

Grieving a Soulmate

The Love Story Behind “Till Death Do Us Part”

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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.*

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

Grieving a Soulmate

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

Introduction

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

Grieving a Soulmate

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

Introduction

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

Grieving a Soulmate

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:

Introduction

- **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

Grieving a Soulmate

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

Introduction

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

Grieving a Soulmate

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.

Chapter 1

You Have Ovarian Cancer

“Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

—Susan Sontag¹

It all began on an autumn evening while we were walking on the promenade in Cannes. Earlier that day, we had landed in France—the start of a ten-city European lecture tour. The fresh Mediterranean air felt good after the long transatlantic flight. In the middle of our walk, Jeri suddenly said, “Stop, I’m feeling a sharp pain in the stomach.” So we just sat down on a bench, waiting for the pain to go away. Jeri had just had a full gynecological exam before we left the U.S. and everything was fine. Consequently, we were not too worried. We assumed it was an upset stomach from the long plane ride. Sure enough, the pain just went away and we resumed our walk along the Riviera.

Over the next month, Jeri felt some intermittent pains as we flew from one country to the next. Again, we attributed it to airplanes and changing diets. By the time we returned home to Hawaii, the pain was gone.

One month later, however, the pain returned with a vengeance—this time, in the form of sharp pokes and a bloated stomach. We

¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Picador Press, 1978).

Grieving a Soulmate

immediately went to see Jeri's gynecologist, who then promptly ordered an ultrasound. The doctor called us the next morning with the results—something appeared to be very wrong. I remember my heart sinking when she said, "The ultrasound shows two large masses." My heart sank further when she referred us to Dr. Keith Terada, the top gynecological oncologist on the island. I asked her, "Does this mean Jeri has cancer?" She answered, "You'll need to talk to Dr. Terada." I could see from Jeri's face that she was devastated by the news. That night we did a lot of crying and hugging. The next morning we drove over the hill to meet Dr. Terada.

We Need to Operate

Our first encounter with Dr. Terada was scary. He was sitting at his desk looking at Jeri's ultrasound results with a frown on his face. "Not good," I thought. Finally, words came out of his mouth: "Umm...we'll need to operate to find out what's going on." He asked us if we had any questions. Jeri and I were both in a daze. I remember Jeri softly asking, "Do you think it's cancer?" The answer came back, "We'll know when we operate." All I could ask was, "What are the odds?" Dr. Terada paused, took a deep breath, and then answered, "I'd say 50/50." I did not like those odds at all.

Over the next ten years, we both grew to love Dr. Terada. He kept Jeri alive and well. We returned to that same office and sat facing him in the same two chairs over a hundred times. In every one of these visits, we dealt with matters of life and death. But, unlike that first uneasy encounter, Jeri could always make Dr. Terada smile (perhaps not at the very end). They both had a good sense of humor and got along very well. Most importantly, she completely trusted him with her life. These two developed a very deep relationship that only grew stronger with the years.

What Is Ovarian Cancer, Anyway?

As we left Dr. Terada's office, we both came up with one more question: "What type of cancer are we dealing with?" Phyllis, Dr.

Chapter 1: You Have Ovarian Cancer

Terada's nurse, looked surprised at our ignorance and answered, "It may be ovarian cancer, you know, the cancer of the ovaries." Of course, neither of us had heard of that cancer. Jeri had always been a model of good health. Like most women, the only two cancers she had been screened for every year were breast and cervical. So what was this ovarian cancer? It took less than 30 minutes of research on the Internet to get an answer: It's one nasty cancer.

Ovarian cancer is often called the "silent" killer because many times there are no symptoms until the disease has progressed to an advanced stage. This lack of symptoms means that about 75% of ovarian cancer cases will have spread to the abdomen by the time they are detected. Unfortunately, most patients die within five years. Ovarian cancer usually occurs in women over age 50, but it can also affect younger women. Its cause is unknown. About 21,550 women in the U.S. will learn they have ovarian cancer in 2010. About 14,600 will die from the disease.²

***Tip:** If you're a woman reading this you may be wondering: What can I do to protect myself against this horrible cancer? As Jeri would tell her friends, there are three things you must do: First, ask your doctor for a CA 125 test. Like the PSA for prostate cancer, this blood test is not always accurate. Consequently, it's not part of a woman's regular physical. Second, if your belly ever starts to bloat or ache, you should ask your doctor for a thorough examination—including a transvaginal ultrasound. Finally, if you have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer, you should have yourself tested for mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes. It's another blood test. Typically, you get counseling from a geneticist before and after this test.*

The Long Wait

Over the next few days, Jeri's pain and bloating became worse with each passing hour. She could only think of the pain, not the cancer.

