Redeeming Loss

A Radically Different Approach to the Stresses of Grief

A Supplement to *Sacred Stress: A Radically Different Approach to Using Life's Challenges for Positive Change*

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Redeeming Loss:
A Radically Different Approach to the Stresses of Grief—A Supplement to Sacred Stress: A Radically Different Approach to Using Life's Challenges for Positive Change

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A Radically Different Approach to the Stresses of Grief

Novelist Sue Monk Kidd observed, "The sorry truth is you can walk your feet to blisters, walk till kingdom-come, and you will never outpace your grief."[1] When something we value is no longer available to us—either temporarily or permanently—grief is our natural response, typically accompanied by pain and sadness. Loss is inevitable for all of us, and no matter how big or small the loss, it usually arrives with varying degrees of stress. Ask anyone about losses in her life, and you are sure to get a long list of negative consequences. Not only does the grief itself add more stress, but it also exacerbates the stress you already had, causing manageable levels of stress to quickly rise to unmanageable levels. Most of us get overwhelmed by this bitter blend of stress and grief.

Our Bodies' Response to Loss

When we experience loss, the fight-or-flight response is triggered in our bodies. This response is wired into our brain because, as in the case of the loss of a loved one, our own survival is put at risk. When our prehistoric ancestors lost a family member, it reduced their odds of finding food and warding off threats. When we face loss in modern times, we also sense danger and the body mobilizes to fight or escape. The inherent problem with loss is that there is no enemy to fight or run away from. We are stimulated to take action, but because we cannot undo the loss, we cannot channel the energies of our emergency reaction.[2] Our bodies can get stuck for long periods of time in the fight-or-flight response. As a result of loss, we find ourselves under high levels of stress, unleashing hormones such as cortisol, which wreaks havoc on our immune systems; interferes with learning and memory; increases the risk of depression, mental illness, weight gain, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, and stroke; and lowers life expectancy. No wonder cortisol is considered by many health experts to be public health enemy number one.[3] Cortisol is designed for short-term bursts of energy, not long-term marinating.

Our bodies recognize the threat of losing someone or something we hold close. Just thinking about losing people, material items with sentimental value, or the place where we live or work can cause queasiness in our stomachs and pain in our hearts.

We all want our lives to be like fairy tales, ending with happily ever after, not tragedy and separation. (Imagine our disappointment if the story of Snow White and the seven dwarfs ended with the evil queen successfully cutting out Snow White's heart!) Losing a relationship, whether with a friend, spouse, parent, child, or pet, is the source of life's greatest pain. And each time we lose someone or

something we love, earlier losses resurface. Even more challenging, not every relationship we grieve was an easy one. Some losses leave us with loose ends or a sigh of relief. This grief is complicated. Other losses are filled with a heart-wrenching, life-robbing sorrow. The finality of loss makes it appear irredeemable.

Minimizing Mortality

Irrespective of the certainty of something or someone you love being taken away, we are pretty good at ignoring the inevitable. Research shows that only 30 percent of people actually discuss their wishes around dying.[4] It could be said that many North Americans are death or grief phobic. We have a fear of contemplating death and, by extension, of talking about grieving or suffering and sadness. It is culturally normative to avoid these areas or to try to mollify those who are grieving with pat statements or clichés in hopes of minimizing our own anxiety around grief and loss. Maybe our fantasy is if we don't talk about it, then the losses won't happen. But, despite our wishes to the contrary, we all eventually face the fact that we are finite, and our time on earth is limited.

Our society invests a lot of resources focusing on the positive while avoiding the negative. We are raised to believe success is found in acquiring things, not losing them. Gathering stuff equals winning and feeling good, while losing is associated with failure and feeling bad. We unquestioningly trust that we can find safety and security by holding on to our belongings—everything from material possessions to accomplishments and accolades. Somehow we hope filling the bank with deposits will limit the agony of withdrawals.

Gain and loss are not equal in our minds, however. Research shows the pain of losing is a much stronger motivator than the pleasure of winning. We need double the payoff just to risk losing something—to compensate for our fear of losing ten dollars we need to win twenty dollars.[5] We distinctly want to avoid losses if we can. Maybe this explains why in competitive environments like school, sports, or business, the hurt of losing the championship game, failing the test, or not sealing the deal lasts so much longer than the jubilation of winning the trophy. Clearly, the modern game plan for handling loss is to avoid it at all costs.

Types of Losses

Loss strongly affects all aspects of our being, including our emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions. But we can respond to it in ways that ultimately enhance our well-being. In our book *Sacred Stress: A Radically Different Approach to Using Life's Challenges for Positive Change*, we categorized the types of stress as generally (1) external, (2) internal, and (3) relational. To help you understand the different types of losses more deeply, we can use the same generalized categories. External losses are outside events, like losing your job, a home fire destroying all your belongings, or something as annoying as losing your cell phone. Internal losses are when aspects of the self are lost, such as changes in health, cognitive function, or our capacity to dream of a brighter future. Relational losses occur when interpersonal connections end. This includes divorce, the end of a friendship, pregnancy loss, or the death of a loved one. All three types of loss wash over us in waves of hurt, sadness, and hopelessness.

The three types of loss are often interwoven. For example, enduring a natural disaster and its aftermath (external) could cause a negative strain on your marriage, possibly leading to a breakdown

of the relationship (relational), which can lead to health issues (internal). We believe these separate categorizes can create a clearer framework and reduce confusion. Identifying who let us down—the world (external), another person (relational), or ourselves (internal)—provides a good starting point for figuring out the basis of the grief. Understanding the source of the loss also suggests where we need to go to find relief from our suffering. A map that contains both the start and finish of a journey provides structure to help mitigate the chaos and helplessness of loss. The great news is that although the source of the loss may vary, the destination—transforming the stress into a positive force for change—is the same for all three categories.

Relational Loss

Given the magnitude of this topic, we are going to focus on the most noticeable of losses: relational loss. The pain of disconnection from those we love is registered in the same part of our brain as physical pain. The amount of pain is often correlated with the degree of separation. If the loss is temporary and can be repaired, then the pain is typically short-lived. Couples who separate and later reconcile tend to experience relief of their loss symptoms. However, if the loss is permanent, without the hope of reconnection, then the pain is often intense and enduring.

All of us face the ultimate loss, which is our own death. Along the way, we are visited by many other smaller losses or deaths. Losing a grandparent or pet may have been some of our earliest experiences of death. Throughout our life we are shaped by the deaths around us, and how those we love interpret them for us. Each loss, in some ways, is preparing us for our own passing.

