Lesson 6:
Surrendering to Grief: The Nature of Trauma

Reading:
Bearing the Unbearable
by Joanne Cacciatore
pages 137–145, 155-157
Bearing the Unbearable

Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief

Joanne Cacciatore, PhD

Foreword by Jeffrey B. Rubin, PhD

“A wise guide—intimate, tender, and fierce—reminding us what it means to fully love. This is a holy book, brimming with insight and compassion.”

—Francis Weller, author of The Wild Edge of Sorrow

“There are sentences in this luminous book that took my breath away. Dr. Jo meets the broken-hearted where we live: in an utterly transformed and transformational space.”

—Mirabai Starr, author of Caravan of No Despair

“This masterpiece is the greatest gift one could give to someone grieving or to the loved ones of the bereaved.”

—The Tattooed Buddha

If you love, you will grieve—and nothing is more mysteriously central to becoming fully human.

When a loved one dies, the pain of loss can feel unbearable—especially in the case of a traumatizing death that leaves us shouting, “NO!” with every fiber of our body. The process of grieving can feel wild and nonlinear—and often lasts for much longer than other people, the nonbereaved, tell us it should.

Organized into fifty-two short chapters, Bearing the Unbearable is a companion for life’s most difficult times, revealing how grief can open our hearts to connection, compassion, and the very essence of our shared humanity. Dr. Joanne Cacciatore—bereavement educator, researcher, Zen priest, and leading counselor in the field—accompanies us along the heartbreaking path of love, loss, and grief. Through moving stories of her encounters with grief over decades of supporting individuals, families, and communities—as well as her own experience with loss—Cacciatore opens a space to process, integrate, and deeply honor our grief.

“Poignant and heart-lifting. Bearing the Unbearable is for all those who have grieved, will grieve, or support others through bereavement.”

—Gabor Mate, M.D., author of In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts

Bearing the Unbearable

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What restraint or limit should there be to grief for one so dear?
—HORACE

In a single day recently, I received four emails from grievers around the world who have been harmed by ill-advised interventions aiming to fix grief.

From one grieving mom: “I started to cry and my therapist interrupted me and said there was no need to cry. She told me to start tapping on my face instead. I felt such shame for my tears.”

From another: “He said it had been too long and that because I still cried every day I should go to an inpatient unit for psychiatric disorders. I was tortured while I was there—nothing short of torture. I was strapped down when I didn’t want to take the medications. It was horror.”

And from a grieving husband: “The pastor told me that God didn’t want me to be sad anymore. And so the only way around my sadness was to drink.”

And yet another grieving mom shared how she is consistently met by coworkers who castigate her for keeping a photo of her child who died on her desk—because after four months it makes them uncomfortable and because she “needs to move on.” (I invited this mom to consider the possibility that it is their fear, not her inadequacy or inappropriateness, that is at issue here.)

On another day in March of 2013, I received a letter from Anne, an elderly woman whose grief went unseen by others:
Dear Dr. Joanne,

I cannot express just what your work means to me. You see, I lost my baby, Barbara on February 15th, 1966. Barbara lived just 16 hours—she was full-term, actually 11 days overdue. I was in the hospital, in labor for 37½ hours. I know they should have done a C-section, but I was a clinic patient and was told all 5 doctors had to agree and they could not get all 5 together. My husband and I were young, knew no better, and in those days, more than trusted a doctor’s word. There were no bereavement groups. I had asked for a priest, as this was a Catholic hospital, yet no one ever came to try to help me through this horror. When communion was distributed, we had to go into the hallway.

I was so torn from the stitches of a breech birth, could barely walk also from the weakness. I went into deep, deep inconsolable grief, and I was so lonely. No one would talk about her. I had another child, almost 3, to take care of and hold and love, but it did not help my loneliness.

By September, my husband finally took me to the doctor, who put me on antidepressants that made my body feel so heavy, I could barely lift my head, much less take care of my little girl. And she herself was going through a terrible time as she was told she had a baby sister, and then had to be told the baby was ill, could not come home, and finally that she went to heaven. No three-year-old could comprehend this.

I have never gotten over my loss, even all these years later. My arms still feel so empty, and I never got to see Barbara. In my mind, I picture her either in the room with tubes and machines or in a tiny white casket, dressed in her christening outfit that my brother bought for her.

When I heard you say that babies’ lives matter, and that my grief is real and valid and that someone should have helped me back then, I cried—as I knew I’d found the place to talk, and
For nearly five decades, Anne’s suffering was shrouded in silence.

Some of the suffering was worthy and necessary: the grief of losing her second child, Barbara, and what that would do to the entire family system.

Much of the suffering, though, was unnecessary: the kind of suffering created by her experience with people who passively acquiesced to a system that promulgated evasion and fear instead of approaching and love.

Grief demands to be seen and felt—and when we see it and feel it, grief will break our hearts open into sweeping expansion.

