

LOVING GRIEF



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Contents

The Beginning and the End	7
Knowing Grief	9
Speaking Grief	12
A Brief Life	21
What Happens When You Let Go of Hope?	28
Loving Your Grief	34
Passion, Loss, Beauty	38
Choosing the Unavoidable	41
Coming to a Stop	44
Ritual	49
Undertow	57
Helping	63
Gifts	68
The Omnipresence of Grief	71
Returning	75
My Path	78
Letting Go of Grief	87
An Ending That Is No End	91

The Beginning and the End

 DEEP in the night of Friday, December 13th, 2002, Bonnie woke up. I asked her if anything was wrong.

“I feel totally miserable.”

“Is something hurting you?”

“No.”

“Are you nauseous?”

“No. I’m completely miserable. I want to stop taking the medicine. I don’t want this to go on anymore.”

This was twenty-three years after the summer we fell in love. We had been married for twenty years. For the last two years, Bonnie had been treated for cancer. For ten weeks, we had known that a tumor was growing in her brain, and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

This night, Bonnie was telling me she was ready to die.

This was the last conversation of our lives. It wasn’t

much, and it was everything: She said she was only afraid of being in terrible pain if she stopped taking the steroids that were controlling the swelling of her brain.


I told her I believed we were ready to control the pain. I promised to call the hospice nurse and the oncologist in the morning and make sure we were ready. Eager to have her free from worrying, I urged her to go back to sleep. She did. I did.

The next day, Bonnie could speak only enough to ask for water or for help to the bathroom. Sunday, there wasn't even that. On Tuesday morning, with her daughter, her sister and me sitting beside her, holding her, stroking her, she died.

This book is what I would say softly to you if you and I were sitting on the porch after the setting sun has left us, two shadows facing each other . . . or if perhaps your head rested on my shoulder as your tears ran . . . this book is what I would murmur to you about grief.



Knowing Grief

 I KNOW a little about grief, about my grief. I was fortunate to see early on that my grief is my own, not measured or predicted by anyone else's. It need not look like anyone else's grief, any more than my love for Bonnie needed to look like anyone else's love.

Still, people see reflections of ourselves in others. We recognize glimmers of our own love in other people's love. I hear echoes of my grief in other people's grief. And some of the many things people said and wrote to me about grief did give me a clearer view of what was happening in me, did help me to go through those sad days more peacefully, did help me make peace with Bonnie's death.

So I offer these reflections for anyone who is grieving or who loves someone who's grieving. *They are as true as I can write them, but they are not the only truth about grief.*

Fundamentally, what I'm writing about is love. Early on, I took comfort in the knowledge that grief is the way my love for Bonnie feels. What I was feeling when I felt so bad was my love for her. What I was feeling on brighter days, too, was my love for her.

I took heart from my confidence that grief changes, just like love does. The way I loved Bonnie after twenty years of marriage was not the way I loved her when we first fell in love. My grief two years after she died is not the same as the grief I experienced in the first weeks and months. Just as my love felt different from day to day while Bonnie was with me, so my grief feels different from day to day and month to month now that she is lost.

I began this book about a year after Bonnie died. By then my life and my grief were vastly different from what they had been, and they continue to change as I write. Through all the change, though, there is something permanent in my grief for Bonnie, because there is something permanent in my love for her. At her memorial service I described that permanence as "Bonnie's canyon." My progress through grief has been progress in discovering the shape of my love for Bonnie, even as it changes.

These reflections are written in small pieces. I don't want to impose an organization that was absent from the experience itself. I felt disoriented much of the time, and what I held onto were very small things, like the short pieces of poetry or prose I have put at the end of each chapter.

What follows here is a story of discovery. In grief I discovered a life within me that includes and embraces Bonnie.

While careening down through the tumultuous feelings that followed her death, I found that there was growth, and there was a destination. Every day, I can look at where I am and say, "I am here because I loved Bonnie. Because she loved me. And because she died."

*Where do I go now?
What is my task?
Am I to heal?
Can a scar cover
The lack of you?
Am I to move on?
I've lost the knack
Of locomotion.
What now? Where now?
Who shall I be
Now that I can't be yours?*



Speaking Grief

✍️ ALMOST as soon as Bonnie died, I began trying to express my grief in words. I'm comfortable with words; what's written down seems more stable, more approachable, available to contemplation. So I began to talk and to write about my grief as soon as I knew it had begun. Two of the people I spoke to (my friend Susan Bachurski and Gretchen Gaines, a grief counselor) suggested I write about this for others.

Each opportunity I had to share my love for Bonnie with others was precious, because mostly I did my grieving alone. My daughter, Rebecca, was living with me, and we spoke about Bonnie, scattered her ashes together, reminisced about her beauty and her love . . . but grief is a twenty-four-hour phenomenon, so grief is fundamentally something you do alone.

The wisest of friends know that grief is not something

that can be fixed or needs to be fixed. The wisest of friends know that grief is something that we must pass through; it is the way love feels now, and not the way love will always feel. And when the grieving person speaks, the greatest and most healing gift is listening. Since then I've learned that in any conversation, the quality of listening is just as important as the quality of speaking. It was into a deep listening that I spoke at Bonnie's memorial service a few days after she died, the memorial service she had designed.

This week we've spent time looking at pictures of Bonnie, something she really didn't like to do. She would wrinkle her nose at them and flip quickly past the pictures of herself. And she was right.

Because pictures of Bonnie never did her justice.

Photographs are too still to hold the liveliness of her smile.

Pigments are too harsh or too dull to render the warmth that was pooled deep in her eyes.

Still, I always wanted those pictures. Near my desk is a picture of Bonnie that I took twenty-three years ago, when we were first discovering our love for each other. She was snuggled in a blanket, in front of a fire; if you look closely in the darks of her eyes, you can see tiny reflections of the flames. It was an accident, a trick of the lens—you might say a photographic metaphor.

But only metaphor can catch her magic.

Last May, on the coast of Italy, she walked up a famous footpath out of the town of Monterosso, up through the vineyards, breathlessly up five hundred and seventy-three ancient stone steps. (Yes, later she walked them again and counted each one.) At the top, on the heights overlooking the Mediterranean, she begged me, Let's go on to the next town, though it was an hour away or more, though we had flown across the Atlantic that day and the sun was already setting. She was ready to risk being caught in the dark on a rocky, winding path hundreds of feet above the sea . . . just to discover, as soon as possible, a beauty that she had not yet known.

I picture Bonnie in high places. I picture her in the bell tower of San Giorgio Maggiore, also last spring, looking across the Venetian lagoon toward Piazza San Marco, drinking in that spectacular vista, but already impatient to go down and venture more deeply into the history and architecture and art of Venice.

I picture her hiking up toward the top of the canyon in Chiricahua National Monument in eastern Arizona. We hiked all afternoon, up into an improbable landscape: huge towers of balanced