There is a finality to death that puts an end to a future and closes the chapter on a past that you made with another person, whether parent, child, spouse, or friend. An old way of being and seeing the world must be grieved and shed so one can start a new story. There is a painful rawness and vulnerability in starting over, especially when there was no advance warning. Left in shock, we must face the daunting task of trying to put back together the pieces of our broken world.

Scientific studies support the old adage that "you can die from a broken heart." The anguish is mental, physical, and spiritual. Parents who have lost children are often so devastated by the experience that it is hard to care for one another given the depths of each other's suffering. The child's death can be just the start of a series of losses, sometimes unfortunately including the death of the marriage. And researchers are consistently finding the death of a spouse substantially increases the likelihood of death in the surviving half of a pair.[6] For some death is a better option than facing the disconnection alone.

Relationships end through death or come about through other means, such as divorce. For many we counsel, recovering from divorce can be a significant source of stress. According to divorce expert Dr. Mark Dombeck, divorce triggers all sorts of disturbing and upsetting feelings, thoughts, and emotions, including "grief, loneliness, depression, despair, guilt, frustration, anxiety, anger, and devastation." Coping with changes in "financial, living, and social circumstances," while also facing the scary task of starting over and dating again, can be overwhelming. Dealing with anger and unfairness at your ex-spouse's "pettiness, abuse, or outright betrayal" adds to the mounting stress.[7] To make matters worse, there are often few places to go for support. Devoid of companionship, many people find themselves utterly alone to make sense of the failures. The cumulative effect of all these mounting losses can be a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in the face of the seeming impossibility of adjusting to this new, stressful life.

Overcoming the scars of divorce is difficult. Right after my (Heather's) divorce a decade ago, I felt like I had a scarlet letter *D* branded on my forehead or pinned on my jacket lapel. It was there for everyone to see. I was afraid to talk to men; I felt too raw and exposed. I was anxious at work, fearing my employer's disapproval. When I saw my daughter struggling to make adjustments, I felt like I had failed her as a parent. Looking in the mirror, I didn't like what I saw. The pain of rejection made me feel unwanted and discarded. Part of me died with the ending of my marriage. Some days it took every bit of energy and focus just to keep taking the next step forward on the long road of healing.

Coping with the pain of relational losses is an intimidating task. There is so much misinformation on what to do to survive the disconnection. Are we supposed to talk about it or not talk about it? Do we dwell on the past or focus on the future? How long do we grieve? The only consistent advice is "time will heal all wounds" (and for many this advice seems cruel and impossible). Yet before we discuss effective ways to manage and redeem the painful loss of close connections, we need to first recognize the responses that don't help and actually exacerbate our agony. Exploring some ineffective strategies enables us to identify the universal longings underneath unproductive coping mechanisms.

Unhealthy Ways of Coping: Affairs, Addictions, and Aggression

We often handle the intense hardships of external stresses and the physical pain of our own illness better than we deal with the grief of losing someone we hold dear. To manage the pain of relational loss, we typically try to avoid, deny, or minimize it—immersing ourselves in other things, whether it be living through our children, working compulsively, shopping to excess, overeating, oversleeping, developing a dependency on drugs or alcohol, or obsessing about some area of life we think we actually can control. Losing someone reminds us we are not in control of the universe; the loss both humbles and frightens us. It forces us to acknowledge our vulnerability and feel the ache of redefining our existence without the one who brought meaning to it in the past. For many people, facing the reality of life beyond loss can be devastating and disorienting.

Unfortunately, attempts to avoid the reality of loss and grief in our life stories don't work. In the short term, they provide relief but at a hefty price. We miss listening to what our grief is telling us. We spend more energy in trying to ignore or suppress our feelings of loss than we would if we faced them directly. The issues grief raises for us don't just disappear, and the energy depletion drains our batteries, making it more likely that we will continue avoiding those issues. Unprocessed pain and stress leads to unfortunate outcomes for us and those we love. Sooner rather than later, our coping choices become habits, and a cycle of dependence is underway. We soothe the pain of the past, demanding pleasure in the moment, at the cost of the future. Most of us never realize the disastrously high interest rates of this burdensome debt.

Let's take a look at a few ineffective strategies for handling loss: addictions, affairs, and aggression or hostility. Many psychotherapy models posit that these strategies are the result of a failure in our attachment systems. We are created to turn toward safe people in our lives to help us deal with stress together. The calm of other people rubs off on us, or as counselors put it, they help us co-regulate our emotions. Their calm can help make us calm. When a glitch prevents this mutual exchange, then we are left with limited ways to self-regulate and self-soothe. If we can't take our stressful problems to a safe relationship, then we are left alone to figure out a solution. In stressful times of loss, when our brains are flooded with stress chemicals and we don't know how to turn toward healthy attachment

figures, then in isolation our brains get hijacked by false attachments.[8] These temporary and inadequate attachments provide a fabricated sense of connection. Feeling the rush of an infatuation, the high of a stimulant, or the energy of rage momentarily fills the hole of the missing attachment. Loss of the real thing leads to dependency on a substitute.

Sadly, as these strategies continue to develop momentum, they actually impair our ability to get the real thing. Many therapists call these "competing attachments," because they take over the energy and vitality we might have put into relationships. The more stress triggers us to turn toward false substitutes for comfort, the further away we get from real support and the more likely our stress will deteriorate into further distress.

Addictions

An increasing number of studies over the last three decades suggest that half of the U.S. adult population suffers from various addictions, including tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, eating, gambling, Internet, love, sex, exercise, work, and shopping.[9] That is a lot of people trying to find ways to soothe themselves and avoid the pain of distress and loss. Spiritual teacher Richard Rohr defines addiction simply as a compulsion to do something that is not in your own best interest.[10] If the heart of addictions is trying to avoid bad feelings and temporarily replacing them with good feelings, then it makes sense that our society, which values feeling good and being comfortable, is so heavily addicted. We all expect fast results, and these addictive behaviors immediately boost our mood by tapping into our brain's reward center and releasing feel-good neurochemicals like dopamine. Given a choice between sitting with difficult, dark feelings and escaping into feeling better, taking the easy road of gratification seems to make sense.

