

# Grieving a Soulmate

*The Love Story Behind "Till Death Do Us Part"*



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**Robert Orfali**

MILL CITY PRESS



MINNEAPOLIS, MN

2011

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www.GrievingaSoulmate.com

Mill City Press, Inc.



Minneapolis, MN 55401  
Tel. 612-455-2294  
www.millcitypublishing.com

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Includes bibliographical references.

1. Loss—Bereavement 2. Grief—Psychological aspects 3. Soulmate—Final love 4. Death—End-of-life. I. Title

First Edition 2011

ISBN-13: 978-1-936400-66-9

LCCN: 2010941337

Cover design by Jayne Cloutier

Cover photos of Diamond Head and Jeri by Richie Rich & J. Cloutier

Typeset by Jay Garthwait

*Printed in the United States of America*

**In Memory of My Soulmate**  
***Jeri Edwards Orfali***  
**September 5, 1952 - June 19, 2009**

*An extraordinary woman radiant in beauty and aloha.  
She remains a constant source of inspiration and support.*



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# Introduction

*“I, Robert, take you, Jeri, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”*

—*The Traditional Wedding Vow*

This book is really a love story. Since the beginning of time, millions of love stories have appeared in every form of medium—stone tablets, papyrus, songs, poems, books, movies, and TV soaps. By now, everything should have been covered—first dates, courtship, marriage, honeymoon, lovemaking, parenting, dual careers, sex after menopause, and so on. What could have been left unsaid about love? Drumroll, the answer is: The “death do us part” thing. It never gets the proper coverage. No one likes to talk about what happens to love stories at the very end. The timeline just before and after the death of a soulmate remains the untold part of the story. There are some exceptions—for example, *Ghost*, which is a very tender and romantic movie.

Unfortunately, in the real-life version of *Ghost*, there is a high probability that one of the partners will eventually get sick and then die. The other partner first becomes a caregiver and then a griever. So the bad news is that sickness and death will eventually “do us part.” The good news is that the love relationship only gets stronger with illness and death. It also survives death. Yes, one spouse dies, but the love continues to live forever in the surviving partner’s heart. Of course, this assumes that the surviving partner does not perish during the grieving process.

So the big surprise is the incredible level of bonding, loving, and tenderness that takes place during sickness and the last days. It’s the ultimate love affair. It’s total and unconditional love. It’s more romantic than courtship. It’s more tender than mothering. And, it can

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be very sexy. You live in the moment. You savor every remaining microsecond that you can enjoy with your lover on this earth.

After death comes the grieving. At the beginning, you are assaulted with the red-hot pain bursts of young grief. It's like molten lava burning through your entire being. If you find some way to get rid of these grief bursts, you'll then withdraw into a period of sadness and meditation. This is a time when you can explore your relationship and give meaning to your lover's life and death. Incredibly, this meditation elevates you to another plateau of love. In your grieving, you rediscover what it was all about: You have loved and lost, but you also understand how lucky you were to have loved.

### **The “Final Love”**

So, yes, this is a love story. It covers love at the end of life—the “final love.” A few lucky lovers will leave this earth at the same time. For the rest of us, there will be grieving and, perhaps, a period of caregiving before death. Most lovers will experience this last part; it's almost universal. Deep inside, we all know it's going to happen—the marriage vows give us ample warning. Yet, none of us seem to know anything about the love experience in the final days. I certainly didn't. The subject is taboo. The tabloids never cover it. Hollywood gives us endless scenes of instant death. We don't ever see the entire process, even though it's pure love at its peak.

This book is about that process. It's about the death of a soulmate and the grieving that follows. It's the book I wish I had read before my soulmate, Jeri, died. I was so unprepared for both her death and the brutal period of grieving that followed. This book should help you get through both. It can be your guide through “death do us part” and its aftermath—the profound process of grieving a soulmate.

### **My Soulmate Jeri**

Jeri died on June 19, 2009, at age 56. I met her in 1979. I was a happy bachelor then, but I knew I had found a gem. After our first encounter we became totally inseparable for the next 30 years. It's almost as if

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we were fused together—she was my lover, co-author, partner, and best friend. We were soulmates from the very first moment.

We were both in the computer industry in the early Silicon Valley days. Jeri joined some very exciting start-ups. She was a good techie who, at one time, managed hundreds of the best programmers in the Valley. She was able to turn out some great products, which she also knew how to market. In the early 1990s, Jeri was named *Silicon Valley Executive Woman of the Year*.

