

*“From our very first breath, we enter and trust the cycles of life. As infants, we trust our parents to tend to our needs. As children, we trust the good in those around us. We are taught that if we are good to others, they will be good to us. Soon we become adolescents who are taught cause and effect. We are taught that if we eat nutritionally and take care of our bodies they will serve us well for years. And we grow into adulthood, where we continue to trust in these basic cycles.*

*We trust that the sun will rise each morning and set each evening; that our children will outlive us; that there will be many more days to cherish those we love. Then, in a split second, with the news of a loved one’s death, the world changes forever. The orderly world of predictable cycles ends. We are thrown into an abyss with few tools at hand. No time for preparation. No time to gather what we will need for our journey. No time for unfinished business or goodbyes<sup>1</sup>.”*

With these words, Brook Noel and Pamela Blair begin their book *I Wasn’t Ready to Say Goodbye*. From their own heartbreaking experiences, these courageous women draw the wisdom and strength to create a resource for those of us forced to confront human mortality far before we are ready.

We are rarely, if ever, ready. Whether given the chance for a lingering goodbye or forced to respond to the news that our loved one was ripped without warning from the very fabric of our lives; whether these losses happened three days ago or thirty years ago; we always want the opportunity to share more milestones, the chance to create more memories, with the one we loved.

Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. These stages of grief, first presented by David Kessler and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, may be the responses to loss that many people have, but we know too well that there is no typical response to loss just as there is no typical loss. Each person experiences grief differently, and messy emotions don’t fit into neat categorizations. Psychologists today warn us, and those around us, to expect a different model. Instead of a progression, they would —and I would — encourage everyone to think of grief, and our emotional states while processing grief, as a continuum.

One day resilient, one day paralyzingly overwhelmed. One night restful, one night sleepless. One hour happy, one hour filled with rage and anger. One moment comfortable with others, the next uncontrollably depressed. A continuum through which we move moment by moment, day after day, as we put the pieces of life back together. One day, one hour, one minute we may be functioning at a high level and in the next we might be subsumed by an ambush of grief that immobilizes us. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays are all excellent hiding places for those ambushes, and so are favorite foods on a grocery store shelf, smells that remind us of a favorite vacation, or a dream over which we have no control.

The ticket to this rollercoaster, this continuum, is love, and while there is no telling how long it might last, you should never feel shame for riding. Feeling like you are abnormal is actually quite normal. While others around us may be uncomfortable with raw displays of emotion or at times our lack of emotion, with our incessant desire to talk about a lost love or to never talk about them, with what we choose to wear or how quickly we quote unquote “get over it,” this isn’t about them. There is no normal, as each moment on the continuum is isolated from the previous and the next, and you shouldn’t feel constrained by what others expect of you.

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<sup>1</sup> Brook Noel and Pamela Blair: *I Wasn’t Ready to Say Goodbye*, Introduction.

At the same time, know that you are not alone in these experiences. Believe it or not, the rollercoaster has many other non-judgmental passengers. Some of them have boarded other cars involuntarily, but others still have chosen to ride alongside you. Tell them directly what you need. Rely on them when you feel like you cannot rely on yourself. Accept the one-way nature of their friendship now as you will eventually be asked to return the favor. No matter how irrational your actions may appear, no matter how crazy you may feel, grief is a continuum, and the only people that matter right now are those who will weather these frequent swings with you.

With a quick Turkish parable illustrating the emotionally fraught nature of this time and the importance of people willing to remain by your side I will conclude:

Asil was on his hands and knees peering through the grass and sifting the dirt with his fingers. A neighbor arrived and saw him there. "Asil, why are you crawling about?"

"I have lost something important to me, " he replied.

"Let me help you, then" said the neighbor and began to crawl on his hands and knees, meticulously searching in the dust.

Another friend came, and then another, and another. Each one asked and then offered to help look, all of them crawling about, all around the Asil's house. The sun began to set and the streetlamps were lit. Still they had not found the important thing.

Finally, the first neighbor sat back on his heels, "Asil, where was this important thing when you last saw it?"

"I last saw it in my home two days ago" he said.

"Then why are we looking here, outside?!"

"Because, my friend, " said Asil, "it is dark in my house, and I am alone. Out here, there is light and there are many friends to help me".