

## CHAPTER TWO

# Grief Must Be Witnessed

For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.

—Elie Wiesel

Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining.

This need is hardwired in us, since our emotions bind us to one another, and in those bonds is the key to our survival. From the moment we're born, we realize we're not alone. Our brains are equipped with mirroring neurons, which is why when the mother smiles, the baby smiles back. This continues into adulthood. I remember walking down the street one day and a man said to me, "Howdy." I'm not usually someone who says "Howdy." But I instinctively said back to him, "Howdy!" This is more than copying each other's expressions. It's also about the emotions underlying the expressions. The mirroring neurons enable mother and child to pick up on each other's emotions.

Dr. Edward Tronick is part of a psychology team that made a short video that shows what happens if babies do not feel their emotions reflected and acknowledged by those around them. First we see a ten-month-old sitting in a high chair, eyes wide and happily fixed on his mother's smiling face. The baby and mother mirror each other as I described above. One laughs, then the other laughs; the baby points and the mother looks in the direction in which he's pointing. But then at the direction of the researchers, the mother turns away, and when she

turns back to the baby, she has a blank look on her face. The confused baby does everything to try to get a reaction out of her. He cries and screams in distress. This is an innate reaction, because children know on a subconscious level that they need others for survival. If their survival is dependent on someone who is unable to be truly present for them, they suffer.

The same is true for adults. If they are grieving, they need to feel their grief acknowledged and reflected by others. But in our hyperbusy world, grief has been minimized and sanitized. You get three days off work after a loved one dies and then everyone expects you to carry on like nothing happened. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for those around you to bear witness to your pain, and this can be very isolating.

I was touring in Australia when I met a researcher who told me about the work she was doing to study the way of life in the northern indigenous villages of Australia. One of the villagers told her that the night someone dies, everyone in the village moves a piece of furniture or something else into their yard. The next day, when the bereaved family wakes up and looks outside, they see that *everything has changed* since their loved one died—not just for them but for everyone. That's how these communities witness, and mirror, grief. They are showing in a tangible way that someone's death matters. The loss is made visible.

In this country, too, it was once common for us to come together as a community to bear witness to the grief experienced when a loved one died. But in our current culture, the mourner is made to feel that though his or her own world has been shattered, everyone else's world goes on as if *nothing* has changed. There are too few rituals to commemorate mourning, and too little time allotted to it.

Grief should unite us. It is a universal experience. If I'm talking to someone with a physical ailment, I can listen and empathize, but I may never have that particular problem. When I'm with someone whose loved one died, however, I know I'll be in their shoes someday and I try to understand what they are feeling. Not to change it—just to acknowledge it fully. I feel privileged when someone shares their pain and grief with me. The act of witnessing someone's vulnerability can bring the person out of isolation if the witnessing is done without judgment.

Too often outsiders who may have the best of intentions will suggest to a bereaved person that it's time to move on, embrace life, and let go of grief. But

grief should be a no-judgment zone. Those who understand what you're going through will never judge you or think your grief is out of proportion or too prolonged. Grief is what's going on inside of us, while mourning is what we do on the outside. The internal work of grief is a process, a journey. It does not have prescribed dimensions and it does not end on a certain date.

When people ask me how long they're going to grieve, I ask them, "How long will your loved one be dead? That's how long. I don't mean you'll be in pain forever. But you will never forget that person, never be able to fill the unique hole that has been left in your heart. There is what I call the one-year myth—we should be done and complete with all grieving in one year. Not remotely true. In the first year of your loss, you're likely to mourn and grieve intensely. After that, your grief will probably fluctuate. It will seem to lessen, then something will trigger it, and you'll find yourself back in the full pain of loss. In time it will hurt less often and with less intensity. But it will always be there."

That's about as specific as I can get in answering the question. As vague as it is, it still doesn't cover all the possibilities. Over many years of grief work, I've come to realize that if I've seen *one* person in grief, I've only seen that *one* person in grief. I can't compare one griever to another, even if they're in the same family. One sister cries a lot and the other one doesn't. One son is vulnerable and raw. The other just wants to move on. Some people are expressive. Others shy away from their feelings. Some have more feelings. Some have less. Some are more productive and practical in their grieving style. They have a "buckle down and move on" mentality. We can mistakenly think that people who show no visible signs of pain should be in a grief group, getting in touch with and sharing their feelings. But if that is not their style in life, it won't be in grief, either. They must experience loss in their own way. Suggesting otherwise will not be helpful to them.

