Chapter 1

Connecting Grieving with Loss

In This Chapter

- Understanding how grieving relates directly to loss
- Grieving in a highly competitive society
- Debunking death as the ultimate defeat
- Making sense of suffering

Before you can find a way to alleviate the pain of grieving, you need to stop for a moment and find out just what grief is and what makes it tick. Our pace of living has become so frenzied that we have less and less time for stopping to investigate anything, let alone something such as grief that doesn't carry the best of reputations. Nevertheless, to have a fighting chance of processing your own grief with a modicum of grace or helping someone you care about process his grief in a like manner, it's imperative that you understand the process known as grieving, particularly the nature of grief, the close association between grief and loss, and the factors in society that complicate the natural response to grief.

A few factors tend to complicate grieving:

- The highly competitive nature of modern society, which has an extremely low tolerance for loss and even less patience for grieving
- Ignorance about the grief process due in large part to a set of societal norms that stress thinking over feeling and that make the subject of death taboo
- Our own inability to find meaning in loss

This chapter looks at all three of these factors along with ways you can mitigate their influence as you and people you care about try to come to terms with grief.

Grieving as a Natural Response to Loss

Here are a few *working* (nonclinical) definitions for three interrelated terms: grief, loss, and grieving. These definitions are designed to give you something to hang your hat on in subsequent discussions about grieving and to show how closely interconnected the terms are.

- **Grief** refers to the feelings that arise when you suffer a loss in your life.
- **Loss** refers to a breaking of a bond you've formed with a significant person, place, thing, or idea (including beliefs) in your life.
- **Grieving** refers to the process of acknowledging the loss, experiencing the grief that the loss produces, and incorporating the loss into the rest of your life.

Grief as an emotional response

Because grief has to do with feelings, it's primarily an emotional response, and emotions, by their very nature, are often quite volatile and unpredictable. The emotions associated with grief, such as anger, sadness, and fear, are ones that we generally consider negative, and as a result, we do everything we can to avoid them (thus my deliberate choice to use the phrase "suffer a loss" rather than the more neutral "experience a loss"). To be blunt, grief, by its very nature, is painful, and the grief that arises from a great loss can often — too often — be excruciating. (As a lovely staff grief counselor at my hospice emphasized in our Bereavement Volunteer training, we often need to affirm with the people we're attending that "Yes, it hurts just that much!")

Loss as it relates to connection

When it comes to the definition of loss, I need to point out a couple of things. First, the bond you have with the person or thing lost is most often the result of a network of associations and relationships formed over time. Most of the time, these associations are positive, but because the bonds are often complex, they can include negative associations as well. Second, because the extent of grief depends upon the strength of the bond you've formed and the degree of significance of the loss, a *profound loss* is necessarily one in which you've developed a strong bond *and* which has high significance for you.

This book deals solely with profound losses of loved ones and the grieving process required to incorporate losses of such a magnitude into one's life.

Grieving as an involved process

The following corollaries regarding the connection of loss to grief and grief to grieving generally hold true:

- **The stronger the bond you made with the person you lost and the greater the significance that person holds in your life, the more profound your grief over the loss.**

  Although the bond has been broken, the significance of the person you've lost generally remains present in your life. In fact, you may actually find that his significance *increases* after the loss. If you find that the significance of a person fades as soon as or shortly after your relationship with him is over, then you really aren't grieving the loss (you're probably just a little bummed out about the termination of the relationship).

- **The more profound the grief over the loss, the more involved your grieving process.**

  When I speak about *involved grieving,* I'm talking about a process that usually doesn't adhere to a linear timeline or anything like a recognizable schedule and may never include what's commonly referred to as "closure" (a term that I thoroughly detest but that continues to appear in bereavement literature nonetheless).

  I purposely don't refer to involved grieving as *complex* or *complicated grief* because that's a technical term in the death, dying, and grieving profession (which goes by the $10 name *thanatology,* from the Greek for the study of death and dying). As a clinical term, complicated grief refers to a grieving process that gets really stuck in some way because of a deep inability to acknowledge, experience, or integrate the loss. An example of complicated grief is a mother who keeps the room of the child she lost 25 years ago exactly the way it was at the time of the death. Chances are good that this mom's having an extremely hard time acknowledging and incorporating the loss and maybe even experiencing the pain of the loss. Most often, complicated grief requires and benefits from psychological counseling. (I discuss seeking psychological help in Chapter 14.) The good news is that most people, even when their grieving is really messy and they get a little stuck in some aspect of it, aren't really experiencing complicated grief (it just feels that way at the time).

When it comes to the definition of grieving, the three tasks that I single out as being integral parts of this process are

1. **Acknowledge the loss.**

   This task can run the gamut from accepting the awful truth of it to finally facing up to its lasting impact on your life.

2. **Experience the grief the loss produces.**

This task can run the gamut from suffering the wave of emotions it brings up to contemplating its influence on your life.

3. **Incorporate the loss into the remainder of your life.**

   This task can run the gamut from simply surviving the grief produced by the loss to fully integrating the loss into your everyday life (something that professional grief counselors sometimes refer to as "creating a new normal").

Keep in mind that for some of the most profound losses, the grieving may never come to a complete end. Although you may finish acknowledging the loss for the most part and may seldom suffer the pain it engenders, you may continue to be involved in the intricate dance of fully incorporating the loss in your life all the rest of your days.