At one point, Jeri and I decided we would give back some of the knowledge we had acquired. We teamed up with Dan Harkey to write books that would help a new generation of programmers understand the technology of Client/Server and Java. We used simple terminology to explain some very difficult stuff—like the mission-critical software that runs the banks, stock markets, and telephone companies. Our books became bestsellers. We sold over a million copies.

In the last two years of our professional life, Jeri and I went together on two world tours to promote the technologies in our books. Although our books had been translated into 27 languages, we were surprised by how famous we were. We had a great time on the road with the “Jeri and Robert” show. Jeri was a very articulate and expressive speaker—the audiences loved her from Beijing to Stockholm.

At the end of our last world tour, we decided that Hawaii was the most beautiful place on this earth, so we made it our home. In July 1998, we packed and moved to Kailua, on the island of Oahu. We were in heaven. Unfortunately, Jeri was diagnosed with ovarian cancer just a short time later.

Jeri and I spent the next ten years fighting her cancer. She was on chemotherapy for most of those years. During her chemo years, Jeri learned how to surf. It became her passion. In record time, she became a very good surfer and was able to win fourth place in her age division. Most importantly, surfing helped Jeri fight her cancer and keep her alive. The ocean kept her radiant and fit until the very end. It was the best detox for her endless chemo. Jeri received one of the most moving

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surfer funerals ever. We scattered her ashes in the ocean at Waikiki where she had surfed.

### **I Was Caught Off Guard**

During the ten years I helped Jeri fight her cancer, I was on top of the research. I knew everything about cancer treatments and her chemo choices. I also knew that her cancer would eventually kill her. We lived from one cancer count to the next, so I knew death was at the door all those years. But strangely, I was totally unprepared for both the death process and the grieving that followed. I was a death virgin and also a grief virgin. I had to learn about both the hard way—while they were happening. I kicked myself for not being better prepared and I ended up suffering too much during the grieving process. After years of helping Jeri, why was I not better prepared?

The answer comes in two parts. First, none of us spend very much time thinking about death and grieving. On an ordinary day, we tend to avoid both these topics like the plague. We try not to worry about them until they hit us. Some of us even delude ourselves with thoughts of immortality. Second, there is a lot of information out there, but it's spread out all over the place. It takes forever to find it and then digest it. During my grieving, I finally did the research—it became a matter of survival. I devoured everything that was written on the topic. It consumed hundreds upon hundreds of hours, about the same level of effort it takes to earn a master's degree in computer science.

Eventually, I completed my research. To my surprise, not all the pieces were there. There was nothing that could help stop these horrible grief bursts—the red-hot waves of pain. And there was nothing out there to help me grieve in a modern, secular way. If you don't subscribe to an organized religion with an after-death retirement plan, then you must become your own priest and philosopher. And because modern psychology doesn't do grieving well, you must also become your own psychologist. Finally, and most importantly, not all grieving is the same. The death of a soulmate is particularly harsh because the lovers are so intertwined and bonded. The pain you feel now is the flip side

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of the love you once had. The more you loved, the greater your grieving pain. Yes, grieving a soulmate can be pure hell.

### **So, Why Did I Write This Book?**

I was left alone to face the death of my lover and grapple with the existential issues of life and death—from a secular perspective. Prodded by the red-hot pain, I had to develop, on the fly, an entirely new way to grieve my soulmate. I am grateful to the many people who gave me some guidance during this difficult period. I wrote this book to give back this knowledge I acquired the hard way. It's the book you will need to help you navigate through the final stage of your relationship. It's my gift to you and also my tribute to Jeri, my soulmate.

Of course, I am not going to profit from Jeri's death. All the proceeds from this book will go to charity (hopefully, St. Francis Hospice, where she died). I also want you to know that I did not write this book to help me grieve Jeri better. I was done with the painful part of my grieving before I began to write. My grief bursts are history. I now have happy memories of my life with Jeri. Instead of grief bursts, the memories bring smiles and good thoughts. It wasn't easy. It took me four months to get rid of the grief bursts completely. If I had this book, I could have done it in less than half that time. When you're suffering the pain of grief, every bit of help counts. Trust me, you want that horrible pain to stop. You want to get out of the pain zone as fast as you can. After you eliminate the pain, you can then enjoy the rest of your grieving. It becomes "good" grieving.