Strong emotions are present for a reason; they are calling us to action. A devastating effect of numbing our emotions through addiction is that experiencing and sharing vulnerability becomes almost impossible. As we mask our emotional signals, they get harder to read, and thereby our ability to send out clear, direct messages is severely compromised. As any addiction advances, we disregard more and more important emotional messages as we focus our energies elsewhere. Comparing the brain scans of addicts to nonaddicts shows striking differences. For instance, drug use rewires our brain, decreasing the number of dopamine receptor sites and pruning the brain regions responsible for judgment, decision making, learning, and memory.[11] Taking a drug to escape our negative feelings actually changes the neural pathways in our brain, making it harder to regulate any emotions and fueling the need for the drug of choice to relieve our dysregulated feelings. Before long, the substituted attachment becomes our mistress, the one we to turn to for support. The more we turn away from real emotional connection with a loved one, the more we need the mistress. The more we need the mistress, the harder it is to face our losses.

Let's consider an example of how the cycle of addiction works. "Bill" recently lost his father and goes to the bar after work to blow off some steam. He drinks in an attempt to avoid his bleak feelings and numb his worries. This actually taps into the reward center of his brain, releasing endorphins and pleasurable feelings.[12] Drinking serves the dual purposes of temporarily avoiding negative feelings and increasing positive ones. No wonder it is so seductive. With each drink, Bill finds it easier to open up, laugh, and connect with his fellow drinkers. Bill is engaged, and the world is a better place. Bill's brain remembers this good feeling, and the promise of the alcohol to replace negativity with happiness

is reinforced with every drink consumed. As the neurons in Bill's brain that are experiencing the benefits of alcohol fire and wire together, the neural pathways craving this high only grow stronger. Every drink strengthens the pull toward the laughter in the bar.

So what are the crucial factors that drive addiction? The original research supporting popular perceptions of chemical dependency and the irresistibility of addictive drugs came about through experiments where rats were put into cages and given the option to take drugs. Once they tried a drug, the rats would keep taking the drugs until they died. Scientists concluded it is the powerful addictive nature of drugs that is so dangerous. Once we get a taste of drugs' seductive nature, we are hooked. Psychologist Bruce Alexander challenged this assumption because he believed there was a fundamental flaw in the original experiments: the rats studied were totally alone in the cages. Alexander redid the experiments, creating a "rat park," where the rats had their friends and family to socialize and play with. These "connected" rats refused the drug cocktails. Alexander concluded it's not the drugs that are the crucial factor in addiction but the environmental stressors and disconnection.[13]

There is no doubt that the emotional needs for comfort and connection fuel addictions. The darker emotions of depression, sadness, rejection, failure, and feeling unlovable, helplessness, or hopelessness are calling for a response. If we can't find healthy responses, we'll settle for unhealthy ones. That is how powerful these emotional signals are. As the old Irish saying goes, everyone focuses on the drink, but the real issue is the thirst. Often the needs of the person struggling are outside her conscious awareness. Part of the role of a counselor is to help a person unpack his thirst and what he is trying to compensate for with his behavior. We try to connect with the positive function the substances serve, instead of leading with what is wrong. Addictions, like all behavior, always make sense when we understand the context. Usually addictive behavior begins because it offers an easier path than having to face life, our past, our personal challenges, or an uncertain future. But when we experience the power of connection and responsiveness, the pull of the addiction wanes. It seems that, like rats, if we are connected we are much less likely to be addicted.

The goal of any effective treatment is to replace the bad stuff with good stuff. Addiction shows we are searching for love in all the wrong places, but still searching for love. Addiction is an illness resulting from the misdirected desire, deep dissatisfaction, and emptiness that emerge out of the shadowy lack of intimacy with ourselves, with others, with God, and with the present moment.[14] Understanding the root problem of addiction as a failure of connection allows us to add the missing ingredient: intimacy. It may feel counterintuitive, but learning to acknowledge, tolerate, and process the painful feelings of loss within a safe relationship is the key to healing. The incredible success of Alcoholics Anonymous is based on the same simple process of using the engine of connection to replace the artificial attachment with the real thing—intimacy with fellow addicts, family members, and a Higher Power. As we learn to turn away from our addictive objects and toward vulnerability and safe attachment figures, we discover comfort to soothe our loss. We learn how to turn our weakness into our greatest strength.

Affairs

Affairs are frequently rooted in mismanaged stress and grief. Seeking temporary relief in the novelty of a fling is a common way to try to feel better in the face of losses and everyday stress. It is estimated that roughly 30 to 60 percent of all married individuals will engage in infidelity at some point during their marriage.[15] These high numbers are similar to the percentage of people who are addicted to various

behaviors and substances, consistent with a culture constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. An affair provides an immediate lift out of the grind of everyday living. Even though part of us knows it is wrong, it feels good. Our need for the high of connection pulls us away from our spouse and into the arms of a substitute attachment.

There are as many reasons for infidelity as there are relationships; however, whether the motivator is disappointment or a midlife crisis, loss is often at the center of all of these reactions. Often the person who pursues intimacy with someone other than her partner is struggling in some way. It may involve accumulated disappointments within her marriage that she hasn't successfully addressed with her spouse. Perhaps the death of a parent or a child or the realization that her life and youth are swiftly passing leads her to seek something to make her feel alive again. She may act out of a desire for revenge, in part motivated by the grief and hurt of past mistreatment—or maybe the affair is simply a way to get attention.

Like addictions, affairs are most often a compensation for something missing in our lives. The combination of a lack of closeness in the marital bond and increased isolation due to loss creates the ideal conditions for extramarital excursions. On a brain level, the chemistry of affairs looks very similar to addictions. The older, emotional parts of our brains that are not concerned with rational decisions or moral choices simply react to various kinds of stimuli. When we are feeling down and no comfort is coming our way, our brains are more susceptible to craving a stimulant to improve how we feel. During the infatuation of an affair, high levels of dopamine in the pleasure center of the brain cause reactions very similar to an addict getting high on crack.[16]

Those who have an affair can use what drives it—their deepest longings for intimacy and the pleasurable feelings of connection—to channel misguided desires back to their true destination, their partner. Overcoming an addiction or affair is easier when the underlying needs are addressed in healthier ways. Stopping the maladaptive behaviors without figuring out how to attend to the wants driving the actions leads to continued distance and distress. Imagine a "dry drunk" or an unforgiving spouse, and you get an image of a failure to repair a relationship. The troublesome activities may be finished, but the opportunity to transform the pain into growth is lost.

In affairs, somehow one's primary attachment has become unsafe or intimacy too difficult, so it is easier to find something less intrusive, more numbing, thrilling, or distracting from the primary relationship, in which there may be pain, loneliness, and anger. A common justification for an affair is, "Everyone deserves to be happy." However when the happiness of the "I" becomes more important than the needs of the "we," then the bond is severely compromised. Affairs involve a major breach of trust. It takes two to hold a marriage together, but only one to break it apart. Many couples never recover, and the affair leads to divorce, yet another loss.