² Source: The American Cancer Society.

Grieving a Soulmate

Luckily, there was an opening in Dr. Terada's busy schedule and we were able to move up Jeri's operation date. She was on the operating table less than a week after the ultrasound. Because the events had moved so fast, we did not have the time to notify our friends and families. On the day of the operation, I found myself alone in the visitor's lounge, waiting for Dr. Terada to come out of the operating room.

Ten years later, I can still vividly remember the thoughts that were racing through my mind that fateful day. I remember pleading, "Please, don't let it be cancer." Then as the hours dragged on, all I could think was, "Please, let her come out of this operation alive." This was the first time I faced the possibility that Jeri could die on me. I was absolutely terrified. I could not conceive of life without Jeri. She was literally my other half. Then I had my first grief burst—a precursor of the horrible pain stabs I would feel after her death. I was in panic mode.

I must have looked terrible because I remember a kindly nurse asking me, "Sir, do you need help?" "Yes," I replied, "this operation has been going on forever. Could you please let me know if my wife, Jeri, is still alive?" She returned shortly after with very good news, "Jeri is alive. The operation will take a little while longer. Dr. Terada knows that you're waiting outside. He'll come and see you after the operation." I felt an incredible sense of relief. All that mattered was that Jeri would come out of this alive. Together, we could deal with any outcome—including cancer.

Thirty minutes later, Dr. Terada emerged from the operating room. He looked exhausted. I could see from his demeanor that the news was not good. He reported that both of Jeri's tumors were cancerous. The cancer was also in the lymph nodes, which meant it was not localized to the ovarian cavity—it was Stage 3. Dr. Terada felt he had done an excellent job removing the visible cancer. He had also performed a complete hysterectomy and removed the appendix and the omentum. So Jeri had been thoroughly "de-bulked." Finally, he mentioned

something that made my hair stand up: “I had to cut out a piece of the colon around which the tumor had wrapped itself. We can reconnect the colon later. For now, she has a colostomy.” The news put me in a state of shock. Thankfully, Jeri was still alive, but I now needed to take an inventory of the damage.

Tip: It’s now become known that proper de-bulking greatly affects the survival outcomes in ovarian cancer. Jeri was extremely lucky that her gynecologist had referred her to Dr. Terada—a very skilled surgeon who is also a gynecological oncologist. If you’re ever in this situation, just make sure that a very skilled surgeon performs the initial de-bulking operation.

Please, Google “Colostomy” for Me

As soon as Dr. Terada left, I got on the phone with friends and family to report on what had just happened. My first call was to a friend with a fast Internet connection: “Could you please do a search on “colostomy” for me?” The result came back: “It’s a procedure which connects part of the colon to an opening in the abdominal wall to allow stools to drain. A colostomy may be permanent or temporary, depending on the reasons for its use.”

The good news was that in Jeri’s case the colostomy was reversible. The bad news was that she would have to live with colostomy bags in the interim. It was bad, but not terrible. The cancer, however, was a big problem. I dreaded having to tell Jeri the bad news.

How Do You Tell Your Wife She Has Cancer?

I went upstairs to the hospital room that would become our home for the next ten days. It was a private room with a spectacular view. The nurses fixed me a cot next to Jeri’s bed. I looked at the ocean on the horizon, waiting for Jeri to be transported into the room. There was a beautiful Hawaiian sunset. An hour later, Jeri was finally wheeled in and then moved into her bed. She looked very pale, tired, and

Grieving a Soulmate

beautiful. She must have seen the tears in my eyes because her first words were, “Do I have cancer?”

