

When you notice your interpretation of a story, notice your tone and your perception of the past and future. Think about the meaning you are bringing to it:

Original Meaning

This death happened to me.

I'm a victim.

This death was a punishment.

Original Meaning

Why did this happen to me?

It happened because of something.

My story is the saddest one.

New Meaning

Death happens.

I am a victor because I have survived this loss.

Death is usually random.

New Meaning

Everyone gets something this lifetime.

There was nothing I could have done.

My story had very sad parts.

Along with having people examine the way they perceive and tell their stories, I ask them to remove two words from their vocabulary: *never* and *always*. When someone says they'll never be happy again, I tell them it may be true, but research shows it doesn't have to be true. They will often respond with, "Not after this horrible event has happened to me." I tell them about a study years ago in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that compared lottery winners to people who were paralyzed in accidents. It seemed to show that we have an internal baseline for happiness. In the long term, winning the lottery didn't increase happiness as much as others thought it would, and a catastrophic accident didn't make people as unhappy as one might expect. Your life will never be the same, but happiness again is still possible. Never being happy again is a statement about the future. But no one can predict the future. All they can know for sure is that they are unhappy today. It helps to say, "I'm unhappy today," and leave it at that.

In one of my grief groups, I was working with someone whose son had died unexpectedly a few years earlier. She told me that she was deeply saddened by the image of her son in the morgue. Since we were dealing with grief and not trauma, I told her it might be possible to change her thoughts since they were reminding her of one horrible moment.

“I can’t do that,” she said.

“But we have to question that concept in grief,” I said. “Can you really not change your thoughts? Every day we choose our thoughts. As a society, we don’t have much awareness of that. We have to unlearn the belief that we have no power over what happens in our minds.”

She interrupted me, “David, the images just come at me and make me so sad.”

“I’m sure they do. That breaks my heart. But let’s try something. Could you all just take a moment and close your eyes? I’d like you to picture a big purple elephant. Raise your hand when you have that image.”

Within a second, all hands went up. They opened their eyes and I told them, “I just changed your thoughts. I made 100 percent of the people in this room think of a purple elephant. We *do* have power to change our thoughts.” Even in its simplicity this exercise reminds them they do have control. Imagine the thoughts in your mind as being like a garden. Whatever thoughts you water are the thoughts that will grow. When you have a horrible image in your mind, if you keep looking at it and telling yourself that you can’t stop, that image will become stronger and stronger.

“Instead, whenever that image comes up, you could say to yourself, ‘Oh my gosh, I see my son in the morgue, and I can also picture how happy and excited he was on his fifth birthday.’

“When you look at that positive image, when you linger over it and replay it, adding details to flesh it out, perhaps refreshing your memory with photos you took of the occasion, you begin to see other really good moments in his life, too. When you water those thoughts, they grow. You have the power to bring attention to the memories most meaningful to you.”

I caution people not to misunderstand what I’m saying. It is important to tell their stories honestly, without trying to censor the bad parts. Early on, they must retell their story to understand it, to process it. But once they do this, they can put the painful memories into a larger context, rather than isolating them from the whole and repeating them endlessly to themselves. Their loved one’s life encompassed far more than just its worst moments. For people who are dealing with traumatic grief, who often wonder why the story keeps coming up over and over in their mind, I explain that they don’t have a place in their mind to put it

yet. Our mind is like a computer that doesn't have a file for it yet. It just floats and gets repeated until we integrate it into our psyche.

The World Outside Our Loss

Sometimes after we have reached acceptance and fully felt our pain, we may need to step outside of it and look at it from another perspective, to see how other people make meaning from their losses. Realizing that you're not alone in pain can be helpful.

Some months after Jan's father died, I could see that she needed to shake things up because she was spiraling inward. When she and I talked, she described the inventory of pain she had been making as part of her effort to accept it rather than try to deny it, but she told me she was tired of thinking about it.

"Perhaps it's time to put down the mirror and pick up the binoculars," I suggested.

