

Pilgrimage through Loss

*Pathways to Strength and Renewal
after the Death of a Child*

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PROLOGUE

NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED MY HUSBAND, JIM, AND ME FOR the sorrow that rocked our lives when Krista, our twenty-five-year-old married daughter, died in Bolivia. Only shrouded memories remain of the shock and grief that occurred that May 20 dawn in 1998 when we first learned that she and her husband, Aaron, were riding in a bus that plunged over a mountain cliff.

One startling memory stays vivid. The warm spring sunlight that infused our Spokane, Washington, living room suddenly shifted when storm clouds gathered later that afternoon. “Linda, come quick,” Jim called. Out the French door windows, a menacing thunderstorm arced with a vibrant rainbow. A crash of thunder rumbled as he said, “Look, lightning pierced the rainbow.” This fleeting sky scene gave a hint to the months and years ahead as we lived with loss that parents know pierces the soul.

Parents experience almost inconsolable grief when death takes a family’s child. Whether their child is stillborn, a

three-year-old, a twenty-year-old, or a forty-three-year-old, it doesn't matter. Such loss permeates with a sorrow beyond all our previous imagination. This journey into unfamiliar emotional territory turns upside down every assumption we've made in the natural order of life. The vulnerable desolation of the heart often spirals families into an abyss of emotional longing, brokenness, and pain that is hard to conceive will ever ease. Such a grief response is universal, transcending all cultures and time.

For years, a dominant theory around grief centered on the "five stages" a bereaved person goes through, from denial, anger, bargaining, and depression to acceptance. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced these ideas in her 1967 book *On Death and Dying*.¹

These became further popularized with Scribner's focused publication of Kübler-Ross's thoughts in *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* in 2005.² Even she said later that people didn't necessarily grieve in this "order" or experience all stages. "The trouble is that this theory turns out largely to be a fiction," claims Meghan O'Rourke in a 2010 article called "Good Grief" published in the *New Yorker*. "New research suggests that grief and mourning doesn't follow a checklist; they're complicated and untidy processes, less like a progression of stages and more like an ongoing process—sometimes one that never fully ends. . . . It's the messiness of grief that makes us uncomfortable."³ This definitely rang more true to my own experiences.

After Krista's death, I read extensively on grief, but most books proved primarily useful in describing the early depth of disorientation and loss. Although helpful in reassuring us that our sense of devastation was normal, as the months of grief continued, I sought to understand more. Many questions surged to the surface during ensuing years; other parents echoed this reality. *Will I always feel this bad or will it be possible*

to savor life again? How can I keep a broken heart open? Why do I long to be alone sometimes, and other times need the comfort of friends and family? Are there ways to remember one's child that are life-affirming? Why do most men and women grieve so differently? How does one reconcile trust in a loving and powerful God with unanswered prayers for protection? Can one face grief in creative and intentional ways? A movable feast of questions became guides in living this unchosen journey.

This caused me to wonder, will accessing the wellspring of love that lies beneath all sorrow offer a dynamic resource for healing?

So I began talking with other parents who had lost children. They added their voices into the silence, which often surrounds suffering. We need immense strength and even creativity to survive such loss, two qualities parents often lack during profound times of grief. They openly shared what they have learned and the creative gestures they found that eased their way. Their stories richly describe their tensions and choices while walking in the maelstrom of grief. But to these parents' astonishment, many also slowly discovered the healing energy in the reservoir of love that underlies all great loss. This caused me to wonder. *Will accessing the wellspring of love that lies beneath all sorrow offer a dynamic resource for healing?*

Such deaths ask us to expand our hearts so that we can still engage life with meaning and hope. Yet, our first temptation or need can be to shut down and close off the world. I recall at Krista's memorial service talking with a young college woman, a family friend for years. Her family had endured the horrific murder of her delightful two-year-old nephew Devon. "Molly, how have you and your family survived such a loss?" I asked. I'll never forget her response. She paused for a moment, and then said simply, "Your joys become more intense." She gave

me the first inkling of what the poet Kahlil Gibran wrote in his book *The Prophet*. His poem “On Joy and Sorrow” explores how these two are inseparable. He writes, “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”⁴ But on this day of our daughter’s memorial, these words held only abstract meaning.

