AWAKENING FROM GRIEF WITH PEMA CHÖDRÖN

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An Autoethnography on Loss, Grief, and Awakening with Pema Chödrön

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Abstract

Death is an event that our society encourages us to avoid, cheat, hide, delay, and deny though it pervades our daily lives with every experience of loss that we encounter. Consequently, we are further conditioned to limit the duration, intensity, and open expressions of our grief. This paper provides an autoethnographic account of my experience with becoming a widow, and the transformational healing that has occurred with the help of Pema Chödrön’s teachings, including teachings on cultivating fearlessness, compassion, and loving kindness, as well as meditation practices known as shamatha-vipashyana and tonglen. By sharing my personal narrative, I hope to encourage awareness, insights, and open dialogues on death and grieving, as readers are invited to vicariously share my experience of loss, grief, and healing.
DEDICATION

For R.

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength,
while loving someone deeply gives you courage.”

~ Lao Tzu
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man’s land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 71)

Death is ours to experience in our everyday lives. Although we live in a culture that fears death and hides it away from us, we could wake ourselves up to the fact that it shows up all the time and in many different forms (Chödrön, 1997, p. 43). It shows up in the form of disappointment, in the form of things not working out the way we want, in the form of things always being in a constant state of flux. We also experience it when each day ends, each relationships ends, and with each breath out. At some point, there comes a time when we meet it face-to-face—with nowhere to escape—and it can wake us up to life.

My time came when I lost my husband, and was forced to grieve him and the life we had shared. It was a nearly unbearable experience, but it also motivated me to live more consciously, more awake, and with a clearer purpose. Steven Levine writes about how our society has been conditioned to deny death: “Like sex, death has been whispered about behind closed doors (and) we feel guilty for dying, not knowing how to live” (Levine, 1982, p. 2); and when reminders of death overpower our ability to distract ourselves—as when serious illness occurs—our typical response is to see death as an enemy that we must battle, a battle in which our dying makes us the “loser”. From this limited perspective, there can never actually be victory over death; there is only the
postponement of our eventual defeat, though we encourage one another to share in the illusion that we have “won”. In denying death, we deny life, and therefore, deny allowing ourselves the chance to experience our whole selves. “It is almost as though we were never completely born, so much of ourselves is suppressed and compacted just beneath the surface…so much of ourselves postponed.” (Levine, 1982, p. 9)

Although we are constantly surrounded by death and dying, we are also highly practiced at segregating ourselves from the “unfortunate” and “unlucky” ones who, unlike “us”, are at death’s mercy. Within our fear of death, lives our fear of impermanence, and when we deny these truths, life becomes confusing, and our views about what will bring us happiness become distorted. In vain, we try to grasp and hold onto those things that bring us pleasure, while running away from that which brings us pain; both become a source of suffering.

Ironically, pain and suffering can be our saviours: they can be our most convincing motivators and our most profound teachers. This proved true for me as I struggled to find my way through my grief. It took losing my husband to earnestly examine the way in which I lived my life, and to see how much of myself I had “postponed” and hidden away. There were so many parts of myself that I found embarrassing, uncomfortable, and unwanted. Somehow being unable to escape the immense pain that I was experiencing gave me the opportunity to “wake up” and see the truth of the impermanence of life. Pain was like a key that further opened my awareness, as well as my heart, to the pain and suffering of others.

We all have grief, though we often deny our grieving, and through this denial, we consciously or unconsciously shut down parts of ourselves. Subsequently, we also
implicitly or explicitly discourage others from openly feeling their pain. Grieving, however, can be a transformational experience—an opportunity to live with greater authenticity, fulfillment, and meaning. It was through the teachings of Pema Chödrön that I began my long journey of healing. It is an arduous journey, yet at the same time thrilling. Her teachings have allowed me to see that grief and pain are great connectors, great equalizers: they cut through culture, economic status, ethnicity, beauty, intelligence, and so on. Pain, she says, is also where the tenderness comes in:

When things are shaky and nothing is working, we might realize that we are on the verge of something. We might realize that this is a very vulnerable and tender place, and that tenderness can go either way. We can shut down and feel resentful or we can touch in on that throbbing quality. There is definitely something tender and throbbing about groundlessness.”

I have chosen to share my experience of loss, grief, healing, and learning because I want to honour both my husband as well as the promise that I made to him and myself that “something good would come out of all of this”. It is my hope that what I have written will provide some benefit to others. I know I have only begun my journey and have much to learn, but I offer my newfound insights and lessons in the spirit of universal friendship—a gesture that Chödrön (2001, p. 1) likens to a drop of fresh spring water:

If we put (our learning) on a rock in the sunshine, it will soon evaporate. If we put it in the ocean, however, it will never be lost. Thus the wish is made that we not keep the teachings to ourselves but use them to benefit others.
CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Qualitative Approach

I chose to use the qualitative method, autoethnography, to share my experience of losing and grieving my husband as well as the learning I gained from the teachings of Pema Chödrön—teachings which were instrumental in my healing process. My purpose in sharing this painful experience as a personal narrative was to stimulate learning, reflection, and greater awareness in others by inviting them to have a glimpse of this pivotal time in my life. My purpose matched well with the goal of autoethnographies, which, according to Carolyn Ellis, is “to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience, and to write from an ethic of care and concern” (2004, p. 46). It is from such deeply personal and reflective writing that a reader can be roused to a “feeling level about the events being describe”, thereby stimulating them “to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46).

A fundamental aspect of autoethnographical writing is the ability to “see and feel the world in a complicated manner and then reflexively turn that lens on ourselves” (Ellis, 2004, p. 98). While self-reflection is a worthy endeavor, and one which is certainly fundamental to this particular writing process, it can also be an unpleasant one, for it can bring up a multitude of uncomfortable and unexpected emotions such as embarrassment, humiliation, regret, and self-denigration. In order to be of use to anybody, however, I knew that my thesis could not be written without a sufficient amount of self-awareness and self-disclosure. To help me through this process, I turned to a
variety of sources for support, including: my therapist, my naturopath, my homeopath, my thesis advisor, my program advisor, close friends, instructors, and my dog. Indeed, self-care was a critical component in being able to complete this project. In addition, I found both journaling as well as my regular meditation practice to be instrumental to not only my self-care efforts, but also in helping me gain rich insights from my story.

Data Collection and Presentation

Data was collected from my journals, my late husband’s journal, as well as from personal reflections and memories of my experience. Data was also collected from my collection of both audio and written material of Pema Chödrön’s work as well as the written works of her principle teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his son, Sakyong Mipham. Credible on-line sources, such as those with which Pema Chödrön is directly affiliated, were researched for biographical information on Chödrön.

The thesis is comprised of four main sections including: a brief introduction, a method section, my account of how I experienced my loss, followed by my account of how Pema Chödrön’s teaching affected my grieving process and nurtured my healing. In the last two sections, I alternate between presenting material as an entry from a specific date in my personal journal and as later reflections of my experience. The journal entry dates provide a clear chronological order of the material presented. To further guide the reader, I have given thematic titles to distinguish the different subsections.
Ethical Considerations

As Ellis (2004) explains in *The Ethnographic I*, because all ethnography is interpretive, it is also fiction. Ellis’ comparison of the writing process of ethnographers with that of novelists illustrates that the distinction between the two is more blurry than sharp:

Ethnographers select and omit, often creating composites and typical representations that may describe behavioral means rather than specific actions. Sometimes, they camouflage participants’ identities and events. Readers may have trouble finding a truth that resonates with their own experiences. Novelists seek a truth of experience, often basing their scenes and characters on real events and real lives. Readers of novels often find profound insights and moral lessons about how to live. The stories we write as ethnographers do not have to be factual to be true. Novels and ethnographies coexist on a continuous plane of truth seeking; they are not oppositional forms of truth telling. (2004, p. 332)

Ellis (2004) uses the term *autoethnographic fiction* to describe writing that integrates autoethnographic observation with novelistic and fictional writing, as done in my thesis. My primary goal was to accurately communicate the essence of my experience to readers wanting to examine, understand, or gain greater awareness of such experiences. At the same time, it was important to address ethical considerations such as confidentiality and privacy rights. Fortunately, these goals proved not to be mutually exclusive. I believe that I was able to weave together both fact and fiction in a way that maintains both ethical integrity as well as faithfulness in the sensory and emotional description of my experience. Specifically, pseudonyms were used to protect people’s
confidentiality. In addition, while being mindful of wanting to be loyal to the truth of the events, creative license was used in the form of both omissions and fictional additions for the purposes of preserving anonymity or to accommodate the literary demands required of concise thesis writing.