As marriage therapists who work frequently with infidelity, we face the task of helping couples realize two important truths: (1) the offending partner has broken a vow and needs to engage in a (sometimes tedious) process of rebuilding trust, and (2) the state of the couple's bond and their ability to meet each other's needs influences both the probability of an affair occurring and the possibility of it being repaired afterward. The betrayer is often more prone to an affair in the first place because he doesn't trust in the real power of vulnerability. To start the healing process, both spouses need to understand that trust doesn't develop through using words like *I'm sorry*. Rather, trust is a natural by-product of vulnerability. For example, if Bill engages in an affair with someone at the bar, then the key

to repairing trust with his wife, "Sally," is for Bill to vulnerably, empathetically feel Sally's pain. This is difficult to accomplish when Bill's shame gets triggered just thinking about the affair, causing him to focus on his own internal experience and blocking his ability to empathize with Sally. When Bill is overwhelmed with his own negative feelings, he can't be there for Sally. Bill can more easily avoid his own discomfort by dismissing Sally's questions about the affair, saying, "I've said I'm sorry multiple times, and there is nothing more I can do. So let's turn the page and not focus on the past." This protects him from feeling guilty and helpless around Sally's pain. Yet when Sally looks into Bill's defensive eyes, all she sees is that it's all about him; he can't see her. His inability to open up to Sally's pain means she is alone, which is not a good way to build trust.

With help Bill can learn to see Sally's questions as opportunities to build trust. Each question offers a chance for a shared experience. When the intrusive hurts and fears pop into Sally's head, she and Bill can choose to face them together because trust gets rebuilt as we allow someone to join us in our distress. Bill is empowered by realizing the antidote to the fear of betrayal is intimacy. When Bill keeps his focus on Sally's pain, the two start heading toward each other. Trust is built when Sally looks into Bill's eyes and sees her pain mirrored back. According to infidelity expert Dr. Shirley Glass, the single best indicator of whether or not a relationship will survive infidelity is the amount of empathy the betrayer feels for the betrayed's pain.[17] When Sally feels Bill's pain for her, she starts to believe he'll never want her to experience that pain again. In these powerful moments, the emotional bond is put back into its rightful primary position.

This process of repair is bolstered when the offender also experiences the power of receiving empathy. This may sound like a stretch; after all, the betrayer is guilty and deserves to feel bad. However, the reciprocal nature of vulnerability points us in a different direction: we learn to believe in the power of vulnerability by receiving it first.

After months of some success rebuilding trust by Bill doing his best to empathize with Sally's pain, the couple feel they hit a roadblock in moving forward. Bill's shame keeps derailing the healing process, preventing him from coming alongside Sally. Just when Sally's mounting resentment seems likely to exacerbate their distress, she comes up with an amazing move. Inspired by love, Sally realizes she has an opportunity to give Bill comfort in his worst darkness. Even though he wants to be left alone in his self-loathing because he believes he deserves to be punished, Sally says, "Bill, just because you did something terrible doesn't mean you deserve to be left alone in your torture. Being left alone is what got us into this mess, and I want to love you in your broken places." Sally reminds Bill of Rumi's wisdom, "Beyond the ideas of right doing and wrongdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."[18] Sally chooses to be with Bill in his field.

A powerful response can change lives. When Bill experiences the unconditional power of his vulnerability pulling his wife toward him to provide support and comfort, he feels loved in a totally new way. For the first time in his life, his ability to be loved isn't based on his successful performance but actually on his failure. Sally loves him even when he can't love himself. After this, his capacity to truly empathize with Sally skyrockets. Bill wants her to experience the profound impact of connection in dark places too. For Bill, empathy shifts from a placating tool used to give Sally what she supposedly wanted to a true gift of his heart, demonstrating his unwavering desire to be with her wherever she is.

Empathy isn't excusing bad behavior, but rather it is seeing the person who is struggling with the behavior. The research is clear that we do better struggling together. Expanding awareness of each

partner's unmet needs within a relationship empowers the couple to grow from adversity and discover healthier ways to respond to each other. To their pleasant surprise, some couples discover that an affair is the beginning of a turnaround as they use their pain and loss to grow closer together than ever before.

Aggression

Although many of us try to cope with loss through avoidance (addiction) and distraction (affairs), some of us move in the opposite direction, diving headlong into loss. We are consumed by thinking about the loss, and our world constricts. Constantly protesting the injustice of the loss, we obsessively ruminate on what-ifs. Anger becomes our go-to emotion, as if it is a sign of how much we loved the one lost. As we limit our emotional expression to anger, we become more critical and pessimistic. People find being around us and handling our negativity harder and harder. Anger pushes people away, increasing our need for additional anger to deal with the isolation. As with addictions and affairs, we can easily see the shortcomings of this strategy, yet hostility must have some value, given that so many of us turn to it for relief.

Hostility covers up the more vulnerable feelings of fear, pain, rejection, sadness, helplessness, and hopelessness. Anger is a powerful tool for blocking out hurt and providing us with energy to keep going. Raging at the drunk driver who killed your child channels the unbearable aching of a broken heart. Ironically, although the energy of anger is very different from avoidance, both offer a way to temporarily numb the pain. Another benefit of holding on to our anger is it allows us to feel like we are holding on to our loved one. Constantly thinking about what "should be different" ensures our loved one remains at the forefront of our minds. Maintaining a relentless focus allows the griever to feel a sense of control. Our self-righteous indignation offers the impression of having a direction and taking a stand. No wonder so many of us turn to anger in our moments of despair.

Unfortunately, any short-term emotion like anger that never turns off results in long-term mistrust of everyone involved. Even brief bursts of anger deplete our energy and cause distress. But unabated anger hardens our hearts and constricts our arteries. It actually decreases our chances of getting what we need the most—supportive responses from others. It is difficult to get close to and vulnerable with someone who is raging or seething. Our attempts at self-protection keep out the healing. Sorrow has the opposite effect of anger; it pulls people toward us. Sorrow softens, cleanses, and creates a space to embrace the sufferings of others.

As therapists who work with so many families impacted by war and terrorist attacks like 9/11, we witness different levels of coping with loss. Those clients who learn to work through their anger and get to their vulnerability rediscover what they are missing—the power of connection. However, the clients who never move past their anger become a shell of their former selves. They get stuck in a waking nightmare that consumes their lives.

