

SUSAN CAIN

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

Quiet

Bitter- sweet

HOW SORROW

and LONGING

MAKE US WHOLE

CROWN

Bittersweet

not unlike the way I'd felt before the Leonard Cohen memorial concert. I had no idea that I was about to answer my decades-long question about my mother—but also to explore a much larger question of bittersweetness: how to transform the sorrows and longings we inherit from the generations who came before us.

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We meet in a bright, airy room that doubles as a yoga studio—folded blankets and foam blocks fill the shelves—but today a full-body skeleton stands propped at the front, alongside a small wooden table holding a votive candle and a whiteboard that says: “To understand death is to understand life!”

Dr. Simcha Raphael, a psychotherapist, a “death awareness educator,” and the founding director of the Da’at Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training, sits expectantly by the skeleton. Simcha, who invites us to call him by his first name, seems a cross between an Orthodox rabbi and an old-school California hippie, with a salt-and-pepper beard, navy blue suit, and skullcap, but also a stud earring, silver pendant, and cowboy boots. His speech is a mix of Talmudic cadence and the quick-witted patter of a Borscht Belt comedian. He was “pickled in the brine of grief,” he tells us, having weathered the deaths of many close friends and family members when he was young. But he believes that between this world and the next is a window, not a wall, and that our “death-phobic” society stops us from seeing this.

There are eight of us in the workshop, our chairs arranged in a circle, and Simcha invites us to share our personal experiences with death. One of the first to speak is Maureen, who describes herself as “tough Irish.” Maureen comes across as

competent, sensible, and cheery. She speaks glowingly of her daughter and husband, with whom she’s celebrating a fifteenth wedding anniversary tonight. She has short, straight hair, and she’s wearing glasses, running shoes, and a name tag with a smiley face. In a clear, assertive voice, hands resting at her sides, Maureen tells her story.

“I always start out with what I do, because that’s the safest place for me to go. I’m a medical social worker. I’m comfortable helping people face their own deaths, and *to the core*,” she says with grim emphasis, “I’m afraid of my own. My father died when I was fourteen, and my mother didn’t allow us to grieve. When I started to cry at the funeral, my mother gave me a furious look.” Maureen reproduces the look with what I guess is perfect mimicry, the corners of her mouth turned down in stern disapproval.

“My sister lost her hair from the grief,” she continues. “I cried a lot, but never dealt with it. I found a friend who was a father figure, and then that friend committed suicide. Later, I became an alcoholic, and had relationships with abusive men. I’ve had several abortions, and believe I’m going to hell. I’ve been sober for fourteen years. I’ve poured myself into my work, so that I can make restitution for the lives I’ve taken. So I could somehow lend support to others, where support was not to be had for myself.

“I want to grieve my own terrible mistakes,” Maureen adds quietly. “I want to learn to heal that pain, and to ask for forgiveness. How can I forgive myself? If I can do that, it would set me free to help other people.”

Simcha listens intently throughout. “I see two things,” he says gently. “One, your mother taught you very well to shove your feelings under the rug. Your story is very painful, but if I replayed a video clip of what you just told us, with the sound

off, you could be talking about a trip to the Caribbean or a meal you just ate. So, thank you, Mom, but you can have that one back. Two, I see a yearning for healing, and to remove the judgment of yourself. We have to get rid of those three words: *my terrible mistakes*."

He asks the rest of us to pay attention to what happens when we hear someone's painful story. Do we take it on as our own? Yes. My detachment is crumbling; I feel something coming undone as I listen to Maureen.

Then Simcha asks whether we're judging ourselves: "Are you thinking that 'she had a four-tissue story and I only have a two-tissue story'?" Yes, that, too. I'm relieved to see others laughing with relief at Simcha's question. I wish that I didn't have to tell my story at all; it feels so thin compared with Maureen's.

But refusing to speak feels wrong, ungenerous. When my turn comes, I talk about my mother—of our great rift when I was a teenager, of feeling, back then, that I'd killed her spirit. I describe how my mother grew up in the shadow of her own mother, and a father whose entire family was being slaughtered, in real time, across the ocean.

And as I speak, the old tears come; I should have known they would. I'm crying like it's a four-tissue story, a seven-tissue story, I'm crying like it's a story of a thousand tissues and still there wouldn't be enough tears. Here's Maureen, whose father *actually* died when she was a teenager, and whose life unraveled as a result, and I'm crying more than she did. I'm sure that Simcha wouldn't want us to compare griefs, but I feel ridiculous.

Simcha isn't judging me, though, and as far as I can tell, neither is the group. "I hear that there's not been a full and healthy individuation," he tells me. "So, part of you is still stuck at sixteen, where you're still wanting to stay bonded to

your mother. Where you had to say, I can either be an individual, or feel loved, but I can't be both."

He's right, of course; I've known this for a long time. But then Simcha says something else: that I'm carrying not only my own grief; I'm carrying my mother's grief, too, and the grief of her mother and father, and their mothers and fathers. I'm carrying the grief of the generations.