I think there’s even more to grieving than this inseparable quality of joy and sorrow that Gibran affirms. Our family discovered, as many of these parents’ stories illustrate, how our love for a child has potential to be a resource for solace, even creativity, within our broken hearts. If we stay open to this love that once graced our daily lives, we can journey through our desolation and find inner strength. Parents even describe more empathetic and expansive living, and eventual thankfulness in remembrance. However, too often the sheer pain of losing the physical presence of one we’ve loved, compounded by American culture’s reinforcement to “move on,” keeps us from being alive to this possibility. “We live in one of the world’s most ‘mourning-avoidant’ cultures,” observes Dr. Alan Wolfelt, counselor to thousands through The Center for Loss and Life Transition. He finds this attempt to prematurely shut down or repress grief hinders genuine healing.⁵

During the past fifteen years, I’ve learned more about ways parents access this reservoir of love, both in our own family’s journey and in listening to others describe what they’ve experienced in the school of sorrow. One weekend I invited nine other mothers who had lost children to simply talk together. How had they responded after loss created such a seismic shift in their lives? What gestures contributed to their sense of healing? What choices had they made, and what were memorable gestures from family and friends?

Later, I interviewed more fathers and mothers who shared their stories with an amazing generosity of spirit. To my surprise, most welcomed any chance to talk of the child they lost.

Even if the death of a child occurred years before, once their stories began, the truth of their love and loss felt like death happened yesterday. Their trust in me didn't come because of my background as a writer, researcher, and professor. This meant little to them. Instead, they trusted me primarily because they sensed "you've been through this . . . you *know*."

Pilgrimage through Loss also shows how pivotal friends and family can be as they offer sustaining gifts of comfort and essential companionship during the ensuing years. Often this help can be wordless, more a fulfilling of the African saying "sit and cry with me." Friends comfort one another simply by their presence.

However, family and friends can unintentionally cause deeper harm, which inadvertently contributes to greater emotional isolation during grief. These stories are included too, such as parent's bewilderment with society's premature insistence on "getting on with life" or "closure." Even some professional grief counselors once emphasized this.

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Whether the child was an infant or middle-aged, whether the relationship between the parent and child at death was warm and positive or difficult, even estranged, a depth of parental love infused each of these stories. They helped me understand why there is no word in Yiddish for a parent who loses a child because "it is unspeakable."

But speak they did, with force and fragility as their hearts revisited the early years following the shock of their child's death. Parents agreed to interviews because they knew how sustaining a friend, even if only through the companionship

of a book, became for them. They hungered to talk with someone who understood their journey into unknown and unwanted territory. Some parents also described the change from acute raw anguish to a deeper acceptance. As one father expressed several years after losing his son, “I can now give thanks for his being in our lives.”

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To “heal” means to “make whole” again, “to make whole, sound, and well.” The Oxford English dictionary traces the word’s origin to a similar root *haelan*, *hela*, *heelen*, *hal*, which is the same source as health. In my mind, it does *not* mean “moving on.” This book is definitely not meant to be a *prescription* on how to survive such a loss. When someone tried to comfort a father after the death of his college daughter from cancer by assuring him “You’ll get over this,” he was enraged. “I don’t ever want to ‘get over’ my daughter. I will always want my daughter in my life every day.” He expressed what I feel and hear from other parents. Physical death never ends our forever love of our child.

My hope is these stories help parents and their supportive communities expand and trust in their *own* ways to live with hearts intertwined with love and loss. During profound grief I wanted to read only short sections of a book, so I’ve tried to include just one central idea in each chapter, some discovered solace. Certain chapters may be more relevant to your own experience than others since grief has many faces. May these stories simply spark your *own* imaginative ways to draw essential inner strength.

These parents' stories also offer insight for family, friends, and others who want to come alongside someone on this journey. A discussion guide for parents and grief support groups appears at the end of the book and includes questions to encourage conversations. *Pilgrimage through Loss* invites parents, extended family, friends, and companions into this compassionate circle of other mothers and fathers who walk this road of sorrow.

I've woven our own family narrative with the stories of many other parents, grateful for what we've found meaningful on this journey no parent chooses. During the first days after Krista's death, as we waited for her injured husband, Aaron, and her body to be flown home from Bolivia, friends and family began to gather at our home. One afternoon, Woody Garvin, the pastor from First Presbyterian church in Spokane, Washington, where we worship, dropped by. His words seemed central to our next years. "Receive the gifts," he encouraged, "however strange or imperfect. People want to do something but don't know what to do."

Pilgrimage through Loss attests to the wonder of the gifts offered to those in grief. Love never dies, but our hours and days now demand a new willingness for spirited heart work to be empowered by this love. Our choices, imaginative gestures, and the power of openness can lead our broken hearts to expanded living, healing, and wholeness.

Chapter 1



ATTENDING TO A BROKEN HEART

“How could I ever prepare for an absence the size of you?”

