

Creative Grieving

A HIP CHICK'S PATH FROM
LOSS TO HOPE



ELIZABETH BERRIEN



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For Ella

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Foreword

This is a story of resilience, strength of the human spirit, hope in the face of loss, and the connection, joy, and gifts that can inevitably be found through grief. Grief is universal, but society has yet to develop the tools and awareness to approach grief as a “normal” experience. There are so many concepts and rules that we each have in our minds about how grief should be handled, what feelings are involved, the stages someone should be moving through, and the time frame we are given to grieve a loved one who has died. The grieving journey is not a one-sided, rigid process of pain, longing, hopelessness, and despair. A devastating loss is not only an ending but also a new beginning.

Through Elizabeth’s story of unspeakable loss, we are given insight into an authentic journey from tragedy to triumph. The path she follows is not neat and tidy and predictable as she walks into the unknown. It is beautifully messy. It is scary, uncertain, painful, joyful, surprising, and ecstatic. As her story unfolds, we witness the breaking open of the spirit. Through fumbles and falls, baby steps and giant leaps, growth creatively begins to occur. Unexpected pathways open up before her as she walks forward fully awake and aware of her emotions and experience. We see her evolve from the depths of sorrow

to the point of standing at the peak of possibility and, eventually, to become a woman reclaiming her wholeness. This wholehearted journey from loss to hope would not have been possible without The Model of Heart-Centered Grief that is later introduced in this book. Through this model, Elizabeth was able to truly mine the gifts of her grief, which brought her from deep sadness into a place of gratitude. From this place of gratitude, she was eventually able to give back to the world through the lessons of her journey.

The beauty of Elizabeth's story and the heart-centered grief model is that it can apply to anyone. We are often unaware of our innate resilience when moving through difficult experiences. Yet Elizabeth reminds the reader that through trial and error, humor, self-expression, connectedness, community, and personal creativity the grieving process is a completely natural human experience. It may be different for each individual, but no one is truly alone in the experience of grief. This message of connection along with The Model of Heart-Centered Grief have formed the basis for her nonprofit, The Respite: A Centre for Grief & Hope, which Elizabeth cofounded with business partners Mandy Eppley and Cindy Ballaro in the effort to provide hope to others coping with loss. As she moved through grief, Elizabeth recognized that it affected not only her soul but also her mind and body. Therefore, grief is recognized in its holistic form. This perspective brings the reader to a variety of creative grieving activities listed at the end of this book, which address the different levels—mind, body, and spirit—of the grief experience.

May this book offer you encouragement and empowerment as you embrace the meaning of your own grief journey. Elizabeth's story represents a path that many grieving women have the choice to make. It is about listening to your heart, loving yourself through the hardship, and reclaiming the strength of your spirit. By moving forward with awareness and an open heart, incredible gifts and blessings are revealed. Through Elizabeth's voice, and the voices of other

amazing women in this book, may you fully take in what resonates with you and apply it to your own sacred experience of grief and growth—your own creative path from loss to hope.

ANDREW HARVEY

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Acknowledgments

This book has brought my spirit so much joy. Throughout my writing I have met the most incredible people, witnessed some of the most beautiful stories of grief and hope, and continually been inspired by my family, friends, and coworkers that make up the supportive community in my life. I cannot thank all of you enough for your generous support. I feel so honored to have witnessed many of the stories from the women who contributed their wisdom to this book.

I want to acknowledge Carol Poteat, a wonderful writer and coach, who provided great encouragement and enthusiasm since the inception of this book. Her ongoing coaching and support helped me share my story with an open heart. I also want to thank my editor, Linda O'Doughda, for treating my story surrounding the grief journey with such compassion, respect, and wisdom.

I am so deeply grateful to Andrew Harvey for his contribution to this book. He has greatly championed my work and encouraged me to put my voice out there for all to witness. Thank you as well to Chris Saåde, the cofounder of The Model of Heart-Centered Grief. I feel blessed to have your beautiful contribution and ongoing support for our work at The Respite: A Centre for Grief & Hope. You each

continue to give tremendous gifts to the world through your teachings and offer deep guidance and inspiration to those who are suffering. It is such an honor to know you both.

I also want to give a special thank you to my dad, David Russell, for tirelessly listening to all my book ideas, for sharing his knowledge as a writer, and for helping me through this process from start to end. Thank you to my mom, Patti, who is always encouraging and who believes in everything I pursue. And my sisters, Megan and Jennifer, who have stood by me, uplifted me, and helped me find laughter at times when I thought it wasn't possible. I couldn't ask for better sisters. I will always appreciate the many late nights you sat up with me as I struggled through my early grief. You were my rocks!

Thank you to my daughter Ella and my stepchildren Lauren, Nathan, and Lily for bringing so much love and light into my life. To my husband, Tim, for your love, patience, and belief in me since the beginning of this project. I also wish remember my son Tookie who left this life all too soon. You are forever in my heart and mind, and a part of everything I do. And to the late William Brian Woods, Jr. May your memory and spirit be honored through the work that is being carried forward.

I also want to acknowledge my incredible business partners, Mandy Eppley and Cindy Ballaro, for their heart and soul support for this book. Mandy was the first person who said I should "go for it" and who believed that my story was meant to be told. I am so grateful to have found such beautiful, wise, and courageous women to carry forward our dream for *The Respite: A Centre for Grief & Hope*. You have each inspired me with your gifts of helping others. May we continue to bring hope and joy to people grieving everywhere.

