

HOW TO GRIEVE: PAIN, GRATITUDE, & PEACE

The following is an excerpt from the book [Bearing the Unbearable](#) by Joanne Cacciatore.

To love deeply is one of life's most profound gifts, and the loss of a loved one is one of life's most profound tragedies. That they can happen simultaneously, and that we somehow manage to, one day, find even a morsel of joy in our hearts again, is profoundly and wonderfully mysterious.

Yet our grief-phobic culture numbs us to this. "Just think happy thoughts!" it says. "You can choose to be happy!"

The "pursuit of happiness" is enshrined in no lesser place than the U.S. Constitution. But what if we have this all wrong?

Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of the seminal book *Man's Search for Meaning*, cautioned us about pursuing happiness. He said that we cannot chase happiness and expect that we will attain it. Happiness can only arise as a byproduct of a life devoted to the service of others—a view that undermines the very foundation upon which the happiness-peddlers have built their platform.

There is an enormous hidden cost for us, as humans, to this relentless obsession with happiness: we lose our willingness and ability to be vulnerable, and we forfeit our connection to self, other, and the natural world—and most especially to our honest, authentic, legitimate grief.

The mischaracterization of grief as abnormal is pervasive. Some mental health providers claim to possess a special treatment for grief. Some physicians and psychiatrists will prescribe medications to tame grief. Some life coaches claim they can "cure" grief in less than three sessions. Even some spiritual leaders today promote the prosperity gospel by equating grief to self-pity and suggesting that we can exchange trust in God for our authentic experiences of loss.

All of this rests precariously on the dualistic certainty that feeling sad and being happy always and inevitably oppose each other. But is this really so?

I met a woman last year who lost her sixteen-year-old son to cancer. She told me that she feels such tremendous loss in his absence that living actually hurts—a feeling to which I can directly relate. As we began our work together, though, she also told me that she was beginning to feel, at the very same time, a remarkable sense of gratitude for every second she'd spent with him.

For some, it may seem strange to speak of feeling grief and gratitude simultaneously.

For others, if we can set aside the pursuit-of-happiness zeitgeist, this is unadulterated truth.

I assert that being happy does not mean we do not feel pain or grief or sadness—successively or, often, simultaneously. Sorrow and contentment, grief and beauty, longing and surrender coexist in the realm of sameness. This is called the unity of opposites, and it liberates us from a myopic, dualistic view of our emotions as either/or.

We are not either happy or sad. We are not either grieving or grateful. We are not either content or despairing. We are both/and.

In early grief, it is hard if not impossible to imagine ever being happy again, and yet, slowly, moments in touch with joy accrue by seconds and minutes and, later, hours or even days of contentment. Gradually, we regain the capacity to feel joyful, and we feel this in the same space as grieving. Even in moments of joy or lightness, we still know grief—because there is always this ongoing longing for our loved one, for their voice, for their hug, for their touch, for their simple presence. We may also feel grateful for what we have even as we experience despair over what we've lost.

It's so easy to buy into the lies our death-denying culture sells about the pursuit of happiness. And when we do, we find ourselves decrying and resisting painful emotions.

Much of the work I do with those grieving is devoted to counteracting this message, shifting an either/or understanding to a more accepting, nondualistic one.

Beauty and pain coexist. But when we are in the early phases of grieving, in order to eventually see beauty in the world again, we must first feel and inhabit our pain. As we do this work, we begin to notice how we move in and out of these seemingly binary states. We needn't eschew grief to be happy, and we needn't decry happiness in order to feel grief. This is a trap of the dualistic mind, and it is life-limiting rather than life-affirming.

Any joy I experience throughout life is not contingent on things going my way, on having no losses, no disappointments, and no (more) deaths. Most important, it's not dependent on forbidding grief to come and go as I know it will for the entire duration of my own life.

Living into this means accepting whatever we feel, moment by moment, without trying to change it. In this way, we gradually come to experience a peace with what truly is.