Healthy Ways of Dealing with Loss

We are built for wholeness, yet loss reminds us this world is not a perfect place and that maybe it is even unsafe or indifferent to our plight. All grief affects how we define and see ourselves in the universe. The ground we are standing on has shifted, and the landscape around us is changed forever. Loss strikes the core of our safety and security, our most basic needs. When we are feeling unsafe, in an alien and potentially hostile place, we are under great distress, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

The question remains for all of us: How will we live with the loss? How do we weave new meaning out of the void left behind? What is required for these broken pieces to be made whole? How can we reframe our understanding of life and death? Given the seismic changes that loss brings into our lives, we all need space for healing when we are dealing with loss to make room for a new birth, a redefinition of our lives, and the new meaning and relationships that form.

Reframing Loss

It is normal to avoid grief and the stress it engenders, but avoidance is not healthy in the long term. Healing begins with the first counterintuitive step of facing the loss instead of turning away. To courageously face loss, we need an expanded definition of loss that includes its positive potential. As with all forms of stress, when we embrace our negative emotions as necessary and adaptive, then they don't turn into distress, ravaging our bodies. Changing our minds about loss changes our bodies' response to it. Recognizing loss as a life challenge that we all must face prepares us to find meaning in the loss. Using loss as motivation to live more fully channels the energy of loss toward constructive outcomes. As motivational speaker Suze Orman says, every loss can be reframed as a "gift you have been given so you can get on the right path to where you are meant to go, not to where you think you should have gone."[19]

Many people emerge stronger and more resilient after a loss. For example, after September 11, 2001, Lisa Beamer, whose husband, Todd, valiantly tried to reclaim control of United Flight 93 to prevent it from flying into the White House and instead sent it crashing in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, channeled her pain into creating the not-for-profit Heroic Choices foundation dedicated to helping traumatized children. Candy Lightner, who tragically lost her daughter to a drunk driver, directed her grief into organizing Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which helped change the world's attitude about drinking and driving. These women chose to move forward and turn their losses into a more enriched life. To realize we always have a choice about how we deal with loss empowers us to take control of an otherwise helpless situation. Even if sometimes we can't change the circumstances of our lives, we can change our attitude. Tom Bodett, author, voice actor, and radio host, said, "In school you are taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you are given a test that teaches you a lesson."[20] Those of us who look to embrace the lesson of loss learn to shift our perception and appreciate the essential function of loss.

Loss, strangely, can attune us to what is beautiful about existence even as it wounds us. In order to choose differently, we need first to be honest about how hard grief is and what path we are choosing to manage it. Healing happens gradually; each griever's path is unique. The process can't be fast-tracked. In counseling we see all types of strategies, ranging from massive avoidance to utter obsession. Either extreme gets in the way of acceptance and growth. We have stressed in our book the disadvantages of not listening to our emotional signals. The other end of the spectrum is also problematic. Some people become so consumed with the loss that they are unable to move on. They are like a pinball that stays stuck. The key is to find the right balance between remembering the past, living in the present, and taking the risk to find new meaning.

Finding meaning sounds like good advice, but how do you do so when your world is turned upside down? When we lose our sense of safety and security, we can easily choose to pull into our shell, like a turtle, to shut out a world that is prickly or to protest and rage against the unfairness. However, in the midst of the turmoil, we also find an opportunity to use the pain of loss as a catalyst to see our story differently. Many people talk about how their suffering clarified what is most important

in life. Our attention is refocused toward those we love, our faith, and our gratitude for the blessings we do have, despite what has been lost. Grievers who ponder the question, "What really matters to me at this point in my life?" seem to find motivation to reengage with life, rather than disappearing.

You may be wondering, "How do I get out from the darkness of despair into the light?" We invite you to consider hope. Hope is not a happy sentiment on a Hallmark card, but a weighty conviction to hold; it is an act of the will, a leap of faith. Hope is required to keep our sanity in the midst of the challenges and sufferings life brings. Often we cannot control the bad things that happen in our lives, but we can control our reactions. The current Dalai Lama says, "Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength. No matter what sort of difficulties or how painful the experience is, if we lose our hope, that is the real disaster."[21] Fortunately, hope is inside us and can't be taken from us by others. Holding on to hope enables us to find the positive in the midst of anguish. Grieving well means being willing to hope for a better tomorrow. It is risky, and it is a choice—not a feeling. We say not "I feel hopeful," but "I choose to hope that one day the loss will make more sense or the missing won't dominate all of every day. I choose hope."

A great example of the power of hope is seen in the story of Gordon Wilson, a simple Irish draper who was thrust onto the international stage after an IRA (Irish Republican Army) bomb exploded, burying him and his daughter under rubble. She reached out and took his hand, asking if he was OK. The last words she ever spoke were, "Daddy, I love you very much." Afterward, Wilson went on television and said, "I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge."[22] Wilson recognized the quality he missed the most in his daughter Marie was her capacity to love. By becoming a "peace campaigner" for Northern Ireland, Wilson showed the world that love is stronger than vengeance. He even visited the bombers in prison and told them he forgave them. Wilson became a symbol for reconciliation as he inspired those around him to choose hope over despair.

Gordon Wilson's decision to forgive highlights the importance of forgiveness in the grief process. When we are in emotional distress, many of us carry the burden of past harm and betrayal that we have not yet worked through. Wilson needed to forgive to move back onto the road of living. When we choose retaliation against those who wrong us, we get lost in bitterness, resentment, rage, and mistrust, all of which block healing. The key to understanding forgiveness is the realization that forgiving is in the best interests of the forgiver. The decision to forgive is a choice to let go. Forgiveness recognizes that not forgiving leaves one a prisoner to resentment.

Forgiveness is the starting point of healing, and reconciliation—the restoration of the relationship—is the end point. Many people never achieve reconciliation because the offender is not motivated to make amends. However, forgiveness is not dependent on reconciling. Even if trust is never repaired, we have a choice to replace the pain of a negative experience with the healing love of a positive response: forgiveness. Forgiveness generates incredible power when exercised. It releases us from our burdens, frees us, and enables us to risk loving again. Forgiveness taps into our universal longing to not hide behind our self-protection but instead to use our energies for connection with others. Even when the opponents of Wilson's peace initiatives vehemently rejected his bids for repair, Wilson chose to focus on the power of love to repel any resentment.

We do not intend to simply put a silver lining around the pain of loss. A positive spin does not come close to putting our shattered world back together. But we can use the pain as a way into connection and growth, because no matter how deep the grief, it is only part of a larger picture. Too often

an all-consuming pain prevents us from seeing the greater whole. In adopting a bigger framework, we make room to ultimately rediscover love, meaning, and faith. In grieving, we honor the power and legacy of the connection. The pain is simply the missing of something good, which reminds us of what matters, the love that was working before the loss. Even after a magnificent sunset fades into the night, we can continue to savor the experience. Recalling the goodness that preceded the pain allows room for both joy and sorrow, which helps us face the future with courage.