—Mark Doty, “Coastal Home,” *Heaven’s Coast: A Memoir*



QUESTION: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TRY TO KEEP A BROKEN HEART OPEN AND CONSCIOUSLY ATTEND TO PROFOUND GRIEF?

When the sun rose over Mt. Spokane with the shimmering promise of a glorious May day in 1998, two couples awoke us at 6 a.m. with a knock on our door. Friends for years, they bore a message of immense sorrow. “Krista’s been killed,” said Ron Frase, his voice cracking with pain. “All we know so far is that a speeding bus plunged over a mountain cliff in Bolivia. We understand Aaron is injured, but alive.” Both couples, colleagues of ours at Whitworth University, had known Krista since she was an endearing, spritely one-year-old, and loved her like family. Shortly before Krista and her husband, Aaron, left for a three-year volunteer assignment in Bolivia, these same friends joined at a gathering in our home to offer blessings and prayers for their upcoming service adventure. We also prayed for their safety.

After initial training in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, Krista and Aaron worked alongside indigenous Quechua families in Bañado de la Cruz, a remote river valley 7,000 miles from our home in Spokane, Washington. They carried a deep hope. Living and serving within a grassroots community in a developing nation offered essential insights before attending graduate school in international development or public policy. “How can we wisely shape U.S. foreign policy in the United States if we haven’t a better understanding of the implications in others’ lives?” they reasoned.

Late one night, six months after their arrival, Krista and Aaron traveled from Bañado to Santa Cruz for a retreat with other volunteers in the agency that sponsored their service. One minute they slept contentedly with their puppy, Choclo, on their lap. In the next terror-filled moments, the bus careened down a mountainside, tossing Aaron and Choclo at the top of a ravine, injured but alive. Krista was thrown out hundreds of feet below. Then the bus landed precariously on its side above her body. In pitch black, with only the night stars to light the sky, Aaron scrambled down the mountainside. Pulling aside

tall brush with his injured shoulder, he knelt to touch broken bodies in desperation to recognize his wife.

The Bolivian representative only knew sketchy details when he called our friends. He wanted them to break this devastating truth to us in person. As any parent who has lost a child knows, this news shattered our hearts in as many shards as the broken glass littering the mountain crevasse.

From the moment of hearing of Krista's death, friends and family came alongside to offer their comforting presence and practical help. Throughout the day, continuing phone calls from Bolivia brought new information. We learned more about the overnight hours it took to recover her from the deep ravine, and the insistence from authorities that Aaron leave his wife to go to the hospital for his injuries. Our anguish intermingled with deep concern for her young husband who had also recently lost his mother, Linda, to breast cancer.

At first, they requested us to travel to Bolivia for her burial. "Her body probably can't be flown back to America," we were advised. "It's a policy since drug smugglers often use caskets as carriers."

"What are they thinking?" I cried, frantic over this possibility. "We can't leave her sister, brother, elderly grandmother, and her friends alone here in their grief—she didn't die in a family vacuum." Hours later, we learned this dilemma had been resolved.

Susan, Krista's twenty-eight-year-old sister, planned to be married exactly one month later. Invitations had already been sent for their festive June 20 wedding in Rhode Island. When we called, her first words were, "Should I call off the wedding, Mom? How can I get married if my sister is dead?" She planned for Krista to be her maid-of-honor, expecting her to fly up shortly with Aaron for their celebration. "Let's wait a bit until you get here to decide," we suggested. "Our family might need a point of joy."

When Krista was three, we adopted Jefferson Kim, a four-year-old from Korea. So close in age, they shared plenty of the typical sibling tussles growing up. Yet we knew he cherished his little sister more than almost anyone in his life. We were unable to contact him directly on a remote island in Bristol Bay where he worked in the Alaska fishing industry, so he had to learn of his sister's death from a personnel supervisor. An added heartbreak. My mother, widowed just four months earlier, lived alone now after a sixty-year marriage. She knew intimately the grief of losing a child when my older brother, Larry, my only sibling, died at twenty-three. She rarely talked about this loss, but I knew she grieved deeply for years.

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life gives, but we do have the power to
“choose one's attitude, to choose one's
way in any given circumstances.”

—Victor Frankl

At this time, I was an English professor at Whitworth University, a liberal arts private college. I was also relishing remission from an aggressive breast cancer a few years earlier. Besides teaching writing classes, I team-taught with four other faculty in a Western Civilization core course. A pivotal concept that helped me through cancer came from one of the books we read, Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. An Austrian psychiatrist, the author barely survived the Holocaust after years in horrific concentration camps, including Auschwitz. Astutely observant, he became interested in the interior lives of individuals when he discovered that some prisoners could transcend the terror and daily evil of their existence. They lived with eloquent courage, compassion, and dignity, even offering comfort and giving away their last scrap of bread to others.

