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## lessons in grief

IT WAS A TYPICAL AFTERNOON in the family's bustling apartment. One-year-old Henry was dancing in the living room to the Monkees' tune "I'm a Believer," and Lucy, his four-year-old sister, sat laughing beside him. Emily was straddling several rooms, tending to her two younger children in one room, doing laundry, helping six-year-old Hannah with her art creation, and making dinner at the same time. The phone rang. Emily smiled when she heard Hannah answer it. She listened to her daughter respond, simply and politely, "No, I am sorry. He is not here and he is never coming back. You're welcome. Good-bye."

Emily stopped in her tracks. She realized the caller's question must have been something along the lines of, "Hi, can I speak with Andrew please?"

*No, I am sorry. He is not here and he is never coming back.*

That is this family's plight. Andy, like many others, was not lucky enough to arrive late for work that dreadful morning. He did what he always did: got up early to exercise, went back home to help with the kids, then left with enough time to arrive at his job by 7:30 a.m. When that ill-fated plane hit the tower in which he worked, Andy called Emily to tell her he loved her. The only thing she could say at the moment was "Andy, get the hell out of there!" Emily never heard from her husband again.

I didn't know Emily and Andy well before September 11, 2001. They were members of my synagogue in New York City, a congregation of almost two thousand families. In congregations of that size, it is unfortunate but often true that clergy don't necessarily get to know families in an intimate manner unless there is a good reason. So I had seen Emily and exchanged pleasantries before September 11, but the first time I really met her was when I showed up at her apartment on September 12. I did not call in advance, and I was honestly frightened out of my mind. There was no training that prepared me for this type of thing. When I entered her apartment, many of her friends were there. People were bustling around making meals, hugging, making sure the children had

playdates, and trying to maintain some semblance of balance in the home. At that point, the whole world knew that there were no survivors in the collapsed towers.

During those days, Andy's colleagues' spouses started to gather and make plans for the series of memorial services—one after another after another. The streets of New York were quiet. It felt as though people could not do enough for one another. Each night at our synagogue, hundreds of people showed up for services, though none are usually planned in the middle of the week. But the word spread, and sure enough, people who might have sworn their atheism the week before were there, looking for comfort and solace. People's need for depth, for meaning, for a caring community, for a communion with something bigger than us, started to take hold in ways I had never before experienced in my life.

I noticed that not many came to ask why. The question of theodicy, of why bad things happen to good people, may be asked when there is a little distance from the blow of misfortune. On September 12, people were in utter shock and misery and needed to be next to others to try to regain some balance through human embrace and contact. Many also needed to connect to a sense of faith, even if that faith had been dormant in their everyday lives. Our synagogue was a meeting place where both needs could be met—as I imagine other houses of worship were as well—a place for people to

hold on to something solid and whole when the rest of the world felt like it was falling apart.

Those days were unbearable for Emily and her three children. To say that Emily was devastated hardly begins to describe it. She was completely broken apart. She couldn't sleep, eat, or do anything that any of us would consider normal in a day's routine. But she could, somehow, talk and think more clearly than most people do on a normal day. This was most puzzling to me. She could barely breathe, but somehow she was able to think through extraordinarily difficult issues in beautiful and emotionally comprehensive ways. As we will see, this ability of hers is connected to the overall lesson that Emily taught me and can teach us all about dealing with the worst of suffering.

Emily's children were so tiny at the time. Hannah was starting kindergarten. Lucy was just four and did not want all of that crying going on in her house. She wanted things to be normal. And little Henry was about to turn one year old. He took his first steps on the day his dad died.

Andy's body was one of the few found from that dreadful day. Just imagining his end was torture for Emily, and wondering why his body was one of the 5 percent that were found did not necessarily make things better; in some ways her imagination ran even wilder because of it. The day of the burial was worse than one can imagine. It was pouring rain.

The hearse driver had mini strokes on the way to the cemetery and got lost from the rest of us. We waited, as if trapped in a bad dream, for Andy's body to arrive. It was like he was defying this tragic end. The one image I will never forget from that day is of Andy's coffin being lowered into the dank, dark hole while his oldest daughter, Hannah, tears streaming down her face, repeated the words, "Good-bye Daddy. Good-bye." I still can hardly bear that image; it is one I will take to my own grave.