Anne, after forty-seven years, was finally able to come back to herself—restored to her basic human right to grieve—but she needed others, as do we all, to help carry the burden of surrender.

We need others to remember with us.
We need compassion.
We need empathy.
We need to find within us the courage to slowly stretch and strengthen our grief-bearing muscles so that one day, we are better able to cope with grief’s weight and, perhaps, one day, to help another.

Be skeptical of the advice you internalize.

Find those who are willing to join you and walk with you nonjudgmentally.

Steer clear of those who claim to have a cure for your grief.

Surround yourself instead with those who admit they have no answers but who will enter into the realm of unknowing with you.

Seek others doing real soul work and join hands with them, your tribe.

Listen deeply and you will recognize other citizens of the country of sorrow.

They are many, and they are beautiful.
The pain is there; when you close one door on it, it knocks to come in somewhere else.

—IRVIN D. YALOM

The word *surrender* means to give back something or yield ourselves over to something. In the context of grieving, we give ourselves over to grief.

Anything that takes us from our routine of life into the sacred space of intentional grief can be part of a surrendering practice. This may mean revisiting a support group; it may mean retelling our story again and again, focusing on the associated feelings rather than facts during each narration; and it may mean writing out our story of love and grief every few months or years—and seeing how it may start to change or grow.

The inner perspective seeks birthing—it must be outwardly borne and witnessed—and the outer perspective seeks to be internalized and integrated.

In my own case, while some details of Cheyenne’s death in 1994 remain constant, the qualitative aspects of her death have shifted dramatically for me. Intentionally revisiting my own story of loss is one way I give myself back, surrendering, to each revision.

Finding specific words for our present-moment experiences of the loss can also be helpful.

Glenn, a man who had lost his thirty-seven-year-old wife, Julie, to a motor vehicle accident, had difficulty expressing his feelings. He
frequently used the same four adjectives to describe how he felt: *sad, angry, confused, and lost*. It had been about two years since Julie’s death when we started meeting.

He said he was growing weary of hearing his story, hearing it sounding the same—over and over. So I invited him to carefully consider the words he chose to describe his feelings. Glenn would take one night a week to find more specific words better suited to the particular emotion arising in the moment.

One week, *anger* became “fire in the pit of my belly” and *sadness* became “feeling as if someone reached into my chest and pulled out my heart.” As we began to work with the specific feelings, as Glenn began to give himself over to each unfolding moment, he noticed the capaciousness of his emotions.

He began to tell the story of “date night” with Julie and—while he often cried—he also started to realize a bottomless depth of gratitude for their time together, even though far too limited. Glenn had previously believed any “good” feelings that might arise were a betrayal of Julie. Yet through keeping the “adjective journal,” he realized that, rather than being mutually exclusive, the “good” feelings coexisted with the painful ones. His feelings seemed to flow more with this practice—even the feelings of guilt for having survived her, which were there whether or not he was awake to them.

Many bereaved people struggle with issues of guilt and shame. This is particularly true in cases of traumatic grief and, especially, when a child dies or when one person is directly responsible for another person’s death.

Just the process of staying present with shame and guilt in a safe space can help to neutralize those emotions’ potency. In such a place, we can abandon the need to judge feelings as *right* or *wrong* or *good* or *bad*.

This alone has the power to diffuse and dilute them.
Alexandra was responsible for the death of her only child, Maggie. I met her two years after Maggie’s death.

She had become a master of disguise, always pretending to be happy—which meant not remembering Maggie. She had become a kind of “avoidance ninja.” It’s easy to see why she felt she had to: Maggie had died as a result of head trauma after Alexandra had lost hold of a television she had been trying to move. Alexandra hadn’t realized that Maggie was in the room with her.

Our work together began when Alexandra realized she’d been drinking too much and needed help. She would frequently lament the role she had played in her child’s death, and yet, when she would speak with others about her feelings, they dismissed her guilt, urging her to forgive herself or not to think about it.

They denied what Alexandra knew to be a core truth: though not intentional, Alexandra’s actions had indeed caused Maggie’s death, and Alexandra needed a safe place to talk about her guilt and shame.

Since she could not find that safe place, she stopped talking about it altogether. She grew weary of the knee-jerk reactions she got from others: “Don’t blame yourself” or “You shouldn’t feel guilty” or “She wouldn’t want you to be sad” or “Don’t cry, it’ll be okay.” While these messages came to her under the guise of sympathy, to Alexandra they felt dishonest, coercive, and self-serving. She felt invalidated rather than seen. What she longed for was a refuge for her darkest moments, a witness for the most agonizing aspects of grief, which were still pleading for a safe place to be seen.

She told me that she didn’t want someone to help her feel less guilty.* She didn’t want someone to help her feel less despair. She didn’t want someone to help her find happiness.

And this was a good fit for the kind of work I do. I don’t help people feel good. I help people feel: without judgment, without trying to change anything, without averting my gaze. We would spend many hours together with her shame and guilt, both of which we
consciously welcomed during our work together. Such guests needed to be given a place to be accepted, and I sensed Alexandra’s need for some expression or expiation. She was now able to share those feelings safely—and in so doing she sought atonement and a way to speak of her contrition to Maggie.

