You Don’t Move On From Grief. You Learn to Live With It Transcript

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Introduction to Grief and the Podcast

One of the most profound changes that we experience any time in life is the loss of companionship of a loved one in our lives when they die. It strikes us in every dimension of who we are.

it's not just psychological, it is physical, social, spiritual. Losing your breath is like being hit by a major force or punched in the gut and you can't gasp for breath.

The weight of and the substance and significance of the event of someone's dying is larger than we anticipate and when it hits us as the whole persons we are and it just stops us in our tracks.

Welcome to this episode of the Think Well, Age Well podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Heather Sandison. And today's conversation is a little different from typical, and I think we've invited Tom Attick here for a really essential conversation.

We spend so much time in our world talking about how to protect the brain, how optimize cognition, extend not just lifespan, but brain span and health span.

And there's another part of the human experience that touches every single one of us, and that is loss. Whether it's the loss of a loved one, the gradual changes that come with aging, or the heartbreak that can accompany cognitive decline, of course, grief is woven into the fabric of our lives.

And yet many of are never taught how to navigate that. I'm really honored to be joined today by Tom Attig. He's a philosopher who's spent decades exploring the nature of grief, loss, and what it means to human in the face of both.

he's received multiple lifetime achievement awards in death education and bereavement and his work has helped shape how we understand grief. Not just as something to get over or get through, but as is something that we can grow within the process of.

His perspective is deeply intellectual, profoundly compassionate. And today I want to get into exploring grief, not just as a form of suffering, but as the process of relearning how to live life itself.

So if you've ever been in the position of supporting someone through loss, if he's experienced it yourself, or if your walking along someone with cognitive decline, I'm hopeful that this conversation will meet you in a meaningful place.

Tom, welcome. I am so grateful you're here. It's nice to be here and nice be asked. We think about grief as something, and I think you describe it as, something that can take our breath away.

How Grief Affects the Whole Person

What is happening at an emotional and physical level, physiological level when someone goes through those stages of grief, that experience of loss? One of the most profound changes that we experience anytime in life is the loss of the companionship of a loved one in our lives when they die.

It strikes us in every dimension of who we are. it's not just psychological, it is physical, social, spiritual. It's like losing your breath because it's being hit by a major force or punched in the gut and you can't gasp for breath.

The weight of and the substance and significance of the event of someone's dying is larger than we anticipate it's going to be and when it hits us as the whole persons we are and it just stops us in our tracks and part of what's

happening is that emotions are coming over us and, when emotions come over, us there is a kind of a myth that what we have to do is express them and I don't think that's what they have what they're crying for.

I think they are crying attention. You'll like this because you like things that are positive and experiences that help people contend with them. Just as physical pains aren't just for fun, teasing us about our knees or our lungs or back aches and so on, they're calling attention to something that needs attention.

And our emotions and other reactions to loss, a lot of people say what you have to do is express them. Now let's just echoing back to them what they're trying to say to you.

What you have to do is listen to then and see what their telling you about the ache in your soul, the pain in you spirit, your souls and spirits and they're saying, pay attention.

I'm calling your attention to something that needs attention, I'll get louder until you start paying attention I am not going to let you go. You need me, you need what I trying to say to you about what you have to do to take care of yourself, what do you to pause and reflect, to prepare yourself to move on in a new direction.

to reshape your daily life. A major player is no longer there. You have to work around that to redirect your life story because it's going to have a major character off the stage with you and you were expecting that he or she would be there and I think the really good news about this, it just occurred to me the other day when I was having a conversation, like this, but I've written about it before.

The good news is, what you're being asked to do by your emotions is what, you've been learning how to, do your entire life. My view is that grieving requires that we relearn how, to live in the world.

That's profoundly changed. Since we've been born, we have been learning how to live in the world. We've developing skills and attitudes and aptitudes and inclinations that take us on constructive paths into shaping our lives and directing our life through the history that is ours and ours alone to life.

So we've got a lot of experience in doing what grieving and grieving emotions are asking us to do. And if counselors and others, good friends or our own self-understanding can get us on track to realizing this isn't vastly unprecedented, this is the kind of stuff that your body, soul, spirit, all the dimensions of who you are, prepare you to do from the time you're just an infant.

