



**grieving
wholeheartedly**

**Bringing Healing
to Every Part of
Your Soul**

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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Grieving Wholeheartedly* by Dr. Audrey Davidheiser

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com

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Grieving

UNWANTED, YET UNAVOIDABLE



I HATE GRIEVING.

There. I said it.

A part of me did, actually. The part that abhors the tears I shed while writing this book.

But I am not the only one with parts. Your soul comes pre-packaged with them too. Have you noticed the maelstrom of reactions following your loss? Perhaps maintaining concentration has been hard, as your mind keeps slipping to memories of the deceased or fears about tomorrow. Your digestive system feels wonky. Reminders of your loss spur shame, guilt, perhaps even both. Maybe you avoid crying at all costs. These are some of the ways your parts might have expressed themselves.

Grief intrudes differently into our existence. Did you sense death's steady cadence as cancer colonized your sweetheart bit by bit? Or did the grave ambush someone you loved? My initiation to the world of grieving fit the latter category. On July 2, 2018, I waved goodbye to my parents as they boarded a jet to Jakarta, Indonesia, after spending their summer stateside.

My dad died less than two weeks later.

You will read about my shock and the deep sorrow that followed suit in later chapters. For now, it is enough to say his sudden departure shoved me into a surreal world. Sleep spurned me that first night. I dialed my mom three times instead, driven by the intense urge to hear her voice—the least I could do, given the thousands of miles tearing me from her embrace.

One thought kept looping back in between reliving memories of the last time I saw him: *I can't believe he's gone.*

Even when sleep eventually returned, I often awoke with a start. Fear fueled my dreams. Day and night I battled the dread that my mom's broken heart would soon finish her off.

Denial accompanied my dazed state. One day I spotted my father at the local hardware store. I ran through the aisles to glimpse him—but of course, it was just a random man with a similar build as his. Another day, I heard his footsteps by our bedroom. Except it was just my bittersweet memory from when my father had fetched us Saturday breakfast from the farmer's market.

His death disoriented me. I had always assumed my parents would grow old and retire together. Losing my father made me sad, but also mad: *How come others my age still have both their parents but I can't?*

I could not string *my dad* and *dead* in the same sentence for the first year after he passed. To do so would have cemented as reality the awful situation I loathed.

GRIEF'S INDIVIDUALIZED IMPACT

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross postulated grief as passing in five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹ Prior to her own death, however, Kübler-Ross clarified her position: “[The stages] were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat

packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss.”²

Even with her own admission, and even though the scientific community has debunked the stage theory of grief, many still cling to the stubborn belief that grieving progresses in a tidy trajectory.³ But prescribing the same neat steps for mourners everywhere is as realistic as restricting every Disneyland visitor to only a handful of rides, with a specific order to boot.

Truth is, many factors determine how we approach loss. Our psychological composition, faith tradition, family background, culture, and upbringing all play significant roles. Whether we have fully dealt with prior losses can also determine how our current grief fares. If we repressed or glossed over past losses, for example, the current emotional load might tip us over—which might then activate the impulse to get high, work overtime, super-spiritualize grief, or engage in other strategies to smother our emotions.

Our history with the deceased and circumstances around that death will also influence how we grieve. An abused teenager is unlikely to mourn her stepfather’s death; and if her mother was clueless about his harmful behavior, the mother’s grief might incite her to lash out at the teen for appearing aloof. The grandkids whose grandmother spoiled them before dementia took over might be wrecked with sorrow. But their mother—who quit her job to take care of her mom—might feel secretly relieved to be liberated from heavy caretaking responsibilities.

Regardless of how others do it, you are free to mourn in your own way. The same goes for each part of your soul.

UNPROCESSED GRIEF’S FATAL CONSEQUENCE

King Solomon once made an interesting comparison: “Love is as strong as death” (Song of Solomon 8:6). How strong? Death

can rip marriages apart, such as when parents blame each other after their child dies. When the deceased leaves a substantial will that is then contested, death can also pit family members against one another.

In the case of suicide, its imprint can be indelible in the soul of those psychologically close to the deceased. A suicide can deposit in survivors increased risks of killing themselves.⁴ This grim prediction proved true in my personal world. My husband, John, and I befriended a man who, as a young adult, discovered his mother's body after her suicide. This sensitive soul wound up with chronic depression and tried to mimic her exit strategy several times throughout his adulthood. He eventually took his own life in his late 70s.

Death is formidable.

What may be less obvious is the equally powerful potential of unprocessed grief. Consider Moses' story in the Old Testament for example. Numbers chapter 20 opens with the breaking news of Miriam's death. She was Moses' older sister who also rescued him from infanticide (Exodus 2:1-9). No doubt this childhood history hovered in Moses' mind when he learned about her passing. Her death must have affected him.

But did he have the space to grieve? Not if the rest of the clan could help it. They were too consumed by their own need to let Moses attend to his—much less slip him a sympathy card or home-cooked meal. Miriam died in an arid place, and no matter where the Israelites dug, they could not find a drop of water anywhere.

Out came the complaints.

