

THE COURAGE TO GRIEVE

Creative
Living,
Recovery,
& Growth
Through
Grief

JUDY
TATELBAUM

The Courage to Grieve

by Judy Tatelbaum



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Prologue

*Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which
your laughter rises was oftentimes
filled with your tears.*

—KAHLIL GIBRAN, *The Prophet*

On March 17, 1956, my brother, David, age twenty, was killed in an automobile accident. I was seventeen, a senior in high school then. I couldn't face the reality. I pretended that his death was a lie and that the policeman who informed us had made a mistake. I imagined David would reappear at any moment and prove me right.

As time went on, and David didn't reappear, I felt an overwhelming sense of loss. I missed him terribly. I agonized about why I did not die instead of David. I felt helpless, knowing how much my parents must be suffering. I did not know what to do for them or say to them. I envied intact families, now that we were three instead of four. I didn't want to be an only child. I was afraid of the dark that reminded me of death. David was in all my dreams. These dreams of reunion made me happy and at the same time made me want to die to be with him again. My sense of loss was revived each morning, when I realized being with David was only a dream.

Although seeing David's body at the funeral forced me to acknowledge the truth of his death, it still took me years to accept it. My feelings of loss were so intense and overwhelming that periodically I would retreat into my denial of his death. My grief came and went, over and over again. I hated my sorrow and yet felt guilty when I forgot about it.

I was angry at the reckless driver who caused the accident and at God for letting such a vital young man die. I asked the question "Why?" over and over again. People kept saying David's death was "God's will." What kind of God would will David dead? God looked wrathful and frightening to me. I wondered if I was a fool to believe in God at all.

My lack of a belief system made my grief more painful. For years a sense of meaninglessness pervaded my life. I went through the motions of living: school, dating, working as a social worker, marriage, divorce, and other new experiences. I saw life as an empty struggle, hard work without much reward. I thought a lot about dying. I wrote poetry and short stories about my hopelessness. I was treading water, getting through somehow, but certainly not relishing my life. I felt guilty to be alive when David was not, and I missed him still.

I searched for a way to accept death. I longed to find meaning in life and death. Few people would even talk with me about death and loss. My graduate training in social work at Simmons College in Boston confirmed how profound the trauma of loss is for people, but it did not help me resolve my sorrow. I wasted three years in therapy with a psychiatrist who could not face grief and death himself and who kept telling me to grow up. I felt myself questing alone, searching out answers through philosophers and gingerly exploring some religions. In 1966 I went to another psychiatrist in New York, Mel Boigon, a wise and loving man who helped me face my grief and work through more of it. Then Mel died unexpectedly at the age of forty-eight. It was a terrible loss but I faced it squarely. I wanted to show Mel that I could, to testify to his helping me. Now, at last, I discovered my strength and ability to face death.

I did not completely finish with my brother's death until 1970, when I participated in a professional training workshop with Jim Simkin, Ph.D., the renowned Gestalt therapist. Through working on an angry dream, I discovered my unfinished business with David—my secret anger at him for dying, anger which was unac-

ceptable to me. At last I was able to say good-bye to David and, I realized afterward, to years of depression as well. This personal experience of mine is detailed in chapter 12.

The profundity of that experience with Gestalt therapy led me to give up being a traditional psychotherapist and to train with Jim in 1972. Gestalt therapy enabled me to not only finish grieving but also to come alive at last and find real joy in living.

This psychological healing led to my opening up to the spiritual dimension of life. I felt enormous gratitude to God or the Universe for helping me find my way at last. I was interested in death in a new way. My curiosity grew as I studied meditation and read metaphysical books that described life after death and reincarnation. I was particularly moved by the Edgar Cayce material; by Ruth Montgomery's books, *Here and Hereafter*, *The Search for Truth*, and *A World Beyond*; and by Jess Stearn's book, *The Search for a Soul: Taylor Caldwell's Psychic Lives*.

At the same time, in examining my recurrent dream about my brother, I realized that for almost twenty years David had been telling me in dreams that he lived somewhere else, a place where I cannot go—yet. With my analytic background and skepticism, it took me twenty years to accept a message of life after death.