## The Light and Dark of Grief

In our modern world, our grief is often witnessed online. When I post quotes about grief on social media, I notice different kinds of responses. If I post hopeful, optimistic quotes about healing, they give hope to many people, but don't resonate with others. Those who are in a dark place aren't ready to hear about

hope, often because they're at the beginning of the grieving process and their grief is too acute to allow for any other emotions. They just want the darkness of their grief to be seen and acknowledged. Their tears are evidence of their love, proof that the person who died was someone who mattered deeply. If I post something like, "Today it feels like the pain will never end," or "Grief feels like a dark cloud that encompasses the whole sky," that will resonate with them. It mirrors and validates their feelings, which can be far more consoling than trying to find something positive in the situation.

Some grieve with darkness, some with light, some with both, depending on where they are in the cycle of grief. It would be a mistake to conclude that one is better than the other or that there's a right way to grieve. There are just different ways to grieve, different feelings evoked by loss. This is also true of our relationship to hope. Hope can be like oxygen to people in grief. For others, however, especially in the early stages, it can feel invalidating. "In my sorrow, how dare you want me to feel hopeful... about what? Do you need me to hope to make *you* feel more comfortable?"

Hope has a very close relationship with meaning. In the same way our meaning changes, so does hope. Sometimes when I work with someone stuck in grief, I will say, "It sounds like hope died with your loved one. It seems all is lost."

Surprisingly they perk up. "Yes, that's it."

They feel witnessed. I often say, "A loved one's death is permanent, and that is so heartbreaking. But I believe your loss of hope can be temporary. Until you can find it, I'll hold it for you. I have hope for you. I don't want to invalidate your feelings as they are, but I also don't want to give death any more power than it already has. Death ends a life, but not our relationship, our love, or our hope."

Sometimes I meet someone in grief who tells me that a family member or friend said something terrible—which often turns out to be some variation of "time heals all" or "be happy your loved one is at peace now." Such statements can make the bereaved think that their feelings have not been witnessed. Most of us want to say something helpful, but we may not realize that our timing and delivery are off. If the griever needs to remain in a dark place for a while, then trying to offer some kind of cheer will be very hurtful. We must really *see* the

person we are trying to comfort. Loss can become more meaningful—and more bearable—when reflected, and reflected accurately, in another’s eyes.

We also have to remember that our own thoughts about the one who died are irrelevant. Maybe we think our friend’s mother was so awful that she wasn’t worth grieving over. Or we know that our sister’s husband had been unfaithful and wonder why she is nonetheless sobbing over his death. What we think has nothing at all to do with the feelings of those who are in grief, and they will not be comforted by hearing us criticize their loved ones as not being deserving of their sorrow.

People who mourn the loss of their pets often comment on how little people understand about their grief. In the months that followed the death of my son, one of my dear friends experienced his own loss. His beloved dog died at the age of sixteen. When I reached out to him to express my condolences, he was taken aback by my concern. “Your loss is so much worse than mine,” he said. I couldn’t see his tears and think that his loss was any less painful or meaningful than mine. Every loss has meaning, and all losses are to be grieved—and witnessed. I have a rule on pet loss. “If the love is real, the grief is real.” The grief that comes with loss is how we experience the depths of our love, and love takes many forms in this life.

Paul Denniston, my partner, teaches Grief Yoga. Sometimes he has people in his classes do an interaction that physicalizes witnessing. He has two people who are grieving stand facing each other and place their hands over their own hearts. They look into each other’s eyes and say, “I witness your grief. I see your healing.” This kind of witnessing of another’s vulnerability can be very healing. Participants often say that they found it the most memorable, helpful moment in the session.