According to Emily, there is no being brave under these conditions. You just do what you do to get through. But, as I would tell Emily, this is not always true. Some don't get through. Some, and I don't say this in judgment, simply do not get through. They don't get out of bed in the morning; they don't get their kids to school in the morning; they don't function in any manner at all. Others get through by shutting down emotionally so that they can function each day, their pain an unexamined hole in the middle of their lives. I would argue that, in the days and weeks and months following Andy's death, Emily did more than "get through." This period of her life, unbeknownst to her, me, or anyone, was the beginning of a process of transformation for her. Later, I will explain the critical difference between "getting through" and "transforming through"—a difference Emily helped me understand.

As Emily trudged on through these initial terrible days, she plugged into every resource possible. First and foremost, her community of friends marched into action. They set up a food delivery rotation, freeing Emily from having to cook for almost six months. There was someone assigned to sleep over every night for the first month, so Emily didn't have to be alone during her most vulnerable and dark periods. Another team helped her get her three kids ready for school. And there were even friends who jumped in to help with all of the dizzying and complicated issues of finances, estates, and wills. I will never forget the love and compassion that poured out. I think some of the action fulfilled her friends' needs to do something tangible in a time of national tragedy, but most of it was just pure love, loyalty, and dedication in friendship.

It is important to point out that Emily was open to all of this compassionate help. Believe it or not, most of us are actually not open to accepting assistance from others. We don't want to be a burden, or we think that accepting help makes us look weak and vulnerable. But when we are in need, we are indeed weak and vulnerable, so we are hurting ourselves doubly when we shrink from the help that will foster our recovery and make us whole once again. I think there was a specific and spiritually connected reason why Emily was able to accept such help when many will not, and that it was part

of how she was able to transform through her grief rather than just get through it.

Emily also sought other help. She began seeing a therapist to deal with the immediate psychological duress. She joined a bereavement group specifically founded for widows of September 11. She spent a solid hour with me daily for a couple of months, and then weekly for a year. Like most clergy, I am trained to see or counsel a congregant for no more than six sessions in most cases. But because Emily was involved in all of these other disciplines of counsel, I felt something different was possible here. Sure enough, my engagement with Emily allowed her to follow a kind of spiritual breakthrough that neither of us ever imagined.

With all of this incredible and powerful work Emily was engaged in, she was still in absolute and utter distress. Everything she knew as normal and regular was blown apart. Each and every day was simply a complete nightmare for her and her family. She went to sleep in tears and woke up every day to the realization that none of this was a dream but instead was a new, dark, and utterly painful reality. Taking her kids to school, attempting to read the paper, doing the laundry, answering the phone, turning on the television, seeing the sun rise and go down, picking up the telephone—all of it hurt in the deepest ways. The things she used to find interesting—art and film, writing and reading, politics and culture—none of

it mattered anymore. The way she looked, walked, talked—that didn't matter either. I don't mean to say that she was rude or nasty or anything of that sort. She simply had no interest in putting on any sort of appearances.

The one thing she was almost magically able to do was speak the truth without any guise or filter. She said she had no choice. It was not like she had suddenly become wiser or smarter; she just spoke her unadulterated inner truth. She was who she was, and she wasn't going to hide anything that came to her mind. She wasn't going to waste a minute doing things she didn't care about. She suddenly, maybe for the first time, did absolutely everything from the bottom of her heart. And since her heart was full of pain, this meant she was present in her pain. Not clinically depressed, just present in her pain in a way I had never experienced before.

There was nothing heroic about this, according to Emily. She had no choice but to be who she was in every moment. That is all she actually had left, besides her beautiful Hannah, Lucy, and Henry. She did find solace in the love and affection and support she was receiving. But everything else in Emily's life as she knew it was completely stripped away, from the inside out, and nothing would ever again be normal as she had defined it before September 11, 2001.

