



GRIEVING US

A Field Guide
for Living With Loss
WITHOUT LOSING
YOURSELF

KIMBERLEY PITTMAN-SCHULZ

Grieving Us

Also by Kimberley Pittman-Schulz

Mosslight

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Author's Note

Aspects of many characters and their personal stories have been altered to protect their privacy and the often deeply personal nature of their losses, especially the stories of donors and colleagues with whom I've worked. I've changed their names, identifying characteristics, and contextual details, in some cases merging the similar stories of two people into one to assure anonymity. Their words are shared as I remember them, and all stories are true to the extent memory allows.

Seeking Help

This book is intended to be a self-help resource in your personal journey with loss, grief, healing, and achieving well-being. It is not meant to replace professional medical or mental health care. If you are struggling with extreme grief and/or experiencing suicidal thoughts, please seek immediate professional support. The world needs you to live your one-and-only, precious life.

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Dedication

In memory of Pammy and Kathy

Where are you now?

Who would you be if you were still here?

You are the loss that comes along with me.

With empathy for My Parents

We cried, but we also laughed.

You are now nestled with your two girls.

I miss you, yet you are still with me.

With gratitude to Terry

*You taught me the birds, and one day,
sooner than we'd like, you will take flight.*

Love you, SilverBear.



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Introduction

*Loss comes along. First it breaks your heart,
then it stays.*

Digging in the garden, I plucked loose a smooth river rock where I wanted to bury flower roots, a nasturtium with edible, fiery-orange blossoms. A river rock, yet no river in sight. How did that get here?

A long history precedes you and me. We all grow out of what has come and gone.

Gone. It's one syllable that sounds so final, doesn't it? So many people and animals I've loved are *gone*. I suspect that's true for you, too. Is that why you're here? Welcome to this book. It's about learning to live with loss and with joy in a world missing someone you love.

Life holds surprises.

My garden must have been a rush of water once. Now it's redwoods, a house, and land visited by wildlife from quail to bears, two indoor kitties, my husband who's navigating the end of his life, and me sometimes holding a palm full of nasturtium roots.

The river rock wasn't the surprise. When I moved the rock, there was a flowing current, but it wasn't water, it was pill bugs. Do you know what pill bugs are? They're tiny, about the size of your pinky fingernail, and they have armadillo backs and roll into a tiny ball if you touch them. They're also called roly-polys. These were frantic. I imagined them sighing, *pesky human!* Most were dark brown like coffee grounds or grey as the stone I'd just lifted away. But. Among the scattering mass, surprise, there were three bright lavender pill bugs. *Lavender!* Beautiful *lavender*.

Know what popped into my head then? *Mama*. I wanted to show her the lavender pill bugs. But she's been dead for years. *Gone*.

Pill bugs have always fascinated me, but my mother could do without them. They were to be avoided as she worked in her garden, barefoot and ungloved. My mind went on a journey about how my mother could learn to admire a humble pill bug if she saw these lavender ones. Remembering my mother, a wave of emotion built, a boomerang of grief. I felt the heat of tears in my eyes as I kneeled in dirt.

Memory is a blessing and a burden. You ever feel that way?

Death happens. It happens to the people we love and to our beloved animal companions. It will happen to me and to you. Then if we're loved, we'll be the source of others' pain.

When you're grieving, a stack of sympathy cards tell you how your loved one will live on in your heart and memories. It's true. My mother

being with me in the soil and surprise of lavender pill bugs is living proof, or not-so-living proof, that she's still with me.

To say that death changes a relationship, however, is the greatest understatement on this planet. Exactly how do I text my mother a photo of the lavender pill bugs? Regardless what you or I believe of the afterlife, our loved ones are gone as a physical, breathing presence in our lives. Forever.

How do I live with loss without losing myself?

When other women talk to me about loss and feeling stuck in grief, that's the number one question they ask. They're not really asking *me*, as if I can fix them. Mostly they're asking themselves or God or a sky full of dull clouds or as I've done, my kittens, technically cats now, who can only cock their heads, quietly confused.

The goal is to keep loss, or more specifically the vast range of grief emotions that accompany it, from consuming your life in all its meaning, purpose, and beauty. The world needs you to live your one, unique, beautiful-if-heart-broken life. No kidding.

Unfortunately, feelings of despair, longing, anxiety, anger, regret, emptiness, and a sense of being utterly lost can bring your life to an abrupt halt. You'll look around, astounded, that the world keeps on going, people doing what they've always done, the sun rising and setting, all as if nothing happened. But. Something *did* happen. Death visited.

Once family and friends have shared their condolences, they move on, often expecting you to do the same. You can feel very alone. Grief is unavoidable when someone you love dies. Grief is part of healing and helping you figure out how to hold your beloved someone in your life in a new way. Sometimes, though, grief can become an overwhelming pres-

ence, as if you're falling down a giant hole or bottomless well. It's hard to imagine ever climbing out, let alone smiling.

Is that what grief is like for you? What if you could take a *break* from grief?

This book is for you, to help you get that break and experience joy again. Right now, believe joy is there with you waiting to emerge.

Imagine taking a break from being deeply sad or totally numb. In that break, you feel light. Literally, your body feels freed, as if you took off a backpack full of rocks. You also feel *the* light. The sun is coming through those dull clouds, the brightness of the world finding you among the nearly eight billion people on the planet. It's a day and a world you know you are meant to be in. Imperfect? Yes. But you feel good anyway.

What if little by little that break got bigger and bigger? I can show you how to create that break from grief and cultivate joy in your life every day. Yes, really.

Loss is life-changing.