Grieving as a Totally Personal Process

Zen Buddhism has a story (and I apologize in advance for its rather off-color nature, but Zen does tend to deal with the concrete and, at times, is intentionally quite graphic) about a master whose student asks him about how to go about getting enlightened (presumably when both are side by side at whatever serves as the monastery latrine). The student is then completely surprised when his master responds to his question by starting to urinate and then saying, "Such a small thing, but only I can do it for myself." Grieving may not fall into the category of such a small thing (but then neither does becoming enlightened), but it's right in there among those things that you can do only for yourself (although not necessarily all by your lonesome).

The point is that no one else can spare you the pain that accompanies the grief your loss engenders no matter how desperately that person wants to alleviate your suffering. In fact, even if it were somehow possible to fix somebody else's grief, it's entirely debatable whether or not this would be a good idea. And the reason for this stance has absolutely nothing to do with some hackneyed cliché about how "that which does not kill you makes you strong" or some notion about grieving as a noble growth process that enriches the soul — don't worry, you'll never hear such things from me.

Although it may be tempting when I'm on the floor doubled up by the intense pain of my grief, I'd tell you not to try to fix my grief from a profound loss because in trying to fix my grief, you inadvertently negate my loss by devaluing the bond I had with the person I've lost. Consequently, you discount his significance in my life.

Can you share another's grief?

The question sometimes arises as to whether or not another person who shares your loss can share in your grief. Given the way I define grief as a personal response to loss (even a commonly shared one), my answer is a definite "No." Of course, people grieve together when they're a family facing the loss of a family member or when they come together to mourn a regional or national tragedy, but each person is grieving in his own way, albeit in response to a shared loss.

If you're a parent suffering a family loss that affects your children, you may well feel that it's a natural part of your parental duties to protect your children from the pain of their grief over this loss. Although witnessing their pain may add notably to your own grief, it's really important that your children be allowed to do their own grieving. See Chapter 7 for information on how profound losses can affect children and suggestions of how you can go about helping your children through this difficult and trying period without also impeding their own grieving.

Some factors that influence grieving

Although each of us must do our own grieving, this doesn't mean that we all do it in a completely different manner. Grief is certainly idiosyncratic inasmuch as each loss is personal and the grief it produces surely varies with the strength of the bond to the person lost and his significance in one's life. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of people, the process of grieving profound losses shares some common characteristics (as discussed in Part II) that span gender, generations, and even cultural differences to a certain extent.

Certain factors affect the way in which you grieve a profound loss in your life, including:

- How naturally outgoing or introspective you tend to be
- How easily you express your feelings
- How well integrated you are into a circle of friends, your family, and the local community
- How confident you are
- How secure your worldview is

Many social scientists would consider the first items in this list to be gender based, pointing out that, traditionally, most societies attempt to socialize

their men to be more outgoing to fulfill their roles as the protectors and breadwinners and their women to be more introspective to fulfill their roles as the nurturers and caregivers. As a result of this overt attempt to socialize men and women differently, on the whole, women tend to be able to express their feelings more easily than men.

Whether or not you accept this gender-based viewpoint, you need to keep in mind that many different traditional gender roles currently are being challenged in societies all over the globe; more and more, the time-honored roles allotted to men and women are being interchanged. In addition, even where people accept and follow conventional gender roles, the actual degree to which a man or woman is extroverted or introverted and able or unable to openly express his or her feelings is still quite personal. (See the "What to do when feelings aren't your forte" section, later in this chapter, for a few suggestions on approaching grief for folks who tend to hold their emotions inside and in check.)

It's pretty easy to understand how the last three factors in the list — how well integrated you are into your society, how self-confident you are, and how secure you are in your worldview — can mitigate your grieving by offering you indispensable external and internal support throughout your time of need. Be aware, however, that a loss that occurs in one of these areas or fundamentally disrupts one of them can greatly intensify your grieving process and make it more involved. For example:

- Losing the person who functions as primary head of your immediate family, such as your mother or father, could well result in an inability of the remaining family members to act as a cohesive unit that's mutually supporting, thus making this loss all the more difficult to integrate into your life.
- Suffering a catastrophic physical loss, such as the loss of your eyesight or your limbs, could well negatively impact your self-confidence in ways that ensure your grieving will be more complex and involved.
- Suffering an inexplicably tragic loss, such as the loss of a child, could well shatter your worldview by undermining your belief in God, thus making a tremendously arduous grieving process all the more grueling because you don't have the support and solace of your accustomed religious beliefs.

Everyone has a right to his or her grief

Each of us has a *right* to our grief because the bond that we cultivated and shared with the person now lost to us is entirely worthy of grieving. I believe quite firmly that, should you somehow be prevented from grieving or choose not to grieve a profound loss in your life, you run a much greater risk of

becoming embittered by that loss. Obviously, the disenchantment that necessarily accompanies such bitterness benefits no one in the long run, even if bypassing the grief appears more convenient in the short term.

I recognize that grief isn't convenient for us or for those around us (I have a great deal more to say on this point; see the section "Grief as a nuisance," later in this chapter). I also understand that grief is often seen as quite scary because it runs counter to all notions (or are they delusions?) of control. But I also realize that grieving is a basic part of being human, and, like it or not, you need to engage in the process for as long as it takes. In my view, we all owe that much to the people we've lost as well to our own well-being. (You can come out of hiding now. I've gotten down off my soapbox.)

