

The Conversation That May Never Come

Grief, the feelings we learned to hold back, and making room for life

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The phone is in your hand before you remember. Something has happened, something small and funny that this person would understand, and for a moment the movement toward them is as ordinary as breathing. Then you remember. There will be no answer. You stand there holding the phone, and the absence enters the room again.

Other times the person is still alive. You are driving home from another visit, saying in your mind the things you could not quite say across the table. If you could find the right words, perhaps they would understand. Perhaps your father would ask the question you have been waiting for. Perhaps your former partner would finally acknowledge what happened. You can almost hear the conversation. You have been carrying it for years.

I am interested in that place in us that keeps reaching. There is love there, and hope, and sometimes a loneliness so familiar that we hardly notice how much of our life has been arranged around it. We may understand another person's limits and still feel ourselves leaning toward the possibility that the next encounter will be different. What happens when we begin to feel the sorrow of what has not come?

A death, an unanswered wish, a home we have left, a body that has changed, a childhood in which care was scarce: each has its own weight and reality. Bereavement cannot be exchanged for disappointment as though they were the same experience. Yet in each we may come upon something precious that we cannot restore by wanting it more. We feel the first tightening in the throat. The eyes grow warm. Almost immediately another movement begins: explain it, get busy, think of someone who has suffered more. *Keep it together. Don't start. There will be no end to this.*

We may want to let ourselves feel the sorrow and still be frightened of what will happen if we do.

What Grief Makes Possible

I sometimes think of grief as cleaning out the closets of a life. We put things away because the day required something else of us. There was work to do, a child to care for, a family that could not bear another feeling. We closed the door. Years passed. Then a loss, a kindness, or an ordinary quiet afternoon brings us back, and we discover that what we put away still matters.

There may be love in that closet, anger, disappointment, the coat of someone who has died, the imagined life we were sure would someday begin. Making room for these things changes our relationship to the house we live in. We can remember what was precious, acknowledge what was missing, and begin to distinguish what we still hope for from what we have been trying, with all our effort, to make different.

Perhaps we notice how often a new relationship has become another chance to earn the recognition that never came from someone else. Perhaps we discover how much energy goes into preparing an explanation

for a person who is no longer available to hear it. Feeling the sorrow of that can hurt. It can also bring us a little closer to the life that is here, with its unanswered questions and the people who may yet be able to meet us.

We do not have to come out of grief a better person. Some losses remain devastating. On a difficult day the room grief makes may be only large enough for a meal, a little sleep, or a friend sitting at the kitchen table. For now, that may be what we can manage.

When the Ending Is Catastrophic

A person leaves for work. The morning proceeds as mornings do: a cup left by the sink, a door closing, something you meant to say later. Then the telephone rings, and the life in which later seemed certain is gone.

Sudden death can leave us standing in a world whose familiar arrangements no longer hold. There was no goodbye. The last conversation may have been about groceries, an irritation, a plan for the weekend. How could something so ordinary have been the last? We go back to it, searching its small details, trying to approach an ending we had no opportunity to prepare for.

We miss the person, and we begin encountering all the places where we had expected them to be. Dinner. A holiday. Growing older. The conversation in which we would finally make something right. We may know what happened and still listen for the car, or wake into a few unknowing seconds before the whole weight returns. The fact of the death and the experience of living in its absence do not arrive together.

Sometimes shock is loud. Sometimes it is the startling efficiency with which a person makes arrangements, answers calls, and tells the story again. Someone feels numb or unreal. Someone cannot take in a simple question. Someone is frightened by an image that keeps returning or cannot sleep because the world suddenly feels dangerous. We cannot read the measure of love from any one of these responses.

In this first bewilderment, help often comes in the form of another person doing something simple and necessary. They bring food. They take the children for an afternoon. They make the call you cannot make, or stay through the evening you cannot yet imagine getting through alone. We may need help getting through the next hour before we can begin to make sense of what has happened. When distress becomes frightening, overwhelming, or interferes with basic care, professional help belongs here too. We can seek it now, while the loss is new.

The Reservoir Beneath the Present Sorrow

Imagine standing beside a deep reservoir. From the bank the surface looks quiet. Beneath it are depths you cannot see, places the light does not reach from where you are standing.

