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# **The Mourning After:** Grieving Someone We Love





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# Introduction

I started writing about grief, three days after I lost my father. At the time, I wasn't an expert on the subject, though none of us are until we're forced to become one. Until we have to say goodbye to someone we're not ready to say goodbye to, we never really understand grief—and even then, we only know our own unique story of that particular separation. Though loss itself is a universal experience, we all ultimately grieve very specifically, and because of that, much of the road of grief we walk alone.

When I began documenting my journey through the “Grief Valley,” billions of people had lost someone they love, but only I could speak as me, losing my father. And since then I've discovered that telling my story has allowed me to be a companion to others, albeit from a distance. I hope these writings help put words to something you couldn't find words for, that they provide some comfort in your sadness,—and that they serve as a reminder that you are in good company in your mourning. Even as you grieve, be encouraged.

# Part One

# Acknowledging Our Grief Anniversaries

I always struggle on sunny Saturday mornings.

It was a brilliantly blue-skyed September Saturday four years ago, when I bounded down the stairs on the way to the gym and noticed my phone vibrating on the hallway table. The caller ID told me that it was my youngest brother Eric and so I rushed to it, eager to catch up. Had I known what he was going to tell me ten seconds later, I wouldn't have answered it.

That was the moment I found out that my father was gone.

As only those who mourn the loss of someone they love deeply understand, sunny Saturday mornings have never been the same for me. They are now a Grief Anniversary; a perpetual, involuntary holiday where my heart marks its injury over and over and over again without me getting a say in the matter. Since that terrible day there has rarely been a Saturday morning regardless of what I've been in the middle of, when I have not found myself reliving it in some way, my mind jarred from its routine to momentarily eulogize my father once again.

I wish it was the only such occasion, as I could probably handle feeling this horrible once a week, but that's not how this works.

Most people think that grieving is about the big annual events—about Christmases and birthdays and the like, and of course it is. But the brutal truth (one that only those who continue to live after someone dear to them is gone can rightly fathom), is that these other quiet anniversaries are equally devastating and far more frequent.

In the wake of losing a loved one, everything in your life becomes a potential surprise memorial. Out of nowhere you are broadsided by days of the week or times of day or numbers on the calendar, or songs that were playing or cologne you were wearing or the feel of the grass beneath your knees as you fell at the news. These seemingly incessant reminders force you once again to observe the loss anew.

And since these days and times and triggers aren't obvious to most people in our lives (and since we don't have the time or the words to describe them all), they are usually unaware of just how much and just how often we mourn. Even those who are closest to us and care for us greatly remain largely oblivious to our recurring sadness. Our grief can feel like a very lonely journey, which in many ways it is because it is specific to us and to the one we've lost. It is a customized but hidden wound.

I've tried to remember this because it helps me to realize that most people I encounter every day are doing this continual memorializing of someone they love too. They, like me have these constant pinpricks to the heart that they are experiencing at any given moment. They, like me could be internally reeling for what seems to be no apparent reason. This very ordinary day for me could be a day of extraordinary mourning for them.

When someone you love deeply dies, the calendar of your life is altered forever. It gets divided into the time before and after that moment. I'll probably never have another uninterrupted sunny Saturday morning ever again. My mind will likely always find a way of marking the occasion and reminding me once more that *normal* is a very relative term now. In this way each moment is another chance to grieve my father, another potential opportunity to measure the depth of my love for him by the level of the loss in his absence.

Today, for a million reasons you might very well find yourself observing the absence of someone you miss dearly, and though it will be a rather uneventful day to the world around you, it will be a National Day of Mourning in the center of your own aching heart.

Please know that you are not alone, dear friend. I acknowledge the pain within you and I observe this day along with you.

Peace, on this Grief Anniversary.

Be encouraged.



# What Not to Say to Grieving People

When my father died, people around me tried to help me.

They saw my total, alarming devastation, and in their urgency to alleviate some of it, did what good people do when other people they care for are grieving: they said things.

And often the things they said, as birthed from a beautiful place as they were—really hurt. What they so desired to be healing, actually poked the already massive wound in my heart, and made it worse.

You may recognize a few of the things I heard.

“They’re in a better place.”

People imagine this will feel comforting to those who mourn; the idea that those we’ve lost are somewhere more beautiful, enjoying the afterlife. There is rarely solace in this, because the absence of those we love, means that this place (the place we live and need to stay) has grown much worse without them. It is this place, that we now have to inhabit forever disconnected from them, that weighs the heaviest on us. We don’t want to imagine our parents and best friends and siblings and children, blissful without us.

“God needed another angel.”

The moments after a death are rarely a good time for a spontaneous sermon, even the most well-meaning one. Religious people tend to want to make theological sense of really senseless loss, and they often resort to platitudes that again, feel helpful—but are more likely injurious. Painting for a survivor, the image of a selfish Creator somewhere in Heaven who actually engineered their blinding sadness by taking someone from them, doesn’t just exacerbate the trauma—it makes it the work of a God they are likely to resent.

“Everything happens for a reason.”

On the surface this seems like a safe declaration, but it’s a minefield for a grieving person. Now, they not only have to face the emotional wreckage of their loss, they have to somehow figure out the whys of that loss; the purpose for God or Fate or the Universe taking their loved one in that manner and at that time. That’s far too great an ask for a person on their best day—and this is not their best day. If there is a reason for such despair, it’s probably not possible to comprehend on this side of the hereafter.

“I know how you feel.”

You don’t. Grief is a singular experience. No loss we endure can be held up to another’s. Their relationship with the person they’ve been separated from is unprecedented, which means they alone carry the intimacy and the memories and the vacancies of their departure. No one was grieving my father’s death the way I was; not my mother or my sister or his friends. No one in the history of this planet was my father’s oldest son, and no one could know what it is like to be his

oldest son having to grieve and miss him in the way that I now did. You may have known grief, but you don't know anyone else's.