## Unwitnessed Grief

Sometimes people can’t bring themselves to be with a person who is grieving. Perhaps they fear they won’t be able to find the right thing to say, or they think it will be too hard on them to show up. After my son David died, a friend kept calling me and leaving messages for weeks, until I finally picked up the phone. Maria told me how guilty she’d been feeling for not coming to the funeral. She knew David and me very well. “I just couldn’t do it,” she said. “I was afraid the

pain would be too intense, and I didn't feel I could face you. But these days, I can't get you and David out of my mind and I feel a lot of guilt."

The fixer in me wanted to say, "Don't worry about it. It was no big deal," to ease her guilt. But that wasn't the truth. I just said, "I missed you."

Later I thought about what she had said, not only from a grief perspective but from a life perspective. Something goes out of alignment when we try to avoid sadness and grief. If Maria had come to the funeral, she would have felt intense sadness and grief. But it would have been meaningful. It would have had an authenticity that came from moving with the rhythms of life. The sadness she felt would have gently melted her soul. Instead, she now had a river of guilt that ran through everything.

Life gives us pain. Our job is to experience it when it gets handed to us. Avoidance of loss has a cost. Having our pain seen and seeing the pain in others is a wonderful medicine for both body and soul.

In one of my lectures, a counselor said, "I have a client who can't go to funerals because she finds them too sad. What's the clinical term for that?"

I responded, "Selfish, self-centered." I wondered when people started to think they couldn't go to a funeral because it was going to be too sad. Life has peaks and valleys. It's our responsibility to be present for both.

In Maria's case, she failed to show up, which hurt me. Pain can also be caused by people who mean well but don't know how to be present. When you hear someone repeating his grief story over and over, that means his grief has not been witnessed in a healthy way. Perhaps one of his children said, "Dad, enough, we all know how Mom died. You have to stop dwelling on it." Or another child might have tried to comfort him by saying, "Don't be sad. Mom had a long life and at least she's not suffering anymore." Why doesn't he just move on? Repeating the story is often a griever's subconscious way of trying to get much-needed attention.

Another manifestation of not having grief witnessed is comparing one's loss to someone else's. "Can you believe Martha is complaining about the loss of her dog when my husband just died?" Comparing is a way of needing to be witnessed. It's saying, "Listen to me, not to Martha. My pain is worse. I need you to notice my pain."

The way to help is to make sure that the person who is grieving knows that she *does* have your attention, that you *are* listening, that she is welcome to talk to you about her feelings. “I see how much you are hurting,” you can say, “and I know what a wonderful man your husband was. Do you remember the day we all went...” Some kind of opening like that might help her find a way to talk about her loss.

## The Practical Griever

I met Lindy Chamberlain briefly in Australia long after her court trials were over and she was released from prison. I only had a moment to express my condolences for her loss. Based on the public’s judgment of her grieving style, she could be the world’s most well-known “practical griever.” She gained international notoriety as Australia’s embattled bereaved mother whose baby was taken by a dingo in 1980 while her family was camping. Meryl Streep authentically replicated her scream, “Dingo got my baby,” in a movie about this horrible tragedy. Most believed she was guilty of the crime. Why? Because Lindy had a strong faith and did not publicly cry. She was found guilty of murder and received a life sentence with no parole. After many legal actions and DNA advancements, she was found not guilty. Finally in 2012, the public felt that Lindy had been fully exonerated.

Some grieverers don’t talk about their loss, they don’t cry a river of tears. They get back to “normal” as soon as they can. Like Lindy, they appear too strong. Perhaps disconnected. Since they don’t publicly or privately cry or share their feelings with friends and family, they are often misunderstood. We mistakenly think this relates to how much they loved the person. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such people may be labeled as having “delayed grief.” It’s assumed that one of these days, when the pressure of denying their feelings builds up, their grief will come flooding through. I’ve learned that some people are what I think of as “practical grieverers.” If you ask why they’re not crying, they are likely to say something like, “I’d cry if it would bring them back, but it won’t.”

We must witness grief as it is. Practical grieverers often complain that everyone is trying to change and fix them. They don’t need to be fixed. They need to be seen and respected for their own way of dealing with loss.