There are times when the sorrow of a life feels something like that water. A death we moved past because everyone needed us to be strong. The ending of a relationship that we described for years without quite feeling what it cost. The child we were, waiting for comfort in a house where nobody knew how to offer it.

We went on. We learned to work, to care for people, to be useful. Much of what hurt remained without a witness.

Then a small stone enters the water. A song comes on the radio. We find handwriting on an old envelope. Someone does not call. In the image, the stone moves down through the reservoir, and widening concentric circles reach out through the depths. One sorrow touches another. The present moment begins to resonate with things we had almost forgotten we were carrying. We are crying, and we cannot quite say what all the tears are for.

From outside, it might look as though a very small event has produced a very large feeling. From inside, the stone has touched deep water. I wonder whether some of the shame we feel about being “too emotional” comes from measuring the stone while knowing very little about the water it has entered.

A sudden death can enter like a huge boulder. It moves through us, shaking us to our core, disturbing the quiet places as well as the places already in motion. Grief for the parent who has died may meet grief for the closeness that never quite happened. Missing a partner may bring us near the remembered loneliness of earlier losses. The sorrows can touch while remaining distinct. And a new death can shake us this deeply even when earlier grief has had ample room. The enormity of this loss may be the whole story.

When I think of sorrow that has not yet been *alchemized*, I think of experience that has had too little opportunity to be felt, understood, accompanied, and given its place. The love need not disappear. Neither does the sadness. What can change is the loneliness around it, the shame of having it, the effort required to keep it beyond reach. That is what I mean here by transformation.

I offer the reservoir as a way of approaching experience, a metaphor whose usefulness we discover in ourselves. It asks for no excavation of every loss and no emptying of an inner tank. We can feel one ripple, say to someone, “I think this touches more than today,” and remain with what is available. The meal is still on the table. The room is here. The person beside us can help us find our way back. We have a lifetime, and we do not have to encounter all its sorrow in one sitting.

How Do I Know Which Stage I Am In?

There can be comfort in the thought that grief has a map. When we are bewildered by our own responses, we want to know where we are, whether we are doing this properly, whether there is some recognizable way through.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler gave familiar names to five responses: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The language began in work with dying people and was later adapted to bereavement. It can help us recognize an experience. Research does not support using it to place everyone on a universal sequence, and it cannot tell us which stage a person has reached or what they should feel next.

Denial or disbelief may be close when you find yourself thinking, *This cannot be happening*. You know, and you do not quite know. You reach for the phone, expect the familiar voice, feel astonished again by the

empty chair. It may be worth asking how real the loss feels today, how much of it you are able to take in. The return of an old expectation does not by itself mean you are refusing the truth.

Anger can arrive as protest, resentment, irritability, or a raw sense of injustice. *Why this person? Why now? How could someone have allowed this?* We can listen for what feels unfair and for anything that still needs action. Anger deserves a place where it can be understood and expressed without harm. Some people never feel it in a particular loss; that does not mean they have missed something they need to feel.

Bargaining often begins with *if only*. If only I had called. If only I had noticed. The mind goes back along the path looking for a turn that could have led somewhere else. Sometimes we are trying to imagine a world in which the person is still alive. We can recognize that wish while looking carefully at what we actually knew and could have done. Regret can be very strong without establishing that the death was ours to prevent.

Depression, as the model uses the word, points toward the heaviness, emptiness, sadness, and longing that may settle around the absence. What is this day like without the person? What care does it ask for? This descriptive word cannot diagnose major depression. Bereavement and a depressive illness can occur together, and help may need to attend to both.

Acceptance may be less like arriving at peace than finding yourself able, for a while, to live beside what is true. You make a necessary plan. You receive a friend. You remember without immediately trying to change the ending. The death can remain unacceptable in the ordinary sense of that word. You can acknowledge its reality and still wish, with your whole heart, that it had never happened.

Several of these responses may visit in one afternoon. Fear, relief, tenderness, numbness, and guilt may be there too. We may revisit a feeling years later or find that the five names miss the thing that matters most. If we want to know what another person is experiencing, we have to ask and listen. Their composure, tears, or busy calendar cannot answer for them.

For our own grief, a useful question can be simpler than locating a stage: *What is strongest in me now, and what would help me carry this part of the day?* There may be a need for quiet company, help with a task, a place to remember, or professional care. We can respond to that need without waiting to move further along anyone's map.