How to respond to mom, dad when they're close by. how to engage with your brothers and sisters once you come to a point where you recognize that that's who they are.

Or you develop your physical skills and lots of other things before you developed your capacity to book learning. and so on. You learn how to be a little kid with other little kids, you learn to how be the child of parents, but you also learn about things that are okay to do and other things are troubling, things which are adventurous, and things you need to draw on all that you have learned in learning how live a life and learning to live the next chapters without someone who's just died.

And we're ready for that. We're equipped for it. The pain can be such that it's hard to reach through it to get to what we know, but it is there. Be assured.

You're not stuck in a place where all you get do is ache until the ache stops, and God, I hope it stops. What you do, is what carries you past the worst of the pain.

And the truth of the matter about grieving is also this, I'm just sort of rambling on here a little bit, but forgive me, the worst of pain you're gonna feel is usually at the beginning.

Listening to Emotions and Relearning Life

The first time you meet up with grandma and have to tell her that you were there when her son died, your father

and so on, that's the most awful. You're going to meet her again and again, and it will never be as bad as it was the first.

It tends to get better. So, the more you engage with what hurts you and trying to live your way through it, then more likely you'll be successful at doing that.

Pardon? That first morning you wake up, I think, and realize that, you know, in that dawn of realization that they're gone, that for me, been a big one.

I'm curious, I want to double click on this distinction between expressing the emotions and you said it's more about paying attention to what's coming up to the emotion.

Working to understand them. and seeking to understand them, would you kind of just describe in tangible terms, does expression mean crying? Does expression means giving voice to them versus you talk about living in a new world, living a different, I guess, environment without that person who you've lost and that adaptation, maybe is that part of what the attention piece is?

I think I'm not fully understanding or appreciating those distinctions. Well, they want your attention because they're telling you things that you need to understand.

And if you understand that, you'll need slow down and give yourself some time and maybe get some rest. That's part of the early… business of listening to and paying attention, as opposed to if the message is expressed, you would say, God, I'm tired.

I just don't know what to do. You can say that over and over, and you're not getting anywhere. If I am tired, my body is telling me to slow down and not do so much.

and give myself some breaks and take some time outs and ask people to give me more time to do what was the normal schedule for my getting things done.

in my life and lighten up on me at work for a while please if you can or in your family constellation if there are others there who are not as affected as deeply as you are and so on ask for some assistance or if a friend says I wouldn't like to just come over for cup of coffee I have a feeling it's hard for you to do some of the child raising or some house cleaning and other things that need to be done now.

Your heart is crying out to you to slow down and get some rest. I want to help you do that. It's more that kind of thing. Expressing it is just sort of blowing it off, screaming it out, writing it down, doing nothing with it.

using it, understanding it. Taking the advice that it's offering you, what it is crying for you to do seriously is what I have in mind. And in general, I had this idea that Up to maybe the early 80s, a few years after I was starting to do this stuff, the emphasis on responding to people in grief was thinking of grief as entirely what comes over us when someone dies, what happens to us, in effect what makes us passive.

It's the reaction to what's happening. We're not choosing to react that way. The reactions come over and we're passive, And in grieving response, we actively engage with, choose to do things in response to, begin reshaping our lives and our daily lives, and are a larger scale understanding of life and so on.

I've been sort of responding to my students from my first courses who described their three most important loss experiences and I read hundreds if not thousands of those things over a number of years and no one emphasized what was happening to them or talked about five stages of this happens, then this, happens then, this happened.

They were talking about, I don't know what to do with the stuff he left behind in the closet. I didn't how to talk to grandma now that her son, my father has died.

If I want to go to that church again, it's really hard for me to walk down the street toward downtown because it

reminds me of when mom Mom and I experienced this together on that street.

I don't know how to manage my money because she always did that. I remember I had one student who told me that his dad didn't die because he encountered him in the living room and he had a gun in his hand and was planning to kill himself.

And I wrestled the gun out of my father's hands. I mean, the variety of things that people wind up facing when someone dies is unlimited. The limitations are only what can people possibly care about doing.