Study the Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—and you will see there is nothing unusual about their response to this latest trial. The Israelites grumbled their way throughout the forty-year sojourn in the desolate wilderness. In a way, their discontentment is understandable. They were already saddled with the

generational trauma of being enslaved. Then they had to surrender the only home they knew—Egypt—for an endless trek across the vast desert day after day (after day). But to do so while dehydrated?

Ask anyone who has felt “hangry” and they might admit it: hunger can easily drive you to complain. And so can thirst. “My baby is *parched*, Moses. She’s been crying nonstop since our last camp, but there’s no oasis anywhere. She needs to drink!”

How Moses responded made the moment memorable. The Almighty had informed Moses to grab his staff, gather everyone around a giant rock, and speak to it. The inanimate object would then gush water (Numbers 20:7-8). But this transpired instead: “[Moses] and Aaron summoned the people to come and gather at the rock. ‘Listen, you rebels!’ he shouted. ‘Must we bring you water from this rock?’ Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the staff, and water gushed out. So the entire community and their livestock drank their fill” (Numbers 20:10-11 NLT).

Hallelujah! Problem solved.

But did you notice how the story diverged from God’s decree? God told Moses to *speak* to the rock; Moses *struck* it instead. Can’t you see Moses standing there, seething under the shadeless sun, swallowing raw grief because the people only care about themselves? No wonder he thwacked the rock in frustration.

But the man the Bible describes as “a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3) also *shouted* at the crowd. Humble people do not typically raise their voice. A humble man who feels overwhelmed, however, might.

File that tidbit away as we review what he said next. “Must we [as in Moses and Aaron] bring you water from this rock?”

Whoa, Moses. Did you just take credit for the miracle?

The turn of events provoked the Almighty. “But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me enough to

honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them” (Numbers 20:12).

Let’s zoom out of the dusty desert scene to reflect. Moses’ track record shows a consistent trend of applying patience to pacify his people’s demands (for instance, Exodus 14:10-14; Exodus 15:22-25; Exodus 16:1-8; Exodus 17:1-6; Numbers 11:1-3; and Numbers 14:1-20). Yet the one time he lost composure happened on the heels of his sister’s death.

Coincidence? Doubtful—and let me explain why.

Soon after Miriam died, Moses’ remaining sibling, Aaron, followed suit. Notice what happened next: “All the Israelites mourned for him thirty days” (Numbers 20:29). Yet, the Bible makes no similar mention following Miriam’s passing. There was no eulogy for her. No national day of mourning. No space for the masses—much less Moses—to mourn her departure.

I submit it was the lack of space to grieve the loss of his sister that drove Moses to disobey the Lord *and* steal his glory. God showed Moses his ways (Psalm 103:7) and talked to him in person (Exodus 33:11). He entrusted Moses with the Ten Commandments—twice (Exodus 19:20–20:17; Exodus 34:1-33). But neither Moses’ intimacy with God, nor his pivotal position in Judaism and Christianity alike, exempted Moses from the emotional task of mourning.

The man God handpicked to marshal his multitude into their destiny (Exodus 3:1–4:16) ended up missing his own—likely due to a death he did not fully mourn. If spiritual giants cannot afford to bypass grieving, neither can we.

GRIEVING BENEFITS YOU

Missing our destiny may be a steep price for skipping grief, but it is not the only one. There are also physical and emotional costs to consider.

Elyce Wakerman's father died from a heart attack when she was only 3. Her book *Father Loss* reveals how Wakerman appraised this early loss as affecting everything she did. Small wonder she felt compelled to study the impact of fatherlessness on daughters, whether because of death, divorce, or abandonment. Reflecting on the results of her pilot study, Wakerman concludes, "Unresolved grief may result in unexplainable sadness, defenses against emotional commitment, or the very serious condition of denying feelings altogether."⁵ Unacknowledged grief frequently appears as a chronic state of apathy.

But that is not all. Failure to process grief can also undermine health. According to professor Toni Miles, who completed a statewide survey of bereavement in Georgia in 2019, binge drinking increased in the bereaved individuals in her study.⁶ Miles cautioned how grief may cause mourners to neglect wearing seat belts, pick up their old smoking habit, or stop taking care of their medical needs.⁷

A scent, a melody, a specific time of day, something someone says—*anything* can trigger your grief. Please make room for your feelings when these tender moments materialize. Rather than avoiding them, how about viewing the loss in your life as an invitation to venture into your internal world, where emotions reside?

DIPPING INSIDE

What came up for you in this chapter? Jot down every thought, feeling, and sensation you noticed. For instance, if you resonated with the part of me that resented grieving, write it down. Reactions you note down in this section likely represent parts of your soul.

Now, consider the loss that brought you to this book. Are you noticing any resistance to grieving that loss? If so, listen to what the thought says and write it down fully.

Let the part of you that resists grieving know that you hear it.

Did you sense any response from the inside? For instance, you might sense an inaudible *thanks*. Jot it down too.

If there are any reactions to this chapter you have not written down, you can do it now.



From childhood until he left, my father always supported me (Jakarta, Indonesia)

Thank every part that showed up.

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