Having said this, however, I wish to make it clear that thoughtful attention was given to when, where, and how these alterations were incorporated. For example, I created the composite character Alice R. to stand in for all those healthcare professionals whom I had felt were limited in their ability to be empathic; this was done in order to compress time and to avoid having to introduce each of these individuals as separate characters. In addition, I chose the pseudonym Ryan for my husband because it is the surname of the protagonist in Tom Clancy’s (1984) *The Hunt for the Red October*—one of his favorite books.

Moreover, while the majority of the thesis adheres to the grammatical guidelines written in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, the one exception can be found with the journal entry excerpts. In order to preserve the casual tone found in my journals, I have allowed these sections to retain their colloquialisms, slang, and informal style. Furthermore, while citations have not been included in these sections, reference information of citation-applicable materials has been included in the reference section of the thesis.
CHAPTER III

A WAKE

Death woke me with a start. It was just after four o’clock in the afternoon on December 13th, 2006. I had just dropped off my husband’s suit at the dry cleaners when I received a call from his boss, the chief of surgery; his voice was calm, yet heavy, so heavy they seemed to choke my ears, and only a few words managed to squeeze through: “Ryan…collapsed…come right away”. I do not know what graceful force guided me, but somehow I found myself in the emergency room of the hospital where Ryan had worked as a cardiac surgeon since finishing his medical training two years earlier. The doctor would be out shortly, and I was to “just have a seat and wait”. My legs walked me to a nearby chair and slowly eased me down. Across from me, sat a young child with a small cut on his forehead, thoroughly engrossed in his chocolate bar—though more of it seemed to be getting on his tear-stained shirt than into his mouth. Beside him, a pregnant woman sat calmly knitting, as her excited husband —on both his cell phone and ipad— skillfully juggled the two conversations. There was a television in the room—an old episode of Seinfeld was on. I had seen it before; it was the one where Jerry pretends to be married so that his girlfriend can get the “spousal discount” from his drycleaner. Suddenly remembering the drycleaners, I pull out a slip of paper in my pocket: “Valetor Cleaners - pick up Friday”. Relief flushes through my body as I reassure myself, “Of course, Ryan, will be fine…he’ll need to pick his suit up on Friday.” I look around the room, at how normal everything is, and I am about to allow myself to fully slip back into the safety of this old, familiar “dream” of life when I am taken to see the emergency doctor who tells me that my husband is in a coma.
December 16th, 2006: It’s been three days, and Ryan has still not woken up. I remember only bits and pieces of the last few days. I remember being taken to see the emergency-room doctor and getting a glimpse into Ryan’s room along the way; a nurse blocks my view of his face, but seeing movement of his legs, I am reassured that he is all right. Thank you God! My relief and gratitude, however, are soon pushed aside by a growing surge of annoyance—fueled by thoughts of how blasé my husband can be about his health and well-being. I am constructing the lecture that I will be giving to Ryan once we get home, when I hear the doctor say “coma…lack of oxygen to the brain…up to fifteen minutes…possible brain damage”, and I am yanked from my old life for the last time. Why is the doctor saying this?! I saw Ryan’s legs move, and so I know he is fine. I am about to say this when I realize that I cannot speak. “Brain damage?!” No, I don’t understand why the doctor is saying this. Doesn’t he know that I saw Ryan’s legs move? No! No! No! I want to shut the doctor up, but I am now on the floor. I cannot breathe. Two nurses pick me up, but I want to crawl into a ball and disappear. I have to leave. I have to get out…out of this room, out of my body, please get me out!

Ryan and I met during our first year at university, and in many ways, we were an odd pair. He was a self-proclaimed “adrenaline junkie” who loved skydiving, bungee jumping, and once admitted to me that he liked to drive as if he was Burt Reynolds in Smokey and the Bandit (Engelberg & Needham, 1977). I, on the other hand, was the quiet, studious girl who always sat at the front of the class, had never had a speeding ticket in her life, and felt terrified by the thought of flying in a plane, let alone jumping out of one. Although we appeared different on the surface, we connected with one another in a way that neither of us had ever experienced. Both orphaned at a young age,
we knew how it felt to always feel like a burden to others, to live under a coat of shame and loneliness, and to never have a sense of belonging. We knew what it was like to grow up never having anyone cheer for you at sporting events and knowing that no one was searching to find your face at school concerts; we knew what it was like not to matter to anyone.

For nearly 19 years, we had been best friends, lovers, and witnesses to each other’s lives, and therefore, shared the privilege of knowing the intimate details of one another. For instance, Ryan knew that my first driving exam lasted the length of time it took me to drive out of the parking lot; it seems that driving into the wrong lane and into on-coming traffic not only freaks out the examiner, it earns you an automatic “fail”; though it did provide great entertainment mileage for Ryan, who never failed to be “cracked up” by that story. He also knew that I could not get into an airplane without having my childhood stuffed-animal safely stowed away in my carry-on, and that my stuffed animals had helped me get through my darkest times growing up. I, in turn, knew that after seeing the movie *Grease*, at age 9, Ryan had given himself a disastrous home perm in an attempt to look like Danny Zuko; I knew that this hard-rock music lover also secretly knew all the song words to Bonnie Tyler’s *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, and that beneath his seemingly cynical exterior, was a man who had painted a portrait of a beloved stuffed animal for me one Christmas. Yes, we had the proverbial “goods” on each other, and we certainly had our share of arguments, but luckily we had learned to follow Phyllis Diller’s sage marital advice to: “Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight” (as cited in Moncur, 2010). We made each other laugh like no one else, truly delighted in one another’s idiosyncrasies, and no matter how annoyed, frustrated, or irritated beyond
belief we were with one another, we never forgot that what we shared was irreplaceable, and that it was something to cherish.

December 31st, 2006: Happy 37th birthday, Ryan. I can’t help but wonder where we will be at this time next year. Perhaps we will be in Maui—a second honeymoon—both grateful for having lived through this “worst time in our life”. I hope; though this past week I have noticed that the doctors are more hesitant to encourage hope for any “meaningful recovery” for you. “Meaningful recovery”...what does “meaningful” mean? What does it look like? I used to know the answer to this: it was paying our rent each month, sending off Christmas gifts by postal deadlines, and filing our taxes on time; these had once all been important to-do list items. I feel as if I’ve been living in some dream from which I’ve been abruptly awakened—only to realize how meaningless such things are. All I want is to have you back, feel you hug me, and be able to speak with you and tell you all the things that I may never get to say. Your eyes are open now and your body moves, but I don’t know if you “see” me—your eyes seem unable to track any movement. You contract your arms and turn your head, but it’s as if a machine now inhabits your body. I can physically feel the weight of missing you bearing into my chest; it makes it hard to breathe at times.

Hope is something that I both fear and lean on. It is like a drug that helps me get through each day, but is something that must be taken in the proper dosage—too much, and I worry that I am setting myself up for an agonizing fall; too little, and I become paralyzed by fear. I am terrified of this fear for I know of no escape from it. When it hits me, I instinctively try to hold onto something, but there is nothing, but fear. I see, I grasp, and my desperation to escape my body engulfs me. Guilt and shame are my
common companions for I secretly long, in such times, to be joined with you in unconsciousness.