Dealing with Loss in a Highly Competitive World

Grieving is hard enough on its own without the complication of a society that has very little patience or time for loss of any kind. Given the emphasis — some may say overemphasis — on winning and achieving success in all aspects of modern society, it's no wonder that loss carries such a poor reputation.

Loss is an inescapable part of life. When it's relegated to such a low status in society, the grief that necessarily accompanies it also is consigned to that netherworld. As a result, when untoward circumstances hand you a profound loss that places you squarely in the grips of grieving, you're burdened not only with the pain of the grief itself but also with the onus that society places on loss.

The impact of competition on grief

"Winners never quit, and quitters never win." How many of these kinds of platitudes about "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" can you name? It seems that there's no end to such banalities when it comes to loss, which, after all is said and done, is just another four-letter word in today's society.

It's one thing to use winning as a motivating force for achieving goals and dreams; it's quite another to make it into the be-all and end-all of life. The spirit of winning at all costs seems to permeate all aspects of society — school, sports, business, love, war, and, last and always least, politics. In this highly competitive environment, loss becomes a fate worse than death (if you pardon my pun).

It's really not our fault that we're so inept at dealing with grief (both our own and that of people we care about). After all, we live in a secular society that's highly adept at training us how to acquire and refine the cognitive skills needed to become successful in a highly competitive society. We receive no instruction on how to suffer defeat gracefully, cooperate fully with one another, and express and release our feelings.

With no role models for grieving available, people have a very difficult (if not impossible) time judging whether or not the cascade of extreme feelings — ranging from anger to depression to despondency — they experience is normal. I can't map out in advance all the feelings that a grieving person will experience during his grief process, but when the people close to you who are also grieving the same loss appear to have none of the same feelings that you do, you may question whether or not your grief has unhinged you.

It may not surprise you that one of the most common questions that grief counselors are asked initially by the people they see is "Am I going crazy?" The answer is a quick and unequivocal "No." Although you may never guess it by the outward appearance of a typical grieving person, the sky-high level and all-over-the-map range of emotions that most people experience after a profound loss is entirely normal.

Few people have an adequate sense of what grief typically looks and feels like, and most don't comprehend that grieving profound losses isn't an optional part of living (like getting married and having children) but rather is a sure bet for which it's never too soon to be prepared.

Although we mostly associate an exaggerated emphasis on winning with the realms of achieving power and acquiring material goods, I've also seen it rear its ugly head in spiritual communities where winning is equated with attaining enlightenment or achieving some sort of sainthood. Unfortunately, competition is alive and well and thriving in the both the secular and sacred worlds.

The impact on grieving of negative attitudes toward loss

The idea that loss is somehow deserved negatively impacts your acceptance of grief by making grief often appear as something shameful; it insinuates that the loss that generates this grief somehow reflects badly on you. In its most extreme form, this viewpoint gives rise to the not-so-subtle suggestion that the loss is somehow the result of your own doing, justified by some sort of failing on your part or on the part of the loved one you've lost.

The worst example of this addlebrained thinking occurs in religious circles when seemingly well-meaning people or religious leaders indicate that losses

from disease, natural disasters, or untimely death are divine punishment for sinful activities (see my discussion of the biblical Book of Job in the section "When bad things happen to good people," later in this chapter, for the classic example of this type of thinking in religious literature) or the comeuppance of bad karma from this or a previous life.

A similar sentiment is expressed when people insinuate that a chronic disease such as cancer has to be the ill person's fault in some way, either as the result of an unhealthy lifestyle or activity or negative attitude or thinking. Such people regard any and all protestations to the contrary as suspect and continue to ignore the contributions of environmental and hereditary factors (over which we exercise little or no control) to the person's condition.

Maintaining these narrow and unconstructive viewpoints simply may be attempts by otherwise well-meaning people to make sense of suffering in the world and to shield themselves against loss (assuming that they have and continue to lead blameless lives). Holding such perspectives, however, is fraught with danger because the day may dawn (heaven forbid) when the doctor hands one of these people a severe diagnosis, a natural disaster visits his neighborhood, or someone in his family suddenly dies out of turn. This person's not only left bereft with his grief but also is forced to deal with the very uncomfortable notion that either his beliefs regarding divine punishment and bad karma turned out to be really unproductive safeguards or he has some serious explaining to do about his own past behavior!

Grief as a nuisance

The highly competitive nature of modern society can also negatively impact you by turning your grieving process into a veritable nuisance, for which very few people have adequate patience. (If thus far you've been so blessed that you haven't suffered a profound loss, you haven't had the extreme displeasure of meeting up with this kind of impatience.)

All too soon (for you, at least), you may find that dear friends and seemingly caring family members are done with your grief and therefore expect you to be done with it as well. In subtle and some not-so-subtle ways, they start suggesting that it's time for you to move on by taking whatever course would seemingly assuage the pain of your particular loss, such as starting to date again, visiting the animal shelter, considering trying to conceive again, or adopting.

Friends and family no longer have time to hear your stories about the loss and the one you're grieving, and they no longer have patience for what they consider to be your intense mood swings, your overly developed sensibilities, and your need to wallow (their words, not mine) in your feelings. They may even start avoiding you, and, if you're really unfortunate, they may go so far as to temporarily or, in some extreme cases, permanently break off their relationships with you.