Convinced that “human choice” made the pivotal difference in survival, Frankl calls this response “the last of human freedoms” after everything is taken away. One cannot always choose the experiences life gives, but we do have the power to “choose one’s attitude, to choose one’s way in any given circumstances.”¹ His insights shaped my response to cancer, especially the harsh chemotherapy treatments, keeping me grateful for the gifts of modern medicine and deep friendships.

He considered this power to choose our attitude a vestige of spiritual freedom. Frankl found himself pondering the Russian author’s Dostoevsky’s wish, “There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.”² Frankl became convinced that “if there was meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering.” He also observed that believing in a hope and a future, especially personal goals, sometimes even kept prisoners alive. Those who shut down in hopelessness often died within days. Their inner life became the powerful determinate of their future.

I had been steeped theoretically in Frankl’s ideas each semester for several years and valued students’ engagement with his insights. But it became even more personal when Jerry Sittser, a close friend and one of our faculty team members, suffered a catastrophic loss. In one night in 1991, a drunk driver killed three generations of women in his family. His wife, daughter, and mother died in a car accident after attending a Pow Wow for their home-schooled children on a Native American reservation. Through the bleak months and years following this, I was invited into this friend’s profound journey of loss, often over a cup of coffee or during a walk on campus. He began pondering how all people suffer loss of various degrees and their varying responses. He also joined in asking Frankl’s questions, such as, “How can we grow through suffering? How can one absorb suffering into one’s life, rather than live with any illusion you’ll get over it?” Before Krista

died, I'd read early drafts of his reflections on these questions, which ultimately emerged in his thought-provoking book *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*.³

I vividly remembered a conversation Jerry and I shared one morning. After visiting the funeral home and staring at the coffins of his wife, daughter, and mother, he entered weeks of unimaginable anguish that he likens to existential darkness. Walking across campus together before class, he said, "After a terrifying dream last night, I had an amazing conversation with my sister. I dreamed of elusively chasing the setting sun, running west, wanting desperately to remain in its fiery warmth and light." In his dream, he collapsed in despair when he looked east at the vast darkness closing in on him. "I thought at that moment I would live in darkness forever." But his sister reminded him that *the shortest distance to the light of the sun is to go east through the darkness until one comes to the sunrise*.

This became an important truth for Jerry, recognizing there was no way to flee from his pain. "I recognized at this moment that darkness was inevitable and unavoidable, and to face the loss the best I could, rather than flee from it," he told me. "I wanted to allow myself to be transformed by suffering, rather than have any illusion I could avoid it, and yield to the loss wherever this would take me."

A newer friendship that developed shortly before Krista's death also gave me a glimpse at the pain that lay ahead. Mary Beth Baker, a mother around my age, audited my Journal Writing and Autobiography night class. She needed to write through her enormous grief over the sudden death of her twenty-seven-year-old son, Stephen, in a motorcycle accident. Her poignant essays gave me a glimpse into pain so primal and love so profound, they brought you into the heart of mother-love.

These companions who laid out their raw grief gave me a compass point. Their lives demonstrated how all-encompassing

grief *demand*s attention. They showed me that any healthy emotional survival from such potentially debilitating loss depended partly on my own choices on how to respond. But after May 20, the day of Krista's death, it wasn't an academic exercise.

"I recognized at this moment that darkness was inevitable and unavoidable, and to face the loss the best I could, rather than flee from it."

—*Jerry Sittser*

During the early days, as we waited for Aaron's return and for Krista's body to arrive from Bolivia, I thought a lot about the sudden death of my brother, Larry, in a car accident. Almost the same age as Krista; it seemed too similar to believe.

One afternoon, longing for a few moments of solitude, I slipped out to the front porch to sort out some of the thoughts and feelings swirling inside me. Part of my bewilderment was that there was no way on earth the death of such a luminous young woman made sense. Krista was beloved by her husband, her family, her students, and friends, and wanted to use her education and talents in service to others. Like that of my brother Larry, her hope and beauty and springs of joy came from her quiet confidence in a loving Creator. Whether providing leadership as the student-body president in a large high school; studying biology, government, and women's studies in college; starting a peer-tutoring program for inner-city high school students while teaching in Tacoma; or cooking alongside Quechua women on her Bañado front porch, she entered life with zest, creativity, and compassion. With her unfathomable death, it felt like not just our family lost, but the world lost too. *Where was God's protective hand?*