Or what can people possibly care about saying? Well, whole lifetimes are filled with that. And in any way, or in many ways, things can become problematic.

To think in terms of five simple steps or five stages, distinguishing characteristics of lost experiences and so on, leaves you missing the details that mean everything to the people who are having the experiences.

And the best thing to do is to listen to what's happening with you and listen very carefully to they say and look for ways where you can help or be supportive.

This is much more active and active engagement with the process. Yeah. Many of our listeners are caregivers who have loved ones with cognitive decline.

We call, sort of term this, I guess, we bring it up as the micro griefs that show up really differently when the loss is gradual, right? It's that shift, that subtle shift at first where the partner becomes more of a dependent than a partner.

where you're having to remind someone to get in the car and what time appointments are over and over again, where they're unable to cook the way that they used to.

Can you talk about the difference in how grief shows up differently when that loss comes in that flavor? Whose loss are we talking about? The one who's gradually losing their wits or the caregiver or both?

I suppose both. Uh-huh. Well, I've been in that caregiver position a lot. My mother was one of nine and my dad was 1 of 10 and all but one on both sides married.

And I lost both my parents and the one grandparent that I knew. the 31 aunts and uncles that I know. And lots of them had varieties of dementia along the way, including my mother, not my father, my grandmother, several aunths and uncle.

So I've been there. I remember with my Mother, as she was slipping away in the last four or five years of her life, I used to call her regularly. We lived a couple of thousand miles apart.

Mom, how are you doing? Just fine. Who's calling, she says. I said, Philip. Tom, you're just kidding. Yeah, ya got me, mom. And when she didn't call me on using the wrong name, I knew she'd moved into a different place.

When I didn' call her, identifying myself as Philip anymore, because she was incapable of identifying her son with his real name.

Grief in Cognitive Decline and Caregiving

That requires a lot of patience, developing and growing in understanding, finding ways of continuing to do things with them that aren't the elaborate scale that they once were.

I remember her last birthday party. We sang together in the restaurant. My uncle Billy got a standing ovation. He sang Alexander's Ragtime Band with a Polish accent.

The people in the restaurant gave him a standing ovation when all done. Well, mom was entertained by her brother

singing in a restaurant in ways she never would have been entertained.

Had she not been into a bit of Alzheimer's, I would've been embarrassed, embarrassing for her. It wasn't that way. And you just learn what's gonna work for and what isn't, and you don't get to control.

In most circumstances, you didn't have the right to really try to control anybody, but you might ask people to shift how they're behaving and so on. You do less of that because they are less able to adapt in certain ways, or if you're going to do it, it's on the spectrum of what they were able do, so they can feel good about making the adjustment, and I remember in that last birthday party, We went back to the nursing home where she was living and they had set a room aside for us that was pretty substantial in size and the new mom well and what would please her and so on.

So we had a little bit of extra snack in there and then they blew up a bunch of balloons. And for the last half hour of my mother's birthday party, we hit balloons in the air and she laughed at every hit.

And we were all enjoying it because she was enjoying so much as opposed to, oh, poor mom, look at her pathetic thing and so on. Those thoughts weren't there.

It was, well, let's give her a good hit in this way and that. Let's watch what she can do. Watch how she picks things up and just listen to her laughter.

And she was laughing. So it was obviously fine. Uh, and we enjoyed that time being sort of like at a one or two year old level. with her in terms of the activity we were in, but it was mom and a couple of her kids, mom, and the couple over brothers and sisters and so on.

And if she needed some kind of help, if you needed something to drink or food, things were covering her face because she's been laughing so much and she started to drool or whatever.

Well, go over and just kind of give her a chance to wipe it off herself, adapt to what she's able to do and respond to her heart to heart. More the way you would a two or three year old child at that point.

There were points of having conversations, but you really had to moderate the level at which you were talking and refrain from asking sort of multivariate questions that she's not capable of answering anymore.

And you could try out Philip on her one more time just to see how she'd respond. That's how your son Philip always behaved. Oh, yeah, no, don't call yourself that.

tangible examples of relearning. How to look at life, how to a partner or parent who is going through the cognitive decline process. And I think you mentioned patience.