Her question felt like a stab. I began to cry again and she knew the answer. Then I went over the status report I had received from Dr. Terada. I concluded by telling her, “And you also have this thing called a colostomy bag. But don’t worry; it’s only temporary.” She nodded in a daze and gave herself a bolus of morphine. Her more immediate problem was how to recover from the long operation.

At 6:00 a.m. the next morning, we were both in deep sleep when Dr. Terada walked into the room. He went over the prognosis, this time with Jeri, who seemed to be a bit more lucid. At the end, she asked him one question, “Does this mean I’m going to die?” Dr. Terada was startled. If I remember correctly, his answer was, “No. Well, eventually we will all die. Well, there are statistics for your cancer.”

This Is Our Cancer

The next few days were spent dealing with the various pains from the operation. Eventually, a nurse went over the colostomy procedures with us. Jeri’s blood pressure jumped twenty points when she understood what it was all about. The next day a beautiful woman called Jackie showed up. She explained to Jeri how she went about life with her own colostomy bag. It seemed doable. Jeri felt much better.

One night, after the pain had subsided, Jeri invited me to sit next to her in the hospital bed. For a long time, we hugged and held each other. We also had a good cry. Then I turned over towards Jeri and said, “Look, we still have each other. This is our cancer; we’ll fight it together. Somehow, we’ll win.” After that I felt much better. At this point, I had no idea how we would win. What I knew was that the team was still intact—Jeri was alive. Together, we could face almost anything life would throw at us—including being touched by cancer.

Chapter 5

The Grief Burst Explosion

*I'm walking through streets that are dead
Walking, walking with you in my head
My feet are so tired, my brain is so wired
And the clouds are weepin*

*Could you ever be true? I think of you
And I wonder*

*Just don't know what to do
I'd give anything to be with you*

— Bob Dylan, “Time Out of My Mind”¹

The grief bursts returned with a vengeance right after the funeral. They started to hit me all at once and from every direction. This time they did not stop. So what is it about “after funerals” that triggers such a reaction? Perhaps it’s that funerals represent the *grande finale* of a life. They signify the final passage from which there is no return. They drive home the idea that your loved one is gone forever. Maybe it’s because everyone starts to leave after the funeral. They go back to their lives, families, and jobs and you are left alone to face your loss. Maybe I had more time to reflect after the funeral, and I could more clearly see the enormity of my loss. Maybe it’s all of the above. In any case, this is when it all started to sink in. It was time to face my loss head on. I couldn’t avoid it any longer.

In this chapter, I’ll first go over what it means to lose your soulmate, the deepest loss a person can experience. Then I’ll cover the explosion

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Grieving a Soulmate

of grief that is triggered by the realization of the loss. The mind tries to forget these grief bursts from hell. Typically, we develop some kind of amnesia to make us forget pain we previously experienced. Luckily, I kept a collection of e-mails from that period. They cover some of my pain in gory detail. It's first-hand documentation of that horrible stuff that plays out in your mind. I'll be able to share it with you. My grief bursts went on for four months. In the chapters that follow, I will tell you exactly how I got rid of them completely. With the knowledge I have today, I think I could have extinguished those grief bursts in half the time—maybe, even less. Keep this thought in the back of your mind when you read some of the gory material that follows.

Surveying My Loss

I did a quick survey of my loss. Thirty years of my life had just vanished into thin air. When my lover died, she took everything that mattered in my life with her. This could explain the scenes of devastation in my mind. Jeri played so many roles in my life. There were the major roles—lover, partner, life witness, coauthor, caregiver, intellectual companion, and so on. Then there were all those everyday life roles—clothes matcher, TiVo technician, home decorator, news commentator, espresso maker, gourmet chef, confidante, holiday organizer, back scratcher, and many more. She was my ever-present companion in life's more mundane activities—breakfasts, dinners, movies, walks, travel, sunset watching, whale spotting, shopping, and the list goes on. She was the love of my life and the person I grew up with. She was the person I woke up to every morning of my life.

The grief bursts were proof that the enormity of my loss had started to sink in. I was grieving for all these primary and secondary losses—so many roles left with holes that needed mending. That's why it felt like I had such a huge hole inside of me. I had lost such a big part of me. How could I ever recover?