“Call me if you need anything.”

This is a logical default for us. We want people in pain to know that we're there for them. The problem is, when the bottom drops out from us and we are torn open and nothing seems normal—we have no idea what we need. We can barely sustain ourselves to the next breath. And even as the haze of the initial trauma begins to lift, and we realize we are lonely or struggling or in deficit, we will almost never call you. That's just how this works. Don't tell grieving people to call you. You call them.

Honestly, there are very few words that will be helpful in the face of the total existential collapse that comes when those most dear to people are suddenly gone. If you are going to try and fill with words, a cavernous space that really defies description, the only words I'll suggest are:

“I'm sorry you have to walk this road.”

“I love you.”

That's about it. Anything else is bound to be either superfluous or damaging.

What I knew about my father's passing is that it wasn't fixable. I know there weren't words that were going to replace him or counterbalance my heartsickness or make sense out of his absence. Nothing anyone said was going to rewind the clock back to a time when I felt the way I felt before he left, or fast forward to some future place of greater peace. I knew I was just going to have walk through hell and to let it hurt and to allow time to do the work that only time can do.

What this means, friend, is that the greatest gift you can give a grieving person is your presence: that loving, steady (silent) reminder that they are not alone. That presence will make a difference for those who now face the world with this unspeakable attrition, in a way that words never could.

Relatively soon you will likely encounter a grieving person you love, whose devastation shakes you and whose heart you will want to heal with words.

This is a beautiful aspiration, just know that it is a likely an impossible one.

Be quick to embrace.

Be urgent in presence.

Be very slow to speak.





# When Your Loved One Dies Again (A Lesson in The Grief Valley)

My father died today.

This wasn't the first time, though. I initially lost him almost twenty months ago, and when the news first reached me it literally brought me to my knees on our front lawn. In the early morning sun of an ordinary September Saturday, my unsuspecting body fell to the ground as the vicious tidal wave came and leveled me.

I still remember the dizzying flood of thoughts and questions and emotions as it all hit; my brain trying desperately and unsuccessfully to keep up with everything coming in. There's no way to adequately describe those next few frantic, disorienting seconds and the hours and weeks that followed for anyone who hasn't experienced it, other than to say it was a terrible personal Hell that I'd never hope for another living soul.

And yet for those of us who have lost someone we so love, it's a Hell that endures.

The thing about grief that people rarely tell you is how it repeats itself, how cruelly it cuts you again and again and again. You can go days, sometimes weeks feeling as if you've gotten the upper hand, that you've made some kind of tenuous peace with it all, that you've finally truly accepted the reality of the situation. Life can even seem quite normal, and you can foolishly find yourself genuinely believing you've turned a corner.

And then it happens.

Something randomly trips that invisible land mine buried just beneath the surface of your mundane; a song or a scent or a date on the calendar, or worst of all seemingly nothing, and you feel like the one you love has just died—again. The pain of separation comes as violently and clearly as it did in that very first second and you find yourself reeling once more.

I can't count the number of times I've relived my father's death since that first horrible September morning, and yet the ferocity of the feeling never dissipates. Though it's been nearly two years, a new city, and a new job since then, this week I once again found my knees on that front lawn, my mind struggling to make sense of anything, my tears pouring through heavy sobs. It was sorrow rebooting itself in my heart; another brutal Groundhog Day of grieving.

And yet the worst part of all of this, is that although I feel well right now, I'm quite certain that it will happen again. I may enjoy another season of apparent resignation perhaps even for a considerable amount of time, and then out of nowhere the pain will return with ferocity and suddenness, and my father will die again.

Grief yields a perennial pain; one that continues to do its invasive work within us for as long as we live.

It, like the love we have for those we are now without, never ends. This is both a beautiful tribute and a heavy toll.

And I guess that's the other great truth about grief, that hope perseveres too. As many times as the hurt comes to blindsides you, healing does as well. Without warning or reason or sense you suddenly begin to feel the unmistakable lightness of unexpected joy, and you get enough strength to keep going.

Not only that, but you somehow actually find *life* again. There, your beloved is ever-present; the beautiful bond of your relationship with them is not at all severed and you are connected intimately anew. Once more, there is gratitude and sweetness in remembering.

That is my prayer and wish for you; that for every time you relive your loss and for every day the one you love dies again, may you receive enduring comfort and a peace that is equally relentless in its coming to you.

Be encouraged.



# The Grieving Need You Most After the Funeral

My father died suddenly while on vacation three years ago. The event rattled the bedrock of my life in ways that are difficult to describe, and taught me lessons I couldn't have learned any other way.

One of the truths I discovered, is that when you lose someone you love—people show up.

Almost immediately they surround you with social media condolences and texts and visits and meals and flowers. They come with good hearts, with genuine compassion, and they truly want to support you in those moments. The problem, is that you're neither prepared nor particularly helped by the volume then.

The early days of grief are a hazy, dizzying, moment by moment response to a trauma that your mind simply can't wrap itself around. You are, what I like to call a *Grief Zombie*; outwardly moving but barely there. You aren't really functioning normally by any reasonable measurement, and so that huge crush of people is like diverting thousands of cars into a one lane back road—it all overwhelms the system. You can't absorb it all. Often it actually hurts.

This usually happens until the day of the funeral, when almost immediately the flood of support begins to subside. Over the coming days the calls and visits gradually become less frequent as people begin to return to their normal lives already in progress—right about the time the bottom drops out for you.

Just as the shock begins to wear off and the haze is lifted and you start to feel the full gravity of the loss; just as you get a clear look at the massive crater in your heart—you find yourself alone.

People don't leave you because they're callous or unconcerned, they're just unaware. Most people understand grief as an *event*, not as the permanent alteration to life that it is, and so they stay up until the funeral and imagine that when the service ends, that somehow you too can move ahead; that there is some *finishing* to your mourning.