Robert and Joan had been married for twenty-five years. One day, Robert answered the phone and learned that his brother, Corey, had died of a massive heart attack. He knew his parents and Corey's widow were too brokenhearted to take on the responsibility of planning everything, so he went right into "doing what needed to be done" mode. He was the point person for all the arrangements. His sister-in-law says to this day that she can't imagine how she could've gotten through this difficult period without Robert's help.

There were whispers at the funeral about how wonderfully Robert had stepped in, but had anyone seen him cry? No one had. Family members approached Joan privately and asked, "Has Robert cried with you?"

Joan had not seen him cry and she began to get worried. Over the next couple of weeks, she kept asking him how he was doing. "Do you miss Corey?"

"Of course I do," he said.

"I just want you to know it's okay to be sad."

"I know that and I am."

After about six weeks, Joan suggested that her husband go to a therapist. He was taken aback by the comment and asked her, "What's wrong? Is something going on?"

"Well, Corey died, and I'm worried you're not feeling it."

"I am feeling it. I don't cry like you, but I'm feeling it. I'm not sure what there is to say. He's gone. It's tragic. I'll miss him for the rest of my life. Nothing I say is going to bring him back."

Nine months later it was time for the annual fishing trip. Most of the men in the family got together each year for a weekend on a nearby lake. Joan was thrilled this was happening. She knew Robert's brother's absence would be deeply felt, since he had always been a part of the gathering. She was sure the men would talk about his death and this would give Robert a chance to process his feelings. When Robert returned, she said, "It must have been good for all of you guys to have a chance to talk to each other about Corey's death."

"We didn't mention it."

"How can that be?" Joan asked. "Corey was there last year and every year before, and he wasn't there this year. How could you not talk about it?"



She came to me because she felt Robert might be blocked. I suggested that although it was natural for her to grieve openly and expressively, he might be a practical griever, and he was probably dealing with his loss in the way that was natural to him. I asked her to imagine how she would feel if someone were to say to her, “Stop grieving,” or, “You’re grieving too much.” Just as that would interfere with her natural way of processing loss, I explained, doing the opposite with Robert, telling him to show more emotion, was disrespectful to his way of grieving.

Joan realized she had to acknowledge Robert’s way of grieving was as legitimate as crying a thousand tears.

## From the Most Private to the Most Public

Simone was a talent booker for one of the late-night TV shows. One of the best in the business, she knew when a celebrity had a new film coming out or when there was a scandal in the making. It was her job to book the hottest stars at the peak of their fame.

Everyone knew Simone, but beyond the fact that she had a husband and grown children, few knew anything about her personal life. She rarely talked about it and was always careful to maintain a separation between her personal and her professional life.

One day Simone’s assistant pulled her out of a meeting to take an urgent call. It was her daughter, saying that her husband had just died from a heart attack.

“What can I do to help?” her assistant asked. “What should I tell people?”

“Just tell them my husband died and I’ll be back in two weeks. There’s nothing more to say.”

After two weeks, Simone returned to messages and flowers. She graciously accepted condolences, but when her fellow workers wanted details, she said she’d rather not talk about it. She had a “get back to work” attitude. But six months later, she turned in her resignation. Although her boss was sure she’d been snatched up by one of the rival networks, her resignation was much more complicated than that.

No one knew that Simone's husband had been bipolar. She'd spent years trying to keep him healthy, keep him on his meds, and help him be as productive as possible. Because of the stigma attached to her husband's illness, she had always been reluctant to talk about it, and her desire to protect his privacy had been reinforced by her own natural reserve. Work had been her escape from the difficulties of her home situation, a place where she didn't have to think about her husband's problems. But after his death, she found it hard to just keep going on.

When I met her, shortly after she'd left her job, she said she felt traumatized from the many years she'd spent taking care of and shielding him. She said that suddenly her work had begun to feel meaningless. She was reflecting on how few resources had been available to help her husband and she wanted to try to find a way to be more useful in the world. We talked about her going back to school and perhaps becoming a counselor or social worker. Neither of those resonated with her. However, she did have the resources to take some time off, and she decided she would use the time to think about her next moves.

I received a call from her about a year later, asking me to come and speak at the annual conference of an organization in a city far from where she had lived before.