She got a glimmer in her eyes. I reminded her that she had told me how sad she was that her father was no longer a part of this world because there was so much more of it he had wanted to see. I explained to her that the world he'd wanted to explore was still here, and perhaps she could allow herself to see some of it.

"I don't know how to do that," she said.

"How about calling a friend and making a date to do something special?" I asked.

"I can't," she said quickly. "I can't. I need to be alone."

It occurred to me that even though she didn't want to be with anyone else yet, perhaps she could see some plays and movies as a way of peering into the lives of others and taking a step back into the world. She seemed to like that idea.

After a month, I checked in on her. She had gone to a number of plays and movies, which had taken her out of herself, and she felt much better for having seen them. But while other people in her position might have done this through laughter, she had made a point of not seeing comedies. She chose instead to see stories about characters who suffered. "It was helpful to be in someone else's pain," she told me. "I sat in theaters and let someone else's love and sorrow wash over me. I was so moved by the art.

“In the theater I saw the tapestry of life. And it helped me to realize I was a player in the great human drama. My loss was heart-wrenching, but I could see that other people’s losses were, too. I began to care about the characters in the stories I was watching, to become interested in what happened to them. I felt love. I felt compassion. I found myself laughing at funny moments. Was that me who just laughed? Is that okay? If crying is a part of life, so is laughter. I began to see my life in a more connected way. I felt myself rising back into life. Connecting with myself was important, and so was reconnecting outward to humanity.

“My outer world began to expand. I was intentional about whom I spent my time with, because when I was with them, I was present with my heart and whole being.”

For Jan, this is how the pain of her grief began to heal. I do want to offer a word of caution: this choice to look outward was made in her own way and on her own timetable. For many people early in grief is a time to turn completely inward. That’s what they need to do, and no amount of urging them to reconnect with the world is going to change that. But as Jan explained to me once she began her journey back to the world, “There’s a fine line between fully feeling pain and sitting around sticking knives in the wound. I looked inward, felt the pain, and dug down into it. There was no part of me avoiding it. In fact, I think I was beginning to indulge it. My pain was becoming special. I know that sounds strange, but it was demanding all my attention. My pain seemed to be escalating and I knew I had to do something different. I had to look outward.”

Changing the Meaning

How does the search for meaning help those who have endured some of life’s worst events? What kinds of stories can they tell themselves that will be true to what they have experienced and also to their healing?

I talked to a colleague, Duane, who works with people who have been through terrible situations that often contain traumatic grief. How does he help them find meaning from such experiences? “I look at the meaning the person is giving the event,” he said, “and then I help them change the meaning, not the event. The

event is not going to be any different, but the meaning can be, and this can help them to deal with the loss.”

Changing the meaning of an event is not easy, and often it’s too challenging to do on our own. Sometimes friends can help, sometimes counselors and therapists may be necessary.

I asked Duane for an example from his work. He said:

I remember a horrific story. A woman’s daughter had been missing for twenty years and no body was ever found. The rumor in town was that a farmer and his two sons who lived out of town had murdered her, and then fed her to the pigs. The mother had a very strong Christian faith. She sought help, but no one was able to help her. She didn’t know for sure whether her daughter was dead, but that was her belief, and she also believed the story about what had happened to her. While we were talking about that horrific image she had been unable to get out of her mind, I said, “I wonder what your daughter thought about when she was watching this happen to her body.”

The woman looked at me like I was crazy. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

“If this story is true, your daughter was dead before they cut her up. She would have already arrived in heaven, and I wonder what she was thinking.”

That totally changed this woman’s perspective, because she had kept picturing her daughter *in the pain* of the moment, feeling excruciating pain. Even as a devout Christian, she had never imagined the possibility that her daughter wasn’t in pain at that moment, that she had left her body and was somewhere else. Once she was able to change the meaning of that terrible scene in her mind, it lost its hold on her.