For many caregivers, it feels overwhelming. You distinguish between problems and mysteries. And I think that that distinction helps with the overwhelm.

How does it shift and help people relate to grief differently from your perspective? Well, I, think what you're asking me about is my views about challenges in living.

difficulties we encounter. And we have within us what I would call ego. I think of ego as our very practical selves, down to earth, and there are problems which are finite challenges, clearly definable and clearly manageable, like putting the dishes back on the shelf, cleaning the dish, buying the groceries, getting the tire fixed because it's got a hole in it, painting a wall, bathing a child, changing the sheets, putting together a grocery list and going to the store and ticking off the items on a list.

Those are all manageable, finite, circumscribable, solvable, challenges. There are other things that challenge us in life where, in response, we don't get to change the world.

We change in the faces of the face of this world that it presents to us. For example, How about life itself? There's a mystery. It's massive, multi-dimensional, shows you a new face almost every time you think about it.

You never finish with it, you never control it You never master it. Every time you think you've got a really good angle on it, it shows you a new face, makes you adjust yet again.

Among mysteries, I think of things like life itself, death, suffering, change, impermanence, uncertainty, We don't finish with any of these things. We change in response to them.

we respond to then rather than control them and make them respond us. I think it's very important to help people understand that learning how to live is not just the practical learning to do the little tricks of housekeeping or scoring well on tests at school or learning drive or how learning change a child's diaper and so on.

Raising a children is a matter of engaging with this mystery that is this human being that's more complex than anything you're ever going to completely understand.

And if you pretend to control it, you're an idiot. That's just not what raising a child is about. And people try to do that. I think a basic kind of mistake in living is to treat as problems things that are deeper and more complex and unending.

It will come back to you again in a different light kind experiences.

Problems vs. Mysteries in Living

I think problem solving is stuff that we all do on a pretty simple level and the kind of thing that sophisticated managers and engineers do, on very complex levels and scientists do it.

But I thinking engaging with mysteries, like life itself, death, uncertainty, being finite and small and so on, are things that require a different kind We don't live more or less scientifically.

We live, more less wisely. And it's a different kind of study that enables you to gain insights about how to engage with something as complex as the mysteries that I've been talking about.

There is a discipline that i happen to indulge in, in my training, and it is called philosophy. By definition, it s the love of wisdom. I think part of my calling is to invite the world to remember that a lot of what they're dealing with in the area of death and dying, grief and loss, is mysteries.

And just as we never finish loving, we've never finished learning. how to live with mysteries. It's an ongoing thing and you can think through your middle ages that you understand perfectly well how live in a family and how do engage with everybody who's there and so on.

And then there's this mystery called Alzheimer's that comes into people's lives. that has dimensions that you haven't engaged with very much before and will always show you something new.

And you have to get used to living at a different pace in the light of different kinds of challenges that don't go away. It's not so much the problem solving, it's the engaging with the mysterious directions these loved ones of yours seem to be taking now and you want to still love them.

But that loving requires some wisdom and adapting to what's possible and what is no longer possible. And Alzheimer's and other dementia sufferers will present new faces to you as long as they live.

It requires patience, it requires cleverness, Good, good hearted motivation requires learning new sets of skills you never thought you were going to have because dad always did this.

Well, dad's not doing that anymore. Or the way he does it is maybe objectionable or offensive or too rich to be

believed. So you have to learn to. Kind, welcoming, open, honest.

I don't know. I'm pretty sure I can't do this alone anymore. I've got to find people who will help me and cooperate with me in my family. This has taken on too much for our family, and we would enjoy being with Grandpa more if we could be there confident that others are taking care of some of the really tough stuff so that we can have the enjoyable stuff, the loving stuff and the funny stuff.

for the most part. I mean, we'll do our parts to care, but the really hard caregiving, I'm not a nurse, so I am not social worker, or a minister, and there are things happening here I want help with.

and families need that and individuals need it. Especially I think solo partners need. If you're the only one at some point, I'd think before it gets too bad, speaking with the one who's starting down the road about, you know, at one point I'm going to need some help or we're going with managing this.