Loss is the one powerful force that's shaped my life. I know I'm not unique in having a lifetime of people I love die. For me, it started early, at age three and a half, surviving a house fire that my sisters, sleeping in the same room, did not. My mother was never the same after that, which is another kind of loss. I witnessed her pain for the rest of her life. Not looking for sympathy here. I'm just saying, it is what it is.

Over time, I lost both parents to lung cancer, a mother-in-law who adored me, friends to suicide, a first love and a former husband to illness-es, a snaggle-toothed dog, and four sweet-spirited cats. I've been stunned

at how some losses knocked me completely off center, while others I seemed to navigate just fine.

The death of my mother hit me the hardest, but then, we had a complicated relationship. It took more than two years to get my life moving forward without my mother. I changed jobs more than once, the simplest chores seemed impossible, and in the middle of it all, my father was declining toward his death.

While I now know it's not unusual, but common, to be in what I call *loss limbo*, I wish I had found a way through that awful time sooner. Back then a few people and my physician suggested antidepressants, which can work for some. I knew, however, that for me, deep, unrelenting grief was fundamentally different than depression. Counseling, or "talk therapy," helped a little. It was good to understand the five stages of grief. However, I could go through all five stages in a morning!

Honestly, those approaches didn't lead to well-being. There was no "how to" get better that really gave me an actionable set of steps or process for getting *unlost* from loss.

I needed to shape my own healing path.

My hope in writing this book is that it will help you shorten the time you spend in pain and the darkest moods of grief. By sharing my life-support system for living with loss—the rituals, habits, and mindsets that really work—I want you to avoid *loss limbo*.

It's not about pushing grief away or rushing through it. Trying to sidestep grief is a common response, and a mistake, that can lengthen the time you spend in distress, trust me. My approach focuses on harnessing loss so unrelenting grief doesn't take away, as poet Mary Oliver calls it, "your one wild and precious life."

Now my husband is in his end-of-life time. So, I know loss lies both behind me and ahead of me. It's with me now in the form of anticipatory grief. Heart disease has already taken so much from my husband, from us. His approaching death is undeniable.

Beyond learning to live with the deaths of so many I've loved, I've worked with hundreds of individuals and families in my professional role as a charitable and end-of-life planning advisor and leader for 25+ years. I've led or worked for a range of philanthropic organizations (from community-based to international), which sometimes includes entering deeply intimate, one-to-one conversations.

It's been an unexpected gift to be a listening ally and a resource to people from strikingly diverse backgrounds as they consider the meaning of their lives. I've sat with them as they acknowledged the reality of death, shared their losses and regrets, sharpened their focus on living, and thoughtfully shaped their personal legacy, including the values they'd leave behind. Occasionally, we cried together. Other times, we found ourselves laughing so hard our ribs hurt, because, as I've learned, laughter is always there, jumping out unexpectedly from the shadows of despair, if we let it.

I'm also a poet, writer, naturalist, and mentor who strives to expand awareness and empathy so this planet will be more livable for all beings, especially in a time of heightened racial and cultural divide and an era where we're losing entire species daily.

We're living with huge communal loss right now. Add in a pandemic as I write, and we have global grief.

Becoming an expert in death and loss hasn't been my goal.

I'm here as a fellow traveler who has more experience dealing with death and dying than I'd like. My intention is to come alongside you to

share what works for me. I'm still evolving and discovering the diverse faces of loss, grief, and mourning as I work on becoming the best version of me possible.

This book takes you on a practical, step-by-step journey to build your own, unique life-support system for living with loss. There are four progressive stages to achieving greater well-being and joy, so I've broken the book into four sections. Each section comprises a few chapters that combine sharing concepts and strategies with storytelling to illustrate ideas, including what has and hasn't worked for others or myself. At the end of each section there's a Practice Chapter with how-to guidance to implement the concepts and strategies into your process of mourning and building a new post-loss life.

In Section One, we'll review the big ideas of loss, grief, mourning, and becoming, including the importance of telling your Loss Story. Then I'll offer a process for how you might tell your Loss Story and set a Feeling Intention to imagine and define a near future where you're enjoying a true sense of well-being.

In Section Two, we'll explore your senses and the way in which your body can reconnect you to your life, while touching on the impact of relationships in shaping your identity and grief experience. I'll show you how to start a single tiny, sensory ritual to create a break from grief that's doable, even if you're feeling exhausted, detached, too busy or overwhelmed, or otherwise unable to accomplish anything.

Small victories add up to transformation. In Section Three, we'll spend time with joy and your capacity to cultivate it in your daily life, then we'll discuss the power of action and focusing your attention to move your life forward. You'll learn how to build a flexible Joy Habit, if you don't already have one, and give yourself space to play, even if just a few minutes a day.

Moving into Section Four, we'll work on expanding and deepening your break from grief by shifting existing mindsets or developing new ones, while learning how to leverage memory and meaning as part of your healing. Finally, I'll provide a framework for building an Emotional Flak Jacket, a mindset toolbox, if you will, and discuss possible next steps in your journey to live with loss *and* with joy.

Let me make two final points about this book. First, it isn't for everyone. If you are in the early, raw stages of grief, this book may be for you—just not yet. Because I'll be asking you to focus on your senses, memories, and sources of meaning, you may not be ready for the practices and approaches I'm sharing. Put the book aside and come back to it when you're ready. At the same time, there are many viable approaches to working through grief and getting your life back on solid footing. What works for one person may or may not work for another. If you need a different approach, please pass this book on to someone else struggling with loss who may benefit.

Second, you don't have to live in the woods or hang out with ravens for the strategies I suggest to work. I'm a bit of a nature and natural history geek who thrives in forests and paddling lagoons, so examples often have a wild or rural context. If you're a city dweller, you could think of the stories as a loss camping retreat, if that helps. Regardless, all of the concepts and practices outlined will work if you're sitting in the middle of a dense urban environment, hanging out in a comfy suburb, enjoying small-town life, or isolating as a hermit. Just have an open mind and try the practices.