He asks me my sign. I'm not an astrology type, but I go with it, tell him I'm a Pisces. "You're permeable," he says, nodding. "It's hard for you to know what's yours, and what belongs to other people. To the people who came before you."

"But you can keep the connection to the generations alive," he adds, "without holding on to their pain."

I have a shock of recognition, as I realize—these strange tears, the ones that appear out of nowhere, like a mugger at a street corner—I've had these tears all my life, had them long before the troubles with my mother. They came at farewell moments, such as the last day of summer camp at age ten, even though I was ambivalent about camp and glad to go home; I remember feeling mystified by them even then. The tears didn't seem to match the circumstances, except in some cosmic way I couldn't put my finger on.

We have almost no aunts, uncles, cousins in my family of origin; most everyone on both my mother's and father's side was killed in the Holocaust, in their place a century-old sepia photo of vanished relatives I've wondered about since I was a child—a group of men, women, elders, children staring somberly into the camera. Their unsmiling expressions were the fashion in European photography of the 1920s, when the picture was taken, but it had always seemed to me that they were anticipating their fate—as, indeed, some of them had.

In 1926, when my grandfather was a promising seventeen-

year-old rabbinical student, he and his father spent all the money they had for train tickets from Bezuch, their small Polish village, to a city called Stanislaw, to hear a lecture by a leading thinker who predicted what was to come. "Polish Jews," the speaker had prophesied, "there are two giants: Russia, and Germany. These two giants are competing for hegemony, for mastering the world. They keep on heating the furnaces where they burn and prepare ammunition and bullets and all kinds of vessels for destruction, and they will eventually collide with one another. And you, Polish Jews, will be in the middle of it. You are condemned to be ground to ashes. May I offer you one word of advice: Escape. Run as fast as you can. I am urging you, I am urging you, with all the power in my voice and in my mind: Escape. Run away from here, because otherwise you will be turned into ashes."

The following year, my grandfather left for America on his own, sponsored by the parents of a bride he'd never met—my maternal grandmother. He intended to bring his family as soon as he could. But he lived in poverty, in a tiny Brooklyn apartment, had nothing to give them, nowhere to house them. The Stanislaw prophecy was always in his mind, but who knew how real or imminent the threat really was? He waited a little longer, a little longer, and in the meantime, his family was ground to ash. Just as the speaker had predicted.

To the congregation he served for fifty years, my grandfather was the twinkly-eyed rabbi with the lilting voice, sympathetic presence, philosophical bent, and delighted laugh. He knew the Talmud by heart; he was the leader of prayers, the shepherd of souls. To my mother, he was all these things, and a deeply devoted father besides. To me, he seemed in this world but not of it, like a character in a magic-realist tale. He carried the scent of an ancient library, as if he'd emerged, genie-like,

from the stacks of old books that filled his small apartment. He was one of my favorite people in the world.

But he was also the man who never forgave himself for his family's destruction, who sighed his way through the afternoons, who almost a century after the trip to Stanislaw wept on his deathbed for the parents he left behind. My grandfather commanded the respect of the dominant types of his community, but his heart was with the lost souls. They gathered in his living room and walked with him to synagogue. "*Oy, nebach*," he would often say, in Yiddish, with a great big sigh, as he recounted to my mother the misfortunes of this or that member of his congregation. *Oy, nebach* means "that poor soul." It's one of the few Yiddish expressions I know, conveyed when I was a little girl playing in the kitchen as he talked to my mother, and I heard him say it in every conversation. *Oy, nebach*, the caption of my childhood.

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Did these historical events somehow transmit to me, did they contribute to my mystery tears, as Simcha now suggests? And if so, by what mechanism—was the transmission cultural, familial, genetic, was it all three? We'll explore these questions in this chapter. But we'll also ask another question. If our task, as the bittersweet tradition teaches, is to transform pain into beauty, *can we do this not only with the pain of the present, and of our own personal pasts, but also with the pain of the ages?*

You may not have a dramatic story of inherited sorrow; your family's history may not be written into the better-known catastrophes of the past few centuries. But chances are that some of your ancestors were serfs or slaves; even if they were kings

"But it's a matter of choosing your attitude to the legacy you're given. There has to be a reason—a meaning for why we survived, and others didn't."

This, of course, is the heart of meaning-centered psychotherapy, or meaning-centered anything. The death sentence has come (it was always here, from the moment we were born). And what do you live for then?

"I love everything about life," Breitbart says, his voice growing louder now. "Familial love, parental love, spousal love, lust. I love beauty, I love fashion, I love art, I love music, I love food, I love plays, I love drama, I love poetry, I love movies. There are very few things I don't have an interest in. I love being alive." He's gesturing widely, at the window, at the pouring, driving rain.