For the most part, these people mean well. They sincerely want to see you get through your grief with as little pain as possible (just as long as you do it according to their timetable). Unfortunately, they're usually operating from ignorance about the nature of the grieving process. For the most part, people have no idea that grieving a profound loss is necessarily and quite normally a lengthy process. For example, some studies suggest that five years is the *average* time for grieving a profound loss such as the death of a spouse and that grieving the death of a child may take even longer.

Each person grieves slightly differently. It doesn't matter whether your grieving process takes longer or shorter than what's considered average or the norm for your type of loss — the important thing is that you're able to take the opportunity to grieve as completely as you need to.

Even when the people around you are aware from their own losses that grief has no quick fix and tends to want to take its own sweet time, they still may want you to get through your grief in short order. If they were forced to abbreviate their grieving, they naturally figure that if they could do it, you can do it, too. The only trouble is that they may only think that they've grieved. The necessities of life coupled with society's pressure to move on as quickly as possible can easily conspire to interrupt a person's natural grieving cycle. It's entirely possible that they got through their grieving in such crack time because they abandoned the process midstream. In this situation, your grieving is particularly problematic because it may trigger their unfinished grieving processes, giving them all the more incentive to get you over your grief as quickly as possible.

You may find that your grieving process unnerves some of the people you're close to in your life (especially if you're rather expressive with your feelings). You may find yourself in the uncomfortable role of a pariah within your circle of friends or family. Most of the time, this change occurs because your loss and grief threatens the other folks' naïve notions about how life works (or should work). Your grief also may trigger unresolved grief over losses in another person's life (thus, it just cuts too close). If you see this kind of change happening, you have very little choice but to seek out people who stand outside of your circle and who can be with you without triggering their own issues with grief (see Chapter 14 for suggestions on how to locate such people).

Winning and losing: Two faces of the same coin

"Heads you win, and tails you lose" is a common saying. I particularly like it because it points outs very clearly and concretely that the winning (joy) and losing (grief) are just two sides of the very same coin. This image underscores how these two pairs of opposites are necessarily and completely conjoined (unless you can somehow conceive of a one-sided coin).

These pairs of opposites are *correlative,* which means that when you're facing the side of the coin with loss and grief staring you in the face, you can be sure that the flip side of gain and joy are there as well, just waiting for the moment when you turn the coin over.

This point is sort of obvious but can't be stated too often: Just as with other pairs, such as life and death, good and evil, truth and falsehood, or beauty and ugliness, you don't have one member of the pair without the other. Both parts of the pair arise together and mutually support each other, even in cases where one item usually precedes the other. For example, you have to gain something before you can lose it, and you experience the joy of a relationship before you experience the grief over losing it.

Unfortunately, in their narrowest forms, some Western religious and philosophical systems greatly downplay the reciprocity of these pairs by overemphasizing the more desirable member of the couple (gain, joy, light, good, beauty, and so forth) at the expense of the other. A few even argue that you actually can have the more desirable one without the less desirable other. These one-sided views give rise to a sort of utopian thinking in which the goal is the eradication of the less desirable member of the pair. This black-and-white view of the world leaves little or no room for the orphaned member of the pair (loss, grief, death, darkness, and the like).

Such one-sided thinking leads directly to the unrealistic expectation of many people that they can live lives absent of the less desirable member of the pair or, at the very minimum, should lead lives that emphasize, examine, and strive for only its polar opposite. Most of us have grown up with and accepted this worldview without question, but clearly it makes grieving all the more difficult by associating grief's direct cause (loss) with the side of the coin that we rather naïvely believe we can do without.

How Fear of Loss and Death Impact Grieving

Most people harbor a certain amount of fear and loathing for one or more of life's more distasteful aspects, what I like to refer to collectively as *Life's Big Downers.* For some, the physical and mental decline from illness and disability are top items on the list of Life's Big Downers. For others, the physical and mental deterioration associated with growing old is high on the list. For still others, the physical and mental displacement that can come from joblessness, homelessness, and even expatriation is the big-ticket item on the list. And for almost every single person, the physical and mental dissolution coupled with death claims the number-one spot.

In this section, I look at how the natural loathing associated with physical and mental decline, disability, and displacement, along with the ever-present

fear of death, complicates grieving. First, I look at three of Life's Big Downers — decline, disability, and displacement — and how they can impact grieving. Then I turn to death, the granddaddy of downers, and attempt to determine how this fear really makes it difficult to be open to grieving (especially when the people around you are grieving, too).

Loathing decline, disability, and displacement

Each morning, I get up and repeat to myself the maxim "panta rhei," which translates as "everything flows" or "all is in flux" (my loose translation is "there's only flowing"). This adage is attributed to one of the world's first Western philosophers, an ancient Greek fellow by the name of Heraclitus.

The message at the heart of the panta rhei axiom isn't simply that change is ongoing and therefore inevitable (a truism if there ever was one) but that change is all there is! This idea of eternal changing poses a definite problem when the type of change you have to look forward to is one that involves a declining, disabling, and displacing of the resources you've worked so hard to obtain or the faculties that you've taken for granted.