That's the thing about grief that you learn as you grieve: that it has no shelf life; that you will grieve as long as you breathe, which is far after the memorial service and long after most people are prepared to stay. Again, they still love you dearly, they just have their own roads to walk.

Sometimes people leave because they suddenly feel estranged by the death. They may have been used to knowing you as part of a couple or as a family, and they aren't able to navigate the new dynamic the loss has created. They simply don't know how to relate to you the way they once did, and so they withdraw.

Or sometimes people see you from a distance and mistake your visible stability for the absence of need, as if the fact that you're functioning in public doesn't mean you don't fall apart all the time when you're alone—and you do. We all carry the grief as bravely and competently as we can in

public, but none of us are strong enough to shoulder it alone. People often say of a grieving person, “They’re so strong”, but they’re not. They’re doing what they have to in order to survive. They need you to come alongside them.

Other times people avoid you because they believe that they will say the wrong thing; that somehow they will remind you of your loved one and cause you unnecessary pain. Trust me, the grieving don’t lack for reminders. They are intimately aware of the absence in their lives, and you acknowledging it actually makes them feel *better*. It gives them consent to live with the grief, and to know that they can be both wounded and normal.

Friends, what I’m saying, is that it’s wonderful to be present for people when tragedy occurs. It’s a beautiful thing to express your love and support for those you love in any way you feel is right in those first few days. It does matter. No compassion is ever wasted.

But if there’s anything I would tell you, as someone who’s walked through the Grief Valley, is that the time your presence is most needed and most powerful, is in those days and weeks and months and years after the funeral; when most people have withdrawn and the road is most isolating. It is in the countless ordinary moments that follow, when grief sucker punches you and you again feel it all fully.

It’s been five years since I lost my father, and on many days the pain is as present and profound as that first day.

Remind yourself to reach out to people long after the services and memorials have concluded.

Death is a date in the calendar, but grief *is* the calendar.



# The Hidden, Chronic Pain of Grief

I have a couple of close friends who have struggled for years with undiagnosed chronic illnesses, and they've both shared with me on several occasions how isolating their conditions became because their pain wasn't visible to others.

In the absence of outward, identifiable symptoms, people either questioned the reality or severity of their injuries, or they were simply unaware of them. If in another's presence my friends smiled and refused to mention it, then their suffering (though real and debilitating) remained hidden. They appeared quite healthy and normal and even happy—all the while their insides were being ripped to shreds.

This is how it is to be a survivor of a loved one.

This is life in the Grief Valley.

Your pain is chronic and deep and most often, internal.

To show the suffering when it comes, just simply won't work most of the time.

So you hurt and you hide.

My father died three years ago and as it is with loss, lots of calendar milestones are tough. Yet as difficult as birthdays and anniversaries and holidays are, those are predictable trials. You sort of see those breakdowns coming and you prepare for them. In fact, people are usually much more sensitive to your grief during those times; much more mindful of what might be going on beneath the surface. Your discomfort then seems expected, called for, natural in their eyes.

The really horrible moments are those *other* ones; the random, unexpected, unspectacular times when the pain comes out of nowhere and sucker punches your soul. It might be a song or a word or a time of day or the smell of something on the stove or a place you drive past that rips you open again, that brings the flood of tears, that ushers in the heaves and sobs.

And during many such times it just isn't convenient or socially acceptable to flat-out lose it; at a bus stop with your son or in a staff meeting or paying at the drive-thru or in the middle of a board game with a group of friends. On so many of those occasions, to save yourself the embarrassment or to prevent an awkward moment for those you are with; you grit your teeth, ball up your fist, force a smile and force the tears back down from where they came.

You fall apart in places no one can see—and all the while you look perfectly fine.

I've grown to accept that so much of grief is destined to be a solitary road. Even when well-meaning people care deeply and truly desire to share the journey with you, they will never be privy to the frequency and severity of your suffering. This is partly because your loss is so very individual, and partly because you simply never reveal it all to them. You couldn't possibly.

I would have preferred to never have had to walk this road at all. Traveling through the Grief Valley has largely been a big slice of Hell, but it certainly hasn't been without its hard-earned treasures too. One of those has been the realization of just how much hidden, chronic pain there is in my midst; of how many of people I cross paths with on any given day might be smiling and silently falling apart.



That kind of awareness doesn't come until you too have many moments of deeply buried hurt, but once you receive it your eyes see people differently. They look more intently. Empathy becomes easier. Compassion is involuntary.

To all those who will willingly suffer in secret today, as memories and sadness surprise you in the most inconvenient of moments: I see you.

I know your pain doesn't have to be visible to be real.

Be encouraged.



# How You Die, When Someone You Love Dies

At one time or another you've probably heard someone say that when a person you love dies, a part of you dies too.

I used to think that was just a beautiful figure of speech, a touching poetic image that spoke symbolically to the depth of our profound sadness and loss.

That is, until this week—when I died.

My father passed away suddenly nearly two years ago, and I've written a great deal about the road I've traveled since then. It's one that's meandered from the night-time depths of heaving sobs, to sweet sunrise moments of incredible gratitude. Most of the time I've naturally grieved *his* loss from my life; the absence replacing his presence.

Recently though, I came face to face with the me who also left for good, on the day that he did.

Over the course of our 44 years together, my dad and I did lots of really great stuff—just the two of us. As you do when you lose someone you love, I often find myself randomly rewinding to those places and times in the past, to remind me of the love and adventures and the laughter we shared. One of those cherished memories was of the Saturdays in my early teenage years, when I'd accompany him to a local indoor flea market at the New York State Fairgrounds. Times were tough for our family then (though I was quite oblivious), and my father was selling athletic shoes on the side to help keep our heat on and our pantry full.