Let's talk about it now while we can. And while when it gets so it's hard for you to participate in the discussion, you're still invited, but let's have done some planning ahead of time.

Does this all make sense? Absolutely. Yeah, I think it sounds like it's a curiosity and then a creativity. And I, think a lot of what you come back to is this active nature.

But I also hear a theme around a resistance versus surrender, maybe to the mystery. What about grief might be trying to show us what we tend to resist?

Well, I think there's… I've probably already made this point. I have met people and I actually sat in conversations with people who insist on staying in very dark, sad places because they… I've spoken with them and they've said things like, if we stop feeling sad, it's like we're not loving Dad anymore.

Our sadness pays tribute to him or her and so on. And I've had discussions where wouldn't it be better to pay tribute. To the love that you've heard by becoming the person he or she wanted you to be.

I doubt that any of you had a relative who died before you, who told you explicitly. I hope you you writhe in agony over my death after I've died. Nobody wants that.

What they want from you is that you remember them, that value what they've taught you about living, and that they value other gifts that You've given to them including hope, inspiration, direction, guidance.

We have everything from persons who've die, except what requires their physical presence. And when people think, just a few simple questions, the two of you, or two us, I see two people on screens, are talking to one another.

I do this with whole groups of people in classrooms and other places. How many of you in the room brought everybody you love and care about with you to this meeting today?

They're in this studio with and they're across the rooms from me here. Did anybody do that? No one ever raises their hand. Well then, on certain ways of understanding things, you must stop loving them.

Did that happen? When you came to the studio today, when I came downstairs to talk with you, I didn't have the experience of, God, i've left all the people I love behind.

… Did you stop lovin' them when you left them? No….. Did they stop love you when they left today? where you left. No. What does that mean? Here you are, separate from these people.

And you're loving them. doesn't require their physical presence. Only a very few things really require physical presents.

Resistance, Love, and Sorrow-Friendly Practices

The people we care about the most, our best friends, life partners, children, parents, and so on, most of the time through a whole lifetime, they're apart from you more than they are with you.

It would be pretty bizarre seeing clusters of people not leaving one another for the sake of, you've got to be together if you're going to continue loving.

Families would be smaller among other things. Anticipation of shared experience. Maybe it's what the grief is. But you have said that even in brokenness, we can draw upon what is not broken.

And maybe this is that hopeful idea, right? That we could be apart, but still maintain love. Still maintain that impact that they had on us when they were living.

We're really good at that. Yeah. Yeah, we have the skills for that because we do it every day. Yeah. And I think when you help people, I know it's worked for me when I've helped people.

Just let's think together for a moment. How would your dad want you to be carrying on with your family now that he's not here? Well, are you able to do that?

What's it like when do you do do? I know dad's not here and that's always going to hurt. You'll always miss him. But if he taught you how to teach your kids to play ball or be responsible with their schoolwork or learn a craft or how learn how play a musical instrument or whatever, next time you play it, think of dad telling you, do it this way.

And you can appreciate him appreciating that about you. again. And you can feel touched by Him and encouraged by him because you still are. You haven't lost that.

It just don't get to hear him whining about it again." This sounds like this kind of goes into these sorrow-friendly practices. So for someone who feels that they're deep in that sorrowful space, what can help?

What tangible things might people do to move through the grief rather than fight it? Well, I think what I mean by sorrow-friendly practices are practices that enable people to hear what their emotions and grieving responses are telling them about who they are and what they need.

And I think the best example is two people talking together the way we have been this morning. I'm going to tell you about my grief. Let's see what you have to say about it.

Some people do that with friends and relatives and so on rather easily. some people don't know a person they would be comfortable sharing some things with.

So they approach professional counselors or they go to support groups, mutual assistance, kind of things where people in similar life circumstances speak to one another about what it's like for a parent whose child has died or what is like a child whose father has die or spouses and so on.

And in a similar lives experiences people often find it that they get some of the best advice from people who are experiencing the same thing in their life circumstances, different enough so there might be something that comes up that lights a spark in you, because it hadn't occurred to you but it occurred Yes.

I remember early guests in my classes included pairs of parents whose children had died and they couldn't find any professional who was really prepared to help them.