### **Who Is This Book For?**

This book is for lovers of all ages. It prepares you for the end and it helps you grieve the death of your lover. In her book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion writes: "Life changes fast. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends." She was writing about the sudden death of her husband, writer John Dunne. Unfortunately, death is always a heartbeat away. It's an uninvited guest that shows up

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whenever and wherever it likes. All relationships end with death, our common destiny. So you will need to read this book at some point.

Jeri's "good death" and my ensuing grieving can be your guide. Ideally, you will be reading this book at least one year before the death of a lover. If you're brave, you can read it now. If not, just put it on a shelf and read it when you'll need it. Everyone prepares for marriage and birthing, but no one is prepared for the final passage of a relationship—the death of a lover. It pays to understand your options at the end and to prepare for the grieving that follows.

### **Grieving and End-of-Life**

This book consists of three parts: living with a terminal illness, the end-of-life experience, and the grieving of a soulmate. Most of the book focuses on the grieving aspects. It's really a book on how to grieve your soulmate—a difficult topic that requires much understanding. Why do I cover dying in a book on grieving? Because understanding death helps us grieve better. Dying can be a long and messy affair. It's a lot like birthing, but in reverse. It takes time and effort for the engine to shut down.

As the surviving soulmate, the death you witnessed can leave you with deep feelings of guilt and remorse, which can haunt you throughout your grieving. Why? Because most of us have a sanitized view of death, which is really a messy, organic process. Because death is messy, you will blame yourself for not having done more for your dying lover. You go through endless "what ifs" and "if onlys" revisiting every aspect of the death. Again, the problem is that most of us are death virgins. So the better we understand death, the less pain we will experience during grieving.

### **How the Book Is Organized**

The first three chapters are about living with a terminal illness and the end-of-life experience. The rest of the book is on the grieving process. Again, I cover both the theory and practice (in this case, mine) of grieving for a soulmate:

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- **Chapters 1 and 2** are about Jeri's epic battle with her cancer. For many of you, these two short chapters are optional reading. They do, however, contain a lot of invaluable information for people who are living with cancer. With almost ten years of continuous chemo, Jeri probably holds a world record. During that time, she was also a surfer and, probably, the most radiant person in all of Hawaii. She projected both inner and outer strength. I will share with you some of the things we did to achieve this state of body and mind. Maybe it can help you or a loved one, who is fighting cancer or some other chronic disease.
- **Chapter 3** is a lengthy chapter on death. I cover Jeri's death and the entire process of dying. It's the chapter I wish I had read before she died. It's a very concise guide that covers a lot of material on the process of dying—including hospice, palliative care, pain management, home nursing, caregiving, and what death itself looks like (the pre-active and active phases of dying). This chapter also provides a very intimate view of Jeri's death. In our society, the deathbed experience is private. What happens in the deathbed stays in the deathbed. After some hesitation, I decided that Jeri would not mind sharing her end-of-life experience with the rest of the world—especially if it could be of some benefit to others. She believed that knowledge is power to be shared. Her death is a textbook example of a good death, and there are definitely lessons to be learned here.
- **Chapter 4** is about mourning in the age of the Internet. I packed it with useful information. For example, I cover the importance of the memorial website we created for Jeri. It's the modern version of the tombstone. Jeri's memory now lives forever in the search engines of the Internet. As you can see, I do not subscribe to Freud's *Forget and Detach* view of grieving. The website helps me preserve the memories of my soulmate and feel her comforting presence. However, the website can also help separate the identities of the lovers, which is a key part of the recovery process. I also have a lot to say about cremation, viewing the dead body, writing the obituary, and the funeral itself. It's an insight into a more modern way of

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mourning—a little bit more high-tech than the traditional method of our parents.

