

How Grief Remakes Us

By Angeline Thomas

As the old adage goes, when the student is ready, the teacher appears – and for me, that teacher was grief.

In just two years, my father-in-law died unexpectedly. Then, my dad had died less than a year later. Four months later, I miscarried my second pregnancy. Three months after that, my mom died of cancer. My life, once so full of momentum, ground to a halt. At the time, I was in my mid-30s, leading a small policy focused nonprofit, raising a toddler, and had joined Cohort IV of the Leadership Academy eager to deepen my leadership in the justice movement. I thought the training would help me grow professionally, and it did. What I didn't expect was that grief – not the curriculum – would become my most profound teacher.

After this cascade of deaths, the lawyer in me thought I could research my way through grief. I turned to books and articles, searching for a roadmap. Raised in a Christian household, I found little comfort in the faith that had once guided me. Yet, I longed for anything that could help me feel whole again.

I didn't want to live in a world without my parents or where my second child existed only in memory. My sheer willpower had carried me through every prior challenge – law school, leadership roles, motherhood – and I was convinced that if I just worked harder, I could outpace the void that had opened up beneath me.

My parents' deaths along with the miscarriage felt as though an earthquake had triggered a tsunami, leaving the familiar world around me flattened and submerged. I poured myself into my job, stacked my calendar with meetings, said yes to every opportunity, and clung to the hope that action could shield me from despair. I was terrified that if I ever stopped moving, I would fall apart completely.

But the tactics that once propelled me now betrayed me. The energy I once drew from purpose and urgency had vanished. I was numb, not motivated. I showed up, but didn't feel present. It was as if I were a sailboat stranded in the middle of an endless ocean with no wind, no compass, and no land in sight.

Three months after my mother died, my husband and I took a long-planned trip to Europe for our tenth wedding anniversary. It was a splurge trip meant to bring joy after so much sorrow. But in a rented Paris apartment, stillness settled over me. Without distraction, the grief that I had kept at bay flooded in and I realized how profoundly lost I was.

The anchors of my identity – being a daughter, my vision of a growing family, my professional ambition – had all eroded. I didn't recognize myself. Grief books offered insights and validation but still left me feeling alone in my day-to-day. My husband was grieving too, but our coping styles were different, and we didn't know how to support one another.

After returning home, we began to ask deeper questions that required bravery. The void of grief had created a rupture that allowed buried truths and longings to surface. It was from within that aching space that we began to wonder: What if the lives we had carefully constructed were no longer aligned with who we were becoming? What if the grief had changed not just our circumstances but our very values? Asking these questions meant leaving the safety of the known and stepping into the safety of the unknown, trusting that there was something worthwhile on the other side. Were we satisfied with our life as is? If not, what future might we create? What risks were we willing to take in service of something more meaningful?

For the next six months, my husband and I met weekly to discern the answers to these questions. In true lawyerly fashion, we recorded our insights and dreams on jumbo sticky post its and hung them around our house.

Then came more urgency. My husband's mother, a brilliant academic, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's at 63. Her father had died of the same disease at 55. The diagnosis filled us with fear that my husband could one day face the same fate. If he only had 20 good years left, how did we want to spend them? The clock suddenly felt louder, more insistent. We felt compelled to stop postponing all the dreams captured on those sticky notes and live them now, while we could.

Professionally, both of us felt disillusioned. I had grown tired of explaining systemic limits to communities I hoped to serve. My husband, a prosecutor, questioned whether meaningful change was possible from within a system built on punishment. With a growing toddler, even our home began to feel too small. We were ready for radical change.

About a year after our anniversary, we did something drastic: quit our jobs, sold our house, and bought one-way tickets to Asia. Our four-year-old son joined us. We had no clear plan – just the need to escape the life that no longer fit.

In Japan, I walked my son through monasteries and learned to sit in meditation after he was in bed. During the day, my husband and I traded off parenting duties to give one another moments of solitude.

In Vietnam, I let grief wash over me on a quiet beach. The dam broke. I hadn't cried like that before. I let myself feel sorry for myself. I raged at how my father had left so many things unresolved, how cancer had taken my mother, how my second child never had a chance. Grief wasn't linear or clean – it was rage, guilt, numbness, and moments of awe.

Without titles, routines, or roles to cling to, I saw myself more clearly. With both of my parents gone, I had to ask myself what I truly wanted – and whether my current path was still in integrity with who I was becoming. Nothing had impacted me more than grief. I was doing a lot of soul searching about my next career. In Bali, I stopped trying to fix myself. I started listening.