In the weeks that followed, I managed to learn how to nurse Ryan; I bathed him, brushed his teeth, suctioned the tube that went down his throat, and did my best to exercise his limbs. This new daily routine was now my new “normal”, and I was grateful to have the tasks to keep my thoughts from venturing too far out into the future. Thoughts can be so powerful. I remember the first time I had returned home since this nightmare began. There was laundry in the dryer, including Ryan’s surgical scrubs, which I slowly folded, not knowing if they would ever be unfolded again. On his desk were papers regarding another “Outreach” trip where Ryan would be volunteering his surgical skills to impoverished children living in The Dominican Republic—a cause that Ryan felt passionate about. Our home was filled with signs of Ryan’s active life, a life that was waiting for his return, expecting his return. On the dining table were colourful sheets of origami paper—part of a 1000 origami-cranes project that he had started last month. On his desk was an intimidating mountain of textbooks that were helping him prepare for his medical board exams, and at its pinnacle was a newly opened Civilization computer game—his current favorite. His guitar sat patiently in the corner of the room, waiting to be played, and on the floor next to it, sat a pristine (though somewhat dusty) copy of Guitar for Dummies, Book and CD Set. There was his aftershave and overly worn toothbrush in the bathroom too, but it was his coffee cup that hit me the hardest. It was sitting on the kitchen counter, half-full. I remembered him putting it down that morning, our last morning together, and asking me if I would drop off his suit to the cleaners. I picked up the cup and thought about how short a time it had been since he had
been holding it; this moment was not so far into the past. If I could just get back there; it is so close… Stop! I cannot think about how close—yet forever out of reach—this moment is, or I know that I will go crazy.

Somehow I am reminded of John Keats’ poem, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, and its two painted lovers who are forever trapped in the fervent moment just before they kiss; the feeling of hope and anticipated ecstasy marred by the realization that this kiss will never come to fruition (Abrams, 1819/1986). Although I know it makes no logical sense, I feel a childlike hope stirring within me when I look at Ryan’s cup, hope that this cup is now locked into an earlier moment—a moment not long passed—and holds the power to carry both Ryan and I back in time to when Ryan was holding it, and we were safe—a moment whose preciousness I had previously failed to appreciate. The reality, however, is that I am the one who is trapped—not in time—but trapped in a nightmare; one that I must go *through*, as there is no turning back and no escape. Worse still, I now know that the unthinkable can happen, and I do not know if the most hellish part of this nightmare has passed, or is yet to come.

*January 15th, 2007:* I wonder, Ryan, where you are now? Can you see me? Do you hear me when I tell you that I love you? Are you in pain? Why won’t you come back to me? To our life? I don’t want to have a life without you; I don’t know how.

Yesterday, the hospital social worker Alice R. came by with her weekly reminder that I “need to be strong…need to take care of myself…need to start thinking about my future;” what I really needed was to punch her. The other counselors and social workers have been great; they recognize that although you are still alive, I am grieving the loss of who you were and of the life we shared. They sit with me and allow me to feel my pain, and
they let me talk or not talk. I never feel that they are critiquing my grief, but this Alice R. woman, just doesn’t get it! Last week, I was feeling especially tired and rather nauseated and so, I wasn’t quick enough to escape her visit. Anyways, she told me that it was a “good thing” that you and I hadn’t had any children yet, and that I was still young and could remarry. Remarry? “I am married!” I wanted to yell at her. She then started telling me that she was on her second marriage, and this time she had found herself a man who did all the cooking, all the cleaning, all the gardening etc… “Yes, find yourself a good wife for your next husband,” she laughed. Find myself a wife? I am a wife!” I screamed in my aching head. It’s a tricky thing though, yelling at hospital staff. Ryan, I know you would have wanted me to unsheathe my tongue and “go Ginsu” on her, but I don’t want to do anything that may harm the level of care that you receive. So instead, I took the high road and permitted myself to throw up on her shoes. And yes, they were open-toed.

A sage teacher once taught me to treat everything as teaching, and sure enough, when I reviewed my encounters with this social worker, I saw that she had shown me that I needed to find a less messy and more reliable method of dealing with annoying people if I wanted to continue caring for Ryan. I also realized that I was becoming more tightly bound in fear, sadness and irritation, as well as increasingly worried about maintaining my sanity. By this time, I had a growing collection of bibles and spiritual material—given to me by friends, colleagues, and even some of the hospital staff. I tried praying to God, but I found no solace in this, as our relationship had always been a tenuous one, at least on my part. I had been raised to see God as a Charlton Heston Moses-like figure who was easily angered, and quick to punish those who failed to obey Him; and why, by
the way, was God male? Countless times throughout my life, I had tried to forge a bond with God, but I always felt more fear than love in that relationship. How I have envied people who were unshakeable in their faith! If ever I needed to have something to believe in, it was now, but as hard as I tried, an authentic faith in a Christian God continued to allude me. As much as I was told otherwise, I did not feel that faith was a matter of choice, and pretending as if I did have this faith would be a lie, and therefore, a sin, which brought me back to the image of this Charlton Heston figure who was undoubtedly disappointed, angry, and probably getting ready to throw up on my shoes.

February 11, 2007: I met with the palliative care team today. They say that you are in a “persistent vegetative state”: you breathe spontaneously and you open your eyes, but continue to show no evidence of awareness; you gag, cough, grind your teeth, grimace, move your limbs, and demonstrate other primitive reflexes, but you make no purposeful or voluntary movements. The doctors say that you have “no awareness of self or environment”, and they feel there is “no chance of any meaningful recovery”. They are encouraging me to exercise your living will and let you go. Once I make this decision, they will put you in “comfort care” and discontinue the artificial nutrition that you have been receiving through your feeding tube. They say that once they stop feeding you, you could die in as short a time as a day or as long as two weeks. They assure me that you won’t be in any pain; they’ll put you on a morphine drip. No pain, Ryan, they promised me. No pain. Do you want to go now? The doctors want me to make a decision soon. Please find a way to let me know what you want me to do! Please don’t make me have to decide whether or not to let you die! God, I feel sick. I’m sorry if I am being selfish, Ryan, but I don’t know how I’m going to live through watching you die? A
part of me will be dying with you, and I know there is no “morphine drip” for this pain.

Please tell me what to do!

It was not a surprise that the doctors had given up hope of Ryan’s recovery. I could see that they were increasingly less aggressive in their treatment approaches, and any hope that had existed when discussing Ryan’s condition had long been replaced with resignation. Still, it was a different matter to hear it voiced so definitively. I knew that I might have to cope with his death, but I had not considered how I would cope with his dying. How was I to sign a piece of paper that affectively said that I had given up hope, and that I would give permission for my husband to starve to death? Where is this merciful God that I am suppose to have faith in? Why is he willing to take my husband away, a man who is willing and able to do so much to help others in need? Why would God allow him to die and let someone like Charles Manson live? Why can’t Ryan be one of the miracle cases that end with a guest spot on Oprah and a Lifetime network movie about his life, a life that he gets to finish living?

Fear and anxiety began to crawl into every crevice of my body and mind, and I knew that I had to do something quickly before I went mad. The palliative care team had told me to take some time to think things over, but thinking was the last thing that I wanted to do. I needed to distract my mind, and quickly. I returned to Ryan’s room and began the usual morning routine of flossing and brushing his teeth, suctioning his respiratory tube, and putting lubricating drops into his eyes. After this, I exercised his contracted limbs, though no matter how much I worked to keep them flexible, they grew stiffer with each passing day. I was especially vigilant about keeping his hands limber
for I knew that Ryan could live, perhaps, without the use of his legs, but not without the use of his hands.

