of the situation, even if for no other reason than to remind ourselves of what we have lost and to let that pain come again.
9. **Some people, especially if they have had earlier trauma or their loss involved added traumatic components such as a violence, accidental death, suicide, homicide, or any circumstances that are stigmatized, may need professional help processing their emotions.** Cognitive behavioral therapy and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy need to be guided by a therapist, but both have shown evidence of powerful healing. I needed some intensive trauma therapy to process all I had lost.
 10. **Find a ritual that helps you (and your kids) safely destroy something.** Renovate your house. Create art by smashing something into small pieces. Garden. Destroy so that when the time comes, you can create again. Anger needs an outlet, even if we do not always recognize the need for such. Sometimes it's not until we are knee deep in the mud of it, that we recognize what is stuck. Make sure you make room for your children to let their anger out as well. A punching bag is a good investment for holding a family's anger.
 11. **Do not rush your grieving.** Do not expect too much else of yourself when you are deep in it. Meet yours and your children's basic needs: let them eat microwaved chicken nuggets and boxed mac and cheese for a year if that is all you can handle because doing this emotional work takes all your energy. Make the processing of your emotions a priority. It is often said that grief is the price we pay for love. Deep love = deep grief. Give yourself the gift of grieving well, even if you don't think you are.