Kindred spirits are found in unlikely places.

Are you wondering what happened that day as I crouched beside a hole with lavender pill bugs and the white-lightning roots of a nasturtium waiting

to be planted? After a little cry, I said to myself, “Miss you, Mama,” followed by, “that’s enough.” I grinned, remembering how my mother used to say, “Talking to yourself is the only way to get an intelligent answer.” She was funny.

I couldn’t help gently touching one of the little buggy beings. It curled into a minute, armored ball, briefly immobile, then straightened out and burrowed with its 14 hair-like legs under pebbles. Focused only on paying attention to the moment—each detail of movement, color, texture, and feeling—I savored it all.

Good news. That boomerang of grief didn’t take away my day. My life-support system worked for me, just as my roly—poly friend’s defense system worked for it.

Finally, curiosity—another practice that keeps me out of emotional potholes—got the better of me. I hit the Internet to learn more about the lavender color of those three pill bugs. First, I was reminded that pill bugs are crustaceans rather than bugs or insects, meaning they’re related to crabs and lobsters, though I’m not planning to serve one up with butter any time soon. Moisture-lovers, no wonder they were hanging out with a river rock.

And the lavender? Turns out, the lavender is a sign that those roll-polys were infected by a virus. With this experience happening during our COVID-19 pandemic, I felt a kinship to those teeny crustaceans. How handy it would be if our novel corona virus turned people lavender when infected. Testing problem solved! The kinship, though, goes deeper than viruses.

All beings battle to live and to live with death.



Section 1

DEATH VISITED. NOW WHAT?





1

Storytelling

Your Loss Story is a bridge back to you

It's not gravity that grounds us, keeps us from spinning off into the black, night sky. It's love stories. Some of them are happy, others hard. Love isn't always kind, though it wants to be. Even in death, the story says, I love you still.

— from my notebooks, August 2003

Red. My first loss is lodged in my mind as color. When I woke one early-October night to fire in the doorway, it was red. I crawled out of my sheets on the bottom of a bunk bed and tried waking my big sister, six years old, on the top, but couldn't. Smoke snaked up and pooled at the ceiling above her. My baby sister, who turned two that day, her birthday, was standing up in her crib near the door. Shaking the rails, she was try-

ing to climb out, chattering something that I couldn't hear, because, as I realize now, fire eating a house is loud.

I went to the window where I saw flashes of red. Outside, people were looking at me—my mother crying in her nightgown, the next-door neighbor I called Auntie, and others, too. Red light was pulsing and splashing across their faces as a fire truck approached. The windowpane was warm as I pounded with open hands at the glass. “Out,” I was calling.

The eyes take in so much that the mind often latches onto strange details, like crayons on the floor. I was looking at a red one I'd broken earlier that day that made my big sister mad at me, just as my father punched his bare fist through the window. He scraped shards of glass from the sill and pulled me into his arms, more red, his blood in his palms, then on me. I was handed off to the group of watchers, and I remember being kissed as my father ran back to the house. Then we all froze, hearing an explosion inside. It was one of the few times my father openly sobbed, letting loose a howling, unforgettable sound.

This is the hardest fact: Some of us get to keep on living, and some of us don't.

Death, loss, survival. They're not words. They're more visceral, as if the architecture of my body, tissues to bone, my very cells, grieve. Decades have passed, and still, when this snippet of memory visits me, it's as if some invisible hand has reached inside with a crushing grip.

If you are here with me in this moment, the two of us brought together by this book, I think you understand what I am saying. If we were together physically, I'd ask, “Do you want to tell me about your loss?” I would listen. It's important to tell your Loss Story. You need to tell it, more than once and over time.

Why tell your Loss Story?

We are our stories. They connect us to ourselves and to others. Telling them is proof that we exist and that we are on a journey that hasn't ended yet. When someone hears our Loss Story, really listens to it, they connect with us in the most human way.

I was especially struck by the power of loss storytelling when I traveled in Sierra Leone in 2013 as part of my work in the international child development sphere. It's a country of deep loss due to a war and poverty, then an Ebola outbreak in 2014. As I visited villages, it was through shared stories that I came to connect personally with so many individuals and communities.

There was a custom of first meeting with the local leader called the Paramount Chief, or if a woman, the Mammy Chief, to be received and invited into a village. They would explain their relationship to a clan and their tribal roots, then share what was meaningful to their people, talk about their talents then their challenges, and finally discuss what they wanted for their children. Then they asked the same of me. They never inquired about my job, but they listened intensely to my story as I had to theirs.

Part of the custom in meeting a Chief was to bring a modest gift or token amount of money in the local currency. Well, in my culture, thanks Mother, money (flat and packable!) is deemed helpful but less thoughtful than a well selected gift. As I prepared for the three-week journey through Sierra Leone and parts of Liberia, I needed to travel light in these developing countries with mostly red-mud roads, almost no electricity, and simple "guest houses" to sleep in each night.

At the same time, I wanted something that represented my home in the southernmost stretch of the Pacific Northwest, something symbolic to me that would nurture real cultural exchange. I ended up taking two-

ounce foil pouches of wild salmon, and since I wasn't sure how many chiefs I'd meet, I had a duffel bag full of salmon. As I checked it at the airport, I thought, *hang on for the mother of all migrations*. We'd travel nearly 7,000 miles. I imaged the currents of air instead of water they'd fly through, my school of silvery salmon pouches.