It was an incredible struggle for him and I'm sure from his perspective, a pretty rough time. To me it was like Christmas at Disneyland.

I'd get up before the sun on Saturday and help him load up the shoes into massive hockey bags and off we'd go. We'd usually eat breakfast from one of the vendors on site in the damp cold of the early winter morning. (I can still taste the bagels grilled on a huge flat top with gobs of butter and smell the bacon that had been crisping up next to them). Once things were up and running at my dad's booth, I'd head off to explore the flea market, which may as well have been an amusement park to my ninth grade brain. I spent hours and hours looking through racks of record albums, digging through old comic books, trying out stereo equipment, making handmade buttons with silly catch phrases on them, and checking out cute girls at the other booths.

Between all of that, I'd hang out with my dad and watch him do his thing with customers, trying to be helpful where I could. Later we'd pack up everything and usually head back home after lunch. They were precious times.

There are lots of other things that happened during those weekends he and I spent together at the flea market; more stories, more conversations, more meals, more funny anecdotes—but I no longer have access to them.

That's what people never tell you, about the real, fundamental, life-giving stuff you lose when someone you love leaves.

You lose the part of you that only they knew.

You lose some of your story.

It simply dies.

My dad was the only one there with me during those special Saturdays, and now that he's gone there's no one to go to to help me relive or revisit or remember them when I want to. There's no one to help fill in the gaps of my memories, no one to give me the pieces of life that belonged only to the two of us—and I hate that.

Any part of those days that exists outside of my memory is now dead and buried.

If you haven't walked the Grief Valley yet, just trust me on this.

One day you will miss someone dearly and when that cold reality hits you; the truth of just how much of you is gone too, you'll grieve the loss of yourself as well, even as you live.

One of the great things about having people who love you and who've lived alongside of you for a long time is how they can surprise you, how when you're with them they can dig out a story or unveil something about you that you had totally forgotten about or had never known at all. My dad would do that all the time, matter-of-factly tossing off a random memory that allowed me to see myself through his eyes. It was like having a small lost part of you suddenly and unexpectedly returned to you.

As much as I miss my dad (and I do miss him terribly) I miss the me that he knew, too. I grieve the loss of our shared story.

I mourn losing the childhood *me* who napped with him on his bed, the teenage me who spent those priceless Saturday mornings with him, the college aged me who fell asleep while he drove the four-hour trip back to college, the middle-aged me who made him laugh with silly stories of his grandkids.

Just as sure as he isn't coming back, neither are those parts of my story because he was their co-owner.

Friends, as you grieve for those who are gone, know that it's normal to also lament the part of you that they've taken with them.

While those experiences formed you and reside deep in the fabric of your very heart, in ways that certainly transcend your memories, the painful gaps will still be there in what you lose without their eyewitness testimony.

Those aren't just flowery words meant to simply paint a picture of grief, they're a vivid description of real, personal loss.

A part of you does indeed die when someone you love passes away.

May they, and the unique part of you they've taken with them, both rest in peace.



# The Day I'll Finally Stop Grieving

“How long has it been? When is he going to get over that grief and move on already?”

I get it.

I know you might be thinking that about me or about someone else these days.

I know you may look at someone you know in mourning and wonder when they'll *snap out of it*.

I understand because I use to think that way too.

Okay, maybe at the time I was self-aware enough or guilty enough not to think it *quite* that explicitly, even in my own head. It might have come in the form of a growing impatience toward someone in mourning or a gradual dismissing of their sadness over time or maybe in my intentionally avoiding them as the days passed. It was subtle to be sure, but I can distinctly remember reaching the place where my compassion for grieving friends had reached its capacity—and it was long before they stopped hurting.

Back then like most people, my mind was operating under the faulty assumption that grief had some predictable expiration date; a reasonable period of time after which recovery and normalcy would come and the person would return to life as it was before, albeit with some minor adjustments.

I thought all these things, *until I grieved*.

I never think these things anymore.

Four years ago I remember sitting with a dear friend at a coffee shop table in the aftermath of my father's sudden passing. In response to my quivering voice and my tear-weary eyes and my obvious shell shock, she assured me that this debilitating sadness; this ironic combination of searing pain and complete numbness was going to give me a layer of compassion for hurting people that I'd never had before. It was an understanding, she said, that I simply couldn't have had without walking through the Grief Valley. She was right, though I would have gladly acquired this empathy in a million other ways.

Since that day I've realized that Grief doesn't just visit you for a horrible, yet temporary holiday. It moves in, puts down roots—and it never leaves. Yes as time passes, eventually the tidal waves subside for longer periods, but they inevitably come crashing in again without notice, when you are least prepared. With no warning they devastate the landscape of your heart all over again, leaving you bruised and breathless and needing to rebuild once more.

Grief brings humility as a housewarming gift and doesn't care whether you want it or not.

You are forced to face your inability to do *anything* but feel it all and fall apart. It's incredibly difficult in those quiet moments, when you realize so long after the loss that you're still not the same person you used to be; that this chronic soul injury just won't heal up. This is tough medicine to take, but more difficult still, is coming to feel quite sure that you'll never be that person again. It's humbling to

know you've been internally altered: Death has interrupted your plans, served your relationships, and rewritten the script for you.

And strangely (or perhaps quite understandably) those acute attacks of despair are the very moments when I feel closest to my father, as if the pain somehow allows me to remove the space and time which separates us and I can press my head against his chest and hear his heartbeat once more. These tragic times are somehow oddly comforting even as they kick you in the gut.

And it is *this* odd healing sadness which I'll carry for the remainder of my days; that nexus between total devastation and gradual restoration. It is the way your love outlives your loved one.

I've walked enough of this road to realize that it is my road now. This is not just a momentary detour, it's the permanent state of affairs. I will have many good days and many moments of gratitude and times of welcome respite, but I'm never fully getting over this loss.

This is the cost of sharing your life with someone worth missing.