Embracing Loss

A wise counselor of mine (Heather's), in the years following my divorce, encouraged me, when the time was right, to let pain draw near and to experience it. I did not need to do it all day, every day, which would not have worked for me as a single working mother. Rather, she suggested, "As you can, set aside time and sit with it." As I followed her advice, the grip of grief lessened over time. Her words brought back life to places in my heart that had felt only death. I was becoming free from my avoidance of loss and able to tolerate feeling it in small doses as a way of working through it. I wasn't cured overnight. I still faced a long walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but there was a road to travel on, and I was able to accept and embrace this new part of my story. Life goes on for each of us, and so it did for me as well.

The key to transforming the pain of loss is embracing it instead of resisting its impact. People who grieve well find a way to surrender, accept, stay grounded, and come to terms with our finiteness and the givens of our existence: loss and suffering are parts of reality that no one can escape. We in North America have more capacity to distract ourselves by medicating or buying our way out of trouble than people in other cultures, and consequently, we can end up with fewer tools for dealing with suffering. We have less experience and don't value suffering or accept it in the way that other parts of the world do. Ayaan Hirsi Ali from Somalia tells her story in her book *Infidel: My Life*. She fled to Holland as a political refugee and became a member of the Dutch parliament, and then faced numerous death threats. When asked how she could live with the constant threat on her life, she replied, "It is like being diagnosed with a chronic disease. It may flare up and kill you, but it may not.… Where I grew up, death is a constant visitor. A virus, bacteria, a parasite; drought and famine; soldiers, and torturers; could bring it to anyone, any time.… Death is everywhere."[23] That awareness made her stronger when under threat because she had faced the inevitability of death. She had come to terms with the finiteness of life in a way that sounds foreign to many Westerners.

Philosophers, theologians, scientists, and therapists have weighed in on how to live in light of the inevitability of suffering. Great philosophers and theologians like Simone Weil and Søren Kierkegaard and psychiatrists such as Victor Frankl and Irvin Yalom have expounded on the importance of dealing with death. What they have discovered is a paradox. When we face our eventual death, we can then live and embrace life with greater purpose and joy. Some of us are aware of living with certain internal messages: "If only I were married, rich, out of school; if only I had a child, didn't have this disability; then everything would go my way." However, avoiding discovering joy and meaning in our present circumstances is not being fully alive. We must embrace the here and now to find meaning. We can deal with only what is; not the past, which we cannot change; nor the future, which hasn't arrived yet. *Now*, as many therapeutic models teach, is what matters and where we find power for hope and transformation. As we surrender by accepting the reality of death, we are freed up to live more fully.

Surrendering is not giving up, which is the way we usually understand the term *surrender*. Surrender is entering the present moment and what is right in front of us, fully and without resistance or attempts at control. In that sense, surrender is almost the exact opposite of giving up.[24]

A friend of Heather's from Ireland is part of a local band. She described playing at Irish parties, where they intermingle songs that make people dance and celebrate with mournful songs that can make people cry. People experience both joy and grief as part of a gathering, and because the songs are interspersed, the mood shifts throughout the evening. Music is a vehicle for people to tap into whatever part of the emotional spectrum they find themselves in at that time. The lesson from our friends across the pond is that both joy and grief are part of living, loving, and remembering. Both inform the other: the sadness makes the joy more poignant, and the joy makes the grief deeper.

We can think of this band's music when challenged by our own feelings of sadness or grief. If embraced, these emotions move through us like a wave coming onto the beach and receding. To be with the sorrow and allow tears that are bubbling up to flow is cathartic and freeing. Some people say, "If I start to cry, I'll never stop." That has never been the case for us or our clients. No matter how long the tears last, eventually the person's tension relaxes and they start breathing more deeply; a feeling of peace often emerges.

Leaning into our fear and hopelessness and finding ways to embrace and receive our feelings, we find hope in the place that once was terrifying. As we share with others our emotions about our illness, aging, or dying, they can come alongside us in support, comfort, and honesty about their own fears, sorrows, and questions. You may be providing others the permission to voice their own concerns about what your illness or dying will mean for them and their fears about their own experiences. Vulnerability is contagious; when shared it expands and provides rich and meaningful connection.

Vulnerability is the language of connection and we are profoundly impacted when relational bonds are lost. I (George) remember how the death of my older brother, Joey, to brain cancer a few years ago ripped my family apart. Watching as my family members' different survival strategies of hostility and avoidance collided broke my heart. When we needed each other the most, we turned against each other with blame and criticism. The siblings couldn't accept that our strong brother "Joe Cool" was gone, leaving behind three shattered kids. Sadly, reactivity won out over responsiveness. Family members cut each other off to protect their version of the truth. As my family splintered apart, the losses magnified. Listening to my mother cry about not being able to take any more grief crushed my spirit. All I could offer in return was to share in her pain.

I wish my family story had a better ending. Unfortunately, there are still divides. It takes two sides to reconcile, and the timing needs to be right. Fortunately, I know what will heal us when everyone is ready: by focusing on what unites us all—our love for Joey—we can come together around the common pain of losing that connection. I trust beyond a doubt that comforting each other in our vulnerability will create a bond that is much stronger than the triviality of defensiveness. There doesn't need to be one absolute truth; rather, there are many versions that each family member experienced. It is never too late to add the missing ingredient: relational engagement around the loss. Sharing the softer emotional signals brings connection, the actual bridge that most honors Joey's legacy.

Certain things in life can't be fixed, but connection is always available. From my (Heather's) past chaplaincy experience, I can tell you that working with the dying does paradoxically call you to live more in the present, take risks, and be grateful for each day and every breath. Most residents I worked

with in seven senior care facilities had innumerable losses—of home, family, friends, identity—and were aware that death was drawing near. I realized that to best serve them, I just needed to show up and be present, rather than know the right things to say or which books to quote. They didn't want advice, only my engagement. Although I buried a number of people whom I had grown to love, my residents taught me a number of life lessons for which I will be forever grateful: what really matters are one's presence, a smile, warmth, and the ability to connect.

What does a person in grief need to embrace his loss? He needs someone to listen and empathize with his loss. He needs validation for what he is feeling, whatever it is. All grief responses in the first six months after a loss are considered normal—like not sleeping, feeling numb, forgetting the loss, or imagining seeing someone you love. The grieving person does not need statements that make little of her loss, such as, "I know exactly how you are feeling," "I am sure it will all work out," or "God has a wonderful plan for your life." Instead, she needs a listening ear, a supportive smile, someone who is not trying to "fix" her but who gives her the space to be with whatever is going on in her heart. Being able to tell the story of the lost loved one is part of the journey of integrating her loss into the life of the surviving family.