Each time I sat down with a Chief, when it came time to present my salmon offering, I was asked its meaning. I explained that for those of us in the Pacific Northwest, salmon are central to the balance of our natural environment and culture, especially for our native people, but also for those of us who choose to live there. I explained how salmon are amazing anadromous fish, that is, how they are born in freshwater streams, then swim out and live their lives in the salty ocean, then swim back up into those streams they came from to lay and fertilize their eggs and make the next generation. They die where they were born, and their bodies literally feed the river, the land it passes through, and their babies.

I shared how, when I lived along a river, we waited for and celebrated the return of the salmon and how saddened I am by the serious decline in salmon populations because we're not taking good care of our planet. The salmon teach us about surviving in all conditions, fresh or salty, fighting against predators and stormy tides to get home.

They remind us, I said, that we can always return home at the end of a journey. As my words came out of my mouth, inspired and excited about being in Sierra Leone, I also felt far from home in distance and differentness. I thought, *I know how you feel, salmon, that drive to leave and the pull to return home*.

So here's the power of story and how so many stories are stories of loss. The very first Chief I met was an elder, and his eyes became shiny as I spoke, as if holding back tears. Thinking I had somehow upset or offended this Chief, I glanced at my new friend and colleague, Fataba, who was guiding me during this trip. I gave her my best "help-me!" look. Before

she could say anything, the Chief took my hand and thanked me. Then, I suppose seeing my puzzled face, he explained his emotion.

At the time I was visiting Sierra Leone, it had not yet been 10 years since a bloody civil war, which killed over 50,000 and maimed even more. I met several people missing hands or entire arms, and some who greeted me smiling through severe facial scars where they'd been slashed with a machete, or as they call it there, a cutlass, during the war. In fact, whenever I mention my time in Sierra Leone to another American, if someone even knows where the country is (West Africa), then they immediately think of the movie *Blood Diamonds* and wince.

The Chief explained that during the war, millions fled the country seeking safety, including him and most in his village. He shared how the deep longing for home and for the way things used to be were intense as refugees. I could see and feel how even years later, back in their homeland and talking with me, this man's longing and loss were still raw.

He said that my story of the salmon, reminding him of the hope and power of returning home, deeply touched him, and that it "makes us one." Then I was fighting emotion. This experience happened so many times as I moved through the rural up country of Sierra Leone.

On that trip, I witnessed something new: communal grief. It's when an entire community shares a deep loss. I also witnessed stunning resilience.

Can you imagine a nation of people confronted with true atrocities, Kalashnikovs and machetes cutting through families, everyone fleeing in search of safety, hiding in other countries, and returning to villages that, if not burned to a black smudge, were filled with horrific memories?

When I asked Fataba, who had also fled and returned, how she dealt with the loss and grief, she said, "Everyone knows death, so you are never alone. We would tell each other our stories. They were different but also the same, and you feel better for awhile."

Your Loss Story is a bridge to what's next.

In a way, when someone you love dies, it's as if you've been sent on a trip that you can never really come home from. Like the families I met in Sierra Leone, when you do come back to what you think of as home, it's a different place and you make a new life there.

Telling your Loss Story is a way of building a bridge. Yes, the telling is a bridge between you and others, because as Fataba pointed out, everyone is touched by death. But there's a more important audience: You.

Whenever you tell your story, you are honoring your very real, if uninvited, loss and your survival. Your voice and mind and body and emotions as you speak, they all help you move from the life you knew when your loved one was in the world to a new world where you get to live but have to do it without them.

Telling your Loss Story is also a kind of pressure valve. When you do it, as Fataba said, you feel better, at least for a while, which is why your story needs to be told more than once. Even if you can barely talk through your tears, when it's been spoken, there's been a little healing. The funny thing about telling a Loss Story is that you hang on to it fiercely and let it go at the same time.

Loss is abundant that way. You can never get rid of it, just lighten your load for awhile. When you intentionally tell your Loss Story, you get better at navigating the diversity of feelings and physical reactions. You get to mourn and move forward.

Most importantly, you reduce the likelihood that your Loss Story will ambush you. What do I mean? Have you ever fallen apart unexpectedly and inconveniently?

If you keep your Loss Story closed off in some dark closet of your heart, it will burst through the door and surprise you, and maybe others. You'll find yourself in a meeting or dinner with friends suddenly wail-

ing into your coffee, because your Loss Story wants to be told. Your pain needs attention and will push itself out into the world without asking you, *is now a good time?*

Please know, it's okay to fall apart—no need to be embarrassed or apologetic. It will just happen, sometimes years or decades after a death. Been there, done that. Still, I know that for me and many others struggling to get out of loss limbo, having some moderate amount of control over when our Loss Story is shared is a helpful early step in getting our lives back.

Telling your Loss Story is also an expression of love itself. Remembering our loved ones is how we affirm to ourselves and the universe that their lives made, and still make, a difference.

One of my goals in traveling to Sierra Leone was to meet two children that I sponsored there, Thaimo and Alie, in a region called Bandankoro. After my mother and then my father died, I funded the building of a very humble but needed two-room school in memory of my parents. So many schools were demolished during the war, because every war includes some attack on education and culture.

After the war, when groups of Sierra Leonean children were asked what they wanted most for their communities, they said schools. They wanted to learn how to prevent such wars in the future. Who can say no to that?

I visited with Thaimo and Alie, meeting their families over lunch in Alie's home, clay-sided with a metal roof, one of the nicer houses. The women wore dazzlingly colorful dresses and hair wraps, made of what they called country cloth, a kind of thick cotton printed with bright designs, as they brought heaping dishes of food. It was sweltering inside as we shared plates of chicken, fish, and rice. It was also an honor.