Four years into my walk in the Valley I've resigned myself to the truth that this a lifetime sentence. At the end of my time here on the planet, I will either be reunited with my father in some glorious mystery, or simply reach my last day of mourning his loss.

Either way I'm beginning to rest in the simple truth:

The day I'll stop grieving—is the day I stop breathing.





# Things I've Learned Since My Father Died

This is my least favorite day of the year.

As I write this, today is my father's birthday. Five years ago he turned 70, and that night in his sleep he passed away suddenly while on a cruise with my mom and brother.

It was an atomic bomb detonated in my life that I'm honestly still trying to climb from the rubble of. As people who grieve understand, you don't ever really get past it. You may have days or seasons where you believe you've reached a clearing in it all, some sort of emotional distance. You begin to function at a very high level for long periods of time and occasionally you even begin to think you're "healed". Then suddenly something happens; a scent, a thought, a song, a milestone, or a day on the calendar, and in an instant it's ground zero and Day 1 all over again, and you're buried and broken and you can't see the light.

This is where I am today. I am beginning again; fresh wounds, new grief, history repeating. I'm not ashamed about this. I'm okay being not okay.

People say that when you lose someone you love, you learn things that you couldn't learn any other way. This is true.

I've learned a deeper compassion for people in pain.

I've learned the near superhuman strength of my mother.

I've learned how once ordinary objects become sacred relics.

I've learned how much you can hurt and still hold it together on the surface.

I've learned that the acute pain gives you close proximity to the people you've lost.

I've learned that old memories returning are like surprise packages from Heaven.

I've learned that death will challenge your faith in ways you never imagined.

I've learned that after three years you still reach for the phone to call them.

I've learned that the way you grieve is the right way to grieve, because it is your way.

I've learned that you'd gladly trade everything you own for thirty more seconds with them.

I've learned how to cry in a restaurant bathroom and come out as if nothing happened.

I've learned to accept that my daughter will never remember her Papa, and to be okay hating this.

I've learned the joy in seeing your loved ones in your laugh, your reflection, your hands, your children.

I've learned to resent strangers who have their fathers and grandfathers and no empty chairs at the holidays.

I've learned that on some days, though not suicidal, you'll wish you could die just to see them again.

I've learned that even though good people try to help, you ultimately have to grieve alone.

I've learned that no matter how old you are you never stop needing your Daddy.

I've learned the horrible accuracy of all those clichés about how we never have enough time with people we love, about how there are no ordinary days, and about the tissue paper-thin fragility of life.

I've learned that tears are a tribute.

I've learned that death just sucks, and that any other spin on it is just a valiant but failing effort to make lemonade out of some really bitter fruit.

But mostly I've learned just how big a hole someone can leave in your life; how massive a gap there is when they're gone, and how we all fill that space for someone.

I do much of my work in words written for other people; trying to speak about life with some kind of clarity so that they can find themselves in those words and be encouraged. I'm not sure these words will do that, but these words are for me, because I need to say them; as prayers, as medicine, as thank you.

Today is my father's birthday. He taught me so much in life. He is still teaching me.

Happy Birthday, Dad.



## Part Two

# Fragile People: Handle With Care (My Week As A Grief Zombie)

My dad died very suddenly three days ago.

The first few seconds of that morning phone call will be burned into my memory for the rest of my life; the one where I heard my youngest brother's voice quivering as he told me that my father had passed away in his sleep while on a cruise with my mom on his 70th birthday. The words sent me immediately to my knees on the front lawn and sometimes I feel like I'm still there, at least a good part of my heart is.

Since then, I've been what I would call a *Grief Zombie*; walking around in an odd, contradictory haze of searing pain and complete numbness, which each like to take rapid turns overpowering me. It's as if I'm being sucker punched by sadness one second and bear hugged by gratitude the next.

But all the while, since that life-altering phone call (as those who have experienced the loss of someone they love, know) I've had to continue to do stuff; take the kids to school, buy bananas, go to the gym—partly because things still need to get done, and partly because these mundane, ordinary things help keep you from completely losing it in the face of the pure insanity of your reality.

Over the last three days, as I've navigated parking lots, waited in restaurant lines, and sat on park benches, I've done so, pushing back tears, fighting to stay upright, and in general, being just seconds from a total, blubbering, room-clearing freak out.

I've felt like I've wanted to wear a sign that says: I JUST LOST MY DAD. PLEASE GO EASY.

I mean, other than my embarrassingly bloodshot eyes and the occasional puberty-recalling break in my voice, it's not like anyone would *know* what's happening inside me or around me.

And while I don't want to physically *wear* my actual circumstances on my chest, I know that if I did, it would probably cause people around me to give me space or speak softer or move more carefully, and it would probably make the impossible, almost bearable.

But even as I've wished that people could see the personal hell that *I'm* going through, I'm aware of the acute blindness that I usually live with and the tremendous ego that exists in the request itself.

*Why am I so special?*

*Why is my pain any more pressing than anyone else's?*

*Why do I assume that everybody but me is alright?*

*Why do I expect everyone around me to be any sturdier than I feel?*

This week, I've been reminded that I am surrounded by Grief Zombies all the time. Maybe they aren't mourning the sudden, tragic passing of a parent, but wounded, broken, pain-ravaged people are everywhere, everyday stumbling all around me—and yet most of the time I'm fairly oblivious to them:

*Parents whose children are terminally ill.*  
*Couples in the middle of divorce.*  
*People grieving loss of loved ones and relationships.*  
*Kids being bullied at school.*  
*Teenagers who want to end their lives.*  
*Spouses whose partners are deployed in combat.*  
*Families with no idea how to keep the lights on.*  
*Young moms with little help, little sleep, and less sympathy.*

Yet none of them wear the signs.  
None of them have labels.  
None of them come with written warnings reading, FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH CARE.