Dealing with death, our own eventual death and those of others, sharpens our focus on what we believe about the meaning of life, the existence of God, and the nature of our spiritual journey. We ask different questions. We can live better in the face of death by acknowledging and embracing fear and what is real. Then we have a chance to experience the fullness of life—the love, sweetness, and forgiveness—on a deeper level. In the end, what matters most are the lives we touch. Embracing our losses is the surest way to transform the distress of grief into the eustress of gratitude.

Spirituality and Loss

For many people we have known, no matter what their faith background, loss is an opportunity to tap into a deeper spiritual connection. For some people, it may be the first time in their lives they have taken the time or felt the impetus to contemplate their relationship with God. Wrestling with existential matters often shifts our focus to search for something bigger than ourselves. In the despair of darkness, we discover light.

Ironically, by being around those who are dying, we often find life refreshment as we come into intimate contact with the Holy. We believe in the profound connection between the two planes of existence, this life and the life to come, and the palpable sense of the Holy in the space between, at death's door. There is life in death. After a year of trying to get pregnant, I (Heather) lost a child through miscarriage. With my pregnancy loss, I had to bury my dreams by saying good-bye to the child I would never comfort or cuddle. Still today, I sometimes find myself wondering what my baby girl's face would have looked like.

Many women have told me their miscarriages were the most profound losses they experienced, causing them to question God's goodness or existence. For me, the next seven years of trying to conceive were monthly battles with loss as I tried to keep hope alive. Everything in me wanted to give up, but somehow, by God's grace, I kept trying. Infertility work can be a roller-coaster ride of treatments, procedures, daily blood draws, drugs, and agonizing months of waiting for any positive news. Sometimes good news doesn't come, or at least not in the form we would hope. When my beautiful daughter was finally born, eight years after we began trying to have a baby, I was deeply grateful but

also aware that our life together would involve pain and eventually change, which are both forms of loss. Once a child is born, she begins the process of moving away from her primary caregiver, differentiating, as she embraces her own life. The intimacy of a child in her mother's womb will never be replicated. Growth brings change, which means both joy and sorrow. Life and death are intricately related.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, several texts invite reflection on life in the face of death. Ezekiel 37 is one of the most descriptive pictures of transformation from death to life. The Valley of Dry Bones depicts a scene of loss, carnage, and devastation. By the desire of God, the words of the prophet, and the power of the breath of God's Spirit, new life is reassembled and animated. This scene highlights God's redemptive power. God comes alongside those who are devastated, whose hope is gone, and restores life. God supplies new life but also invites us as people made in God's image to bring life to others. We can do that simply by being present to what is real, honoring the loss, and inviting others back to relationship.

Our Jewish friends do a good job of honoring grief for a loved one's passing in their worship services. When a family member dies, there is a brief period of grieving before the burial, followed by the weeklong period of sitting shiva with the family, a time when others come alongside and show their support. There is then a thirty-day period when the family operates within certain boundaries to provide space for their grief.[25] The Mourner's *Kaddish* is prayed daily for the loved one who is lost and to offer praise to God.[26] Then for the next year during worship, the family of those who have experienced a loss stand during the *Kaddish* to honor their loved one and their own status as ones in grief. In worship, the family also stands for the anniversaries of their loss, particularly at the one-year mark. These practices of acknowledging the loss over time and in community validate the suffering that people are facing, remind others in the congregation to extend care, and honor the story of the family's loved one and the meaning of that life. Ideally, this practice respects the loss in a culture where many try to deny it, tie it up in a pretty bow, or minimize it. Loss is loss. Losing someone is a sacred passage that should be honored as such.

Grief is a process. Although God can heal miraculously, the majority of situations require time, patience, and a healthy dose of good grief to get through them. Loss is a profound part of life, but endings and new beginnings are two sides of the same coin. The late Madeleine L'Engle, author of young adult books, has described all the little deaths we face in life, such as the loss of childhood to our adult selves, the loss of high school to our college selves. All of these prepare us for the ultimate loss, our own death.[27]

Think of the power of a wildfire. It can consume all in its path, but it also explodes cones filled with seeds that start the growth of a new forest. So in the wake of loss and destruction, there is potential new life. And so too for us: as we endure our own trials we may discover something new in the place that was opened. Life includes suffering. Grief can be a doorway to more abundant and fuller life. Loss clarifies our perspective, helping us realize what matters in life, who matters, and how we want to live during whatever time is left to us. We think about these questions differently after experiencing our own losses. It seems clear that God's plan is for us to live vibrantly, fully experiencing the pain of disconnection and the joy of connection.

Saying Good-bye to Losses

All steps in life, even the bad ones, are necessary. We need loss to appreciate life. Those who hide from pain and loss never know the joy that precedes the pain. Living life to the fullest demands our

engagement with both the highs and lows. Being "fully in" means appreciating our basic nature, our desire for connection. We are most vulnerable to stress's negative effects when we are alone emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Our soul is made for life-giving and hope-restoring community. We all need comfort, a refueling meal, a loving embrace. Yet too many of us suffer the distress of loss alone. Think about an elderly woman in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease. Even when her brain can no longer recognize loved ones or feel any pain, she still talks about wanting to go home. Her body recognizes feeling disconnected and needing to connect. Nothing can separate us from our innate longing for connection. We are born into connection, and with our last breath we merge back into oneness with our Maker.

If we remember that the heart of all losses is disconnection, then it is easier to trust that the pain is just a temporary state until we find connection anew. Faith in the value of suffering is at the core of all spiritual traditions. Despite the darkness of violence and evil, despite our circumstances, a belief that ultimately all things work together for good allows us to continue. Deprivation and struggles can remind us of what is most important: relationships. We encounter grace when life throws us unexpected challenges, which force us to step out of our comfortable routine. When we are on the edge, in the foxhole, lying in the hospital bed, listening to a eulogy, or watching a coffin lowered into the ground, we are often more open to the possibility of relationship with the Holy.

Each of us carries around a long list of accumulated losses and new beginnings. For Heather, the list includes miscarriage, infertility, divorce, moving across the country, changing professions, establishing her young daughter in her new community, making new friends, developing a reputation, and redefining her life. For George, it includes deaths of fellow firefighters, loss of his brother, difficulties in his extended family, retirement from the New York City Fire Department, and starting a new career. These losses helped define who we are and what we have become as counselors, family members, friends, and members of our faith communities. Without them, our collaboration in writing would not have happened. We found a way, with lots of help, to redeem the losses into greater connection.