Additionally, there were two very subtle losses that seemed to effect my immediate situation:

Chapter 5: The Grief Burst Explosion

- ***Besides my soulmate, I had also lost a child.*** Yes, I know it sounds irrational but let me explain. The caregiving during the end-of-life period created some very tender and nurturing bonds between us. I felt so incredibly in love with Jeri at the end. It was as if our love had reached a new plateau. Why? The answer is that the death process is just like birthing but in reverse. I felt like a mother who was nursing a child. When Jeri died, I lost my child, too. It was an additional source of deep pain.
- ***I also lost my grieving mate.*** Your soulmate is probably the one person in this world who could have helped you through your entire grieving process. If she hadn't died, Jeri could have been my grief counselor. She could have helped me navigate the existential issues of life and death. She would have helped me absorb the constant shock of grief bursts. She would have given me a shoulder on which to cry, night and day. She would have held me when I was trembling in fear. Of course, she could not be here to help with my grieving, just as she couldn't attend her own funeral.

Death snatched Jeri from my arms. I will never be able to hold her again. It is a huge and devastating loss. I relied on her for much more than I ever imagined.

The Loss of a Soulmate Is Unmatched

The loss of a soulmate is unmatched for the emptiness it leaves in its wake. The grief will vary according to the strength and length of your relationship. The more you've loved, the more you'll grieve. The pain now is the flip side of the happiness you once had with your lover. Of course, not all spouses are soulmates—love is not necessarily alive in all marriages. I'm describing the pain of losing your lover and partner in life.

Grieving a Parent

Unfortunately, much of the grief literature does not differentiate between the different types of grief. I believe that the loss of a soulmate—whether from sudden or anticipated death—generates the

Chapter 6

The Grief Burst Cure

*Walk out of any doorway
feel your way, feel your way
like the day before
Maybe you'll find direction
around some corner
where it's been waiting to meet you*

*What do you want me to do,
to do for you to see you through?
A box of rain will ease the pain
and love will see you through*

*Such a long long time to be gone
and a short time to be there*

— Grateful Dead, “Box of Rain”¹

The grief bursts were getting more intense by the day. It was scary. I was especially fearful when people would tell me, “You’ll never recover. That’s just how it is.” The more optimistic ones would say, “Oh, it’s going to take years to get over this.” Or they would attempt to mitigate it by saying, “You two had such a strong relationship; you’ll never be the same.” Ouch! I was a condemned man. I would be tortured—by grief bursts—for the rest of my life. It was absolutely ridiculous. My soulmate had loved me. Our love was sweet. Jeri would never have wanted me to go through a life of pain on her behalf. She had even warned me of the pain. She said: “*If anyone can deal with that mind stuff, you can. So deal with the grieving pain.*” I had to do

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Grieving a Soulmate

something, that's for sure. But, where to start? I needed a clue, a direction.

In this long chapter, I'll retrace the steps that eventually brought me to my destination: the grief-burst cure. When you're in pain, you act out of desperation. So I grabbed onto any lifeline that could help—self-help books, grief theory, and counseling. I started with Freud and just kept moving down the line to the latest findings in grief theory. Along the way, I consumed the vast self-help literature on grieving. In this chapter, I provide a concise and up-to-date review of the best grief theory has to offer us. Unfortunately, there was not enough out there to get me through my pain. I had to improvise to fill in the missing pieces. I even had to resort to old tricks from my computer science days and apply them to grieving. In the end, it all came together. I discovered the elusive *grief-burst cure*. Most importantly, it worked.

Here's the roadmap for what lies ahead. In this chapter, I'll tell how I stumbled onto the grief-burst cure. Mostly, it was a discovery process. You'll need to read the entire chapter to understand what the cure entails. In the next five chapters, I'll tell you how I used this cure to zap my grief bursts into oblivion. My definition of healing consists of two parts: 1) zero pain and 2) happy memories of Jeri. I achieved both in record time.

What Kind of Help Did I Need?