And since they *don't*, it's up to you and me to look more closely and more deeply at everyone around us; at work, or at the gas station, or in the produce section, and to never assume they aren't all just hanging by a thread.

We need to remind ourselves just how hard the stories around us might be, and to approach each person as a delicate, breakable, invaluable treasure—and to go easy.

As you walk, drive, and click around this week, people won't be *wearing* signs but if you look with the right eyes, you'll see the signs.

Life is fragile. Hold it carefully.  
People are fragile. Handle them gently.  
You are fragile. Take it easy.





# Finding My Kryptonite: Tales Of A Former Superhero

These are weird days in *Metropolis*.

Ever since my father passed away suddenly three weeks ago, there isn't much about life that isn't profoundly different; from the way the nighttime feels, to the tightening in my stomach whenever the phone rings, to the way I see my children.

I think differently, I sense time differently, and I look at the future differently as well.

But more than anything, the grief I've experienced since the loss of my dad, has led me to a clear and startling admission: *I'm not a superhero*.

For the past 16 years as a pastor, I've made a living *saving people*; of dramatically flying into the burning rubble of other's lives, and coming out without a scratch, carrying the grateful mortals I've rescued... or so I thought.

OK, maybe I haven't pictured myself in *quite* those grandiose terms, but I've certainly seen myself as a problem solver, a fixer, a leader.

I've prided myself on being professional, and excellent, and dependable, and like many in ministry, I've been the person others come to for help. If there've been bullets to outrun, trains to overpower, or tall buildings to leap over, I've been your man; or rather, your *Super-man*.

But then I ran into *Kryptonite*.

Ever since I learned of my father's death, I've felt decidedly *human*; and been brought, both figuratively and literally, to my knees. I've found myself unable to focus, or stay engaged, or control my emotions... (just like an actual *person*).

For the first time, maybe ever, I've had to admit to others (and to myself), that I need the saving. And for the first time, I've taken the costume and the cape off, and stopped being so damn super.

It's a pretty tough thing for any would-be hero to face weakness; to acknowledge when they're reached the end of their strength; when they are broken, defeated.

I think many of you understand that. I think you've been wearing the costume for a while too, yourself.

OK, so maybe you're not an overachieving pastor. Maybe you're a superstar at work, or a perfectionist parent, or a superhuman spouse, or a school sports star, or an academic sensation.

Maybe you've gained some attention, or recognition, or reputation by being great at something, and ever since, you've become, on some level, in your own situation, a *superhero*.

Maybe you just find your identity and your worth through your pursuit of perfection.

Lots of us live with inflated perceptions of ourselves; straddled with unrealistic expectations and unreasonable goals, either from outside or from within, we strive and strain to keep it all together; to earn the accolades, to get the grade, to look the part, to get the prize, and to do everything short of saving the world.

And setting down the weight of the planet isn't easy, once you're convinced that you're supposed to be carrying it; that it's your job to keep it all up and spinning.

In fact, if you fancy yourself a superhero, most people will be content to hand you a costume, point you to a phone booth, and cheer you on.

If you've stumbled upon this post, and you're exhausted from being superhuman, whether at home or school, or in your marriage, or at your job, please hear me: *You can take off the costume.*

We all have our *Kryptonite*, and we all reach the capacity of our power. We all find ourselves bruised and bloodied and beaten-up by this life, and yet, the great news, is that even then, we can endure. Only we don't do it on our strength, or with our ability or charisma or intellect.

Sometimes we move forward, only as we are carried on the shoulders of others. I am learning this these days.

The past three weeks have been incredibly painful, but so freeing too. It's a pretty powerful thing, to admit when you are powerless.

Maybe, like me, you'll need to hit some traumatic turn in your road to realize all this, but I'm hoping not.

Perhaps you'll see these words, as permission to be imperfect.; to not have it all together, to fail and fall and cry, and to be carried for a while.

I'm retiring from the superhero business, and I'm asking you to join me.

Ditch the spandex.

Welcome to humanity.



# Grief Valley Lessons: When “A Better Place” Isn’t Better

Words are wild, unpredictable things.

Often, ones delivered in love and designed to heal can wound terribly, especially when attempting to help someone dealing with death.

In trying to help you weather the loss of a loved one, kindhearted, well-meaning people, will often tell you that those you mourn over, have “gone to a better place”.

Though said earnestly, and always in love, this is almost never very helpful or comforting, as grief is really about the personal sense of loss one feels in the *here and now*.

For survivors, this is largely about how stinkin’ lousy this place currently is.

When you’re dealing with crippling pain, and with the unfathomable newly-made hole in your life; when you’re just trying to piece together in your mind, a patchwork of coherent thoughts to make the present bearable, the phrase “a better place”, often adds insult to horrific injury.

Yes, you want goodness for your loved one, and you think about all that they cannot and will not experience here, and yes, the thought of them in Heaven, free from pain and worry *is* a small help, but you’re also pretty darn selfish about the whole thing, too.

To the grieving mind the push-back to this idea comes easy, if we think about it:

Heaven was *already* a better place before all of this happened, but this loss, and the void it has created, has now made *this* place, (the place where those left behind have to stay and live), a much, much worse place.

And in this sadly ironic way, the seemingly innocent words that you hope will bring comfort, can actually amplify the loss for a survivor; magnifying the great chasm between them, and the one they no longer have.

“Heaven gained an angel”, is another similar well-meaning, but greatly flawed attempt at consolation. Again, it’s a beautiful image and a sweet idea, but for those carrying on here in the valley, it’s mixed with the horrible reality that we, living where angels are already in very short supply as it is, have had yet another casualty.

Please don’t hear this as a slight to you, if you’ve ever spoken these words, even to me.

They’re ones that I’ve offered as well at one time or another, and in those moments, I too, was lovingly, desperately reaching for something that could help carry someone as they wept.