I had known for some time that he would never perform surgery again, but if he could still paint and enjoy his love of origami...perhaps that would be enough, for both of us. With his hand embraced in mine, I leaned over and whispered the proposal that I had been presenting to him for several weeks now: “Ryan, if you want to go and not come back to this life, then you go and I will understand, but if you want to come back and have a life with me again, I will be with you all the way, and we can move to one of the islands, and I’ll work and you can paint...it’ll be quieter and simpler than what we had planned, but we can still have a wonderful life together; it’ll just be a different type of wonderful life.” How many times had I said these words to him in the last several weeks, I do not know, but they usually managed to light a tender feeling of hopefulness in me. This time, however, a sudden surge of rage erupted from somewhere deep within me. I looked at Ryan, his now wonted blank stare, and his grimaced mouth that would partially open and then close like a fish searching for oxygen. I continued to massage his hands, and as I did, I thought about how much we had both sacrificed to get to this point in our lives: all the time we had lost to his studies, internships, fellowships, residencies, on-call shifts. It had been a relentless schedule that had resulted in a mountain of student loans and too little time for us to enjoy one another, but we knew that it would all pay off in the future. We would delay trying to have children too, until a few months ago when we had finally been able to start saving for a family. After 17 years of this exhausting schedule, we were finally beginning this “future life” that we had worked so hard for. How many minutes had it taken to take it all away? “Up to fifteen minutes,” was the length of time,
according to the doctors, that Ryan’s brain had been without oxygen. So often I wondered at what point during those fifteen minutes had I lost my husband? Where was I at that point? Perhaps I was chatting with our drycleaner about the Canucks, or maybe I was scanning Ryan’s suit for stains that might need extra attention? For weeks now, the words “fifteen minutes” brought on a sickening revulsion, and I became acutely aware of their ubiquity in our daily dialogues—“let’s take a fifteen minute break”, “be back in fifteen minutes” and “please arrive fifteen minutes early”.

Somewhere I had once heard that when we make plans, God laughs. Well, maybe God was laughing, but I was angry as hell! Now I was the one with thunderous rage, and I was too angry with God to fear him any longer. I was angry with Him for not healing Ryan, I was angry with myself for my lack of faith and courage, and I was angry with Ryan for leaving me to deal with this nightmare alone. I had prayed and pleaded for a sign that would tell me what to do, but neither God nor Ryan seemed to respond. Perhaps they were busy in a meeting together. Perhaps Ryan was begging God to bring him back. Perhaps they had both been inundating me with signs that I had been failing to see. How was I going to watch the most important person in the world to me die? Just as soon as I had finished asking the question, I realized that I did not have to know how. I just knew that if there was any part of him that still had awareness, I did not want him to doubt that he mattered to someone—no, Ryan would die knowing that he was loved.

March 18th, 2007: It was been over three weeks since I had the doctors remove your feeding tube. None of the staff had expected you to live this long. Some of the nurses have assumed that I have been asking you not to die, and so they tell me that I need to let you go. Can you believe it? As if I had such power, and if I did, wouldn’t they
realize that you would have made a full recovery weeks ago, and that we’d be at home resuming our life? Still, I don’t want to upset any of the staff, as the hospital is allowing me to stay here in your room with you—even allowing me to sleep next to you in your bed. At first it took some getting used to—the beeping of the machines, the periodic check-ins by the nurses, the uncomfortable hospital bed (which certainly was not designed for two people)—but it didn’t take long for me to get used to the disruptions, and now I am even sleeping through most of them. I am just so grateful that I get to sleep next to you again, and that we have been able to resume our nightly ritual of holding hands when we go to sleep. Sometimes, I close my eyes and feel your hand in mine—a feeling that is so familiar—and I allow myself to briefly imagine that we are at home, safely in bed, going to sleep as we have done so many nights before, and for a brief moment, I am at peace.

Prior to this event, I had viewed denial as something to be avoided; I saw it as an unmistakable indicator of one’s inability to cope, but I now appreciate that it allowed me to cope. In fact, I now see it as an “unsung hero” of grief in that it is not a destination from which people leave boasting about, yet it can be as restorative as a desperately needed weekend getaway. I came to rely on these “getaways” to keep me going whenever I felt that I could not take one more moment of the reality that I was living. I remember the first time that I realized that I could still have Ryan hug me. I was singing to him Elton John’s song, *Can you feel the love tonight?* the song that we first danced to as husband and wife. I leaned over to hug him and at that moment his arms began to contract. Excitedly, I waited until his arms relaxed, and then I put myself in his arms and waited. A few moments later, his arms contracted again, and I was pulled into an
embrace with him; I closed my eyes and allowed myself to pretend that I was back in my old life and that all was well. I cried with such joy that I had won this part of him back. For weeks, I was so grateful to be able to have these denial getaways; I think I would not have made it through without them.

Just as clearly as I remember the first of these hugs, I remember the last. It was late in the morning, and I had just finished washing and trimming Ryan’s hair. I was especially exhausted that day, as I had been repeatedly woken during the night by the startling screams of the patient across the hall. Queasiness set in as I finished washing Ryan’s hair. There was an odour that had been coming from some part of his body for the past few days, and it had been growing stronger. Although I had tried to clean it away, I had been unable to find its source. There was one final place that I had not yet investigated; it was a bandaged area on his lower back where a small bedsore had been. I would have to ask one of the nurses to help me remove the bandage, but first I needed to have one of my “reality time-outs.” I wrapped Ryan’s arms around me and waited; relief came as I felt him contract his arms and “hug” me, but this time, my hands could not escape noticing the skeletal form that had replaced my husband’s body; he no longer felt like Ryan. I sobbed that day as I had never before; it was one of my most painful experiences of loss, and one that I still grieve today.

April 13th, 2007: The doctor increased your pain medication again today after I told him about your body twitching last night. I tried to bathe you this morning, but it is unbearable to see you like this; your body—so horrifically emaciated now—your rib cage and pelvic bone ruthlessly protruding into your crusted skin. No matter how much I try, I cannot keep up with the deterioration of your body. A couple of weeks ago, I asked the
nurses to uncover the bandage on your lower back, and we discovered that a bedsore had
dug its way to your bone and had become infected; I gagged on the pungent stench. I
hate this! I hate watching death slowly feast on you, and I am so ashamed at my
repulsion. I pray that you are not aware of any of this. I’m trying to prevent the other
sores from becoming infected, but there are too many of them now. I’m so sorry, Ryan! I
promise that I won’t let people see you like this. They don’t come now, anyways; I think
it is hard for them to see you too, and to be so close to death.

I don’t think it will be long now before you go. I’m scared to think of it. Is that
silly? I’ve had so much time to prepare myself, but still, I am not ready. For weeks now,
I’ve woken up each morning in a panic—scared to wake and find you dead. I quickly
check to make sure you are breathing, and I feel so relieved that you are still alive, but
then I see how you look now; I know there is almost nothing left of you, and I don’t think
I can watch you like this for much longer. I no longer know what to hope for, Ryan.
Perhaps, it’s okay for me not to hope for anything, and instead, maybe I just ought to
“be” with you and do my best to enjoy what little of you I still have with me, and for
whatever time we have left together. Perhaps this is as ready as I can be.

Ryan died three days later. I was not with him at the time; I had been by his side
all morning and early afternoon, and had just stepped out of the hospital for some needed
fresh air. No one will ever know how remorseful I was over that decision, but I have
since come to believe that Ryan did not wish me to be present when he finally let go.
Perhaps he knew that it would be unbearable for me, perhaps for him too. We both had
difficulty with endings, and regardless of the problems we had faced during our many
years together, saying good-bye to one another had always been impossible. Ryan helped
me to see that what is most important is not whether we are present with our loved ones when they die; it is being present with them in our living moments together.