Yet, unfortunately, this is exactly the type of change that potentially faces all of us who are fortunate enough to live on into our golden years. It's possible for some people to turn their fear and loathing of the decline associated with aging into an intangible loss that they actually grieve. For example, for some folks in our society, becoming elderly seems to be a fate worse than death. These people react so strongly to the natural aging process that they invest untold sums on ultimately ineffective antiaging products and even go so far as to suffer the risks of unwarranted plastic surgery and the pain of recovery.

The fear of mental and physical decline, disability, and displacement that hides in us can readily complicate our grieving of a profound loss. The lack of control over emotions and mental focus in grieving mimics the lack of control we associate with and fear in these debilitations. In us and in the people who care about us, this connection easily triggers the fear that the emotional and mental disruption and debilitation we're experiencing due to this profound loss will somehow become a permanent part of our being, like a physical disability from accident or disease.

Rest assured that the extreme emotional upheaval and serious lack of mental focus that you so easily experience at the outset of grieving a profound loss are definitely temporary and will eventually wane. That's not to suggest that you won't ever find yourself suddenly riding that old emotional roller coaster again after integrating the loss into your life or spacing out about the loss after actively grieving it (these experiences can and do happen at what often seem like the most unlikely times). However, ultimately, you'll no longer be at

the mercy of wildly fluctuating feelings and will have your previous level of mental focus and concentration back.

Dealing with the fear of death

No human fear is more deep seated while at the same time less heeded than the Big Kahuna, the fear of death. We all *know* that death is our ultimate end, yet we live our lives as though we're going to stick around forever. How so? We make the greatest efforts during the entire course of our lives to cultivate wealth and influence, both of which we're destined to leave behind in the hands of others. Strangely enough, very few of us make an equal effort to cultivate spiritual growth and love, legacies that may just have a fighting chance of surviving the grave and accompanying us to the other side.

This discrepancy between fear and how we live our lives offers some explanation of why, on the whole, we don't deal well with death. We like to fool ourselves into believing that, despite teachings to the contrary in all the great spiritual traditions, our efforts to "have it all" have no debilitating effects on the quality of our souls. We tend to play the role of Scarlett O'Hara when it comes to confronting our inevitable death, reacting in the spirit of "Oh fiddle-dee-dee, I'll think about it tomorrow!"

The process of grieving is aggravated by the simple fact that it takes place in a death-denying society. Because most of our grieving is over the death of loved ones, it can trigger our own fear of death as well as that fear in the people around us. People we come in contact with during our initial stages of acute grieving are often strikingly short with us (and in some rare cases, they actually become angry with us) because our grief sets off their own fear of death.

Because your grieving can so easily remind others of their mortality and trigger their fear of death, when seeking out someone to help you through your grieving process — even a professional who isn't specifically trained as a grief counselor — you need to make sure that this person is comfortable with the subject of death. The best way to find out, of course, is to ask how he feels about death. If this proves too awkward, you should note carefully how he responds to you when you speak about death. If you feel that he doesn't fully engage with you, or if he attempts to change the subject, you know that he has issues with mortality that more than likely will adversely affect your ability to grieve openly around him.

Developing a personal definition of birth and death

I once had the pleasure of attending a lecture by Maezumi Roshi, the founder and head of the Los Angeles Zen Center, and experiencing his deep and extraordinary energy. Later, I read one of his books in which he challenges the reader to confront his own death by coming up with his own personal words and definition for it. We use so many euphemisms for death, such as *passed away, late, departed,* and *deceased,* that this exercise is a good one for everybody to do.

One technique for dealing with debilitating fears

The fear of physical or mental decline can be more debilitating than the actual disability itself. You can deal with such fears by adapting the three tasks of grieving that I outline in the section "Grieving as a Natural Response to Loss":

1. **Acknowledge the fear to yourself and to others if you can get them to listen.**
2. **Experience the fear rather than try to suppress and escape it.**

   For example, feel the closeness of breath and shivers down your spine if that's the way your body responds to the fear. This is definitely the most difficult task of the three.
3. **Assimilate the fear by finding ways in which to incorporate it into your life.**

   One way I assimilate my fear of becoming mentally and physically disabled is by taking stock of the caregivers and hospice workers whom I've had the privilege of knowing and working with. This reflection gives me some measure of confidence that if I become enfeebled, some sweet soul will treat me with the same respect and care that I've known these people to give.

Although Maezumi Roshi was never my personal teacher, I decided to take up his challenge and create my own personal definition for death. This is something that you may want to do as well. If so, I suggest you start by contemplating the meaning of your life in light of your mortality.

The definition I came up with is the result of not only my Zen training and graduate school learning but also my direct experience with death both on a personal level and as a patient-care volunteer with a hospice. It's also heavily influenced by the fact that many of my fellow hospice workers liken themselves to acting as midwives for the dying.

My definition for death is *being born into the world of unity* (a world which takes a whole bunch of different names, including the Kingdom of Heaven, World to Come, Paradise, World of the Spirit, Nirvana, Moksha, One Mind, Infinity, and even nothingness). Conversely, my definition of birth is *being born into the world of diversity.*

I find the image of both birth and death as entrances into vastly different experiences of a single reality to be quite helpful. It reminds me that although we live in a world of multiplicity, these many facets are, in fact, simply the face of unity. Likewise, the definitions enable me to approach my own demise as a complete integration with this unity and another way of experiencing it rather than as a complete dead end (pardon the pun).