- **Chapter 5** is about grief bursts, the red-hot pain of young grief. I explain why the loss of a soulmate is so traumatic and unique from a grieving perspective. I rely on e-mails I wrote during my red-hot grieving period to describe some typical grief bursts. The e-mails document my state of mind during this crucial period. The human mind tends to quickly forget painful experiences—it develops protective amnesia. I was lucky to have this trove of first-hand documentation.
- **Chapter 6** is about my search for the grief-burst cure. It's another lengthy chapter. I start with Freud's detachment theory and its most recent incarnations. I then go over Bowlby's very influential *Attachment Theory*. I spend some time reviewing the popular grief literature. These are the dozens of how-to guides by grief therapists that build on the Kübler-Ross five stages of grieving. Next, I visit what Kübler-Ross herself has to say about grieving and what the critics of her theory have to say. Finally, I cover the new frontier of grief theory including the *Dual Process Model*, Bonanno's new insights on *Resilience*, and the *Continuing Bonds* model. I conclude by presenting my own method for dealing with grief bursts. It's the cure I was looking for. I took the best everyone had to offer and then added the key missing pieces. It really worked for me.
- **Chapters 7 to 11** are about zapping my grief bursts into oblivion. I had to follow each grief burst to its source—the emotions, feelings, and events that were the triggers. Once I found the source, I could then zap the grief burst out of existence. It's an old trick from my computer software days—just trace the bugs. Once you find the root cause, you fix it and get rid of the bug. I had to classify and count the bugs. It's the same with grief bursts. Why five chapters? In my grieving, I had to deal with five types of grief bursts: 1) *The last days*—I revisit the various “what ifs” and “if onlys” caused by Jeri's end-of-life process; 2) *Survivor's guilt*—I'm alive but she isn't, she's not

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here to enjoy what life has to offer, she died so young, and so on; 3) *She's gone forever*—I miss her physical presence on this earth, I can't believe she's gone, she was just erased from every scene, and so on; 4) *Self-pity*—I have to face life without Jeri, she left a big hole in my life, she left me with so many roles to fill, and so on; and 5) *Deep existential issues*—I must make meaning of Jeri's life and death, I'm faced with a torrent of existential questions: Why did she die? Where did she go? What was she thinking? Does anything still make sense?... In each chapter, I go over my techniques for eradicating a specific type of grief burst. These should serve as templates for dealing with your own grief bursts. So you'll learn by example.

**Note:** *Again, I borrowed some of these techniques from computer software design. There, we use templates and patterns to capture the better software practices and methods so that other programmers can reuse them. Good software design is more art than science. The same can be said about grieving techniques. Shameless plug: This is so much better than anything else that is out there. It's a way of applying some method to the grieving madness—even though death shatters our lives in different ways.*

- **Chapter 12** is about the resolution of my grief. My definition of healing consisted of two parts: 1) zero pain and 2) happy memories of Jeri. I achieved both. This is also the final chapter where I try to put it all together. I hope the lessons learned will get you to the other side of your painful grief in record time.

Every grief has its own patterns. Mine can serve as a template to help you deal with yours. You won't need a degree in grieving or computer science. I put it all in one place for you. Remember that once you get rid of the pain you can go back to living. Or, if you prefer, you can continue to grieve. Without the grief bursts, it will be a much more pleasant grieving experience. At the end, you will be left with happy memories of your soulmate. You will be whole again. The memories

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will help sustain you and give you inner strength as you continue to live. I now live for both of us.

### **Yes, There Is a Method to This Madness**

This systemic treatment of grief may sound cold and analytic. Perhaps you may be thinking, “The grieving of a soulmate should be treated with poetry, not with conceptual thinking.” Wrong! You must first deal with the pain; the poetry can come later. For me, dealing with the pain was a matter of survival. The pain attacks became all-consuming. I could not think of anything else, not even Jeri. So I had to use everything in my arsenal to get rid of the pain. From the grief literature, I borrowed anything that made sense to me; yet there were big holes. I had to improvise to fill in the missing parts. I used whatever conceptual training I had to complete the model. Jeri seemed to magically reappear after I got rid of the pain. This time she wasn’t the Jeri of grief-burst nightmares. Instead, it was my loving Jeri—my soulmate. I rediscovered my Jeri. The love was back. My grieving could now turn poetic. You’ll find that this book has more than its fair share of soul-searching and philosophical musings.

### **At the End, It’s Still a Love Story**

In conclusion, grieving your soulmate can be a beautiful poetic experience, but the red-hot pain is not. You must do whatever it takes to eradicate the pain, so that you can live again and rediscover your soulmate. Perhaps, now you can understand why I wrote this book. It’s a survival guide for the final stages in a soulmate relationship. As the surviving soulmate, I tried to capture the powerful, final love experience and put it into words. There’s more death and grieving in this book than you’ll find anywhere else in print, but it’s still a love story. I tried to convey, in intimate detail, that there is love during the dying and after the death. The love story will sustain us through the end-of-life and the grieving that follows. This is the all-important lesson in this book.