Probably because of enduring my brother's death earlier, I sensed that trying to "understand" this loss would be

impossible. I'd lived long enough to recognize that all people in life experience suffering. It's inevitable. Years of reading student essays showed me that even by the late teens, many had already suffered loss over the death of siblings and parents, broken homes, serious health crisis, sexual abuse, or domestic violence. Even a parent's unemployment or the destructive impact of poverty shaped their lives. Though I had no illusion that anything can keep us from experiencing such losses, my core belief was that God absolutely promises to be alongside us in these times of trouble. So in a quiet, candid prayer, I said, *Krista's death seems senseless, but I will try to keep my heart as open as possible, and not shut down.* I wanted, somehow, in spite of what I may *feel*, to trust in God's presence and believe in the biblical assurance in the twenty-third Psalm (KJV), "Even though I walk through the shadow of death . . . thou art with me." Despite pain, I didn't want to lose trust in life itself.

So in a quiet, candid prayer, I said, *Krista's death seems senseless, but I will try to keep my heart as open as possible, and not shut down.*

Like the warming blankets that nurses now place on patients before hospital surgery, I was most likely insulated by emotional shock during these early days. In the months and years that followed, when little could ease the suffering that wrenched my heart, this choice to stay open and trusting was severely tested. I explained to a friend, "Maybe it's because I carried Krista in my womb, but it feels like I've just been ripped apart." Other parents talk of a "hole" and "incompleteness" and "utter emptiness." Two mothers who met almost ten years after the death of their sons and wrote *A Broken Heart Still Beats* expressed how lingering grief can be. "When Mary and I met, we had two things in common: we had lost our sons and we had lost our way. Over and over we'd wandered

the trails of sadness, anger and guilt, hoping to come upon a new vista or fork that would lead us . . . who knows where, but somewhere different.”⁴

Another mother, Sarah Bain, expressed this enduring nature of loss seven years after giving birth to a stillborn daughter. Born in the springtime, they named the child they held for only four hours, Grace. Sarah still physically feels deep sadness. “Every May my body just seems to go crazy and I have a kind of emotional franticness for weeks. Then I remember why.”

Another factor shaped my decision to try to stay open. Because I had recently completed extensive chemotherapy for breast cancer, medical friends expressed concerns. “Beware of bottling up your pain because burying stress inside could be very unhealthy, even dangerous for you.” I knew they spoke with wisdom and love, another compelling reason to keep my heart open amid grief.

Grief therapists concur. As psychiatrist Mark Epstein wrote in a *New York Times* 2013 article, “The closest one can find to a consensus about grief among today’s therapists is the conviction that the healthiest way to deal with trauma is to lean into it, rather than keep it at bay.”⁵

One of the gifts that came during cancer was a friendship that developed with Karlene Arguinchona. I met her when I landed in the hospital after a severe reaction to Neupogena medicine, typically used to elevate very low blood counts caused by chemotherapy. An emergency room doctor, she regularly comes close to families facing catastrophic loss. Seeing the shock of parents losing a child led her to begin a mothers’ support group in her home that met once a month. Some were experiencing a recent tragedy; for others it had been years ago. “A child’s life is forever important and parents need a safe place to talk about the child they’ve lost . . . even years later,” she believes.

Karlene likens deep grief to an acute laceration that inevitably leaves a scar. She explains to mothers, “When we suture a severe injury and patients are worried about the potential for scarring, we try to help them *see how much their own efforts and attention to the care of the wound makes a difference*. For a certain period of time, the scar is more vulnerable.” She then explains the active role that patients must make in their healing. “The wound needs to be kept clean and dry, out of the sun, and protected from high impact bumps. *The skin wants to heal, but it’s essential that the deep wound heals on the inside as well.*” She then adds that the scar will change each day, week, and months—even years later. “A lot depends on how one takes care of it. For example, with too much sun exposure, some persons will hyper-pigment, or a high impact bump can be damaging.” But she also wants patients to understand that *no matter what, there will always be a scar*. She believes grief is like this.

Even after these encounters with wise friends who made clear the choice one must make to “attend” to grief, I had no idea of the depth and length of sorrow, the scarring, and vulnerability that lay ahead. Just to get up in the morning and function in daily responsibilities sometimes proved daunting, let alone to make specific efforts to take care of this deep wound that any bereaved parent feels. I think poet Mark Doty expressed the loss that lay ahead best with his words, “How could I ever prepare for an absence the size of you?” Krista’s “permeating presence of absence” loomed everywhere.