This seems like an extreme example, but it relates to many people in grief. I talk with people who are worried about their loved one’s body in the cold weather, snow, or rain. Or they tell me their loved one was claustrophobic and hate the idea of them being buried in the cemetery. These thoughts complicate the grief by

adding painful scenarios. Helping them untangle the spirit from the body can be tremendously helpful.

The reality is that no two people will react to an event in the same way. How you respond will depend upon the meaning you see in it. And like all perceptions of meaning, this will be influenced not just by the event itself, but by your cultural background, your family, religion, temperament, and life experience. Meaning comes from all that has made you who you are.

A question that both Duane and I often ask people in traumatic grief is, “Where is your loved one *now*?”

Though the question may seem ridiculous at first, and they don’t understand why we ask it, answering it helps them understand that their loved one is no longer in the moment. If they believe in the afterlife, they can imagine their loved one safe in heaven or wherever. If they have no such belief, they can still find comfort in the idea of their loved one being past suffering.

The question of “when” applies to the grieving person as well as to the dead. In my workshops I teach therapists that we put a lot of emphasis on wondering *how* someone is doing in their grief. What if we also asked, “*When* are they?”

To illustrate what I mean, I tell the audience I’m going to make up a story. I then recount in a calm voice that it’s strange to be back here again since I was assaulted in this very conference center five years ago. I say, “Wow, I remember it like it was yesterday. I was so afraid for my life. I thought I was going to die.”

Then I ask the group, “When am I?”

They respond, “You’re now.”

“Yes, correct. I am now, remembering five years ago. What if I had come into this room yelling, ‘This is a very unsafe room. I was assaulted here five years ago. Keep your eye on the doors. Anyone could get in and attack us!’” My voice is animated and intense. My movements are large and shaky.

“When am I?” I ask the group.

They answer, “Five years ago.”

“Yes, correct. I’m feeling the feelings of five years ago today. That is post-traumatic stress.” Then I ask the room of therapists, “What would you do to calm me down?”

“I’d ask you to take some deep breaths,” someone said.

“Great. Why?”

“To ground you.”

Deep breathing grounds me in my body and brings me into this present moment.

Another therapist says, “I’d tell you to name five things in the room.”

“Good!” I say, “I see a brown pattern carpet on the floor. I see people sitting in lots of chairs. I see lights in the ceiling and big windows on both sides and doors in the back of the room. That’s five things. Why did you just ask me to do that?”

They collectively say that they brought me into the now, the present moment. They helped me go from five years ago to today.

That’s what I try to do with those I work with. I want to know, are you still at your loved one’s deathbed? Are you still hearing the bad news? Are you still at the funeral? Where are you and when are you?

I want to help grieving people visit the story again, but not get stuck there, perpetually feeling yesterday’s feelings today.

In grief, we often entangle the past, present, and future. We need to come into the present moment so we’re getting our meaning from the now, not the then. That literally changes our minds and allows us to realize our loved one is no longer dying and in pain. Their suffering is in the past. And their life was far more than just the suffering of their final days.

I help them think about where they are now. They are no longer in the room with their dying loved one. I’m helping them move from their past to the present and eventually to their future. I also ask them what’s happened to their loved one since the death. Of course, I don’t have an answer, but I want them to think about the questions. Where is their loved one now? What are they doing? Just like Duane, I want them to realize that they and their loved ones have a future past that horrific moment. People will tell me their loved ones are in heaven with God or watching over them or they are learning or helping others in the afterlife.

Trauma expert Janina Fisher tells patients, “You won’t feel hope for a long time—hope comes after we begin to feel safer and better.” Finding a sense of hope about the future is important in grief, because people continually replaying negative memories signifies that they are stuck in the past.

Allowing yourself only to focus on the past, however miserably, can seem easier, more comfortable, than deciding to live fully in a world without your loved one. The negative can be comforting in its familiarity, while deciding to move forward can be frightening because it makes you feel like you're losing your loved one not once, but twice. It's also scary because it requires you to move into the unknown, into a life that is different without that person. Many of us know someone who lost a loved one and refused to build a new life afterward. They may have held on to their loved one's possessions, turned the loved one's bedroom into a shrine that can never be altered, held fast to all the old routines. At the other extreme they may remove all traces of the loved one's presence. Neither one is healthy. We must move slowly into the unknown of life after death. Underneath the reluctance to live or love again is fear. Pain seems safer. This reminds me of a quote by John A. Shedd: "A ship in harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for."