Moving confirmation of my own beliefs came in 1976 when I attended a conference on death and dying in Berkeley, California, organized by John F. Kennedy University. Doctors Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Raymond Moody, Ernest Pecci, and Charles Garfield talked about their experiences working with the dying, and all publicly shared their beliefs in life after death and reincarnation with an audience of one thousand.

On September 9, 1978, my friend Nancy Rushmer's eighteen-year-old daughter, Teri, died with three other young people in the crash of a light plane. Nancy, believing that Teri's soul lived on, coped with her grief with a kind of courage I had never seen before. That Nancy found her spiritual beliefs such a source of strength contrasted with my own bitter experience with David's death. I wanted to write about that. Instead I found pouring out

of me a book on grief and how to cope with it, seeing spirituality as one of many supports that enable people to grieve courageously and survive.

It seems no accident that I began to write this book around my dreaded fortieth birthday. I am bewildered to be forty so soon. Whatever happened to thirty and twenty? Time is passing quickly. I am closer to the end of my life than I would like to be. At twenty I disliked the sense that life felt endless, and I liked the idea that I had plenty of time. Now I no longer feel that I have plenty of time. I want to act now, before it is too late, and that certainly is a message of this book.

As I began writing, a powerful awareness hit me that my whole life has been geared to writing precisely this book about grief. I have always been conscious of grief and curious about death. For years, especially after I finished my own personal grieving, much of the therapy I have done has been related to grief. I have spent most of my life learning to be unafraid of loss and death. I have a wealth of experience to share, and I want to help others be unafraid and courageous too.

Only after I had written many pages did I remember that when my brother died the memorial I most wanted to give him then was to write a book to dedicate to him. How amazing and how fitting that I am dedicating this book on grief to David, twenty-four years later! I want this to be a book of hope and understanding that helps others to grieve fully, to finish with their grief more quickly than I did, and to use their loss as a stepping-stone to renewal, growth, and even transformation.

Carmel Valley, California
January 1980

PART ONE

Introduction to Grief

1

The Courage to Grieve

*And ever has it been that love knows not
its own depth until the hour of separation.*

—The Prophet

The death of a loved one is the most profound of all sorrows. The grief that comes with such a loss is intense and multifaceted, affecting our emotions, our bodies, and our lives. Grief is preoccupied and depleting. Emotionally, grief is a mixture of raw feelings such as sorrow, anguish, anger, regret, longing, fear, and deprivation. Grief may be experienced physically as exhaustion, emptiness, tension, sleeplessness, or loss of appetite. Grief invades our daily lives in many sudden gaps and changes, like that empty place at the dinner table, or the sudden loss of affection and companionship, as well as in many new apprehensions, adjustments, and uncertainties. The loss of a loved one throws every aspect of our lives out of balance. The closer we were to the person who died, the more havoc the loss creates. Love does not die quickly. Hence to grieve is also "to celebrate the depth of the union. Tears are then the jewels of remembrance, sad but glistening with the beauty of the past. So grief in its bitterness marks the end . . . but it also is praise to the one who is gone."

During the months of mourning after a death, we learn to face the reality and the pain of our loss, to say good-bye to the dead loved one, to restore ourselves, and to reinvest in life once again. In a sense, mourning is a time of new mastery over ourselves and our lives. Recovery comes in the days ahead, when mourning is completed and a new balance is found. But before we recover we have many experiences that trigger our grief anew

until those feelings truly dissipate. Finishing or completing grief comes when we are able to let go of our feelings of grief and our intense connection with the deceased. Although our love never dies, the pain of our loss can eventually dissolve.

Although we may feel ignorant about grief, grief is in fact like a neighbor who always lives next door, no matter where or how we live, no matter how we try to move away. Grief may result from any significant change or loss in our lives. Whether we want to or not, every one of us has to learn to let go, to move forward without someone or something we wanted very much.

Life is change. We undergo change, loss, and grief from birth onward. Every venture from home, every move, every job or status change, every loss of a person, pet, belief, every illness, every shift in life such as marriage, divorce, or retirement, and every kind of personal growth and change may be cause for grief. These are what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross calls the "little deaths" of life.

If we would face everyday changes and practice letting go in our daily lives, perhaps loss and grief would be less traumatic. Even though we have a multitude of opportunities for learning how to handle grief, we usually avoid our feelings of loss. We bear up and force ourselves onward. Because we deny the full measure of our grief in our everyday changes and losses, when the big griefs come then grief feels unfamiliar, frightening, and overwhelming. Nonetheless, the death of a loved one is so great and so final a loss that our past experiences with "little deaths" may never adequately prepare us.