When Loss Shakes Our Sense of Existence

The boulder moves through more than our personal history. Sometimes it disturbs the ground on which we have been standing, the quiet assumption that the world will go on holding the people we love.

Someone was here. Now they are gone. The ordinary traffic continues outside. People are buying groceries, complaining about the weather, making plans for next year. We watch them and wonder how the world can continue looking so much like itself. If this could happen to the person we loved, what can happen to the rest of us? How much time is there? What can we depend on?

In his discussion of *Wise*, Frank Tallis returns to Ernest Becker's idea of "immortality projects," the ways we seek continuity through children, work, art, or legacy. Tallis recognizes their value and the difficulties

that arise when we ask them to keep mortality at a distance. It is one way of thinking about how we live with the knowledge that our lives will end.

A sudden death may bring us face to face with a bargain we hardly knew we had made: if I am careful enough, loving enough, useful enough, perhaps what matters will be protected. When that bargain breaks, we can feel frightened and strangely unmoored. Our work and our love still have value, but their inability to guarantee permanence can take time to bear.

I do not think we can hurry this encounter into wisdom. Belief may comfort us, become a question, or feel unavailable. A religious understanding and a secular one can each sustain us, and each can be shaken. Sometimes what we most need is someone who can hear, “Since this happened, the world feels less dependable,” without immediately trying to make it dependable again.

Later, when there is room, another question may begin to form: *Given that I cannot make what I love permanent, how would I like to be with it while it is here?* We may find ourselves wanting to make a call, speak more honestly, linger with someone. We may find no answer at all. Someone may simply sit with us while we wonder, and help us get through the day.

Emotion Belongs to Our Human Inheritance

Before we have words for separation, our bodies are learning about presence and absence, comfort and danger, the reach toward another being. We arrive with developing biological capacities for feeling. What happens around us helps shape how those capacities unfold and which expressions find a welcome.

Paul Ekman's familiar basic-emotion framework includes sadness, anger, fear, enjoyment or joy, surprise, and disgust. His work on expression and cross-cultural recognition gives us one way to think about the emotional capacities we share. The categories cannot hold the whole texture of a life, and the list is no claim that their mature expression is already complete at birth.

Jaak Panksepp approached the question through evolutionarily ancient mammalian brain systems. He described SEEKING, RAGE, FEAR, LUST, CARE, PANIC/GRIEF, and PLAY. In his account of separation distress, the pain of losing contact belongs with the importance of attachment. Something about the intensity of missing begins to make sense when we consider how deeply living beings depend on connection.

These are different frameworks, and emotion science continues to debate the categories and mechanisms. Human mourning cannot be located in a single circuit, nor can a theory tell us the whole cause of this person's tears. What draws me to these perspectives here is the room they make for sadness within our human inheritance. We may have learned to fear its expression. Feeling sad does not mean there is something wrong with us.

The Lessons That Teach Us Not to Grieve

A child begins to cry. Someone turns away, laughs, becomes angry, or says, “Don't make your mother upset.” The child watches the adult's face and begins learning how much feeling the relationship can bear. Perhaps the tears stop. Perhaps the child becomes helpful.

Those lessons can be painfully direct: “Stop crying.” “You're too sensitive.” “Be grateful.” They can also arrive through the quieter distribution of attention. Competence is celebrated. Tenderness passes unnoticed. The child who needs little becomes the easy child. Before we have much choice about it, composure may have become part of the price of belonging.

Gender, religion, and family history can enter these lessons. Men may learn to regard tears as shameful. Women may be expected to absorb everyone's sorrow while keeping their own from becoming a burden. Spiritual words can bring genuine consolation, or arrive so quickly that the pain has nowhere to go. The same words may hold us in one relationship and silence us in another.

The larger world has its own timetable. Leave ends. Work resumes. Friends stop asking. Someone lovingly assures us that there will be another partner, another chance, a better day. We may begin to hear what they need from us and perform enough recovery to make the room comfortable again.

And yet culture also gives us songs, meals, prayer, stories, mourning periods, and people who know how to stay. Some of us grieve quietly and feel deeply accompanied in that quiet. Some need to speak and weep in community. I want to understand whether we can grieve in a way that feels right to us, or whether we have had to hide some of what we feel to remain welcome.