In very much Eat, Pray, Love style, I was sitting in meditation, and I felt a mysterious and unexpected invitation to become a hospital chaplain. It came so far out of left field that it felt almost comical at first. I was no longer religious and couldn't see myself as a minister – and yet, chaplaincy seemed like a way I could create meaning out of my pain. And despite all the time and effort I had invested into building a legal career, I could no longer ignore that it wasn't the life I wanted. Letting go of that identity was terrifying, but necessary – because something else was calling me.

Eventually, my family grew tired of constant travel. I craved stability and routine. Just before we left Singapore, I learned my cousin had suddenly died from a brain tumor. It felt like tearing stitches from a wound that had barely begun to close, exposing raw nerves to open air again. I had thought this journey abroad would complete my mourning, like excising the last trace of an infection. But grief isn't something that can be cleanly removed – it grafts itself onto you, fusing with the tissue of your life.

Back in Seattle, we lived in a cohousing apartment, finding comfort in rooftop gardens, strawberries, and yoga. I felt like the 1980s Nickelodeon character "Inside-Out Boy" – vulnerable and strange, with my heart on the outside. My friends didn't know what to say.

Grief was now the lens with which I viewed the world. It had brought me to a threshold, forcing me into initiating a new life. I hoped that, as a chaplain, I could find a deeper sense of purpose.

Seeking guidance about my next steps, I spoke to chaplains about their path. They all said: do Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a rigorous, supervised training program that combines spiritual care, personal reflection, and peer feedback – most often in a hospital setting. Because my husband had a remote job, we moved again – this time to New Orleans, a place we had long dreamed of living. I began CPE at Ochsner Medical Center in January 2020.

My early rotations – pediatrics, oncology, neurology – initially terrified me. They mirrored the very places where I had experienced loss: I had miscarried, lost my mother to cancer, and watched her on a ventilator. I wasn't sure I could bear being near those rooms again. But as I sat with others at their own edge, I realized something: I had already been there. My worst had already happened. I no longer needed to fear it. That clarity allowed me to stay present with others in their pain. And with time, I also saw that my grief was just one kind of story. Patients and their families were carrying burdens of all shapes and scales. This gave me perspective, and a deeper humility and gratitude for what I had survived – and what I was now able to witness.

Grief can come from many things not just death. A painful breakup, a scary diagnosis, lost dreams, things we didn't get in our childhoods, sadness over the environment, or general disillusionment. What mattered was the hurt the person in front of me was experiencing. Grief in all its forms is worthy of care.

Just as I was learning to sit with my own grief, alongside the patients and families I was getting to know in the hospital, little did I know the whole world was about to shift.

Three months into my CPE training, the pandemic hit. The hospital locked down. All elective activities were put on hold and my training paused. I stayed home with my five-year-old, unsure if or when I'd return to the hospital.

The world was gripped in collective grief. Together, we had suddenly crossed over a threshold where the old rules no longer applied.

Over time, our sense of self began to shift. Parents became teachers. Bedrooms became offices. Celebrations were cancelled or reimaged. We lost community rituals, physical connection, and shared rhythms of daily life. But we lost something deeper, too – our collective sense of cohesion, trust, and care. Public health guidance became politicized. Masks became symbols of division. Science was debated. And the administration's response – rife with denial, minimization, and mixed messaging – only deepened the fractures. When we most needed collective clarity and care, we received confusion and disregard.

For those already living at the margins, these failures were catastrophic. Pandemic policies magnified every pre-existing inequity – across race, class, ability, and geography, creating a simmering caldron beneath the surface, that eventually exploded into movements like Black Lives Matter. Access to healthcare, food, education, and safety splintered along familiar fault lines. Essential workers, disproportionately Black, brown, and poor, were both celebrated and sacrificed.

Our collective identity was radically altered. We were not who we had been, and we could not go back. We were grieving not only deaths but the unraveling of a social fabric that had already been threadbare for so many.

Still, there was beauty born out of darkness. Neighbors showed up for each other. Mutual aid networks flourished. Artists sang from balconies. People danced in driveways. We adopted pets, baked bread, gathered online, planted gardens, and remembered how much we needed each other. Murals bloomed across boarded-up storefronts – testimonies of loss, hope, and resilience that still remain. These acts of resistance and care helped us remember who we really were.

I got to visit the George Floyd memorial in Minnesota, where blocks of city streets had been transformed by flowers, art, and sacred offerings. The community occupied that space – not just as protest, but as ritual. It was one of the most profound, collective grief expressions I've ever

witnessed. Similarly, in Seattle, the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) became another sacred space – a messy, imperfect, but powerful reimagining of what life in community could be. These were not just moments of uprising – they were portals. In the dark, the eye began to see.

Out of our collective crucible of suffering, something else emerged. Though we were cracked open by loss, we were also invited into deeper connection – with each other, with justice, and with our shared humanity. The grief exposed the fractures in our systems and our psyches, but it also revealed our capacity for care, creativity, and imagination.