In my last days with him, a seed of hope grew in me that Ryan and I would be reunited one day and, ironically, by the same instrument that had been responsible for our separation: death. I told Ryan that I would regard the time in-between as our “in-the-meantime time”. I vowed to him that, although I did not yet know how, I would see to it that something positive came out of this deeply painful experience. It had been four months since I had been faced with my first loss of Ryan, and now he was completely gone, as were the comforting distractions of caring for him. I was about to begin a new phase of my life—one that I had neither asked for nor wanted—but if I was to keep my promise to Ryan, I knew that my first hurdle was finding a way to survive the tremendous grief I felt over the loss of him and our life together.
May 2, 2007: I feel awful. I miss you so badly. This pain physically hurts; it’s a deep yearning, a constant longing for something that I know I can’t ever have again. My chest feels so heavy, yet empty at the same time; I wish I could cut out this awful feeling. Nighttime is the worst. I delay going to bed every night until I’m too exhausted to fuel the anxious thoughts that tirelessly swim just below the surface of my mind. These thoughts can lead me to full-blown panic attacks. They make me believe that I’ll never have relief from this pain. I don’t think that I can live like this much longer. I wish I could numb myself from this pain. Sleep is the only break that I get, but even that is not a reliable remedy since I keep having nightmares about you. I feel as if I’m on a multi-level highway, stuck in heavy traffic, and while I desperately want to get out of it, I have no idea how or where to exit. I don’t know if there is anyone that can help me, but I have made an appointment with a counsellor, and have also registered for both a grief support group and a program specifically designed for widows. I’m willing to do the deep” inner work” necessary and go wherever I need to in order to drive myself out of this wretched state, but I could really use some guidance from my own GPS—“Grief Piloting System”. Let’s just hope that I navigate through this better than my first driving exam. Is it possible to “fail” grief?
When Things Fall Apart

*When things fall apart and we’re on the verge of we know not what, the test for each of us is to stay on that brink and not concretize. The spiritual journey is not about heaven and finally getting to a place that’s really swell.* (Chödrön, 1997, p. 9)

I was first introduced to the teachings of Pema Chödrön by a therapist that I had begun seeing just prior to Ryan’s collapse. At that time, I remember having a light interest in Buddhism and had enjoyed reading some of the Dalai Lama’s teachings, but after Ryan’s death, my “interest” in Buddhism transmuted into a desperate urgency. I no longer wanted to understand these teachings, I *needed* to; as Chödrön writes, “Things become very clear when there is no escape” (Chödrön, 1997). Shortly after Ryan’s death, I found a therapist, who was not only highly skilled in helping people cope with their grief, but she was also a committed student and practitioner of Buddhism and Taoism. With her support, I began to examine my beliefs, and philosophy of life—to train my spiritual muscle, which admittedly, was terribly flabby. Fortunately for me though, I had not only found a gifted therapist, but she also became my “spiritual personal trainer”, and with her help, I was exposed to the profound “manuals” and “training programs” of various enlightened spiritual teachers.

There is a Buddhist proverb that says, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear”. I do not know that I was ready—I certainly was not prepared—but I was motivated and desperate, and thankfully, that was enough for my teacher Pema Chödrön to reappear in my life. With my therapist’s encouragement I began to study Chödrön’s works. Intrigued by its title, I started with her book, *When things fall apart*. Although I
have never met Chödrön in person, her wisdom and down-to-earth style of teaching immediately resonated with me, and I have felt a deep respect and a strong connection with her since. Influential in further promoting this connection was her use of examples of her own struggles in her daily life, which she often shared with self-effacing humor. There was also the fact that she, like me, had been raised in Western culture and had begun her spiritual journey after losing her husband. Although the catalyst of her loss had been different from mine—her husband had announced one day that he was having an affair and wanted a divorce—both of our losses were sudden, unexpected, and had given us our initial glimpse into a more awakened life. Chödrön writes about this glimpse, which happened the moment after her husband’s painful announcement:

I remember the sky and how huge it was. I remember the sound of the river and the steam rising up from my tea. There was no time, no thought, there was nothing—just the light and a profound, limitless stillness. Then I regrouped and picked up a stone and threw it at him. (1997, p. 10)

Pema Chödrön was born Deirdre Blomfield-Brown in 1936 in New York City. Raised Catholic, Chödrön (whose Buddhist name means “Lotus Dharma Torch”) had a “very gentle and pleasant childhood” (O’Neal, 2011) with her two parents and older brother and sister. She was first married at the age of twenty-one to a young lawyer with whom she had a daughter and son. During this time, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in English literature, followed by a master’s degree in elementary education from The University of California Berkeley, after which she taught elementary school for over a decade and a half. It was during this time that her marriage ended. She eventually remarried and moved with her family to Taos, New Mexico. The intensely painful
ending of this second marriage, 8 years later, ignited a passion within her to find out what this suffering had to teach her; it was the beginning of her spiritual journey. In a conversation with Alice Walker, Chödrön describes the “devastated” state that she was in:

When my marriage broke up…it was really a kind of annihilation…I was scared by my anger and looking for answers to it. I kept having all these fantasies of destroying my ex-husband and they were hard to shake. There was an enormous feeling of groundlessness and fear that came from not being able to entertain myself out of the pain. The usual exits, the usual ways of distracting myself—nothing was working. (Chödrön, 1999)

Chödrön eagerly explored various therapies and spiritual traditions, but it was an article written by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called Working with Negativity (2005) that finally provided some answers for her. In this article, Trungpa contends that there is nothing wrong with negativity (defined by Chödrön, as a “groundless state” in which you feel “uneasy”, perhaps even “queasy” (Public Affairs Television, Inc., 2006). Chödrön says that unlike the widely held assumption that there is something wrong with this groundless, negative state—a state which presumably signals that something is amiss, and hence, is to be avoided—Trungpa held the radical view that this negativity was “the matrix of creative potential, the matrix of the spiritual life” (Public Affairs Television, Inc., 2006). He viewed it as something accurate and connected with reality, and hence, something that one can learn a great deal from, so long as one is able to rest in this place, rather than run from it (Trungpa, 2005). He believed the real problem is with negative negativity, which is when we spin off into endless storylines about the negativity, rather
than allow ourselves to see the nature of its intelligence, as shown through its simplicity and basic honesty. Trungpa eventually became Chödrön’s root guru, and she faithfully studied with him from 1974 (the same year that she became a novice nun) until his death in 1987. Before his death, she helped him establish Gampo Abbey, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in North America for Western men and women. In 1981, she received the full bikshuni ordination in the Chinese lineage of Buddhism, thus becoming a fully ordained nun, and the first American in Vajrayana tradition to become a fully ordained female Buddhist monastic (Miller, 2009). Presently, she divides her time between being in solitary retreat and actively teaching, writing, and working to establish Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in the West.

The Wisdom of No Escape

July 1, 2007: I’ve never known this level of exhaustion before. I feel like I’m having one of those out-of-body experiences—the kind one feels when coming out of a three-hour exam, after having pulled an “all-nighter”. One clear difference, however, is that this exam doesn’t seem to have an ending. Strangely, I’m also finding a certain freedom in how little I care about things that I’d once thought important, like my physical appearance—specifically, wearing make-up, doing my hair, and covering up the mosaic of stress-induced pimples now sprouting on my face. Going “au naturale;” has been an experience; I’m seeing how much pressure there is in our society to conceal our blemishes and to present only our airbrushed selves, both physically and emotionally. I’m even finding that many of my friends want (perhaps need?) me to tell them that I’m doing all right, even though I’m not; it makes me feel alone and depressed. So, I have been going to the gym more regularly, but when I do my post-workout stretches, a deep
sadness floods my body and I can’t help crying. It’s as if the act of stretching releases pockets of emotion that are trapped inside my body. Of the two, I don’t know which one my towel absorbs more of: my sweat or my tears.