Later, waiting outside, looking like a crumpled tissue from riding in a 4x4 and sweating my way through village after village, I asked Fataba what

family life is like in Bandankoro. She told me how life is improving, and most children survive and grow to adulthood. Great news! Then she added that older generations, as children, lost many siblings, and sometimes there is in them “a hidden sadness.” She looked up at me after smoothing her dress, asking, “Do you understand?” “Yes,” I answered, “yes I do.”

Review:

Stepping Stones to Help You in Your Loss Journey



Telling your Loss Story out loud is an expression of love for the one you lost and for yourself—and the most important audience is you.



Because we all experience death, telling your Loss Story is a way to build a bridge to other people and to your future life.



By telling your Loss Story, you begin to integrate your loss and harness your grief so it is less likely to ambush you.



In the telling of your Loss Story, you're releasing built up feelings and emotions—it's a kind of pressure valve to take away some of grief's power to overwhelm you.





2

Losing

What loss looks like

After the storm, some of the trees lie down in mud. Silence takes shape in stunned cows, strewn feathers, sheep wool tangled on wire, and one shingle dropped like a letter in the field, unopened. So much gone. Don't overlook the astonishing fact: you're still here.

— from my notebooks, April 2014

I've come to measure my life in cats. You can't have a lifelong relationship with a cat. Okay, from the cat's perspective often you can. Sometimes I think lucky cat to have the same person cherish and fuss over you your whole life. I'm on my third pair of cats since becoming an adult. Yikes, am I an adult?

Barney and Pumpkin joined me in my early 20s. Barney cat became a true elder, slipping away in his sleep when he was 20½, and Pumpkin made it to age 18. Then came Muir and Maya in my early 40s who each developed intestinal cancer dying at not quite 13 and just past 15 respectively. And now, Tiger and Chloe kittens, technically cats, chase through the house; you can do the math on my age. Is there another pair of cats in my lifetime? Probably not, unless next time around I adopt really old cats.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of my life at this moment is watching my husband, who, with a failing heart, senses he's likely celebrated his last birthday. He lifts Tiger close to his face, saying, "I'll miss you, little guy." Ironic, of course, because in death you don't miss anyone, they miss you. Dying slowly, over months and years, can leave you grieving the life you're leaving behind. As you lose wellness and abilities, becoming less of who you once were, you literally miss yourself.

I'll miss you. That's what I always think to him when he's nuzzling Tiger like that.

When I talk with others struggling with loss, missing their loved ones is always the hardest part, and there's no real antidote. We also miss ourselves, because we're not the same people anymore. To miss another is to miss yourself, too. But. There are ways to embrace that *missing* and hold the ones we love in new ways, which is part of the journey we're taking together in this book.

Finding Tiger was like Internet kitten dating. My husband and I were both sitting at the local hospital waiting to be called for blood tests when we saw an ad in a newspaper with a pet adoption website. What else can you do when your last cat died two weeks earlier, you're still weepy, and you're waiting to be poked with a needle? Of course, you go kitten shopping on your smartphone.

There were many feline faces and mini-stories to go with each of them. With one flick of a finger, up scrolled a tiny tabby kitten, grey and

fluffy, just a couple months old. Then up popped the rest of his litter mates, including one ink-dark girl with brown patches above her eyes, her head tipped sideways looking out of the phone more like an owl than a kitten.

Still mourning our Maya, I didn't think I was ready to adopt. My husband said, "Time is a luxury I don't have."

The ability to love is surprisingly infinite. Loss comes along and breaks your heart, and with the jolt of pain, out pours a stream of possibility. You have the ability to love again and again and again. You just go with the flow, do a bit of paddling through the emotional boulders, and let that stream carry you through loss and back into your life. I'm not telling you it's an easy ride to love and lose and keep loving. But. Know the stream is there, waiting for you to go with it.

What can I say? Before I even met Tiger and Chloe, I was smitten by those kittens.

Look out for loss and value systems.

In talking with others struggling with their losses, two issues almost always come up. Loss is not a one and done experience. It's a Swiss Army Knife with 147 ways to cut. Loss also comes with an unspoken value system, that is, unspoken until someone speaks. Let's tackle the value system first, and since I'm in kitten mode, I have a question for you.

Is it possible to love a cat or a dog or a Senegal parrot more than a person? I don't know about you, but for me, yes, though the only parrot I know is a 30-year-old named Sonny, for a reason. It's not just that some animals are better people than, well, a lot of people. Our animal companions can be key ingredients in the daily routine of our lives.

What happens when they leave us? First, your life can be broken in ways you never imagined possible. Second, human beings can make you feel more isolated in your loss.

One of the strange thorns that come with grief is a usually-hidden, social code around the way to grieve the variety of relationships we lose through death.

After the loss of my step-dog, Gizmo, I was wounded by a woman I worked with in the community. Gizmo was the confident, snaggle-toothed, brown mutt, the size of a grocery bag, who came as a bonus package when I married my husband. Gizmo was my hiking buddy, and even more than 20 years past his death, I can be padding along the beach, come across a rotting gull wing washed up in the sand, and think, *Oh, Gizmo, your nose would go wild with this*. As for the woman, she said she was sorry for my loss “but thank goodness it was just a dog and you can get another one.” Yes, she really said that. I’m not a violent person, but that was one of the rare moments when my brain and my hand momentarily conspired to smack a person in the face, but patience and compassion stopped me.

Why do people do that, place their values on your relationships? Loss is not a competition. No loving relationship can be ranked by Likes or measured by the number of stars as if we’re all for sale on Amazon.

Some deaths absolutely are more tragic than others. I’ve worked with several charitable donors who established scholarships to remember a murdered son or daughter. I’ve heard their loss stories in anguished detail. I’ve sat at their kitchen table, sometimes with their dog at my feet or cat in my lap. I’ve cried with them as they recounted the horror of those losses and the often-dramatic turn their lives took in the aftermath.