"What's your involvement?" I asked her.

"Hang on a minute," she said. "I'm in my office and I need to close the door."

She explained to me that after her husband died, she knew she couldn't do anything about those twenty-five years of feeling helpless. But she wanted her next job to be something that would help her overcome that sense of wasted time. Eventually she found work at a national speaker's organization where instead of booking celebrities, she was booking some of the most important mental health care professionals in the country. "I wanted to do something to help people deal with their problems," she said. "I'm also volunteering at a mental health clinic."

"That's wonderful," I said. "Do your coworkers know why you made such a big life change?"

"David, you know me. I'm way too private for that. I just told them I wanted a change, so I moved out of LA."

That was Simone—private all the way. But being private hadn't meant she didn't feel her loss deeply. Nor did it get in the way of doing something meaningful to honor her husband.

At the other extreme, grief can be very public. One day my phone rang, and a woman's voice said, "I have Vice President Biden on the line." After a click, I heard his unmistakable voice saying, "Hey, David, this is Joe. I wanted to thank you for your writing."

Joe Biden was no newcomer to loss. Many years before, just as he was about to take office for his first term in the Senate, his wife, Neilia, and daughter, Naomi, were killed in a traffic accident. Two days after becoming a senator he had to deal with a mass shooting in New Orleans. Yes, the same one from my childhood. We spoke briefly about the strangeness of our lives and losses having intersected so closely back then, but what Vice President Biden wanted to talk about the day he called was a much more recent death—that of his son Beau, who had died of a brain tumor not long before.

I told him I thought the way he had handled his grief after his son died was remarkable. He talked about his feelings openly and emotionally, at times even shedding tears in public, and he had described in an interview with Oprah Winfrey the intimate scene of him and his other son, Hunter, holding Beau's hand right before he died.

Just as it was Simone's style to keep her feelings to herself, it has always been Biden's style to let them out. But even though he had done so very movingly on several occasions after Beau died, his emotionalism was proving to be a challenge to him at that time. "As vice president," he said to me, "part of my job is to attend funerals and give eulogies, acting as an official representative of the government." He continued to do this even after the death of his son. Less than a month after Beau died he even found the strength to go to Charleston, South Carolina, to comfort the survivors of the horrific mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. As he writes in his book *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*, "The act of consoling had always made me feel a little better, and I was hungry to feel better." But he explained to me that day that since he himself was in deep grief, he was now finding that attending these funerals had become very challenging. They constantly returned him to his own feelings of loss.

I told him that I could imagine how hard this must be for him, but suggested that the death of his own son would make him especially sensitive to the pain of

others. By mirroring their pain, he would be letting them know that their pain matters deeply, too. Moreover, this would be one way for him to find meaning from his son's death. I hope what I said was as helpful to him as something he has said many times to others in grief: "The time will come when memory will bring a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eyes." That's how it goes: pain first, meaning later.

Another person who was in the public eye when she lost someone she loved chose very consciously to make her loss visible to the entire world. When President Kennedy was shot in Dallas in 1963, his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, refused to change the pink suit that was stained with his blood and his brains. "Let them see what they have done," she said. She didn't want the violence to be swept away. She wanted the horrific loss she was feeling to be fully witnessed. Having grief witnessed is about making loss real.

When Jackie Kennedy lost her husband, and Vice President Biden lost his son, they were both public figures. But for others, the tragedy of loss is what thrusts them into the public eye. This was the case for a young couple from Manhattan, Jayson and Stacy Greene, whom I met at one of my grief workshops at Kripalu, a retreat center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. One morning their two-year-old daughter, Greta, was sitting on a bench on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her grandmother when suddenly a piece of masonry fell eight stories, hitting Greta. The toddler was rushed to the hospital where she underwent emergency brain surgery, but she never regained consciousness and died.

Local media reported the tragedy and the story spread immediately, getting picked up by *The New York Times* and many other news outlets. *The Daily News* had used a photograph of Greta from her mother's Facebook page for a front-page story. Greta's parents quickly had become recognizable figures, and everywhere they went, well-meaning strangers would talk to them and offer condolences and ask questions. For Jayson and Stacy, in their fog of grief, these approaches felt intrusive. The attention was bewildering at a time when they were barely able to hold themselves together. They felt like the whole world was watching them grieve.