Yesterday after my workout, I dropped by Safeway to pick up some cereal, and suddenly I heard “Can you feel the love tonight” playing on the store speakers, and I burst into tears; of course the store was especially busy with the after-work crowd, but I didn’t care. I just let myself cry, right there in front of the Fruit Loops, which I thought was appropriate. At that point, I remember having the thought that I was totally coming undone, and then I saw Life before me—Life, the cereal, that is. Suddenly, I was noticing all of the different boxes of cereals in front of me, and I became aware of all of the people busily moving about the store. How was their life going? Were they having a “Lucky Charms” or “Just Right” life, or were they experiencing something far less sweet, less charmed—perhaps even to the point of feeling ready to “snap, crackle and pop,” which, incidentally, is where I seemed to be. There I was, in the middle of this busy grocery store, and I just “let go” of everything and let all the sadness come pouring out. I was tired of trying to hold things together; I looked awful and I felt awful, and somehow it was so freeing just to let that be, and not try to hide or disguise it. It was in that moment that it dawned on me that if I could allow myself to feel my pain, then maybe I would one day be able to feel my joy again too.

When pain comes into someone’s life, crisis, trauma,...loss, it’s very interesting how it shifts, and people become passionate about these teachings and really start to apply them because it begins to feel like no time to lose, every day counts, life and death matter. So pain has its virtue...because without it you don’t long for
freedom…freedom initially from just this pain, but then it turns out by trying to get freedom from relative pain, you begin to get into some pretty profound areas of liberation from not just relative everyday pain, but the pain also of self-importance, the pain of separation between ourselves and others, the pain of holding so tightly to our views and opinions. (Chödrön, 2007)

*When things fall apart* was one of many books that I looked to for help during this time. What set it apart from the others was its revolutionary approach to pain: the advice given is to move *towards* the pain instead of our habitual response of running away from it, or trying to make it disappear. Admittedly, I was disappointed with this advice as it was not the usual softly-cushioned approach to pain that I had become accustomed to from other books on the subject. This author was actually telling me to *lean into* the pain, to *stay* in the present moment with it, and to even have *gratitude* for it. I wondered whether she fully understood how uncomfortable this pain was; after all, she wrote this book in her early 60s, which meant she had been living her life as an ordained nun for more than 20 years. Perhaps she had lost touch with “real world” pain. To my relief and dismay, Chödrön’s description was unnervingly accurate; I felt reassured that she clearly understood pain, yet I was less than enthusiastic about her suggested remedy. Intrigued, I continued to read her rationale for this seemingly masochistic approach to pain.

> When we think that something is going to bring us pleasure, we don’t know what’s really going to happen. When we think something is going to give us misery, we don’t know. Letting there be room for not knowing is the most important thing of all…Thinking that we can find lasting pleasure and avoid pain is what in Buddhism is called samsara, a hopeless cycle that goes round and round
endlessly and causes us to suffer greatly….the only time we ever know what’s really going on is when the rug’s been pulled out and we can’t find anywhere to land. We use these situations either to wake ourselves up or to put ourselves to sleep. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 8-9)

It was true that I felt more awake now than I ever had prior to Ryan’s collapse. It was as if I had lived all those years believing in a kind of illusion; the illusion of having control of my life. I had only now come to realize that what I had thought was solid ground was actually more like ice—ice that was paper-thin in some places. Losing Ryan was like falling through the ice and having the cold water wake me up. Although a part of me was sad that I now knew the reality of the groundlessness and impermanence of life, my newfound awareness also spawned a deep appreciation for its many blessings, many of which I had previously taken for granted.

One such blessing was the increased self-awareness that I was experiencing because of Chödrön’s teachings. For several months, I assiduously applied myself to the task of learning; I read her books, listened to her numerous recorded talks, and even joined a Pema Chödrön book club at the Vancouver Shambhala Centre. I was tired of being afraid of pain, of life, and of fear itself. Chödrön’s message about fear was clear: “If you don’t get to know the nature of fear, then you’ll never know fearlessness” (Chödrön, 2003). This fearlessness does not mean the reduction of fear; rather it means that we go “beyond fear” (Trungpa, 1984, p. 35). We do this first by examining our fear and its various forms—anxiety, nervousness, concern, and restlessness. Subsequently, we see that beneath fear’s chaotic surface lies sadness, which is calm, gentle, and capable of expanding our hearts. This tender opening of one’s heart is the brave act of a “warrior,”
as taught by Trungpa. It is brave because it means being open, gentle and tender with both ourselves and to the outside world. It means dropping our protective shields and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to feel our pain and sadness so that we may see our connection with others, and when we are no longer afraid of our feelings or our openness, it is then we experience fearlessness. As Trungpa (1984, p. 37) eloquently writes:

The ideal of warriorship is that the warrior should be sad and tender, and because of that, the warrior can be very brave as well. Without that heartfelt sadness, bravery is brittle, like a china cup. If you drop it, it will break or chip. But the bravery of the warrior is like a lacquer cup, which has a wooden base covered with layers of lacquer. If the cup drops, it will bounce rather than break. It is soft and hard at the same time.

Comfortable With Uncertainty

December 13, 2007: A year has passed already since your collapse; sometimes it feels so long ago that we had our life together, and yet, in the next moment, it can feel as if it were only yesterday. I wonder where you are and how you are. Are you watching over me? Are you amused, as I am, that I have gone from being a wife to a warrior? I imagine you being both entertained and proud as you watch me; I hope so, anyways.

There are still many days when I cry thinking of you, although I don’t share this with many people. Most of the people in my life expect me to be “moving on” now, only I never know what “moving on” is suppose to look like, and I never dare ask since they are likely to give me their answer. I don’t like the term: moving on; I would rather think in terms of “moving with.” My life has forever been affected because of you, and though
you are no longer physically here with me, the love we shared is still very much alive; it is something that will always connect us, and is the one thing that I get to keep.

I wish I could openly talk about you with more people without seeing the “she-still hasn’t moved on look” plastered on their face—a look which, until recently, could ignite feelings of shame, anger, and a lonely sorrow. I am now seeing, however, that people are not intending to be insensitive, rather it is their fear and discomfort around fully acknowledging their own pain that makes it so intolerable for them to sit with me with mine. I confess that I am well acquainted with this difficulty to sit with pain, both my own and that of others, but Chödrön’s teachings are helping me to understand why it is such a worthy affliction to overcome.

Only to the degree that we’ve gotten to know our personal pain, only to the degree that we’ve related with pain at all, will we be fearless enough, brave enough, and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others. To that degree we will be able to take on the pain of others because we will have discovered that their pain and our own pain are not different. (Chödrön, 1994, p. 4)

The practice of staying with ourselves, regardless of what emotion, thought, pain, or blemish arises, can trigger a myriad of uncomfortable feelings. Indeed, in Chödrön’s book, which is aptly titled, The Places That Scare You, she states that the “essence of bravery is being without self-deception” (2001, p. 75). Thankfully, we have the practice of sitting meditation to help support our bravery in staying with our vulnerability. It is a practice that helps us to cultivate loving-kindness (called maitri in Sanskrit) and compassion by first helping us to develop an unconditional friendship with ourselves
Developing this unconditional friendship is, according to Chödrön (2011), the very first and perhaps hardest step one takes toward fearlessness.

This basic sitting practice is called *shamatha-vipashyana* ("tranquility-insight") meditation, and is regarded by Chödrön as "a golden key that helps us to know ourselves" (Chödrön, 1994, p. 5), for it helps one to achieve clarity of the mind and a heightened level of self-awareness. The basic instruction is to sit upright with legs crossed, eyes open, and hands resting on the thighs; after which we apply light attention to the out-breath. When we notice our minds have wondered off, we *gently* say to ourselves, "thinking" and then we bring ourselves back to the present moment and back to our out-breath (Chödrön, 1994, p. 5).