Maria still has her son’s voice on her answering machine more than 20 years after he was mugged and shot leaving a soccer game. He was heading off to college when he recorded the outgoing message so callers would think there was a man in the house and not his divorced mother living alone. Maria admitted her life was stuck in disbelief that he’s never coming home, her grief evolving into a perpetual depression. When I

asked if she was getting support, she answered calmly, “I don’t want to be happy,” acknowledging the choice she’d made. When she misses her son, she listens to his voice on the little cassette tape. Worried that it would break, she found a friend who could copy the message to her computer, then eventually, moving into the cellular age, as a music file on her mobile phone.

Alan and Cindy’s daughter was assaulted and stabbed by a group of teens she’d been trying to help. They shared heart-wrenching stories of sitting in court listening to the details of her death. Looking into the face of the oldest one who’d taken their daughter’s life, they couldn’t make sense of his matter-of-fact tone as he testified. Feeling alone and unsupported, when the trials were over, they sold their home and spent five years traveling the country in a mobile home reaching out to support other parents facing the fresh loss of a murdered child.

Loss is like clay. You can shape it, choose how much power it will have in your life, and decide what that power looks like. If death has just visited you, it may be too soon to consider this idea. When you’re ready, ask yourself: What if I thought about my loss like clay? I know it’s not easy to think, let alone act that way, but what if?

Let me tell you about another of my donors, Greta. Greta was financially comfortable but not wealthy. She wanted to create a memorial to her friend who passed away suddenly in her sleep, but she struggled fiercely with guilt. Why? Her daughter told her she should be doing the memorial to her husband who died in an accident years earlier. Greta couldn’t afford to do two memorials, and for whatever reason, a memorial to both of them didn’t seem quite right.

“I think I am a bad wife,” she said, with a wobbly voice. “I loved my husband, though you know, he traveled a lot. It was a terrible accident that took him, not a good death.” She paused, staring past me at the wall, and I could see the accident replaying inside her. “I know we’re supposed

to love our husbands above all, except God, and I do. But my friend, she and I talked every day. We were on the phone if we didn't see each other, just checking in, telling each other what birds came to our feeders. We shared tomatoes and zucchinis and cut flowers from our gardens. She was just how I got through some days.”

This is what you need to understand that no one told me, that I had to figure out on my own. There's a difference between the facts of someone's death and the impact of their life in your life.

Greta's daughter wasn't helpful in placing her values on her mother's relationships and grief. Unfortunately, the people who love us as well as those who don't really know us, often judge us. Both losses, husband and friend, changed Greta's life in unwished-for ways.

Understandably, Greta's daughter was only feeling the grief of losing her father, so she couldn't understand her mother's grief for her friend. But. The loss of Greta's friend, while not tragic in how her death happened, disrupted Greta's life more than the loss of her husband because her friend was a part of each and every day. With her husband traveling frequently, she'd already learned to live without his physical presence in her daily life. Greta's sorrow for both her friend and her husband was made so much worse because of a social value system.

There's a daily-ness to losing your person.

Sometimes even the grief support professionals miss this point. The daily-ness of a relationship, severed by death, has a lot to do with how devastated we feel. We're not supposed to say out loud that we grieve more for a close friend than a spouse or someone who died peacefully more than the one tragically taken or even a pet more than a human, but it happens. It's normal.

In working with Greta to create a memorial, she asked what I thought. Name it for her friend or her husband? I'm wise enough not to step into someone else's loss-tinged decision. I just asked a two-part question. "What do you really want to do, and do you think your husband and friend would understand?" She was silent and took a sip of tea from her cup. "They would both understand either way." After another sip, nodding to herself, "My husband knew how close I was to her."

If we are to be real in confronting loss, let's acknowledge that losing those we love who were part of our daily life and routines is going to be an especially challenging journey. We'll talk about this concept later. For now, just know that without addressing the many daily losses that come with the death of someone you love, your ability to move forward with your life may be blocked.

Honestly, the loss of my cat companion, Muir, remains one of the hardest losses for two reasons. First, the moments before he left us were grim to witness. Second, and more profoundly, Muir was a part of so many hours of every day for almost 13 years. This is why the death of an animal companion can be so hard if you are an "animal person," especially if the humans in your circle of friends and family are not.

Muir was white with grey tiger-patches, including one shaped like a lopsided heart, and he had a long, striped, expressive tail. Every morning he sat on the bathroom counter watching me wash my face and brush my teeth, studying me like a researcher, rotating his ears and blinking, trying to make sense of human behavior. We had little routines together. When I'd bend forward and flip my hair towards the floor to brush it from the underside, he'd crawl under the waterfall of my brown and grey strands, roll onto his back, and look up to me, then I'd brush his snowy belly.

Other times when I was hustling through the house with my head full of thoughts or running late or trying to get through chores, he'd wait to the side of a doorframe, and when I came barreling out of a room, he'd

jump as high as he could, kicking off the wall, doing a kind of gymnastic half-twist or somersault. When he landed back on the floor, he'd turn and look up at me as if to say, *What did you think of that? Now pay attention.* I couldn't help but stop, smile, and celebrate Muir's performance. It not only entertained me, but it got me out of my mindless rushing and mindfully back into the moment.

The last morning of Muir's life, my husband and I nestled him between us in bed, along with our other cat, Maya, gently stroking his fur, talking quietly and telling Muir stories to celebrate his feats and his love. A few hours later, there was a brief but awful moment of disbelief as my husband and I, and Maya, too, realized that was it. Muir struggled to breathe. I wrapped him snug in a blanket like a newborn and placed him in my husband's arms. They looked at each other, and then he left us.