The Fear That Sadness Will Become Depression

“If I let myself feel this, I won't stop.” There is often a whole history inside that sentence. A person who has survived by continuing may have very little experience of entering sadness with someone, finding a changing intensity within it, and returning to ordinary life. From where they stand, the feeling seems to have no far shore.

We can respect that fear. If tears repeatedly brought impatience or danger, interrupting them was something the person learned for good reason. Asking for company, recognizing when enough is enough, or allowing a feeling while retaining other capacities may be unfamiliar. Earlier learning is one possible part of this picture. A new loss can overwhelm someone who has always been well supported, too.

There is a difference between grief and depression, although they can meet in the same life. Grief may come in waves, leaving moments in which affection, interest, or enjoyment are still possible. Depression can involve more pervasive changes in mood, pleasure, energy, functioning, and the way we regard ourselves. Tears alone cannot tell us which is happening. We cannot assume that feeling sadness will cause depression, or that crying will protect us from it.

When distress keeps interfering with daily life, professional help can offer something more than an invitation to feel. Following a death, prolonged grief disorder is another possibility requiring individualized assessment; continuing to miss someone does not establish it. We can have our grief understood and receive

treatment for suffering that has become difficult to manage. Both forms of care can be present in the same room.

The Lump in the Throat

Sometimes the body brings us to the meeting before we have a name for it. A tightening in the throat. A voice that grows thin. We swallow, clear the throat, look away. A joke arrives just in time. We explain the feeling while staying a little distance from it.

I am interested in what happens in that small interval. There may be sadness, and alongside it the expectation of what will happen if sadness shows. Someone will lose patience. Someone will leave. Someone will need us to become cheerful again. The wish to speak and the wish to stay protected can pull in different directions.

We can be curious about the sensation without assuming it comes from an earlier hurt. Throat symptoms also have physical explanations, including reflux, as well as stress-related tension. Persistent symptoms, difficulty or pain with swallowing, and other concerning changes deserve medical attention. What the body means to us and what needs medical care can each be taken seriously.

For a moment, perhaps the most honest words are, “I think I’m sad, and I’m frightened to let you see it.” We can feel our feet on the floor, look around, hear the person beside us. There may be tears or there may be none. What matters is that the sadness and the fear of sadness can both be recognized, without forcing either one aside.

When Keeping Grief Out Begins to Cost Us

There are times to put feeling aside. A shift has to be finished. A child needs us. A practical emergency cannot wait for the right emotional moment. Sometimes an ordinary break from grief is what helps us remain in life. Research on emotional flexibility gives good reason to value our capacity to express or restrain emotion as circumstances require.

What concerns me is the life in which there is never a time. Each approach to sadness becomes another task, another drink, another withdrawal from someone who has come too close. Tenderness begins to irritate us because it touches the place we are trying to keep still. Those patterns can bring costs of their own, while anger, exhaustion, anxiety, and numbness can also have other causes. We need to remain curious about the actual life.

Sometimes the cost is less visible. We cannot speak a person’s name without changing the subject. We cannot receive comfort because we must immediately show that we are all right. We have become very good at composure, and there is less room to remember, to acknowledge a disappointment, to let another person know what matters.

We can keep the strengths that have helped us carry on. Perhaps we can add to them the capacity to notice when a pause is serving the day and when a feeling has been postponed indefinitely. With enough privacy, time, and willing company, another way of being with it may become possible.

A Witness Who Can Stay

What would it be like to approach that water with someone who was in no hurry to get us out of it? Someone who could listen without searching immediately for the bright side, who could notice when we needed quiet and when the quiet had become lonely?

This is part of what therapists mean by a container: a dependable relationship and setting, with privacy, time, attention, and room to stop. Its strength is in how it holds the person. There is help with approaching a feeling, and help with returning to the room when the amount has become too much. We do not measure its value by how far down someone goes.

A friend, partner, therapist, or trusted community member may offer this kind of company. The response has to fit. Physical presence alone may leave us feeling quite alone if the other person keeps reassuring, interpreting, or taking over. We need some influence over how we are met.