They wound up talking in some situation and I said, you know, we could get together on a regular basis. And there might be some other people down at the church.

We could have a bereaved parents group and mutual help. is wonderful. You're in a room where you're confident

that they've had experiences similar enough to yours that you might want to know what they can tell you about how it's been for them and what their trying to do and the other way around.

I talked about and I've written about taking advantages of participating in rituals of one sort. I've talked about meditating on one's emotions so you hear what they're saying deliberately and maybe record.

Um, I heard about sort of physical practices that people engage in. during which things will occur to them that otherwise wouldn't occur. You can get involved in massage.

My wife had one of the most effective massage therapists she ever had. In engagement with her, she just asked questions about, you know, what's this kink in the middle of your back?

What's that about? You know, when I rub it a little bit, what comes to mind? And things surface and your body speaks your emotions into the world, if you allow it, and sophisticated hearers can help in lots of ways.

You can lean into our religious faith, you can engage in a prayer practice, You Can Engage in Meditative Practices. One of the loveliest experiences I've had some experience with is taking seriously experiences that people inclined to dismiss, including experiences of believing you've just seen a dead person or heard a voice or received a signal from and so on.

I had a friend, what's his name? I can't think of his He's written five books where he became a radio personality at night, after midnight, and people would call in of their stories about encountering someone who had died in one way or another.

And he just called them extraordinary experiences and they're multivariate. I mean, they were really quite different, distinctive person to person almost.

He said, Take them seriously. Listen to what they have to say. If you really don't like what their saying, or think it's inappropriate and so on, you are not committed to take what you have say seriously, but lots of times they say wonderful things.

Like, they remember in your ear something about you and wanted you to know about it. Or they're trying to tell you that they are in a better place. They're in wonderful place, don't worry about me.

Uh, or just express something that's soothing and reassuring or even directive that a person can take away from the experience. And to say, oh, that is just superstition or you were having a dismissible dream or whatever you could be turning your back on gold.

Don't do that. Cultivate a practice of taking it seriously. A prayer practice can be wonderful in all kinds of traditions. So I've got this list of 12 or 15 sorrow-friendly practices.

And the basic idea is to take seriously what, if I'm right about it, they don't just want to be expressed. They want it to understood. Taking seriously, understanding what your experiences are telling you.

And I thought it was going to be a little book at one time. It never became a book, so I just made it a chapter in the book that's just come out. I'm curious if there was a moment in your life, thank you for what you've already shared about your personal experience with your mom especially, was there a moments in life that led you to choose this as your work?

There's just not. There is just a flood of such experiences. I told you of the large families. Well, in the time when I was growing up, people tended not to be able to go to distant funerals.

And my families were spread out in Midwest all the way to the West Coast. So from the times, I can remember this, from when was four or five years old, My dad's family was 20 years older than my mother's.

So they started getting older sooner and they starting dying. And some of them work on farms and farm work is hazardous. Instead of going to a funeral, we frequently received a long letter about what had happened to cousins so-and-so or uncle so and so or whatever.

It would come to my father and mother. but my brother and I were growing up. My brother was nine years older than I was, so I the little guy.

Tom Attigu2019s Path to Grief Work

And when a letter like that would come, my dad was always quiet and so on. Mom just decided she would read the letters. So from the time I as four or five years old, letters would coming in, and there'd be three or four pages of this is what happened to Aunt Irma, this what happen to Uncle Ed, This is What Happened to Cousins, So and So, in detail.

I remember one cousin who I met. He came through, he worked on a farm. he was in a combine accident and lost half of one of his arms. Well, that's a sobering letter to hear.

And then he came and met, we met him and he had half an arm missing. Later, He was combined to death and I read the story of that. Okay, I've heard the story of that.

And if in my mother's family, we lived in the Chicago area surrounding my grandmother, if someone got seriously ill, they were in a hospital. My mother first instinct was bring the kids to the hospital to meet aunt so-and-so or uncle so and so, and spend the day with a dying person.

All right. Then I went to my first funerals and was helped and supported in doing that sort of thing. Those were early experiences that set me quite apart.