Loss is the Swiss Army knife you never wanted.

Let's talk about the Swiss Army knife-like nature of loss. Loss can cut in so many not so handy-dandy ways. First, on a fundamental level, there are so many types of loss. There is the obvious one we're talking about here: the one you love is gone or leaving soon on their end-of-life journey.

Are there other kinds of losses? Yes! Marriages end. Children are consumed by addiction. Careers shift. Breasts get cancer and have to be removed. The childhood home is now an airport runway. Memories seep away. Chronic illness and aging change abilities. Violence rages against people of color, played again and again in the streets and on the television.

Losses often hit us all at once. In the last several months, as my husband's health declined, it's seemed our world was simply falling apart. The Prius' nifty hybrid battery died. The 18-year-old mesh deck chairs

suddenly ripped, one after another, my bottom surprised each time. A fascia board along the roofline of my home office crumbled at the touch of a hand, rot hidden beneath the paint. A hearty Himalayan rhododendron that's endured for years is now a collapsed withered presence, it's big, waxy, oval leaves, drooped and yellowing. Almost every day something has snapped, shattered, or sputtered to a stop. Do you know what I mean?

Let's also toss in a pandemic. In this moment as I write, everyone on this planet is feeling a range of losses or some sense of grief thanks to the invisible, uncontained spread of COVID-19. Who misses freedom and the ease of leaving the house for dinner with friends, the sight of a face without a mask, or an everyday hug? Out of habit, I still slide on lipstick before jumping in the now repaired car only to realize it will end up smeared inside my favorite dragonfly mask. Who knew I'd ever have a favorite face mask?

A donor I knew, originally from Sri Lanka, once told me that when your world is falling apart, it's because you need to be distracted while the heavenly creator is planning something wonderful for you. Well, there must be a dazzling, incredible, phenomenal future just around the corner. What do you think?

One loss is many losses.

Part of the confounding nature of loss is what I call its gopher effect. Have you ever looked out at your yard or city park and seen mounds of fresh dirt? Below the surface, those big-toothed, persistent rodents will tunnel through your landscape and pop up uninvited in both unpredictable and very predictable places. I've seen a pansy, its purple-yellow flower delicate as tissue paper, suddenly start vibrating, and watched as the stem, leaves, and blossom were slowly sucked into the ground, disappear-

ing. Sometimes after such a magic trick, the gopher will poke his furry face out of the hole, ever so briefly, part in curiosity and part in triumph.

Loss is something of a gopher in our lives. It's with you all the time, working below the surface, making itself known on its own schedule. Any attempt to route it out of your garden of grief and survival is limited, because at some point and then another and then another, loss will demand attention. Without a life-support system for working through loss, it can suck your fragile happiness down into a familiar dark hole.

One afternoon I ran into a neighbor, the two of us walking our one-lane road, socially distanced in this pandemic of course. She lost her husband about 16 months earlier, a kind, community-spirited man who didn't deserve the neurological disease that mangled his body in the three years before his death. Before we even said hello and how's COVID treating you these days, she blurted, "What are you supposed to do about birthdays and anniversaries?" Good question.

Every year specific dates are tied to love and loss. You not only have their birthday, now you have their death day, too.

Besides family- and faith-oriented holidays and the traditions that go with them, there are the milestones. There are wedding days, graduation days, First Communion or Bat Mitzvahs, the day she gave birth, the day he headed off to boot camp, retirement day, the day you summited the mountain together, the day you saw each other across the room, even the day you both lost someone else you loved and comforted each other.

For one donor that I used to work with, it was a day of the week, rather than a date, that initially haunted her, Tuesdays. During the near decade her husband, as she put it, "tangoed with cancer," there was always some sort of treatment or appointment on Tuesday. Her husband would be drained, no appetite, so she'd swing by one of the Mexican restaurants for a Taco Tuesday to-go order for her dinner. I asked her if she still likes tacos, and surprise, she said yes. While Tuesdays were tough, the tacos still

remind her of her husband, how they faced his illness together, and the way he kept his sense of humor through it all. “He called me his crunchy wife,” she said, grinning, “and I can still be her.”

There are all the big days you shared in the past, then all the big days in the future you won’t get to share. Loss has its seasons. As the calendar moves through its cycles, you’ll miss the one you love often, almost on schedule, especially in the first year or two. Each person we lose is so many losses in one—that’s another Swiss Army Knife-like feature of loss.

We need to build our own, unique Emotional Flak Jacket to get us through now and to spring into action when the gopher of loss pokes his head up in the future. Ideally, we should identify the meaningful dates and days before we’re there. For some of us, hanging on to old traditions, maybe even setting a plate at the holiday dinner table as some do, will be the best way to move forward and still hold on to the ones we’ve loved and lost. For others, those traditions will never feel right again, and an empty plate at the table would throw the day or the week into despair.

Fortunately, we are a creative species, and we can design and develop new traditions that bridge our former lives with our survivor selves.

Another of my donor acquaintances heads out to the beach every Christmas Day, first thing in the morning, where she talks to her long-gone and deeply adored daughter for a few minutes, sings “Here Comes Santa Claus” to the sea, then leaves a small feast of crab legs for the gulls. Her husband calls it a waste of good crab. Why does she do it? “If I can’t make Christmas breakfast for Sara, I’ll make it for the gulls she loved to chase as a child.”

Whether your first year or the second or the tenth after your loss will be most difficult is unique to each person and each loss. For some, getting through the first year means every holiday or anniversary is like a bomb. For others, the first year passes in such a blur of numbing transition, it’s the second year that’s a minefield. All I can say is when you are having

a pretty good moment, try to envision the critical dates and days you'll inevitably miss the one you love. Then plan for revising old or creating new rituals or traditions to soften and minimize the pain that will pop up.