Also, keeping this image of birth and death as entrances clearly in mind is helpful in my hospice work because I'm reminded that, just as some births

into this world are easier than others (my mom would have readily told you that my birth as a breech baby was a great deal more difficult than my brother's), some deaths — as births into another phase of the world — are as well. And as with being born into this world, the most important aspect about dying isn't whether or not you go into the next world headfirst (at peace and willingly) or feet first (kicking and screaming) but whether or not you're properly supported throughout this great transition.

Putting the fear of death to good use

In Buddhism, death is to be appreciated as a very good friend (albeit one that we certainly want to keep at a distance and definitely don't want to bring home to dinner) because it reminds us that our time as human beings is brief and limited and thereby goads us into doing spiritual practice while we're still able.

That's the theory at least, and I've found it to be a sound one. Unfortunately, this idea just happens to run directly counter to the values that modern society esteems and pushes so relentlessly (especially in the able hands of the advertising and entertainment industries). In the modern age, dying is most often hidden away, placed squarely in the hands of healthcare and then funeral professionals. In their expert hands, death becomes sanitized, associated with institutions outside the home, and removed from our direct consciousness. As a result, it's now not that uncommon for young people to have no direct experience with the death of a loved one, having never directly experienced any person's dying or been with a person's body after death.

This personal unfamiliarity with death within a society that actively encourages its disregard makes death very unreal for most people, to say the least. Couple this lack of firsthand experience with the entertainment industry's highly stylized and often totally unrealistic depiction of death and dying, and you have a prescription for an extremely distorted view of one's mortality.

Instead of seeing death as the most natural thing in the world (the one single experience that every person can count on having), death takes on an unreal air and often becomes macabre. Instead of acting as an incentive to fully experience every aspect of life, death becomes the ultimate enemy. Because it's currently impossible to defeat, death must be held in contempt when it's not totally overlooked.

Viewing death as the enemy does everybody a disservice because it so easily steers us toward spending our lives achieving goals that seem hollow and empty in light of its certainty. This viewpoint also complicates our relationship to grieving and so hinders our ability to fully honor those we loved who are so worthy of our grief. Thus, it exaggerates our natural apprehension over our own mortality, thereby compromising our ability to live fully and realistically and inhibiting our ability to help others we care about with their grieving.

Meditation to lessen the fear of death

When my own fear of death overtakes me, I do the following meditation. I suggest that you try it, too, if you find yourself overwhelmed by your fear.

1. **Sit for a second and imagine your state before you were born. Examine the feelings, if any, that you associate with that period before exiting your mother's womb, before being a part of time and change.**
2. **Breathe for a moment or two, examining and gently holding those feelings or lack of feelings.**
3. **Contrast the tranquility or neutrality of the feelings connected to the state before you were born with the agitated feelings connected to your fear of death.**
4. **Silently repeat this thought to yourself: "If being dead is anything like not yet being born, then I need not fear my death because I can experience the type of composure that death will bring me by contemplating my state before birth."**

By coming to grips to with our mortality, we're not only better prepared to deal with the deaths of others and help them through their grief but much more apt to live our lives fully engaged. In this way, although never our "best" friend, death is a very useful one.

We're All Bozos on the Grief Bus

When it comes to grieving, we are, to quote Wavy Gravy, "all bozos on this bus." Of the many reasons for our inexperience and discomfort with grief, first and foremost is our overall ignorance and fear of death (as discussed in the preceding section). To complicate matters, there exists a strong cultural bias, at least in the United States, against the overt display of grief. Many people, especially men, aren't comfortable showing their emotions (especially crying), and even those who are comfortable expressing their emotions do so only behind closed doors.

The result is that we live in a society that doesn't really know what grief is or how it normally unfolds. We don't comprehend that it's entirely natural and healthy to grieve and, most important, that the grief resulting from a profound loss isn't something that you can get out of your system in just a few months, let alone a few weeks.

What to do when feelings aren't your forte

The grieving process is perhaps most difficult for those folks who have trouble openly expressing their feelings. Men, in particular, are traditionally socialized to be stoic thinkers who ideally remain impervious to pain and sorrow (and necessarily out of touch with the particular feelings of sorrow that grieving stirs up). Even today, boys often are taught that showing grief (especially by crying) is unmanly and a terrible sign of weakness. When young men internalize this idea, their grieving is made more difficult by an understandable inability to express the strong feelings that naturally arise.

Although most women generally aren't socialized to suppress emotions and normally have an easier time expressing their feelings, this isn't always the case. Studies by professionals in the grief field indicate that women who don't freely express their feelings and who work more from their heads than their hearts have the most difficult time of any group in processing their grief. The reason may be because the traditionally socialized men and women around them misinterpret their manner of grieving (without the expected emotional expression) as not grieving at all.

Regardless of gender, if you happen to be someone who isn't particularly comfortable getting in touch with your feelings, you have to be particularly patient with yourself when grieving a profound loss. You may find that the intensity of your feelings overwhelms your normal capacity to suck them in and sit on them. You also may discover that the grief brought up by your current loss triggers past grief that remains unincorporated into your life.

Although the resurfacing of unresolved grief can add to your current grief work, it also may be a golden opportunity that you can't afford to pass up. Not only can you possibly mend past and present grief by dealing with your current pain, but also you can discover ways to handle and honor your powerful emotions without automatically suppressing them. This work, however, may be too much to attempt on your own and may require the help and guidance of a professional grief counselor (see Chapter 14 for information on seeking out professional help).