It's just another reminder and a lesson for the heart, that when facing the irrevocable, irreplaceable loss of someone you held dear, *all words fail*.

In the end, the only thing we can offer someone who we care for, which can provide the kind of comfort that we all wish words will, are prayers and *presence*.

There's something about simply *being with* someone; about sitting with them in a pain that you refrain from speaking into, that allows stuff much bigger and far greater than words to be exchanged.

And only in those sacred moments of silent presence, can the power of that "better place", really be felt.

A lesson I'm learning in the valley...



# In the Width of a Breath: The Thinness of Life in The Grief Valley

It's been six months since my father passed away suddenly while on a cruise with my Mom and brother.

I'd like to say that things have gotten easier since then, that the pain isn't still crippling at times, that I've come to terms with the fact that I won't get to share life with him anymore—but that would be a lie.

I'd *like* to say that I've made peace with the pain, but I'm not sure you ever really do that.

What's so unbelievable at times is the ways in which grief waves hit you.

Sadness often springs its cruel surprise party, jumping out of bushes or from behind grocery store aisles or from inside the hall closet. The simple, ordinary, sometimes completely unrelated stuff that derails and devastates you is staggering; smells, sounds, food, sitcoms, songs, breezes, temperature.

Lately, one of the things that's been my constant companion in the Grief Valley, is the idea of *thinness*; of the stark, brutal, incomprehensibly small space between living and leaving.

My father died in his sleep on the ship, following a birthday dinner filled with food and laughter, and with the usual excitement and promise of the first day at sea.

As far as any of us can tell he experienced no pain, no trauma, no anguish.

He simply went to sleep and stayed asleep.

As he closed his eyes, it probably never occurred to him that these were his last hours here. No soul-searching, no fond looking back, no final words, no dramatic speeches.

I want to feel relief, but what I really feel is cheated.

I'll never forget one of the first things my mother said when I spoke to her on the phone that day: "He had a beautiful death."

It was, in its gentleness and swiftness, indeed *beautiful*, but here a half a year removed, it's that same silent suddenness that's really messing with me.

I picture his face in that moment lying there in bed; as he quietly passed from this life into what is beyond it; no fanfare or drama or bombast. He just breathed—and then he didn't.

His heart was beating and then it ceased to.

And in that most infinitesimal of spaces, my father's 70-year life was over, and so many others were irrevocably, completely altered.

In the width of *one breath*, everything changed for me.

I've heard and spoken all the words about how quickly life moves and about how fragile it is, and those words have never been truer than they have these past six months.

However, what's both infuriating and frightening (and yet somehow beautifully sweet), is just how *thin* it all is.

And honestly, I'm not sure what to do with all of this here as I type; other than feel like I'm reading aloud some saccharine-soaked greeting card platitudes; about loving the people around you while they're here and about living your life to the fullest and about not sweating the small stuff, but that's horribly underselling the gravity of it all.

Besides, there are some lessons that can only really be learned when looking back, and sadly the Grief Valley is something you simply can't walk through until you're in it.

My faith tells me that on a September night in a cruise ship bed, in that thinnest of expanses, my father went from conscious to much-more-than conscious; that without ever waking-up, he suddenly received the answers to the questions that every one on *this side* of the thinness wonders about.

And yet some days I confess, as I ponder all of it, that my faith too, becomes the thinness. It sometimes stretches to a paper-width place, as hope and grief pull from opposite ends and where I strain to look for the light breaking through.

And it's in that place, where somehow God is closest.

One breath here, the next breath hereafter.

*That*, is life and death—the great, glorious thinness.



# Attrition And Amputation: Losing And Limping In The Grief Valley

My dad died nearly 8 months ago and some stuff is finally starting to settle.

There are realities that hit you little by little as you grieve; brutal truths that you've probably really known for a lot longer but that you couldn't quite wrap your brain around enough to claim as your own then.

Maybe it's your mind's way of protecting itself from bearing too much sadness, too much trauma at one time.

One of the things that's become clear in recent weeks is the simple reality that my life will not get better.

That's not to say that I won't feel better or that the sadness won't eventually recede somewhat or that there won't be really, really good moments. (I've experienced all of this in the time following my father's passing).

I know in the future, that I'll laugh bombastically and eat decadent meals and be moved by music, and I'll travel and dance and create and feel moments of true joy and contentment.

When I say that I know that life won't get better though, it's admitting the sobering truth that despite all of these incredible, gratitude-inducing, live-giving things that will surely come, my life will simply never be as good as it was when my father was in this world.

It will never be better than it was before he left.

It couldn't be.

No matter who or what I add to my journey or what victories or successes they bring, they will never replace the part that's gone—the part uniquely shaped like him.

It would be an insult to my father and to his unimaginable impact in my life to expect otherwise.

I guess that's why the word *loss*, while seemingly incomplete says it all pretty darn well as you grieve.

When you *do* lose someone close to you, you learn to make peace with *attrition*; with the cruel, horrible subtraction that death delivers. You realize that there was a time (now in the past) when your family was whole and that no matter what the future brings, it will always remain *less-than*.

I imagine it's not unlike the way a new amputee feels as they move though life without a leg.

They adapt, they learn to cope and they relearn to navigate daily tasks. They find creative, amazing ways to do everything that they did before, but it's always a reaction to damage.

It's always an attempt to respond to invasive intrusion, an effort to get as close as they can to wholeness, to completeness and yet there's just no way to get it *all* back.

You live, but you live with a limp.

That's what grieving is.

That's what the attrition causes.

You *do* move forward, but it's only because it's the only direction you have left if you want to keep living.

You take every painful, awkward, desperate step it takes to keep walking, and you try to go as far as you can given what you've lost.

This probably comes across as pretty depressing stuff, but for me it's a gift, helping me clearly see and appreciate the present.