Don't put it off, and don't get stuck in "I don't know how I'll handle that day" and just let it hit you like a tsunami. Somewhere between an empty plate and crab legs for seagulls, there's a way to maneuver through those special days emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually intact. Later we'll talk about Tiny-Come-Back-to-Your-Senses Rituals and Joy Habits, which can be helpful practices as part of that maneuvering.

There are a few other dates to plan for that can cause trouble in the midst of your loss and potentially magnify the depth of your grief.

For most of us born in the last millennium, 9/11 remains a sensitive date—a day of deep personal loss for many families and a communal loss for the rest of us. If you lived through World War II, then you also have December 7th, Pearl Harbor Day, as another solemn time. Those dates are layered with loss. A sense of being safe or secure was taken from us. We also lost the comforting illusion, at least for awhile, that death is far away. We saw how individuals went from breakfast to grave in an instant and realized the next time it could be us. Anyone alive and old enough to remember those dates knows exactly what they were doing and how they felt when the brutal news reached them.

Ironically, on September 11, 2001, part of my memory is waking up on the rug after sleeping on the floor with my tortoiseshell cat, Pumpkin, tending to her all night after what would turn out to be an unsuccessful surgery to remove cancer from her mouth. Her plump body grown thin, half of her face swollen and bandaged, she didn't move when I got up. After making a cup of tea, bleary-eyed, I turned on the television just after the first plane hit the first tower. Flame, smoke, chaos. I was living in Pennsylvania then, so the experience was in real time. In stunned confusion, I glanced down at Pumpkin, a limp purse of fur. When I looked

back up, the second plane slammed into the second tower. Bits of debris fell from the buildings, some of which turned out to be people, then each massive tower collapsed.

Did you feel as powerless that day as I did? September 11th will always bear the enormous loss of human lives compounded by the remembrance of my little cat's suffering and passing.

Death was unfolding all around me. Yet, as I stepped out onto the deck, it was the most beautiful, quiet fall morning. The sky was a deep, endless blue ocean above me, cloudless, dew glistened on ferns and leaves, and goldfinches, yellow as sun, partied at the birdfeeder as if nothing unusual was happening.

How can ugliness and beauty coexist in the same moment?

Eventually I learned to reframe that question into a statement: Ugliness and beauty coexist in every moment.

Those words remind me that in the midst of grief there is also joy. Sometimes you have a little work to do to bring the joy to into your life—that's what I want to help you do through this book. Please know joy is there with you, maybe you can't feel it yet, but it really is there.

Review:

Stepping Stones to Help You in Your Loss Journey



Though loss comes along and breaks your heart, it also opens new (if initially unwelcome) possibilities, including an ability to love in so many ways.



There's a difference between the facts of someone's death and the impact of their life in your life. Grief and mourning will usually be more challenging when a loved one played a large role in your day-to-day life.



Unspoken value systems can complicate your loss. People around you may view certain kinds of losses as more life-altering or grief-worthy than others. Loss is not a competition. Only you know the true depth and dimensions of your loss.



Other people will sometimes say stupid things. The vast majority of the time, they mean well. Let go of the of hurtful words and forgive them—you don't need to carry the extra weight of anger and disappoint.



Loss comes in many forms, beyond the death of a loved one, and can magnify your grief. By being aware of these other losses and tending to them, you'll have more stamina to your grief.



Loss has its own seasons. Loss pops up on key dates, specific days, holidays, and milestones. By deciding well in advance how you

will modify traditions or create new rituals, you'll limit the depth and duration of the darker grief emotions.



There's no antidote to missing the one you love. However, just as ugliness and beauty coexist in every moment, you can cultivate joy alongside the longing and hold that relationship in a new way in your life.





About the Author

During 25+ years as a philanthropic and end-of-life planning advisor, Kimberley's worked with incredibly diverse people looking for meaning after the loss of a spouse, partner, child, parent, or beloved animal to illness, accident, or traumatic death. Experienced with grief, she's an award-winning poet, author, and speaker on death & loss.

**Access additional ideas, strategies, & watch for
upcoming workshops & learning opportunities by visiting her at:**

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A Special Thank You

No one succeeds solo. This book was nurtured by talents literally from around the U.S. and the world, from Arizona to Michigan to Serbia to Argentina. I'm so grateful!

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Help this book reach others living with loss.

Please offer a review.



Thank you for reading this book.

I sincerely hope you found ideas, stories, and practices to support you
on your personal loss journey.

By leaving a review on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com),
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Thank you!

LOSS COMES ALONG. FIRST IT BREAKS YOUR HEART. THEN IT STAYS.

How do you live with loss without losing yourself?

Death happens. It touches those you love and changes your world in unimagined ways. While loss comes along with you for life, grief doesn't have to be forever.

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Through storytelling and simple practices, you'll take a break from grief, find new ways to hold on to the one you love, and design your life-support-system for living with loss. How? You'll harness the power of:

- *Telling your Loss Story & Setting a Feeling Intention*
- *Implementing Tiny-Come-Back-to-Your-Senses Rituals*
- *Building Joy Habits to Become the Next Version of You*
- *Creating Your Emotional Flak Jacket by Shifting Mindsets*

Grieving Us is an upbeat field guide for living your one-and-only, heart-broken-and-still-beautiful life.



About Kimberley Pittman-Schulz

During 25+ years as a philanthropic and end-of-life planning advisor, Kimberley's worked with incredibly diverse people looking for meaning after the loss of a spouse, partner, child, parent, or beloved animal to illness, accident, or traumatic death. Experienced with grief, she's an award-winning poet, author, and speaker on death & loss. Visit her at: PoetOwl.com





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