"But even with all these loves," he says, "you're born with a set of limitations: your genetic legacy, your time, your place, your family. I could have been born a Rockefeller, but I wasn't. I could have been born into a family living in a remote tribe where I thought God was a blue elephant, but I wasn't. You're born into this reality: that life is full of dangers, it's an uncertain place. Events occur—you have an accident, someone shoots you, you develop an illness. All sorts of things happen. You have to respond."

"And the big event that I now deal with every day is the diagnosis of life-threatening cancer. That really knocks you off your life trajectory. The challenge is—how do you transcend this new trajectory? Your responsibility is to create a life of meaning. Of growth, and transformation. It so happens that very few people grow from success. People grow from failure. They grow from adversity. They grow from pain."

After that fateful meeting with his first patient—the chemist who saw no reason to live—Breitbart sat down with one of his

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postdoc fellows, Mindy Greenstein, and they cobbled together the first version of meaning-centered psychotherapy. The protocol they developed was based on the idea that we all have two existential obligations. The first is simply to survive. But the second is to create a life worth living. If on your deathbed you look back and see a life lived fully, you feel peace. People who believe that they didn't do enough with their lives too often feel shame. But the key to fulfillment, says Breitbart, is learning to love who you *are* (which is unconditional and unceasing) rather than what you've *done*.

One of the most important aspects of the therapy they developed focuses on core being: on the things that make you you. When you're diagnosed with cancer, you can feel robbed of your identity. But the job of the meaning-centered therapist is to listen for the essence of the person that's still there. Maybe all your life you were a *caregiver*, and now you find yourself in the uncomfortable position of having to *receive* care. But the therapist might notice that you're still going out of your way to make him or her feel comfortable. You're still asking "How are you?" *You're still a caregiver*. The idea is not to paper over your loss, which might be of cataclysmic proportions. The idea is smaller than that, yet also grander: that after all the grief and loss and disruption, you are still—you always will be—exactly who you are.

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Soon after Simcha's bereavement seminar, I talked with him on the phone. I was wrestling with a practical question. I still felt embarrassed by the way I'd cried at his workshop, especially compared to Maureen and her four-tissue loss. And I was concerned that I might do it in public next time, on the publicity

tour for this book. "I don't usually go around weeping, the way I did that day," I told him. "I'm a pretty happy person—I think of myself as a happy melancholic. But I'm writing about my relationship with my mother. Maybe someone will ask me about her on national radio, and what if I lose it in front of ten thousand people?"

"I don't know if you ever fully empty the well," Simcha said thoughtfully. "But ask me this question after you finish the book. Because writing the manuscript is part of the process of working it through. By the time you're done writing, the grief may subside."

And this is exactly what happened. For me, writing this book was yet another act of transforming the sorrow and longing of the past into the wholeness of the present. And I'm not worried about my book tour anymore.

But what about you? Do you feel the tug of an ancient grief, and if so, what connection could you make with your forebears that might help put it to rest? You don't have to write a whole book. Maybe you could ask your parents to tell you their stories, as Dar Williams described in her song "After All." Maybe you'll send a paper lantern down a river, as some Japanese do to honor their dead, or set out favorite foods on designated days, as some Mexicans do to celebrate theirs. Maybe, via therapy, you'll start to notice and make space for the transgenerational patterns you've inherited, as Yehuda's client did with her shock absorber metaphor. Maybe you'll travel across the world to the place where your ancestors' pain began, as Jeri Bingham did at Gorée Island in Senegal. Maybe you'll find ingenious new ways to help those who suffer today from pains that remind you of the ones that troubled your parents or ancestors, as Farah Khatib does with her refugee work and Breitbart with his meaning-centered therapy for cancer patients. And maybe,

as Simcha said, you won't ever fully empty the well; and this is all right, too.

But there's one more thing we can all do, even as we seek out and honor our parents' stories, our ancestors' stories. *We can set ourselves free from the pain:* We can see that our forebears' stories are our stories, but they're also not our stories. We may have inherited an echo of our ancestors' torment, but it was not our flesh burned in the ovens; we may have inherited their grief, but it was not us torn naked from our children. The tears they shed ran down their cheeks, not ours, just as their accomplishments were earned by them, even if we may have inherited some of their stature.

It's easier to see this when we look forward. Our stories will inevitably become our children's stories, but our children will have their own stories to tell; we *want* our children to tell their own stories; we wish them that freedom. We can wish the same for ourselves. "Live as though all your ancestors were living again through you," said the ancient Greeks. And this didn't mean literally to reenact their lives; it meant to give them a new life, fresh and clean.

How many times have you heard, from someone whose parent died young: I am now the age my mother was when she got the diagnosis. My father was an alcoholic: I don't want to be like him. Such declarations echo the ancient proverb quoted in Ezekiel: "The fathers ate sour grapes, and the children's teeth were set on edge." *But the Bible quotes this proverb in order to reject it:* We aren't responsible for the sins of our parents, it says. And neither must we bear their pain. This doesn't mean turning our backs on our forebears. We can send our love back to them, across the centuries. But on their behalf and ours, we can follow the bittersweet tradition, and transform their troubles into something better.