When we are grieving, we want to stay in harbor. It's a good place to be for a while. It's where we refuel, rebuild, repair. But in the same way ships are meant to sail, we are meant to eventually leave our safe harbor, to take the risk of loving again, to find new adventures, to live a life after loss, and maybe even to help another.

The Parable of the Long Spoons

I tell people who feel stuck in grief that the way forward is to help another person in grief. As the Buddha says, if you are a lamp for someone else, it will brighten your path. Those who are stuck will often say, "Wait, you want me to help another person when I can barely tolerate my own pain?" Or "No one else's grief matters. My grief is the only real grief."

I'm not suggesting anything radical. It could be as simple as posting a kind word online to a newly bereaved person or taking a casserole to a grieving family or donating to a charity after a natural disaster. This is for your own sake as much as for the other person as we help them heal.

Marianne Williamson describes a condition that results when a cell malfunctions in our bodies. She says, "A cell forgets its natural function of

collaborating with other healthy cells to serve the healthy functioning of the whole and instead decides to go off and do its own thing. This is called cancer, a malignancy in the body or in the mind.”

There is something about collaboration for the greater good that is programmed into our DNA. If you’ve had a year of grief and know how the worst possible pain feels, you also know the comfort of a kind word or a loving gesture. If you can find it in yourself to give to someone else, it will help two people—the recipient of the kindness, and you. It will also help you become unstuck without you even realizing it.

The parable of the long spoons illustrates this point. A person is ushered through the gates of hell where he is surprised to find that they are made of finely wrought gold. They are exquisite, as is the lush green landscape that lies beyond them. He looks at his guide in disbelief. “It’s all so beautiful,” he says. “The sight of the meadows and mountains. The sounds of the birds singing in the trees and the scent of thousands of flowers. This can’t be hell.”

When the tantalizing aroma of a gourmet meal catches his attention, he enters a large dining hall. There are rows of tables laden with platters of sumptuous food, but the people seated around the tables are pale and emaciated, moaning in hunger. As he gets closer, he sees that each person is holding a spoon, but the spoon is so long he can’t get the food to his mouth. Everyone is screaming and starving in agony.

Now he goes to another area where he encounters the same beauty he witnessed in hell. He sees the same scene in the dining hall with the same long spoons. But here in heaven the people seated at the tables are cheerfully talking and eating because one person is feeding someone sitting across from him.

Heaven and hell offer the same circumstances and conditions. The difference is in the way people treat each other. Choosing to be kind creates one kind of reality. Choosing to be self-centered creates another.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Decision

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

—Mary Oliver

Each of us has a decision to make about how to heal from a loss. Before you make it, it's important to understand that not making a decision *is* a decision. Healing does not allow for neutrality. It's an active process, not a passive one. Each of us must decide whether or not we want to live again. The decision is a subtle yet most powerful one. Living is different from being alive. We come out of loss alive, but we're not living yet.

I was fortunate to spend a little time with Mother Teresa at her Home for the Dying Destitute in India the year before she died. Although she was old and frail, she seemed like the happiest person I had ever met. She told me, "Life is an achievement." When I point that out to people who are feeling helpless, they begin to understand that they can find strength and meaning by making a conscious decision to continue to live. When people show up at my grief support groups, I tell them I'm there to help them grieve and to help them live. I thank them for coming and tell them I know how much courage it must have taken for them simply to walk in the door. They'll tell me, "But I hurt so much, and life is so hard." I remind them that finding meaning will help them deal with the pain and that meaning is everywhere.