It is important to note that meditation is not about achieving a blissful state or a wretched state, for that matter, and it is often highly uncomfortable for it is training us to keep our hearts open, even when what we see in ourselves "is just too embarrassing, too painful, too unpleasant, too hateful" (Chödrön, 2011, p. 50). It is by learning to accept all parts of ourselves, however, that we can begin to develop a complete friendship with ourselves, and therefore, widen our circle of compassion for others. Specifically, there are five qualities that are nurtured through this practice:

1. Steadfastness. When we practice meditation we are strengthening our ability to be steadfast with ourselves, in body as well as mind.

2. Clear seeing. Clear seeing is another way of saying that we have less self-deception. Through the process of practicing the technique day in and day out, year after year, we begin to be very honest with ourselves.
3. Experiencing our emotional distress. We practice dropping whatever story we are telling ourselves and leaning into the emotions and the fear. We stay with the emotion, experience it, and leave it as it is, without proliferating. Thus we train in opening the fearful heart to the restlessness of our own energy. We learn to abide with the experience of our emotional distress.

4. Attention to the present moment. We make the choice, moment by moment, to be fully here. Attending to our present-moment mind and body is a way of being tender toward self, toward other, and toward the world. This quality of attention is inherent in our ability to love. (Chödrön, 2008, p. 21-22)

5. No big deal: flexibility. You have profound insight…and its feeling of transformation, but then, no big deal…a statement of humour and flexibility…(Making) too big a deal leads to arrogance and pride or a sense of specialness. On the other hand making too big a deal about difficulties takes you in the other direction—poverty and low opinion of yourself, self-denigration, and so forth.” (Chödrön, 2000)

Gentleness is a key component of shamatha-vipashyana, and it is through this gentleness towards ourselves that we learn to experience true compassion. Meditation takes courage, for when we gently push away discursive thoughts, we are then able to see who it is we really are and we see that there are “whole parts of ourselves that are so unwanted that whenever they begin to come up we run away” (Chödrön, 1994, p. 4). We also see that we are not our thoughts, our storylines, or our fantasies about ourselves. As Trungpa’s son (and current head of the Shambhala Buddhist lineage), Sakyong Mipham says, “believing that thought patterns are a solid self is the source of our bewilderment
and suffering…seeing through this simple misunderstanding is the beginning of
enlightenment” (2003, p. 63). Knowing that we are not our thoughts, we can cultivate a
clarity of mind which allows us to see our own true nature as well as the nature of others.

Awakening Compassion

February 14th, 2008: It’s Valentine’s Day, which has become part of a long list of
days which now cause a “hold-my-breath-until-it-passes” type of reaction in me. The list
includes our wedding anniversary, Christmas, our birthdays, the anniversary of our first
date, and so forth. These days, which we once celebrated, are now as warm and
nurturing to me as what I have termed, “freshly baked dread.” My therapist tells me that
one day I will be able to remember you with more joy than sadness, Ryan. I hope, more
than believe, this is true. It makes me think of Woody Allen’s film, Another Woman, in
which Gena Rollands plays a 50-year old woman, with all the accouterments of a perfect,
successful life, or so it appears on the surface. The deception fades as she begins to
acknowledge and examine the damage caused by her lack of self-awareness, and at one
point, she openly wonders whether a memory is something you have or something you’ve
lost. I feel I have lost my happy memories of you for I cannot think of them without the
pain of missing you; I hope my therapist is right in saying that, in time, I will get these
back. There is something else that I have come to realize: when someone you love dies,
you not only grieve what you had, you grieve all the things that will never be.

In many ways, my memories of you seem to imprison me. Grief seems to be a
type of prison; it’s something you never want to experience and there’s nothing that can
prepare you for what it’s like. You’re given a sentence (I have been told that it takes
three to five years to get over the major part of grief) and you long for early parole, but
you can never be sure exactly how long you’re going to be incarcerated. At first you feel terrified, trapped within its walls, but with time, you manage to adapt to this new life. As Morgan Freeman’s character puts it in Shawshank Redemption, you become “institutionalized”. Still, there are many times when you wish for some escape, but securely posted at every such point are poignant memories standing guard to pull you back in, slamming the door shut again. Strangely, after a while, the walls come to feel more like a cocoon, with each layer nothing more than a thin veil of a memory—memory wrapped upon memory upon memory—until this cocoon becomes something solid, something tangible, something you can hold onto. It becomes something in the here-and-now that connects you to the one you grieve, but in reality it is a trap that prevents you from truly living and from honoring the love you carry for the one who has died. For months I was in this prison, but I slowly chipped away at the walls each time I sat down to meditate. I became more able to withstand my pain until one day it experienced a metamorphosis. I was kneeling by your side of the bed, feeling hopeless and alone. The pain in my chest felt so intense that I was afraid to let it out; as crazy as it sounds, I was afraid that something inside of me might burst. I decided to let it out anyways, and with this flood of tears came the realization that the only reason I felt so much grief was because I had been blessed with so much to lose. Before that moment, I had not appreciated this truth. I still feel the grief and sadness, but there is a deeper quality to it now, an appreciation of it that was never there before, and with this appreciation, has come a tenderness and an expansion of the heart.
The truth is that it is the human condition to feel pain and pleasure, joy and sadness, chaos and equanimity. To allow one’s self to feel only one side of an emotion is to deny our authentic nature as spiritual beings. By “spiritual beings”, I am referring to the perfection that exists in all of us, indeed in all of life; it is what Chödrön’s teacher, Trungpa (1984), referred to as our “basic goodness”. It is good because it is unconditional and always in existence whether we can see it or not—like the sun—which may be hidden by grey clouds, but steadfastly radiates behind them. Within this basic goodness is our inner wisdom that allows us to feel discomfort when our behavior proves incongruent to our true nature. Consequently, we create further suffering, when we try to hide from our anxiety and fear by employing habitual patterns that keep us distracted and numb to our lives. We wrap ourselves in what Trungpa (1984) calls our “cocoon”, a place where we “think we have quieted our fear, but (where) we are actually making ourselves numb with fear…a place where we “surround ourselves with our own familiar thoughts, so that nothing sharp or painful can touch us” (p. 51-52). It is our basic goodness that allows us to experience a longing for light and for freedom from our cocoon, and the only way out of the dark is to look upon our cocoon with gentleness and compassion. If we berate ourselves for having hid from the light, then we are only serving to wrap ourselves in a new cocoon (Trungpa, 1984).

Unfortunately, when most individuals in Western society gain awareness of their lack of wakefulness (i.e. this “disconnect” with their authentic selves), they habitually use this insight as evidence of yet another failure of theirs, and consequently, berate themselves and others for this, which can lead to feelings of low self-worth and low self-esteem. Interestingly, the Buddha did not see human beings as bad or as having
committed some sin, original or otherwise, that “made us more ignorant than clear, more harsh than gentle, more closed than open” (Chödrön, 1991, p. 13); rather he saw us as sharing in an innocent misunderstanding, like being in a dark room by mistake and needing someone to show us where the light switch is (Chödrön, 1991). In other words, we engage in behaviours that take us away from our authentic selves because we do not “see” whom we truly are, and when we do get a glimpse of this, we rarely do so with a gentle attitude towards ourselves. If we could, however, as Pema Chödrön (1991) writes:

…see our so-called limitations with clarity, precision, gentleness, good-heartedness, and kindness and, having seen them fully, then let go, open further, we (would) begin to find that our world is more vast and more refreshing and fascinating than we had realized before. In other words, the key to feeling more whole and less shut off and shut down is to be able to see clearly who we are and what we’re doing. (p. 13-14)