Most of us have had some experience with healthy grieving. For example, although we often feel isolated in our personal grief, mourners across our nation were helped together to work through their grief when President Kennedy was assassinated. On television we saw images of Kennedy, his life, the circumstances of his death, and his funeral over and over again for several days. We talked with each other about the loss of our president. We

read about his life. This then is the essential process of grieving—repeating again and again the images of, and feelings about, our lost loved one until the mourning process is completed.

That we can grieve and recover often seems an amazing feat, yet human resilience is amazing. Just as a forest can burn to the ground and eventually grow anew, or a town can be devastated by a flood and rebuild, so each of us can be overcome by our grief, have the enormity of our loss overwhelm us, and still eventually recover and restore our lives. This is nature's way. This book is as much about recovery, completion, and restoration as it is about the grief experience itself. This is a book of hope. Even though at times it may seem impossible, we can conquer grief, heal, and even grow from the experience.

Grief is a wound that needs attention in order to heal. To work through and complete grief means to face our feelings openly and honestly, to express or release our feelings fully, and to tolerate and accept our feelings for however long it takes for the wound to heal. For most of us, that is a big order. Therefore, it takes courage to grieve. It takes courage to feel our pain and to face the unfamiliar. It also takes courage to grieve in a society that mistakenly values restraint, where we risk the rejection of others by being open or different. Open mourners are a select group, willing to journey into pain and sorrow and anger in order to heal and recover.

Unfortunately, our misconceptions about grief keep us from developing the courage we need to face grief. Many of us fear that, if allowed in, grief will bowl us over indefinitely. The truth is that grief experienced does dissolve. The only grief that does not end is grief that has not been fully faced. Grief unexpressed is like a powder keg waiting to be ignited. We also misunderstand tears. A slang expression for crying in our society is "to break down." We act as if weeping is wrong or akin to illness, while tears actually afford us a necessary release of our intense feelings. Another misconception is that if we truly loved someone, we will never finish with our grief, as if continued sorrow is a testimo-

nial to our love. But true love does not need grief to support its truth. Love can last in a more healthy and meaningful way, once our grief is dispelled. We can honor our dead more by the quality of our continued living than by our constantly remembering the past. Another common misconception is that grief cannot be finished. The falsity of this notion will be confirmed later, in chapter 12. Finally, there is a popular belief that self-neglect is part of grief. Healthy grief, however, relies on self-care. Self-neglect is no testimonial to love. Instead, our deceased loved one would want us to love ourselves, as he or she loved us.

How do we learn to have the courage to grieve? Some of us learn courage spontaneously, when we must act in order to survive. Most of us learn the courage to face new challenges in the process of living, experiencing and surviving our struggles over and over again. Since pain is unavoidable, we can learn to make pain our teacher instead of our enemy. As George Bernard Shaw so aptly said, "Heartbreak is life educating us." We can learn that courage makes our path more challenging, exciting, and rewarding.

One way to learn courage is to experiment with being courageous. A beautiful example of this was given to me by my friend Tom, who at age forty was told by his physician that he had lung cancer. Tom was terrified. Then he thought about the woman he loved and how frightened she would be if he gave in to the panic inside himself. As an experiment, he decided to pretend to be courageous for her benefit. Soon he found that he was strong and courageous for himself as well, ready to face the surgery and the long recovery afterward.

Each of us, too, can learn to be courageous by experimenting with courage. We can taste courage, notice courage, pretend courage, and most of all we can try it out for ourselves. Having the courage to grieve leads to having the courage to live, to love, to risk, and to enjoy all the fruits of life without fear or inhibition. For many of us it is our fear of loss, and the grief implicit in loss, that prevents us from fully living our lives.

In many cases it is our lack of knowledge about grief that increases our fear, despair, hopelessness, and helplessness when we face a major loss in our lives. Hence, the purpose of this book is to increase our understanding and acceptance of grief as a normal, inevitable life experience. We can each learn to trust that although grief is painful, it is healthy and surmountable, and that grieving fully will enable us not only to recover but also to expand and grow. My wish is that from reading this book we will begin to develop the courage to grieve.