

## CHAPTER FOUR

# The First Step in Finding Meaning

In the depths of winter, I finally learned  
that within me lay an invincible summer.

—Albert Camus

The first step in finding meaning is the fifth stage of grief: acceptance. We don't like loss. We will never be okay with it, but we must accept it, even in its brutality and, in time, acknowledge the reality of it.

Acceptance doesn't happen all at once. You accept *some* of the reality that your loved one is gone when you make arrangements at the funeral home. But the acceptance is only partial. The death still isn't real to you. You'll be cycling back and forth between the various stages of grief for some time to come, perhaps spending long months in one stage, only brief

days in another. Acceptance grows slowly in us.

In the first months after my son's death, I stood over his grave and yelled, "Is this going to be the rest of my life, standing over your grave?" I turned to the skies in search of God and asked, "How could you let an accident like this happen?" I was traumatized, grief-stricken, and in a rage.

In my mind I fast-forwarded to images of years to come, picturing myself stuck forever in that moment, my son David still missing, my pain never-ending. I kept my gaze on the heavens, walking back and forth as I said, "Really, David? Really, God? This is going to be it?"

That is what acceptance looked like for me early on. I visited David's grave and I accepted that he was dead. My limited acceptance was only because I saw his body go into the ground. Otherwise, I couldn't believe he was gone. But that early acceptance was also mixed with anger, and in my anger I thought my pain would always be that enormous.

Three years later, the scene looked very different. I lay quietly at David's grave, looking

down at the grass and up to the heavens and saying, “This is it, David. This is our life.” For me, it was a moment of deep acceptance. With a lot of help and support, I’d moved beyond anger and found some peace.

To find that peace, we cannot skip over the challenging stages of acceptance. It’s not unusual for me to see people early on in their grief trying to jump into meaning prematurely. They feel a temporary rush of purpose. Perhaps they’re speaking out about a cause that was important to their loved one, or they’re starting a foundation. Or raising awareness about the circumstances of their loved one’s death. I often see these people a year later, after they have given the speeches or started their foundations, when they find themselves newly overwhelmed with grief. Often they will sound like I did early on at David’s grave. “So this is going to be my life now? Giving speeches and running a foundation? That’s it?”

They have to recalibrate their grief. I tell them, “I’m so glad you were able to move forward so fast and find so much meaning, but you might need to go back and revisit some of the earlier stages, like anger or acceptance or

both.”

For most of us, the first step in making meaning out of loss is fully experiencing all the stages of grief, which means feeling the depths of pain and taking the time to live there for a while. When we have lived in that painful reality, we can begin to find a more peaceful place of acceptance and meaning can start to firmly put down its roots. In other situations we are slowly finding the acceptance, but having a hard time leaving those painful moments.

In my workshops I ask people to write down what parts of their loved ones’ deaths they have accepted and what parts they haven’t. This exercise guides them to the areas of their grief that have not yet been resolved. It leads them to the feelings that still need to be expressed. That is where their work and healing lie—in those feelings.

I love the quote, “If I had my life to live over again, I would find you sooner so that I could love you longer.” Whoever wrote it wrote from a place of acceptance, an understanding of the inevitability of death.

I was sitting with a grieving woman who

was telling me how painful her life was without her husband. I listened patiently and recognized the pain she was feeling in the moment, but I was listening for something else. She looked at me in tears and said, “This pain will never end.” When I hear this from a person in grief, I understand why she is suffering so deeply.

“Your pain will not always be like this,” I told her. “It will change.” This is a message that the grieving need to hear, and in the moment of saying it, I often observe a shift. The person looks up at me and says, “It will?” And he or she suddenly becomes lighter.

When I do this with someone in front of an audience, they are shocked at the visible change they witness. They want to know what I did that brought about the shift. It all goes back to letting the person know that while pain from loss is inevitable, suffering is optional. I tell the person, “I cannot take away your pain. It’s not my place to do that. Your pain is yours. It’s part of the love you feel. What I can do, however, is to let you know that if you look for meaning, your pain will change, your suffering will end.”

When the voice in someone’s mind is

whispering that they will always feel what they are feeling, now I can interrupt that voice by offering the possibility of a way out, a future—through meaning.

The mind can be cruel in grief. Concentration camp survivors often talk about the horrific situations they had to endure. The physical suffering was unbearable. But they also talk about the internal suffering they experienced when they were unable to picture a future. The torture of not knowing when they would get out, if ever, was even worse than their other tortures. The thought of a future without a release date deprived them of any sense of purpose and condemned them to the horrors of the present. But as long as you are alive you have a future, and the promise of release from your current pain.

To bring this idea to life, on the first day of retreats, I often ask people to write a letter to their past. They usually write something about how wonderful life was when their loved ones were still alive and how terrible it is without them. They write about past losses, the horrible wounds of yesterday, and all their losses.

On the second day, I ask them to write letters to their future selves. They write sympathy letters, such as, I'm sorry you still hurt so much. Then we talk about the fact that their future lives may be very different from what they have imagined. Hard as it is to understand this now, the future doesn't have to be—and probably won't be—the way they think it will be.

On the last day, I ask them to write another letter about the future they envision for themselves. I ask them to write in all caps on the top, MY FUTURE. Then I sit. They wait awkwardly for further instructions. I remain quiet until someone eventually asks, “Are you going to tell us what to write or give us some direction?”

“Sure,” I respond. “Look at your paper. What do you see?”

Someone shouts out, “A blank piece of paper.”

“*Yes That* is your future,” I say. “Blank. It isn't written yet. You are the writer. Not your past, not your losses, not death. But you. You are the creator of your future. Don't let your mind tell you otherwise. Your future is blank as

of now. As the saying goes, *Don't let your past dictate your future.*"

## The Meaning of Our Thoughts

How do our minds create the future? What role do your thoughts play in all of this? After loss, do you have any control over anything, much less your mind? Can you do anything to shape the meaning you attach to what has happened?

The answer is yes, you do have control. Your thoughts create meaning. Meaning guides the story in your mind, the story you tell yourself as well as the story you tell others. I'm healing versus I'm stuck. I will never live again versus I will live a life to honor my loved one.

I was in New York a few months after David died and saw a friend. I ran into him again last year after I had broken my arm in Australia. During that second visit, he said, "You are always wounded, first emotionally, now physically."

I said, "No, I'm always healing when I see you."

The story you tell yourself repeatedly



becomes your meaning. Just as the story I told myself for many years about the past—about my mother’s death—kept me imprisoned in pain, the story I began to tell myself from other points of view freed me. So, too, can the stories you tell yourself about the future help to free you from the pain you are feeling now.

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?

***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.

It happened because of something.

There was nothing I could have done.

My story is the saddest one.

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.