At the same time, Emily's dedication to worship services and her attendance at adult education classes—her interest

in matters of faith—increased exponentially. She showed up for services that very first night and her attachment to the synagogue has been steady and intense ever since. There are some obvious reasons for this kind of attachment after a tragic loss: The faith community can feel like a safe and nurturing place to be. But it was soon clear to me that what Emily was doing was different in a significant and qualitative manner. This was not just a mode of keeping busy or keeping extra company. Of course, there was an element of that type of need. But the combination of her interest in deepening her faith and her constant speaking of inner truth was extraordinarily compelling to me. I knew that something was different here, and that, somehow, my own understanding of faith, God, and spirituality was being greatly affected in a way I didn't grasp yet. I am grateful that Emily, in her worst of days, became a teacher for me while I served as a source of counsel and teaching for her.

As I wondered and thought more about what I was seeing with Emily, I realized that I had experienced something similar with another congregant just a couple of years before. I didn't realize it until I met Emily, but in this earlier experience I had started to see the shape of a phenomenon that has changed my whole mind-set about the ultimate meaning of pain and suffering.

Like Emily, Susan, a dear friend and former congregant, was not by any means a regular in synagogue. All I knew about her was that she was a nice enough person, friendly and sweet. I actually knew her husband, Eric, much better. I liked Eric because of my love of sports—he was a huge personality in sports marketing—but mostly, I just thoroughly enjoyed Eric because he was the ultimate mensch. He was a dedicated father, a loyal and loving husband, and a generous, jovial friend. About thirteen years ago, Eric contracted a rare form of cancer. He was, however, able to live a basically normal life because he was in remission for about five years. I didn't see the family in temple any more or any less because of his condition. Then, after the High Holy Day season had concluded one year, Eric and I were having one of our “check-in” conversations about his kids, and he told me that his condition had worsened and he was officially out of remission. Still, he was confident that he would beat the disease. And indeed, his confidence was infectious. I believed, because he believed, that he was going to be okay.

Eric died a few months later. As time progressed, he realized that he was going to die, and he prepared the way I would hope all of us would and could. Instead of withdrawing, Eric spent his last months writing letters. He wrote goodbye letters to many with whom he'd had an intimate relationship. He must have been frightened, but the idea of leaving

without telling people how he felt about them scared him even more. He even wrote a letter to be read at his funeral. There was nothing narcissistic about any of this; he simply and clearly wanted everyone important to him to know how he felt about them.

I can still feel the pain in the bottom of my stomach from the sadness Eric's family and friends felt the day of his funeral. The outpouring of love from over a thousand people could not even come close to matching the misery people felt that day—and still feel all of these years later.

I tell you all of this about dear Eric because of the unbelievable effect his demise had on the life trajectory of his wife, Susan. As I mentioned, it was Emily who reminded me of Susan, and the experience I'm about to relate will tell you a little bit about why that is the case. Before I start, I want to remind you of the language I used about Emily, that she was totally stripped down to her core. Her loss took almost every bit of her spirit and psyche away from her, and I would say that the same was true for Susan. Like Emily, she was stripped down to the core. All pretense and any sense of denial was gone. All that was left was her need to speak her truth of truths.

A few years ago, about three years after Eric's death, I had the opportunity to join three hundred colleagues at a United Jewish Appeal conference focused on clergy and their

role in assisting families facing loss. Most of the speakers were experts in their field. However, the finest speaker that day was Susan, whose authority came from the real-life experience of losing her husband at an early age. For an hour and a half, with poise, unbelievable strength, and profound authenticity, she spoke of her recovery and the assistance she received from her congregational community. I would estimate that 90 percent of the clergy audience wept that afternoon.

Susan spoke about how she didn't run away from her experience but instead was completely present in her pain. Many of us try to make ourselves busy when we despair and hurt. We try to move ahead and make life normal again, like it was before. But not Susan. She told us that, instead, she cried and cried, she screamed out in pain and misery, and she didn't force herself to do anything but be present in her pain. The death of her husband took everything from her, and she knew that the normal life she once knew would never be possible again. She didn't arrive at this certainty through a conscious process; she was simply stripped down and had no choice but to be present in her existential place.