Making a place for cooperation in the world of competition

Throughout this chapter, I underscore how a society that stresses competition and winning as the be-all and end-all of life makes the already unpleasant task of grieving all the more difficult. In our world of arduous and relentless competition, we need a lot more cooperation, or mutual support, when it comes to grieving.

Bringing death and dying back into the home

A steady and growing movement is afoot to bring dying and death back into the home, where it typically was almost a quarter century ago. The hospice movement makes every attempt to enable a person to die in the comfort of his own home surrounded by family and friends if that's the dying person's wish. In addition to dying at home, there's a growing movement to bring wakes back into the home for those who find funeral homes too impersonal or too expensive.

For more information on hospice services, visit the Hospice Patients Alliance at `www.hospicepatients.org` and the Hospice Web at `www.hospiceweb.com`. For information about home funerals, visit the Final Passages Web site at `www.finalpassages.org` and the Sacred Crossings Web site at `www.sacredcrossings.com`.

Cooperation not only opens up a natural space for loss but offers new ways of supporting each other in grief. Recently, I had the good fortune of attending a workshop entitled "The Healing Power of Grief," presented by Sobonfu Somé, a truly lovely woman from the small west African nation of Burkina Faso. Somé introduced participants to the Dagara people's communal grief ritual.

Participating in this culture's public and shared grief ritual was a powerful experience that showed me the value of collective grief and reinforced the efficacy of mutual support. The cooperative nature of this rite removed any notion of competition over whose grief was greater. It also underscored the universality of grief among a group of people of different ages and very different life experiences. And while I don't advocate grafting the communal grief ritual of the Dagara culture onto our society, I do think that it's a good lesson in the effectiveness of mutual support and the need for it when it comes to individual grieving (to say nothing of public mourning).

Here are three separate yet interconnected steps toward being able to offer mutual support to one another in times of grief:

1. **Become more realistic about death.**

   Even if you aren't able to become friends with death, at the very least, you can be acquaintances instead of total strangers (with the understanding that this is one acquaintance you're going to get to know really intimately at some, hopefully distant, point in your life). This first step is necessary because you can't make a very big place for grief (in your own or somebody else's life) if you can't stand to be reminded of your mortality.

2. **Make it crystal clear to yourself that grief is not optional in life.**

   You can't get through life without experiencing profound loss (in most cases, multiple losses often compound one another). When it dawns on

us that we're all in the same boat (a leaky old tub named the SS *Good Grief*), we're much more likely to cut each other some much needed slack when it comes to grieving.

3. **Promote the understanding that grieving is nothing extraordinary (in the sense of being weird or abnormal).**

   Grief is a totally natural response to loss and, in the vast majority of cases, represents an attempt to restore health to a temporarily wounded system. However, although natural and shared by all, it's also an individual response and, as such, follows its own course and takes its own sweet time.

Armed with a degree of comfort with death and a clear understanding that grief is a common and normal human condition, we can all mutually comfort and better support one another through our inevitable turns with grief. (And that just happens to be the goal of this book!)

Searching for Meaning in the Midst of Sorrow

A common misconception is that people of faith and religious practice are steeled by their beliefs against the pain of loss and therefore suffer less in their grieving. The idea is that the larger worldview offered by faith enables them to put meaning to the loss, and this meaning somehow alleviates the pain. I'm sorry to burst anybody's bubble, but I strongly disagree with this analysis.

Religious faith and practice can facilitate a person's grieving not by lessening the intensity of the person's grief but rather by better enabling him to incorporate the loss into his life by offering a much greater context in which to place it. This broader framework is what gives the loss meaning. In the techspeak of the grief professional, the person's religious faith better enables him to *reframe* the loss. However, reframing doesn't absolve the person from suffering the pain of the loss because the new framework only provides a means for absorbing the loss after the person tackles the hard work of acknowledging it and feeling the grief it generates.

Grief can try a person's faith and even best it. Some people find their losses to be so heavy and incomprehensible that they not only question their faith but actually abandon it — occasionally only for the duration of the grieving but sometimes for good. For those who aren't particularly religious or who have fallen away from a particular religious tradition, the lack of a comprehensible meaning behind a profound loss can either reinforce their separation from religion or set in motion a new round of existential questioning that ultimately brings them to accept and participate in a new system of belief.

Making some sense of suffering

Goodness knows that when grieving hits us squarely in the gut, the human defense mechanism kicks in. We're convinced that we wouldn't be in nearly as much pain if we could just make some sense of the crazy world that produced this unfortunate loss. I resist this notion because I see grieving primarily as a response to the loss of a relationship with a loved one and not as a response to the cause of that loss. From this point of view, there's no reason to grieve any less. For example, suppose you lose a beloved parent by the natural death of ripe old age (may we all be so blessed). Surely you can say that there's a good reason for the loss — your parent's body could no longer renew itself and keep on functioning. Even with that reasonable explanation, however, you can't expect not to grieve your loss fully.