During the workshop, people were reading letters I had them write the night before. Jayson tentatively raised his hand in the back. When he read his letter to

his daughter in a trembling voice, everyone in the room was shaken by their story. I knew they could feel it. I invited Jayson and Stacy to come to the front of the room and gave them permission to express all their negative feelings. I told them, “It’s not uncommon for a couple whose child has died to be jealous of happy, carefree families. It’s normal in grief to feel anger. It’s appropriate and inevitable. Anger even has its own stage in the grieving process. Let it out.”

To encourage them, I took in the story and their pain as much as I could and began hitting the pillows I kept in the room for people to use to release their anger. Their pain was now in the room. I screamed for them, showing them that I was agonized and outraged that their daughter had died. They were shocked at my intensity in front of a room of people, but it ultimately gave them permission to have their own emotional outbursts. Jayson began drawing on an inner rage, and I started with him. I knew I was just a catalyst.

“I hate happy families!”

The room felt like it was with him as his hands hit the pillow. Stacy was behind him, watching Jayson with her hands in fists. But she had nowhere to go. Hardly realizing my own connection with her loss and anger, I turned to her like a coach in the last few moments of an important game and asked, “Stacy, what are you angry at?”

I could see her feeling anger and suppressing it at the same time.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“What kind of world do we live in,” I said to the room and to God, “where your daughter’s death would be allowed to happen?”

Jayson turned to me as a husband who was protective of his wife and her grief. He said, “Don’t yell at her.”

Stacy said, “The building was a center for seniors, and now when I walk around, I feel... When I walk past old people, I have a hard time.” She took a deep breath. “They make me angry, so what am I supposed to do, walk around saying I hate old people?”

“Absolutely!” I said. “Everyone here knows what that means and that you don’t really hate old people. You hate the time they have. You hate that they have lived full lives where Greta’s was cut so short.”

Stacy looked like she was unable to say it, especially with a few silver-haired people in the room. I looked around and said, “Let’s all say, One... two... three: *I hate old people!*”

The people in the room were taking her anger very seriously, not personalizing it, but realizing that this was about the unfairness of time.

When we feel it, we release it and we can be free. It was a profound experience, not only for them. It affected everyone in the room who was there to witness their grief. I knew this would be the beginning of their healing.

Jayson called me months later and said, “I don’t know if you remember me.”

I told him I would never forget him or Greta and he was moved that I remembered. He told me that the weekend he spent in my workshop had been a tipping point. Until then, they had felt like they had been singled out for a tragedy. But being with so many others who had also experienced terrible losses had made them feel less victimized. This is part of what I think these grief workshops can accomplish—allowing those who are suffering to witness and reflect each other’s pain.

## Communal Mourning

Funerals and memorials are important. Something profound happens when others see and hear and acknowledge our grief. Mourning is the outward expression of our grief. Conversely, something goes wrong when it remains unseen. That’s why I believe that when someone decides not to have a funeral, they’re missing out. A funeral is the time for people to gather as a family, as a community, to witness grief together. The funeral is the most well-known ritual for death, a ceremony that creates meaning out of our loved one’s experience of life, and our own experience of loss.

At a memorial, people talk about what the dead person meant to them. This may be in the form of a somber eulogy or a funny story. It can be accompanied by laughter or by tears—or both. Whatever form it takes, telling the story of the loved one’s life helps the mourners to accept the reality of death. It also helps us through the process of grieving. We need to hear the story from others, which helps us see things from a different perspective, and we need to tell it ourselves.

In the eulogy of Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, her brother, Charles Spencer, told those who gathered in her honor, “Today is our chance to say thank you for the way you brightened our lives, even though God granted you but half a life. We will all feel cheated that you were taken from us so young, and yet we must learn to be grateful that you came along at all. Only now you are gone do we truly appreciate what we are now without and we want you to know that life without you is very, very difficult.”

That is where the healing—and the meaning making—begins.