Candace Ossefort-Russell's AEDP writing gives close attention to the individual person grieving and to relational help with overwhelming emotion. Her work draws our interest toward what becomes bearable when aloneness changes. For one person, present sorrow meets the loss of an earlier home. For another, what is needed is help with dinner and someone to watch a familiar program beside them. The experience tells us something about the kind of company that helps.

Grief in the Work of Therapy

Understanding can bring relief, and then, unexpectedly, sorrow. We begin to see why we have worked so hard for approval or why receiving care feels dangerous. For a while the explanation helps. Then we feel something about the years we have lived this way, or the child who needed more than was available.

In my way of working, I want there to be room for that grief when it comes. "My father could not be available" can be a hard-won understanding. Sitting with what it was like to need him may bring us to a different encounter with the same life. Understanding may help us feel something we could not approach before, and feeling may change our understanding. We need to notice what helps us now.

There are days when the work is sleep, a boundary, a practical problem, a more dependable source of support. A person does not have to cry, recover early memories, or produce a dramatic mourning experience for therapy to matter. We can help someone live more freely without requiring a particular emotional performance or a final explanation of the past.

And sometimes we do have to sit with the conversation that may never come. We loved someone, and they hurt us. We are grateful, and angry. We wanted something reasonable, and this person may never give it. Making room for these experiences does not require us to decide that the person was entirely good or bad, restore contact, or forgive. Nor does it erase what they still owe. We can grieve and continue asking for accountability where accountability belongs.

The Paradox of Grief and Joy

There are moments when sorrow has been met and something else quietly enters. We notice warmth toward the person beside us. We are interested in the light through the window, in a piece of music, in something we might like to do. The loss has not changed. The person has not returned. Yet the effort to remain untouched is no longer occupying the whole room.

I think there can be a relationship between our capacity to be affected by sorrow and our capacity to be reached by tenderness or delight. To love, enjoy, and receive is to allow something to matter to us. When we have had to keep vulnerable feeling at a distance, more than sadness may have become difficult to let in. That may fit your experience, or you may notice something different.

Joy may also arrive before any deliberate grieving, in the middle of longing, on a day that later becomes hard again. We can laugh with someone and still miss the person who would have loved the joke. Neither feeling has to cancel the other. Research on bereavement describes varied trajectories, including resilience; the visibility of suffering cannot tell us the size of a love.

Stroebe and Schut's dual process model gives language to movement between attending to loss and attending to the changed demands of life. We cry, do the shopping, become absorbed in work, remember, laugh, and miss someone again. There is room for respite within this movement. We can return to the bank, feel the ordinary ground beneath our feet, and still have a relationship with the water.

Making a Little Room

If you would like to try something, begin with a loss you can approach today. It may be a small change in an ordinary routine. It may be easier to name a present need than to revisit any memory. You can also leave the exercise alone.

Consider one sentence: "What I miss is..." or "What I hoped would happen was..." Say it inwardly or put it on a private page, and wait long enough to notice whether it is true for you. Does sadness come near? Anger? Relief? Perhaps the sentence misses, and what you need is rest or practical help. We can start with what you actually need.

If company would help, choose someone willing and able to offer it. "Would you sit with me for a few minutes? I don't need advice." You might hope that being heard will make the feeling less lonely and worry that you will be hurried. Make room to pause, change the subject, or ask for something different. A private ritual, a little writing, or an ordinary activity may fit better than a conversation.

Then return to what happened. Was there more room around the feeling? Did the other person stay interested? Did the sadness remain much the same, or grow beyond what you could manage? Perhaps something small helped: the short amount of time, the absence of advice, being able to look away. Perhaps the practice made the day harder. That is a reason to shorten it, stop, leave it alone, or seek professional help. What matters is how it affects the rest of your day.

The closet door can remain open a little. The reservoir can be approached without being searched to its bottom. We can feel, receive company, make a meal, and return another day. What was lost may always

matter. The conversation we wanted may never happen. And here, in a room with someone who can hear us, another conversation may begin.

Clinical Foundations and Further Reading

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These sources contribute different research, clinical, and medical perspectives. The metaphors, everyday examples, and suggested reflection are an educational synthesis. This article accompanies BKL's *Grief, Loss, and What Cannot Be Repaired* pathway; it does not prescribe a single way to grieve or replace individualized care.

Companion pathway: Grief, Loss, and What Cannot Be Repaired

For therapists: What Remains When We Cannot Make It Different