Unfortunately, this logic doesn't cut both ways. If you suffer an incomprehensible loss that's totally unjustifiable because it so easily could have been avoided, you suffer not only the pain of the loss but also the fact that the loss was so needless. For example, if you lose a dear friend in a car accident caused by someone under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you're devastated by both the loss of your friend and the fact that his death was so unnecessary. In such a situation, you have to deal with your righteous anger as well as the pain of the grieving (and this is a case in which the grieving can be complicated — in the clinical sense — and thus requires the help of professional counseling).

The real problem of spending time and energy trying to make sense of a profound loss is that it doesn't change the outcome. No matter what theory you come up with to explain a loss, the explanation doesn't bring the person back or excuse you from grieving the loss.

Sometimes, I get the feeling that people fixate on understanding the reason for the loss because, in their inexperience with grief, they think this is a necessary part of grieving. Other times, I get the feeling that people fixate on the reason for the loss rather than the loss itself because they hope against hope that doing this releases them from having to feel the pain of the loss.

Although it may seem as though I'm pooh-poohing seeking out a reason for suffering in this world, I'm really not. Making sense of a profound loss, if you feel compelled to do so, is one of the last tasks that you should assume in the grief process. In other words, it doesn't take the highest priority when you're first thrust into grieving a profound loss. Rather, making sense of the loss is a natural fit with the third task, incorporating the loss into the remainder of your life (see "Grieving as an involved process," earlier in this chapter). In this stage, finding meaning can enable you to stay connected to the one you've lost and can guide you in reconnecting with the wider world around you.

We can't pretend to know the real answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people (and I'm not sure that it's part of our job as human

beings to have this understanding). We do, however, always run the risk of sabotaging our grieving by obscuring the question of how best to grieve with the question of why we have to grieve.

To the enlightened person, investigating why bad things happen to good people is nowhere near as vital as investigating how best to alleviate the suffering that arises from the bad situation.

When bad things happen to good people

From time immemorial, people have questioned why bad things happen to good people. And for the longest time, some well-meaning people have put forward the same tired answer that bad things don't happen to good people, they happen exclusively to bad people who often are deluded into thinking that they're good.

Oh, for the patience of Job!

The Book of Job in the Bible is one of the most famous Western examples of a search for an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people. In brief, it's the story of a righteous man named Job (rhymes with globe) whose faith in God is sorely tried — first by the loss of his wife and children, along with his cattle and servants (both counted as wealth in those days), and later by the loss of his own health.

God authorizes this test of Job's faith after Satan (who else would be so bold?) openly questions Job's motivation for remaining upright in the sight of the Lord. Satan suggests that if God were to remove the many blessings He has bestowed on Job, Job will "certainly curse Thee to Thy face" (Job 1:11).

After Satan destroys all that Job has (including his good health), Job continues to protest that he has done nothing to deserve this fate. Job's (so-called) friends insist that he must have performed some iniquity to have caused God to punish him with all his profound losses.

This argument over whether or not Job is really a good man to whom some really crummy things have happened takes up most of the book. Job, however, is nothing if not persistent in his own defense and doesn't stop protesting his innocence to his friends and heaven itself. God finally has enough of Job's protestations and confronts him directly by, in essence, asking him who he thinks he is to question God's motives. Job finally pipes down and says, "I had heard of Thee by hearsay, but now my eye has seen Thee. That is why I sink down and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:4–6).

In terms of how to make some sense of seemingly undeserved suffering, the Book of Job argues strongly and consistently against the commonly held notion that bad things only happen to bad people. It offers no clear answer to

the persistent question "Why does God allow evil in the world?" other than the severe view that pain like that suffered by Job is visited on people simply as a test of faith.

Better, I think, to adopt Job's final position wherein instead of being content to hear about the divine through hearsay, you establish a direct relationship with the divine that enables you to see it directly with your own eyes. Then, as with Job, you can sink down (relax) and repent (in the sense of atoning by being truly in harmony with the divine) in your dust and ashes (your very mortal body).

By the way, in case you're the slightest bit interested, the Book of Job has a perfectly acceptable Hollywood ending. After Job repents, God takes Job's friends to task for arguing the false theory that bad things don't happen to good people and for falsely accusing Job of unrighteousness. He then has them offer Job cattle for forgiveness. After Job forgives his erstwhile friends, God fully rehabilitates Job, recompensing him double what was taken from him. Job lives happily ever after to the ripe old age of 140 years and sees four generations of children and grandchildren grow up (fade to black).

Karma as cosmic comeuppance

Karma as the Buddhist law of cause and effect is often touted as the reason that bad things *appear* to happen to good people. Accordingly, the people who now appear to be so good and innocent were once bad people (in one or more of their past lives), and although it appears (especially to the untrained eye) that they're now needlessly suffering, they are, in fact, just reaping the bitter harvest that they sowed in the past. It just took an awful long time for conditions to be right for their bad deeds to spring up like weeds and grab hold of them.

So as a result of some very subtle thinking, we're right back where we started with the idea that bad things in fact don't happen to good people. In this Eastern version, they just sometimes take their own sweet time in catching up to the wicked and punishing them — so much time, in fact, that they end up punishing the good. I don't know about you, but this theory does me no more good than that of Job's dear friends.

The Zen school of Buddhism teaches that cause and effect constitute a single process. Even when one can't know exactly the reasons for the loss he suffers, he does know the consequential grief with great precision. Accordingly, it can be through the experience of grieving the loss that one rediscovers that what matters isn't primarily what happens to him but how he responds to that experience.