In response to deep pain, we have the freedom to make a decision about how we're going to live. Viktor Frankl writes about watching his fellow inmates in the concentration camp respond in different ways to the terrible conditions of their

lives. Given the horror of their circumstances, it might have seemed that there was no room for any kind of freedom of choice, and certainly not for any kind of joy. And yet there was. Writing about a journey from one camp to another that he and his fellow prisoners were sent on, he says: “If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that factor—or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature’s beauty.”

The decision to live fully is about being present for life, no matter how hard life is at the moment. It’s about what you are made of, not what happens to you.

I knew I needed to make that decision after the death of my son—to cast a vote for life to continue. There are many ways of doing that, and my going back to work within a couple of months of his death was one tentative step in that direction. There have been many others in the time since then. One day I posted a random picture of myself on Facebook. It was like announcing that I had come back to work, and people said how relieved they were to see that I was okay.

Six months after David died, our sweet old dog, Angel, died. Our world felt empty. A year after Angel’s death, we decided to get a puppy. I was hyperaware that I was choosing a sweet dog to love, and that chances were she would be leaving me in about fifteen years. In the midst of my painful, forced separation from my son, David, and my dog, Angel, I was choosing to attach again, even though I knew it would result in loss. I could have avoided it. I didn’t have to get a dog again. But I purposely made a decision to bring love back into my home. There had been so much subtraction, it seemed time for some addition. Surprisingly, loss is optional. If I want a life with no loss, I also get a life with no love, no spouse or partner, no children, no friends, and no pets. Avoiding the prospect of loss also means avoiding the joys of life. C. S. Lewis said in his book *The Problem of Pain*, “Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself.”

Each day after David died, I saw life going on around me—and in me, too. My hair continued to grow, my fingernails and toenails did, too, and my heart was still

beating. I decided that it must be for a reason, and that I should make a conscious decision to live, not just be alive. Now, sometimes when I'm doing a workshop and someone tells me they're not sure why they're still here, I will gently take their hand and feel their pulse. Yes, you're still alive, I say, so what's it going to be? Live or not live? Most realize that question has to be answered.

Writing this book has been part of my decision to return to life. I've had many moments when I thought I have to find a way to live again, most of all for the integrity of my life, but also for the integrity of the book.

Many readers will think, "It's too late for me. I'm past the point of being able to live again." There is a Chinese proverb that asks the question, "When is the best time to plant a tree?" The answer is twenty years ago. When is the second-best time? Now. People say to me, "I'm trying." I tell them, "There is no trying. Living again is a decision. It's also a declaration. The intent precedes the action and the result."

Years before we knew how to make it happen, President Kennedy said we would go to the moon. Louise Hay talked about the importance of our words to create actions. You can't just wake up and see if today is the day you'll act. Yoda from *Star Wars* was correct: "Do or do not, there is no try." Even a small decision makes a difference.

Learned Helplessness

Yet sometimes help just feels out of reach. On my Facebook page, a woman posted about her son who had died. She said it had been four painful years and she hadn't been able to find help. "This is always the case," she added. "Even as a young girl when bad things happened, I never got any help."

I didn't know if she was just sharing her experience or looking for help, so I asked her.

She responded with, "The pain is unbearable, nothing will help."

"What city do you live in?" I was afraid it was a small city with no resources. But she responded that she lived in a major city. I sent a link and told her, "This is from Grief.com and there are some free support groups in your area."

She wrote back, "I'm not a group person."

“I got it,” I said, “so here’s a link to counselors in your area.”

“I can’t go out.”

“Are you physically challenged?” I asked.

“No, the grief is just too much to bear.”

“You never leave the house?”

“Just for work, groceries, and sometimes Starbucks.”

“I have an online workshop and group that may help you,” I told her. “Let’s private message each other the details.”

In a message she wrote, “If there is a cost, I can’t afford to pay for it.”

“I’m happy to give it to you if you can’t afford it.”

She agreed, and I asked for her email to get started in my online workshop and group.

“I don’t give out my email address. I don’t like giving out identifying information.”

I said, “Isn’t that what an email is for, so we don’t have to give out identifying information?”