Susan's state might seem a natural one, and it is. But in truth, it is anything but the norm in our society. We are taught to be strong, to let everyone know that we will be okay and will be back out there fighting once again. And, of course, we don't want to lie down and admit defeat. But

the paradoxical truth is that we can't ever actually be strong again unless we first allow ourselves to surrender to our suffering when we're in pain.

Susan surrendered to her state of being. She allowed herself to transcend time and space and remove herself—not from her responsibilities to her children and her life—but from the notion that it was all going to be okay. It was not okay. Her husband, her lover, her partner, had died, and nothing was okay. Indeed, she felt like *she* was stripped down to a state of emptiness, even nothingness. Somehow, she allowed herself to be present in this state of nothingness—the type of nothingness where she was bare, all of her disguises removed, all masks and outer shells gone. She was not a coward. I think she was a hero because she did nothing but *feel like* nothing. Instead of trying to fill herself with “things to do,” she remained empty because in an important sense all there was in her life was emptiness.

We all know about the advice we give, the things we say to ourselves and others, in order to fill that space: “It will be okay. Look at everything you have: your children, your job, your friends, your home, your things.” But both Susan and Emily decided to be present in knowing that they were blessed with all of those things, but yet they were still bereft and distraught. They did not feel sorry for themselves; they just remained in a place of despair, in a state of nothing-

ness, in a place of complete surrender. And furthermore, they engaged in that state of being as a way of dealing with their pain. They were stripped down to the core by their pain, and without knowing it, they began in that place to find a sense of meaning that they intuitively knew was a part of them—a part they had never yet been forced to see or confront.

When asked what our hearts most desire, many of us refer in some fashion to our search for a deep connection with our core. We talk about self-knowledge, inner peace, and a sense of balance, wisdom, integration, groundedness, or wholeness. We search and search. Knowing first Susan and then Emily renewed my own questioning about what seems a bitter irony: that people experiencing dreadful crises and tragedy, having reason to feel defeated forever, are often those who most fully encounter their center, their wholeness, and their ultimate connection to God.

I have come to believe that those who transform through grief have a powerful experience of a concept that many of us are reluctant to embrace, a concept our trained and rational minds consider hokey. They have found that elusive concept called “faith.” It makes sense that loss or tragedy would bring people close to their faith community, not least because the community offers the solace of care from others. But what I am referring to is profoundly different. Some individuals find an intense connection to community, to God, and to self that

they never lose for the remainder of their lives. This is not to say their entire lives revolve around spirituality, or that any of them wouldn't trade their strength and newfound faith a million times over to have their loved one back. But they have managed to access a part of themselves they never knew existed, and it changes them forever.

How can a single transformative moment permanently change one's whole mode of encountering life? What is the clarity that emanates from these tragic experiences? What has shaped these two women, Susan and Emily, into leaders of their faith communities, students of scripture, and weavers of the kind of faith we would only dare speak of to our closest friends? These are questions we will explore together in these pages.

Grief will come to all of us. If you are reading this book, it has probably already come to you, most painfully. The pain will well up unbearably at moments, and these moments may follow one another seemingly without end. Will you choose mostly to repress and avoid these moments, or will you allow yourself to act counterintuitively, embracing them and coming to a new understanding of yourself? Will you, in the process, grow to be who you were meant to be in this world? Such clarity and transformation is possible. It is the unasked-for, hard-won, and dearly bought gift of our grief.

In the remaining chapters of this book, I will attempt to lay out what I believe is the nature of suffering, and what I think is happening to us when tragedy strips away our protection and leaves us vulnerable, open, and essentially ourselves. I will offer guidance that will, hopefully, help you grasp the means by which you can transform out of that state of grief, rather than fighting out of it or just moving on and getting through—because there are choices to be made here, at the bottom of the well of despair. Emily and Susan are two who have taken the road of transformation, and they have much to teach us. I will reach back to their stories at several points in this book. I will also explore how we encounter our suffering in certain ways that aren't transformative or even very helpful. The next chapter deals with one of these, a most achingly familiar accompaniment to suffering: our sometimes desperate search for a reason for our pain.