These sacred disruptions didn't just mark resistance – they marked the beginning of something we couldn't unsee. We came to understand that the old way was gone for good. We carry forward not what was, but what has been revealed in the fire. What remains is a new shape of being, one we must tend together. We know that we are not meant to walk it alone. We need each other to find our way home.

Today, we find ourselves under the same administration, but this time they've returned emboldened, threatening to further dismantle the fragile protections of our shared humanity. In this moment, I believe one of the most powerful acts of resistance is to grieve – and to do so in community.

Grief is political, too. It's a mirror that shows us where systems fail to honor human life. To grieve publicly, together, is to say: what happened mattered. What is happening still matters.

Not everyone can take a sabbatical or embark on a cross-country journey – but we all deserve space to grieve. Whether it's an afternoon to yourself, a conversation with a trusted friend, or five quiet minutes to feel what's been pushed aside, tending to grief is not a luxury. It's a necessity.

Here's what I've learned grief needs in order to transform:

Slowing Down. Many of you may be thinking that you don't have the time, space, or resources for grief work. This speaks volumes about how grief-averse and unsupportive our culture is. The truth is: everyone deserves space to tend to their grief. Grief work is hard and demanding. It requires us to gently confront our vulnerability and our shadows. And, it requires sticking with it. Slowing down can look like going to regular therapy, spiritual direction, or going to a beautiful space with a friend or alone with the intention to deeply share what's really going on.

Grief asks us to listen to ourselves. I have found writing to be a wonderful way to connect with my inner voice. One practice I've done in community that has been very powerful is called "writing as a sacred practice." Here's how it works: You can do this alone or in a group. (Hint: it's more powerful if you do it in a group.) Start with a poem from which you can extract a prompt. For instance, I love *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life* by Dawna Markova. From the poem, extract a journal prompt or two such as "I fear..." or "I choose..." Then, write without stopping for at least 5 minutes with no attention to grammar or spelling and with complete disregard for any

critical voice that comes up in the process. If you get stuck, just repeat writing the prompt until you can pick it back up again. When the time is complete, read what you wrote out loud, preferably to another human who will compassionately and lovingly witness you. No fixing or advice giving allowed. Give yourself space to absorb what comes up by allowing silence between shares. If you're moved, you can do a second round of writing for 10 minutes followed by a second round of sharing. This is a vulnerable practice and also a powerful one.

Move your body. Grief lives in the body. If it doesn't move it can become chronic pain, illness, or depression. My yoga mat has become a sacred place for me as has dance. Song circles are another potent tool to move grief. Locally Laurence Cole has been recording songs and leading circles for years. Laughter is also a powerful medicine. I took to watching standup comedy and satire. Science shows that deep belly laughter releases endorphins, reduces stress hormones like cortisol, and activates the parasympathetic nervous system – making it one of the body's most natural tools for emotional regulation and healing. Perhaps for you, you commit to walking every day, hiking, or watching more comedy.

Grief needs beauty. Mourning can make things feel especially bleak and it can also awaken us to the smallest and most simple pleasures. I like to have a fresh bouquet of flowers in my home to bring fragrance, color, and a reminder that I should enjoy life in the moment. Consider things that make you linger, that bring a smile to your face, and that remind you of your own and humanity's goodness. Surround yourself with these things. They will provide stamina in the darkness.

Engage in meaningful rituals. A ritual is anything done with intention. A cup of tea in silence. Lighting a candle for someone you love and thinking of a happy memory. Writing down what hurts. Saying a prayer or casting a spell. These small, or sometimes large, gestures help us mark what matters, honor what hurts, and foster renewal. This is a form of soul maintenance. Need some guidance about how to create a ritual or ceremony? Be Ceremonial provides an online and app-based clearinghouse of accessible tools to help you design a ritual to mark any life occasion. They offer lots of free content as well as an easy-to-use ritual builder for a nominal fee.

Grief needs other people to transform. Perhaps you engage in a support group, circle work, a deep listening circle, or something like that. The key is to witness and be witnessed. One of the most profound ways I have engaged in this is through grief rituals, which combine all of these elements in one place. If you want to learn more, there is a movement of people who are doing grief ritual work from all over the world. The effort is to help us “re-member,” that is, bring ourselves back into wholeness. There are a number of communities leading grief rituals. Locally, Sacred Groves is a community on Bainbridge Island that holds grief rituals of this type, typically over a weekend. Similarly, the Healing at the Roots Team is offering a number of grief rituals including a Grieving White Supremacy cohort to process the inherited trauma for people of European descent.

Grief is inevitable. But when we tend to it with intention, it becomes alchemical – it transforms us, deepens us, and forges a more connected life.

This is not the end of the story. It's a sacred beginning.

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