Our confident message, strengthened by both experience and clinical research, is that the only way we can risk loving in the present is to hold on to hope for a future beyond our current loss. We may need months or years for that to come into focus, but loss is not the end. Knowing that loss ultimately leads back to love and a rekindling of life inspires us to embrace loss and move through the pain toward connection.

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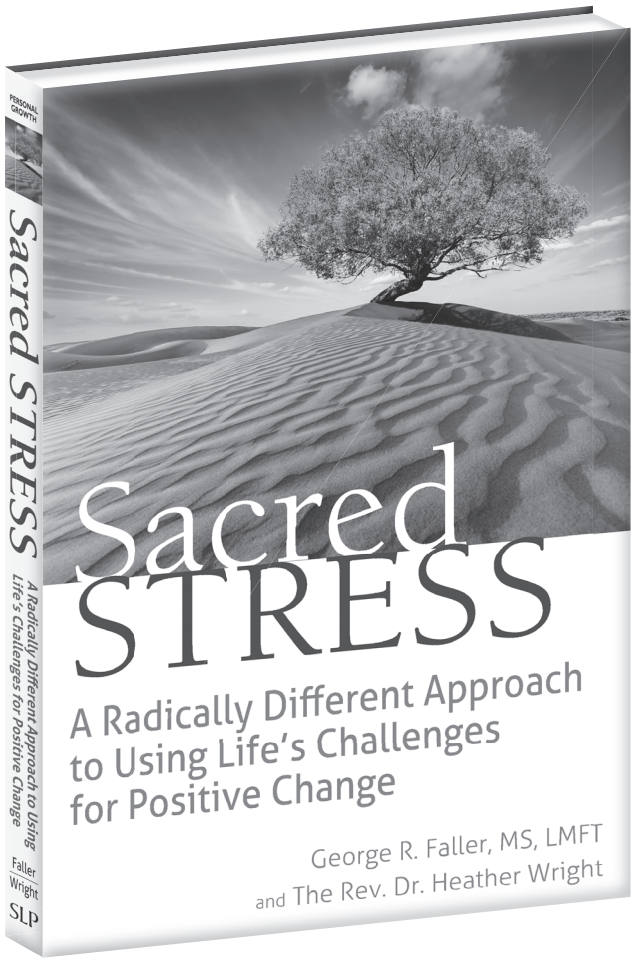

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The Rev. Dr. Heather Wright finds joy in helping others through life's difficulties in her work as a licensed professional counselor, an Emotionally Focused certified therapist, executive director for a faith-based counseling center, and ordained Presbyterian minister. She has also taught graduate level counseling and pastoral theology and served as a board-certified chaplain. She is author of *Redeeming Eve: Finding Hope beyond the Struggles of Life* and *Small Group Leadership as Spiritual Direction*.

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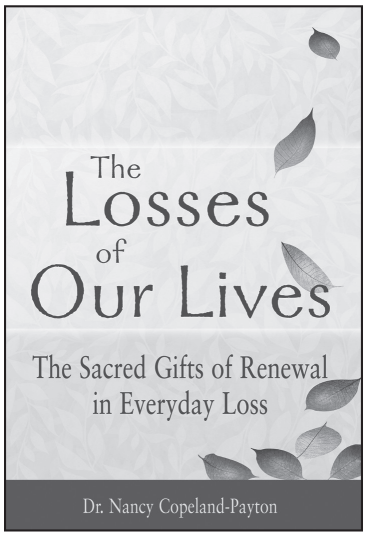

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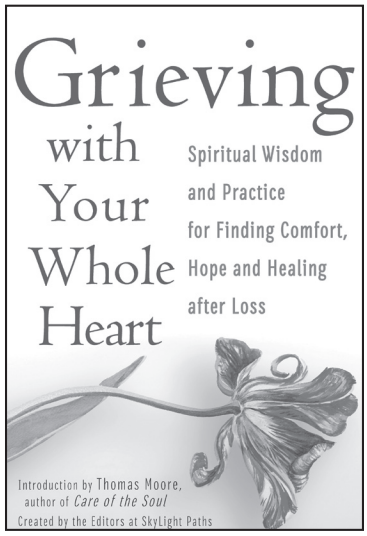

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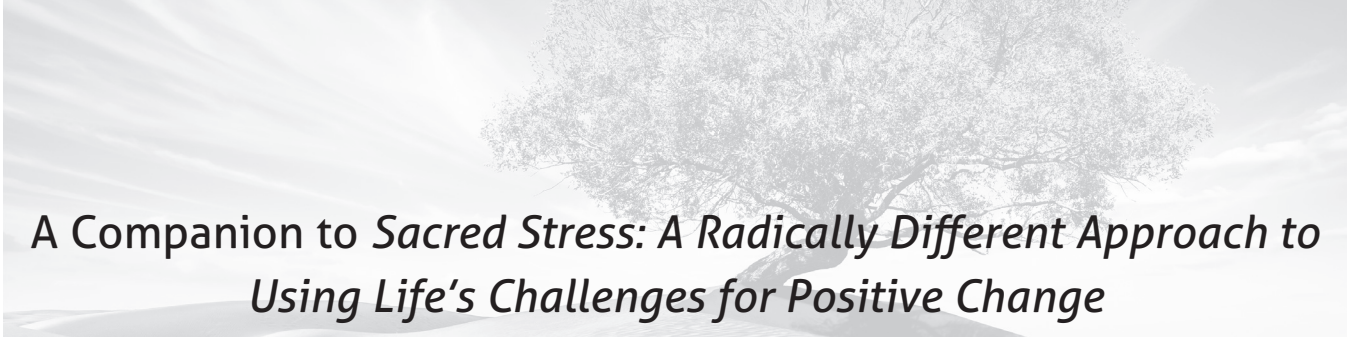

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—from the Introduction to Sacred Stress

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Based on personal experience and their work as therapists, and drawing on decades of psychological research, George R. Faller, MS, LMFT, and The Rev. Dr. Heather Wright have come to see that stress can be healthy and positive. They equip us with the skills and the knowledge we need to reframe our thinking about stress, understand and embrace our darker emotions, and become stronger through difficulty.

Praise for *Sacred Stress: A Radically Different Approach to Using Life's Challenges for Positive Change*

"A thoughtful, accessible and readable guide.... I consider this a valuable resource both personally and professionally. Extremely readable, informative and helpful."

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