_It was fifteen years earlier when my own sense of failure—my own guilt and shame—sent me seeking absolution. My daughter had been dead for more than a year. In a desperate moment, I sat on the floor with a black wire-bound notebook and began writing to her: Dear Cheyenne, I started, as tears flowed. I put the notebook down and lay limply on the carpet. I started again. Dear Cheyenne, I am so sorry, baby. I am so, so, so sorry. I would go on to write four pages of I’m so sorry followed by confessions of my wrongdoings—“wrong” thoughts (like “I should have known you were dying”) and “wrong” feelings (like “I shouldn’t be feeling these things”). I would end asking her forgiveness: Please, baby, please, forgive me. I would give my life for you. Please, forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you. I will always love you. I’m so sorry, so very sorry. Always.—Mommy._

It took me quite a while to finish that letter—and it was excruciating. I wept. I waited and read the letter again. I wept more. It had been awhile since I’d cried like that—a good marathon cry. It hurt, and it felt good.

Then I got still, pausing with heart turned inward, and waited. In the gap between breaths something very interesting happened.

I opened the notebook, grabbed the pen, and began free writing, writing rapidly and without thinking beforehand. What I wrote started like this: _Dear Mommy_—and then, in her little girl voice, Cheyenne wrote back to me her own affirmation of love, granting forgiveness even though I was not yet willing to forgive myself.

To say this was an extraordinary moment would not be enough.

It did not assuage my guilt and shame, but it shifted something in
my mother’s heart, maybe in my soul. It was a pivotal moment for me in my relationship to Cheyenne—and to my grief.

While Alexandra was never able to return the letter from Maggie to her, it was an important and emotional exercise: apologizing, asking forgiveness, and expressing an undying love that endures beyond this world.
Waves of Grief

Between grief and nothing, I will take grief.
—WILLIAM FAULKNER

I made efforts to remember Cheyenne, again and again. And even years after her death, remembering her comes with re-grieving. So I found myself, at times, resisting doing that work. I had many stories to justify that resistance: I was too busy. I had deadlines to meet. I had waves to catch with my surfboard.

One summer, I was at Moonlight Beach surfing during a red tide. Despite warnings from more skilled surfers, I attempted to ride the waves, but the tide beat me—repeatedly, dangerously.

When I got back to the beach, I reflected on what surfing had taught me about grief.

There were times I felt like I was catapulted into the dark, deep water where waves of pain crashed down upon me relentlessly. Grief, like a powerful rip tide, pulled me into its black water and carried me, against my will, far from the familiar shore. I could no longer see my home, my life, or my self between the surges that hammered me. I fought for the slightest glimpse of sky.

The waves persisted.

They tumbled me, over and over and over, disorienting and confusing me. Deeper and deeper, the rip tide pulled me under water. I was gasping for air.

I fought the grief, but it was much stronger—I could not win.

Then grief whispered into my ear with a firm tenderness,
“Surrender—you won’t die from the pain.” And for a brief moment, I heeded. Surprised, I reached the surface for a desperate, pocket of air only to panic and resist again wrenching me back under the dark waters of grief that filled my lungs.

I knew I would not survive unless I surrendered.

And so I surrendered.

I relaxed into the tide, and it guided me to the surface, carrying me to shore—familiar, yet not—where it would release me.

Any surfer knows there is no other way to survive such a force of nature. The surfer’s mantra is just this: surrender to the wave.

So, too, it is with waves of grief: surrender to the wave. I entrusted myself to both the calm and raging motions of grief. I was patient with its unpredictability, patient with the bitter taste it left in my mouth, and in exchange, it was kinder to me. We became cautious comrades—and I found my way back home.

This was how I survived in those early months and years of grief.

I stopped questioning myself—my emotions, my tears, my thoughts, my rituals, my suffering—and I let it all be. I surrendered.

I no longer punished myself for my failure to complete grieving within the allotted three-month period. I relinquished the rehearsed smile and perfunctory joy. I acknowledged my sadness whenever I felt it. I could be, simply and genuinely, me.

This is the gift of surrender: a deepened sense of authenticity and trust in myself.

even these many years later, I am occasionally overtaken by the rip tide—and the sea. I perform our dance many times, over and over again.

I remember her and re-grieve many times, over and over again.

For me it was the rip tide that dragged me under and took away my breath; for another grieving woman it was a different kind of darkening: “I would feel this shadow, terrifying, come down, and I felt I couldn’t breathe. So I would push it away—never asking the shadow
what it wanted. I didn’t know it. It scared me—until I explored it and learned that it wasn’t as scary as I’d thought. I began to talk to the shadow, and it talked to me. And I realized I could handle it.”

When we are caught in a rip tide or overtaken by a shadow, we can trust that this moment will pass and we will regain the ability to breathe again—at least for a while.