I continued to immerse myself in Chödrön’s teachings, and had committed to a daily practice of meditation. At first, I could only sit for ten minutes before either physical or emotion discomfort intervened. Drowsiness was also a common intruder. I signed up for meditation weekend workshops at the Vancouver Shambhala Centre to further support my learning. Before long, I was able to meditate for a half hour, and although I continued to struggle with my discursive mind, I gradually felt less afraid of my grief and had greater confidence in my ability to relax with whatever would arise both on and off of my meditation cushion.
The deeper I was able to go into my practice, the more I was able to connect with a feeling of compassion and tenderness—qualities which Chödrön (1997, p. 86) says arise from “the genuine heart of bodhicitta”. Bodhicitta, which is a Sanskrit word meaning “noble or awakened heart” is said to exist in all beings. “Just as butter is inherent in milk and oil is inherent in a sesame seed”, this soft spot is inherent is all of us (Chödrön, 1997, p. 86). Cultivating an awareness of our own prejudices, addictions, rage, arrogance, pettiness, and all the other unwanted parts of ourselves helps us to connect with other people; it is through this kinship with the suffering of others that we discover our awakened heart. Cultivating this compassion takes bravery for it means feeling pain and being on an equal level with others, unlike pity, which keeps us on a higher plain, and therefore, shielded from feeling pain. As Chödrön (1997, p. 87) explains:

We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In the words of the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, ‘You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart and you turn it into compassion.’

The more I contemplated on these teachings, the clearer I saw the confusion that most human beings, including myself, have around what will bring them happiness and peace. We mistakenly believe that we are being kind to ourselves when we protect ourselves from suffering. In truth, this only causes us to become more hardened, more fearful, and more alienated from others—trapping us in a prison that restricts us “to our own personal hopes and fears and caring only for those people nearest to us” (Chödrön, 1997, p. 88). Contrary to this, was the open-heartedness I felt within myself and from
others in the grief support groups and meditation classes that I attended. Somehow through the shared experience of talking about our pain, a deep connection developed, and from this came healing, hopefulness, and the desire to go beyond just attending to my pain. I became inspired to find ways to be of benefit to others as well.

In an effort to further awaken bodhichitta, I began to train in a meditation practice called *tonglen*, which in Tibetan means “taking in and sending out”. In *Awakening Compassion*, Chödrön (2003) explains that the practice of tonglen presents a fundamental change in attitude from our standard practices of rejecting and running away from the things in our lives which are unwanted and seen as “bad”, and our habitual practice of grasping and holding onto that which we want and regard as “good.” Tonglen presents a radical approach for it encourage us to move towards, to explore, and to open our hearts wider and wider to those things which we do not want, and to let go of and share with all people that which we want, hold dear, and find delightful. It is a fundamental and dramatic change of attitude about how to relate to both pain and pleasure. It is as Chödrön describes:

…a practice of creating space, ventilating the atmosphere of our lives so that people can breathe freely and relax. Whenever we encounter suffering in any form, the tonglen instruction is to breathe it in with the wish that everyone could be free of pain. Whenever we encounter happiness in any form, the instruction is to breathe it out, send it out, with the wish that everyone could feel joy. It’s a practice that allows people to feel less burdened and less cramped, a practice that shows us how to love without conditions. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 88)
Tonglen can be done as a formal meditation practice within a session of sitting meditation, or it can be done right on the spot. When done as a formal meditation practice, it has four stages:

1. First, rest your mind for a second or two in a state of openness or stillness. This is traditionally called flashing absolute bodhichitta, or suddenly opening to the basic spaciousness and clarity of the awakened heart.

2. Work with texture. Breathe in a feeling of hot, dark, and heavy—a sense of claustrophobia—and breathe out a feeling of cool bright, and light—a sense of freshness. Breathe in completely, through all the pores of your body, and breathe out, radiate out, completely, through all the pores of your body. Do this until it feels synchronized with your in-and-out-breaths.

3. Now contemplate any painful situation that is real to you. Traditionally, you begin by doing tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However, if you are stuck, you can do the practice for the pain you are feeling and simultaneously for all those just like you who feel that kind of suffering. For instance, if you are feeling inadequate, you breathe that in for yourself and all the others in the same boat, and you send out confidence and adequacy or relief in any form you wish.

4. Finally, widen the circle of compassion by making the taking in and sending out bigger. If you are doing tonglen for a friend, extend it out to those who are in the same situation as your friend. Make it bigger than just that one person. You can also do tonglen for people you consider to be your enemies—those who hurt you or hurt others. Do tonglen for them, thinking of them as having the same
confusion and stuckness as your friend or yourself. Breathe in their pain and send them relief. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 95-96)

When I first read these instructions, I was unsure whether I would be able to carry them out; this practice seemed so masochistic. The idea of breathing-in pain, and not just my own, but other people’s pain as well, was less than appealing. I empathized with one of Chödrön’s students who amusingly admitted that while he did do the practice, he secretly hoped that it did not work (Chödrön, 2003). Still, with Chödrön’s inspiring faith in the effectiveness of the practice, I begun to try it, and was soon amazed by its ability to shift the energy of a situation. I did experience a kind of ventilation whenever I remembered to use it during tense situations or heightened emotions. It also helped me to stay in the moment and not spin off into my usual storylines. I was not always able to sustain the practice; sometimes the emotions were simply too uncomfortable for me to continue to breathe in, but it was not long before I understood its benefits. Gradually, perhaps imperceptivity, I felt more of a connection with the rest of the world; the barriers were slowly being chipped away. As had been taught by Trungpa (1973, p. 113), compassion had become “a bridge to the world outside.”

An exercise that Chödrön suggests doing to help further break down these barriers is called “just like me.” This is a wonderful exercise to do when stuck in traffic jams. The instruction is to look at the faces of the other drivers and realize that, just like me, they too would like to be out of this traffic. Making a point to look at their face and acknowledge that we are connected in the discomfort of the moment fosters a feeling of kinship. At this point, we can further nurture this kinship and widen the circle of compassion by engaging in tonglen. The key point about tonglen is that we use our own
experience of pain as well as our experience of pleasure as a way to recognize our kinship with all sentient beings.

April 16th, 2008: Already a year has passed since you died. I still yearn for you, but the longing is more bearable. I don’t know if it’s because it has lessened or if I am just more accustomed to the sensation. People are constantly reassuring me that time heals all wounds. I don’t know about that. What I do know is that time passes whether we want it to or not, and healing only happens with effort. I also know that healing isn’t orderly or predictable, rather it’s messy, clumsy, hopeless, scary, insane, enraging, overwhelming, hysterical, freeing, blissful, and everything in-between and upside down—just like all of life.

If only I could have you here with me, even for a moment or two, just to hug you and hold your hand one last time. Never before, have I missed someone so. It’s the little things that I miss the most, I think, like hearing your keys opening the front door, and the way you would give my hand a little squeeze before releasing it, and the little sigh and smile you’d give just before gallantly swapping plates with me after my first bite told me that I had, once again, made an “unfortunate” menu choice. It struck me the other night that I am no longer anyone’s favourite person. But I also realize that I was lucky to have known you at all, and to have known the love we shared. Grief can make you want to forever close your heart, but Pema Chödrön’s teachings have helped me see that in keeping my heart and spirit open, I allow the love we shared the space it needs to breathe, to be cared for, and to further expand, so that it can break free, spread its wings, and fly once again.
Pema has awakened me to the fact that the only things we know for sure are that death is certain and that the time of our death is not, so it’s important to make this moment count. In this past year, I have learned that I can either use my grief to wake up or shut down. I want to use my life to cultivate an open heart and kinship with all sentient beings, and honour the life and love we shared. I am learning to appreciate the impermanence of life, and to see that we never really own the things we think we do—our material possessions, our relationships, our bodies even—everything is leased, everything except for what we hold in our hearts; that, I believe, is what we take with us, and within mine, our love will forever live.
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