“I don’t give it out.”

I realized I had done everything in my power to help, and now it was up to her. I can’t force help on anyone.

I never know for sure what’s going on in these situations, but I see that the wounds of the past stop us from getting help in the present. They register in us as helplessness. When I share this concept with people in grief and they see how much compassion I have for them, they soften. Many times they want to know more about how their past has contributed to their being stuck in grief.

To understand this, let’s look at some experiments from the 1960s that focused on the phenomenon of *learned helplessness*. As an animal lover, I don’t condone these experiments and I hope they wouldn’t be done today. Nevertheless, the results reveal how our past wounds continue to affect us. Psychologists divided dogs into three different groups:

Group One—The dogs were given shocks and there was no way to avoid them.

Group Two—The dogs were given shocks, which they could avoid by pressing a button with their noses.

Group Three—The dogs received no shocks.

Once they had completed this first experimental manipulation, all the dogs were placed one at a time in a box with two chambers that were separated by a low barrier, and all of them were given shocks. Group-one dogs just took the shock and never jumped over the barrier into the second chamber to try to escape the shocks. They had been conditioned to be helpless and take the shocks. But the dogs in groups two and three jumped over the barrier. Nothing had taught them that they had to suffer passively.

This phenomenon can also be seen in the way elephants are trained. When an elephant is still a baby, the trainer uses a rope to tie one of the elephant's legs to a post. The baby elephant struggles for hours, or sometimes even days, trying to escape the rope. Eventually the animal quiets down and accepts its limited range of motion. When the elephant grows up, it'll clearly be strong enough to break the rope, but because by then it has learned that struggling is useless, and it will no longer attempt to break the rope.

Many people grew up in horrible situations and weren't able to get the help they needed. Their painful childhoods turned into challenging adulthoods. They were left believing that when loss came to their world, they could never survive it.

The reality is that there is something they can do. How did scientists help the dogs in group one move to the shock-free side? They needed a slight push to learn. Small steps are what's needed. For example, someone told me about her grieving sister after the loss of a spouse. "It's been two years. She never leaves the house. She won't go out, says nothing will help."

I asked, "What have you told her to do?"

"Get a job, go volunteer, or take a trip!"

I said, "If she is rarely leaving the house, those sound like big things. What if one week you brought over a coffee and just visited? Try that for a few weeks, then perhaps say, 'Let's go out for a coffee.' When we have learned helplessness, big steps are too much. We must help with small, incremental steps."

As a griever, after months or maybe even years of wondering how anything can ever be meaningful after the loss you experienced, you may gradually start to notice that you are deciding to live again in small steps. It may manifest in subtle ways. You don't suddenly start to date again or go to parties, but you're shocked to discover that you still enjoy the taste of a great espresso, or that you want to take a long walk in the park with your best friend. Little by little, you start caring again about things, both large and small.

It's important for people to understand for a few people, the decision may occur in a moment, but for most, it's a process. If I were to ask someone if they've decided to live again when they're still waiting for the autopsy report, that would be far too soon. Over time, however, they can begin to ponder the question.

Norma, who was in her fifties, was making dinner with her husband when he had a sudden heart attack. He fell to the floor and she called the paramedics, but he had died instantly. Over the next year, she was so shocked and bereft she wasn't sure she wanted to go on living. We had several talks in which she shared the depth of pain she was feeling. She said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do next."

"Have you decided whether you want to live or not?" I asked her.

"I haven't made that decision yet," she told me.

I encouraged her to pay attention to her body, her actions, and the world around her. I asked her to notice if things were moving forward.

"What things?" she asked.

"Everything. Your digestive tract. The cars on the road. The wind blowing."

She called me later and said, "David, I get it. Everything is alive and moving but me. I can collect cobwebs, or I can move with the flow. My moving again won't make my husband's death go away and it doesn't mean I'm going to forget him. But I want to quit fighting the wind."

Norma realized that, for her, not making a decision felt like resisting the natural order of things. She made a decision to stop fighting it.

Disloyalty