We think we can spare our children pain by not exposing them to the reality of death. But the opposite is true. Our children, just like us, are in pain when they lose someone they love, and it will not help them to have their pain glossed over. Going to a funeral will help because they, too, need to have their pain witnessed, to feel it reflected in the emotions of those around them.

When I explain funerals to young children, I’ll say something like, “Do you remember last year when you went to Grandpa’s house for his birthday gathering? Everyone sang ‘Happy Birthday’? That’s a way of saying I love you. Now that Grandpa has died, we’re going to have a funeral for him and gather one last time in his honor to say goodbye. Saying goodbye is another way we say I love you.”

The funeral ritual is important in witnessing grief because we will grieve alone for the rest of our lives. This is our last formal time to mourn together. One of the most common things we hear at funerals is that the deceased would not want us to grieve for them. I always think if we can’t grieve at the funeral, when can we grieve? The funeral is by design a communal time to witness each other’s grief through music, stories, poems, and prayers.

People often ask me, “Is a memorial better than a celebration of life?” My answer is one is not better than the other. They are both ways we witness our grief. In a memorial, we witness the sadness of the loss as well as honor their life. The celebration of life clearly moves the focus to celebrate what they meant to us when they were alive. I always remind people you can still cry at a celebration of life.

Ellen was a child of six who was very attached to her great-aunt, Ruth. They were inseparable, and when Ruth contracted brain cancer, she went to a nursing

home to be cared for. Ellen missed her terribly and kept asking where her aunt was. Her mother said, “She’s away resting.”

Ellen kept asking when she would come back home, and her mother said, “Pretty soon.”

A few weeks later, her mother told her that Ruth had died. Ellen climbed into her mother’s lap and cried, but after a few minutes, her mother walked away, went upstairs to her bedroom, and shut the door. On the day of the funeral, Ellen’s mother and father left the house to bury Ruth. Ellen begged to go along, but they said that the funeral was for grown-ups.

In my lectures I ask whether Ellen should have been allowed to go to the funeral. Both small and large groups always answer with a resounding yes!

I follow up with, “How many of you have issues or wounds because you were allowed to go to a funeral?” Occasionally I get a hand or two. Then I ask, “How many of you have issues, wounds, or trauma because you weren’t allowed to go to the funeral?” About 15 percent of the hands in the room will go up.

We think skipping the pain helps our children, but the opposite is true. Our children, just like us, need their pain witnessed, and a funeral is important to them. When I was a child, sometimes our car would be slowed down because we were behind a hearse. We were used to seeing those black station wagons that picked up bodies at the hospital or someone’s home. Now hearses are only used for the short drive between the service and the gravesite. Death has become sanitized, and the dead move around our cities in white unmarked vans. The next time you see a white van with no windows, you’re probably behind a hearse.

People often tell me they are stuck in their loss. In the old days, there was just the funeral and the burial. People didn’t have many choices. Now with cremation, there are many more options. We have the ability to personalize our final disposition as well as choose how and when we have a ceremony. That option to delay things is not just for cremation, but for the burial ceremony. These new choices also provide more opportunity for putting things off.

I often ask people questions about their loved one’s memorial or celebration of life. More and more, the ones who are stuck in grief say, “We didn’t have one. It just wasn’t practical.” Or “Everyone was busy. We were thinking of doing one in



six months when everyone could plan,” or “but now too much time has passed,” or “now another family member has died.”

When someone is struggling with their grief, and I ask about the final remains, they often tell me the ashes are temporarily in the closet until they figure out what to do with them.

Ceremonies commemorating a loss are not supposed to be practical, easy, or come at a perfect time. When our loved ones die, it is the moment when grief is most palpable and witnessing is most needed. There is no completion of grief or closure, but that last ceremony is a bookend that acknowledges that the final chapter of life has ended. There seems to be an ever-growing inconclusiveness when the life of a loved one is not marked by an event.

We need a sense of community when we are in mourning because we were not meant to be islands of grief. The reality is that we heal as a tribe. There is no greater gift you can give someone in grief than to ask them about their loved one, and then truly listen. When we see our sorrow in the eyes of another, we know our grief has meaning. We get a glimpse, maybe for the first time since the loss, that we will survive, and a future is possible.