Author's Note

This book was written with a female audience in mind. However, I want to welcome men who might be drawn to use this book as a resource for their own grief journey as well. Grief and loss are universal; therefore, the feelings and experiences expressed throughout my story are relatable to anyone. My hope is that whoever is meant to read this book will find it and that it will offer some light, creativity, and empowerment on their path from loss to hope.

My Dream Life

Life was pretty simple and predictable for me up until I was twenty-six. I had a rather normal childhood living in a small town called Big Rapids, Michigan, in a home with two parents; two sisters, Jennifer (eleven years older) and Megan (eight years older); dogs (Taffy, Lucy, and Lilly); parakeets (Sunny and Peppy); and a hermit crab (Iggy). I lived in the same house from birth until I was eighteen. I never experienced any major life transitions until I left home to attend the University of North Carolina at Asheville, pursuing an interdisciplinary humanities degree in anthropology, dance, and music.

I really enjoyed my early twenties. I traveled a lot, made lasting friendships, fell in love, fell out of love, lived in the mountains, worked at an independent bookstore, taught at a Montessori school, moved into my first house, and went dancing every chance I got. I had a lot of joy, and my whole life was ahead of me. When I was twenty-four, I met the man who would one day change the course (and purpose) of my life forever.

I married Brian on January 26, 2007, and knew that I wanted to start a family early. In May, I discovered I was pregnant! I was overjoyed. I was so happy that I began to giggle uncontrollably. I vividly remember going to Lowe's right after I found out. I walked into the store feeling elated and thinking, "I'm pregnant and nobody knows yet but me!" Brian and my family and friends were all so excited when they found out.

I ate very healthy foods—mostly organic—throughout my whole pregnancy. I took lots of walks, did prenatal yoga classes and videos, and slept as much as I needed to. I even took a special class called Dancing for Birth® and became a certified instructor since I loved the dance aspect so much. I was in complete pregnancy bliss. I loved shopping at Motherhood Maternity and picking out new pants and shirts as my belly grew bigger. I took pictures every month to show my belly from the side. I woke up happy every day, eagerly awaiting this amazing gift who was going to be revealed to me after nine months.

We decided to find out the baby's sex, and once we learned it was a boy, I decided on the colors green, cream, and brown for his nursery and clothes. Members of both sides of our families threw two wonderful baby showers for us. Before his birth, I had all of his little clothes folded and organized neatly on shelves, his crib put together and made with sheets, toys arranged, and the pack 'n play bassinet filled with diapers and wipes. He was going to be named Tookie after an Australian teammate Brian had worked with during one of his contracting jobs in Iraq. We liked that it was uncommon and fun to say.

I had always liked the idea of doing a natural birth without an epidural. I had friends who had successfully given birth at home in a birthing tub with the assistance of a midwife. I wanted that intimate environment as well. So I found a doctor who had a wonderful

reputation based on doing homebirths for nearly thirty years. I also found a great birth doula who helped prepare me for what to expect during labor. I read tons of books on pregnancy and labor, attended birthing classes, and rented a birthing tub as the due date got close. I was prepared!

I had a feeling that my son would arrive right on time, and I was right. I went into labor the day before my due date. I remember excitedly walking through the grocery store after my prenatal exam during which the doctor told me I had dilated a couple of centimeters. The pain of the contractions was gradually starting to get worse, yet I wanted to make my son a birthday cake for his official “birth” day. So Brian and I grabbed some cake mix and a “0” candle to celebrate his arrival. We also grabbed a vegetable plate and power snacks for the doctor, midwife, and doula. I knew it was going to be a long night. I began making the cake while my contractions were still manageable, but by the time the cake was done baking and I was trying to frost it, I began going to my hands and knees during each contraction to handle the pain.

When I felt that the contractions were getting too intense, I called the doula to come over. She brought with her a basket of candles, massage balls, and aromatherapy scents to help calm me. The doctor and midwife arrived soon after.

I ended up laboring for fourteen hours; it was exhausting. As I was about to give birth, the sun was starting to come up. My son’s head crowned while I was in the birthing tub. I remember reaching down to feel the softness of the hair on his head. It was an ethereal feeling.

My Nightmares

After Tookie's head came out, he stopped descending. I kept pushing and pushing, but his body was stuck. The doctor quickly noticed that the umbilical cord was stuck around his shoulder—Tookie was very broad-shouldered—which made the descent harder. Once the doctor finally freed the cord from his shoulder, my son fully arrived.

I was so relieved; I didn't realize at first that something was wrong. My first thought was how beautiful he was. I couldn't believe that I had just given birth to someone so perfect. I noticed that he was very quiet but instantly thought, "After a few rubs, he'll be okay." But when the doctor started administering CPR, I realized things were not okay. I went into shock. I remember thinking, "It isn't supposed to happen this way. This is supposed to be the joyful part." I just stared and stared at him as the doctor worked on Tookie for thirty minutes. Eventually Brian said, "Just tell us." The doctor said our son wasn't going to make it, and I immediately burst into tears. My beautiful baby boy, Tookie, was not going to wake up. I took him in my arms and held him as his little body turned cold and blue. My entire world had suddenly turned upside down. My days of a relatively "easy" life were over. I had been inducted into the world of loss. My hopes, dreams, and future crumbled before my eyes.

The months following my son's death were very dark, and not just in the emotional sense. It was the Midwest in the middle of winter, so the days matched my mood perfectly. I slept for several days after his birth. The doctor had left behind a variety of pain pills, sleeping pills, and antidepressants that my husband gave to me daily. My body