And I think when I was in my teens, all kinds of things were happening in person's lives. There was a sense, I'd think, that you can talk to Tom. He's a good listener.

And then I wanted to be a teacher all my life, but I never thought I'd teach about death and dying. But I got into philosophy, which was good and kind of disposed me to think of matters of the nature of different kinds of experiences in studying phenomenology, Which teaches you to describe and interpret experiences, significant human experiences including those of mortality and around ethical issues and existentialism which taught me to think seriously about the struggle to live meaningfully and with integrity a finite life, which is a mortal life and so on.

And I was teaching these things and at the college where I teaching they developed the College of Health and Human Services and my colleagues were teaching applied philosophy courses And I thought, I could probably teach a course on death and dying.

I'd thought it was going to be about ethics. And then as I got the approval and then had the approved to go ahead and teach, we're not going be talking so much about ethical issues.

These people are going going working as nurses and social workers and gerontologists and so on. aren't going to know what I know about how to go in a room with someone who's died.

How to listen to someone whose grieving. And I thought I've got to leave philosophy, I have got find out about sociology and psychology and become a one-man band in this multidisciplinary stuff.

But then I wound up in my classes starting to talk about philosophy and it turned out to be home territory for me. And then I did this little exercise, tell me about your three most important loss experiences.

If it's around death, talk about them. if not, pick out another one or two. Nobody ever talked about five stages. They always talked that diverse stuff that I mentioned before.

How do I deal with this in the world, or that in my personal relationships, as I look to my future, and so on. And I came back one day after listening to these things for a long time and I said, You know, you guys never talk about stages of grief.

You never talked about a number of other things in literature. But every one of you is telling me something about how your world has changed and you've got to learn how to live with that, live without change.

Does it make sense to think of grieving as a process of relearning how live in the world? And they all go, that's it, not that other stuff. That's what this is like.

So for someone listening today who is in the grief process, whether it's a recent loss or something that they've maybe carried for years, what would you most want them to hear?

Is it that? Oh, as a way of understanding what they're experiencing, yeah, that's it. And as ways of understand where you can go in grieving, I think the core transition is from loving people in their physical presence to loving them in absence.

That's the hardest thing. It's at the heart of it. If you manage to do it, you get to the best place on the other side. And I think that the more you can move away from the anguish of missing someone to being grateful for all they have given and still give you, that's best.

Hope and gratitude are the two things to aspire to. And I think we're all trained in learning how to live a life to do those things. And if you can do them together, you get to a pretty good place.

Tom, thank you. This is such a meaningful and important conversation. And I think what I'm taking away is a gentle but powerful reframe that grief isn't something we need to fix or rush through, but something that asks us to slow down and to be patient and relearn how to live in the world.

We'll never stop missing them and we'll ever stop loving them. It changes, it transforms. Thank you for bringing so much depth and humanity and grace and wisdom and philosophy to this conversation.

For everyone who is listening, if this episode resonated with you, consider sharing it with someone who might need it.

Core Lessons: Loving in Absence and Closing Remarks

These are conversations that help us feel a little less alone. Thank you, Tom, for being here and until next time. Oh, thank you. Tom please share Seeking Wisdom in Death, Death's Shadow.

Would you please show where people can find your book? I'm hoping. that Heather can help you find the book. We will put the links on the show notes. Is it available where books are sold?

Yeah, my publisher, Oxford, has offered a 30% discount on that book, and the information about getting it will be in your mentor's or inspirer's hands.

It's the best thing I've ever done and it's a lifetime of my reflection all gathered together from early ways of putting things to growingly maturing understandings and A fellow who I thought of as one of the best fellows in the field, his name is Bob Niemeyer, he edits a couple of journals and he's just brilliant.

He calls me his teacher and calls that book a masterpiece. What a privilege. Well, Tom, thank you for your work in world. It is such a priviledge having you here today.

We'll make sure everyone knows where to find the book. Thank you. If you enjoyed today's conversation, please take a moment to subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with someone you care about.

It's one of the best ways to help others discover tools and inspiration for aging well. To stay connected, get bonus resources and never miss an episode, head over to drheathersanderson.com and join my email list.

Until next time, keep thinking well and aging on purpose.