Most likely, this won't be the last time I'll grieve someone I love, and when that unwanted day and time does come, I'll look back and remember *these* days and *these* times as ones when I was a little closer to whole.

For everyone reading this in The Grief Valley, struggling to take the next excruciating step: be encouraged.

Yes, you've lost something irreplaceable but you haven't lost it all.

There's still a good, beautiful, blessing-filled path for you to walk.

So walk on—even if it is with a limp.





# Blood Breaks Through The Skin: Another Lesson In The Grief Valley

Blood is fascinating.

It's so full of life, so critical to every breath and step; a powerful, perpetual flood, flowing just there beneath the surface of our skin. It's a force that we're largely quite oblivious to as well, even as it's part of us, even as it sustains us.

In fact, we don't think much about our blood until something breaks the flesh and we realize just how close we are to it all. Some times it takes so little to bring it rushing to the surface, and then the challenge is to stop it before it does too much damage.

Grief is this way.

It's hidden, just there below the visible stuff of life.

Some days, we who've lost someone we love are quite unaware it's still there at all.

We forget the river raging underneath.

Sometimes for stretches of hours or even days or weeks, we move and plan and laugh and play with our kids and go to restaurants and mow the lawn and fold laundry and Tweet our dessert photos and everything feels normal—and then it happens, a pin prick, and a wound opens.

The stuff that breaks the surface and triggers the flood of sadness and memory in the wake of loss is confoundingly random; often so innocuous that it seems ridiculous; that is, until the abrasion.

The most mundane, trivial things can derail you in The Grief Valley, much like that split-second slip of your finger opening a can or the sudden misstep walking in the garden that can cut the skin, turning an ordinary moment into Triage duty.

Here, ten months after my father's passing, I find (among a million other places) that solitary trips to a local grocery store do this for me. For no reason that makes any real sense, I often find myself pushing back tears in the breakfast cereal aisle or the produce section. (Awkward for the clerks, I'm sure).

And as silly as it sounds, it's the place where I grieve fully. It's the place where I so often bleed and bandage and where I again face the hidden flood.

There is no rhyme or reason to things that reopen the wounds for any of us.

There is no sense to the hemorrhage of Grief.

It simply comes when it chooses, and it makes you bleed.

Over time, you learn to accept that the stuff beneath the surface just isn't going away—ever. You may develop thicker skin or you may be less apt to break as often as before, but the flood is still there below; of sweet memories and wasted words and missed opportunities and lost tomorrows.

I think walking through this valley for the past 10 months has helped me realize just how much is happening right below the surface for all of us.

I don't just see people now. I try to see *into* them.

I know that there is more than they show and more than their surface skin reveals. I know that at any moment they may be bleeding and they may need bandaging.

Look around for those in your path who may be walking wounded and who simply aren't showing it.

See deeper than skin.

If you're navigating your own loss these days, be aware of the river of grief beneath your *own* flesh, and make peace with the fact that it won't stay hidden forever.

Don't be afraid to bleed.



# A Year To Life: My First 365 Days In The Grief Valley

It's the year anniversary of Day 1 in the Grief Valley.

I really thought today would feel different.

A year ago today, my father spent his 70th birthday departing on a West Coast cruise with my mother and other members of our family. He posed for the requisite sail-away photos, had a celebratory first night dinner, took a relaxing walk around the ship, went to bed... and never woke-up.

In many ways I feel like I'm still sleeping too, still expecting to wake-up from all of this.

Most people speak about how difficult the nights are after you lose someone you love, but for me it's the mornings that have been the most cruel. So many dawns with grief, you feel it fresh when you open your eyes and look round and you realize, "Crap, this actually *happened*".

And it's like the first horrible day all over again.

365 days in the Grief Valley and I was hoping for some grand revelation today, some brilliant moment of clarity; a dramatic turning point upon which I could pivot and sprint toward some sort of resolution.

I desperately prayed that I could pass along a sacred nugget of truth today that might help you too; you who are in the Valley with me.

I don't think that's coming.

Thankfully, as so often has been the story of my life, music has spoken the cries of my heart, tapping into the deep recesses of pain where words are hard to come by, and given me words.

Like a letter from an old friend, this was in my music library this week:

*I know there is no end to grief, that's how I know there is no end to love.* – Bono, *California*

That's pretty much the deal.

This *really* is the story of The Grief Valley: once you enter it, you never really ever leave again. And the most ironic thing, is that you don't want to.

To leave the Valley would mean to leave behind *Love*, because love for another is the source of the loss, and it's that loss that fuels the grieving.

And since you can't walk away from Love, you take it with you and you make peace with the reality that your life is now and forever a Valley life.

Yes, there are days when you get to a precious bit of clearing and you feel the sun more fully, days when you laugh and eat great food, and dance and dream; days when you almost feel like you've stepped through it all for good.

But it's never very long until you look-up and you realize that the mountains aren't gone, your eyes have just learned to adjust to their shadows.

Everything is saturated with memory and so *everything* is what reminds you of the love and the loss.

The pain of the absence of my dad isn't going anywhere. It couldn't, so long as his absence replaces his presence. That separation will be here, no matter how much time passes.

Because my love for my father will remain until my last breath here, so will the pain of his passing; no end to Love, no end to Grief.

I've come to accept that I'll share my days with both of them, so we better all just get comfy.

*Tears are a tribute.*

That phrase has been with me since my first days in the Valley and I'm still honoring my dad today. I don't fight them anymore, those tears. I welcome them. I cherish them. I celebrate them.

For me, they are conversation, and communion, and restoration, and resurrection.

Those tears are proof that Love and Grief persevere and they need to, because both remind us of the delicate sweetness of this life.

So in many ways, Day 365 is just another day in the lifetime sentence that Death hands you: One year to life in the Grief Valley.

Love.  
Grieve.  
Love.  
Grieve.  
Repeat.

This is what we do.

Keep walking.