First and foremost, I wanted the pain to stop. Obviously, it wouldn't stop on its own—at least not in the foreseeable future. So there was grief work to be done. Here's what I was looking for:

- ***A finite cure that would quickly get me to zero pain.*** I did not want an open-ended cure. The cure method had to provide answers to these questions: How long does the pain last? What's the timeline to recovery? How do I measure progress? The following answers were totally unacceptable: 1) it will take forever; 2) it depends; 3) it will never go away; 4) let time heal you—humans are resilient; and 5) it will take a very long time—years. I wanted a timeline that would not

Chapter 6: The Grief Burst Cure

exceed four months, maximum. During that period, I wanted the frequency of grief bursts on a steep downward slope that edged towards zero—the end point.

- ***A natural cure.*** I did not want to be on medications—that meant no antidepressants or other meds to numb the pain. I would not resort to recreational drugs or excessive drinking. I wanted my mind to be lucid during the day. I was ready to make one exception: I'd take a sleeping pill—or whatever would get me through the night.
- ***A non-workaholic cure.*** I did not want to postpone the pain by drowning myself in some big work-related project. If I did that, the pain would probably return with a vengeance at a later time. In addition, the suppressed emotions could lead to psychotic disorders. “Stay busy to forget her” was not for me.
- ***A cure that would not kill Jeri a second time.*** “Forget and detach” was not an acceptable cure. I needed to preserve the memories of my soulmate and feel her comforting presence. I did not want to obliterate her memory. On the contrary, I wanted her memory to continue to live within me. I wanted the painful memories gone or, perhaps, morphed into good memories.
- ***A cure that would not require a religious conversion.*** I did not want a born-again experience that involved some new-found faith in paradise and an afterlife. For example, “Jeri is in heaven waiting for you” was not acceptable. Of course, the definition of heaven could be sweetened to mean “Hawaii.” In that case, the proposition could become, “Jeri’s self is out there in the ocean waiting for you to join her.” It would be even sweeter if I could also get her body back—preferably, without the cancer. Yes, I could be very tempted—if I were to see proof. Please, no reincarnation as a shark! Remember, I swim with her every day. But, I wasn’t going to hold my breath waiting—not when I had grief bursts exploding in my head.

That’s it. I was not really asking for much. You would expect such a cure to be readily available. After all, people have been dying since the beginning of time. So where is the Dr. Fischberg of grief?

Chapter 7

My Grief Cure for The Last Days

*“It is a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.”*

— *Anonymous*

Jeri’s last days on this earth were the source of some incredibly painful grief bursts. And why wouldn’t it be so? I had just witnessed the total destruction of my soulmate’s body—including the mind that came with it. If there is a body we intimately know, it’s that of our soulmate’s. It’s the body we made love to all those years. It kept us warm during winter nights. And we lovingly hugged it and squeezed it, every single day and night. This is the same body that was obliterated in front of my eyes, ravaged by the disease and then destroyed by death. What remained was incinerated. I saw it all happen—every detail.

Yes, the end-of-life is the stuff of nightmares. The scenes we witnessed are etched in our brains. We are now tormented by flashbacks of these painful memories. We constantly replay them in our minds. We are traumatized and we ruminate over these traumatic scenes in a seemingly endless loop. We don’t need grief theorists to tell us that we are prime candidates for complicated grief. We know it.

My grief burst bucket from the last days was constantly being replenished. New grief bursts just kept appearing, every day. At least, they were easy to identify. Typically, these bursts tend to be associated with a flashback of a painful memory from the last days. The sobbing that results from these grief bursts is primal. I must have sounded like a wounded animal. In this chapter, I will tell you how I eradicated these grief bursts from hell.

Grieving a Soulmate

This is the first of a five-chapter series on how I zapped my grief bursts out of existence using the cure described in the previous chapter. Here, I'm going to be zapping away at grief bursts of *the last days*. I'll first review what grief theory has to say about this type of grief. Then I'll tell you about the specific eradication technique I used. Finally, I'll give you some examples of grief bursts that I encountered and how I got rid of them. I was lucky to be able to draw from a trail of e-mails to refresh my memory of these painful events.

What Does Grief Theory Tell Us?

Grief theorists have a name for these flashbacks from the last days. They call them intrusive thoughts or *ruminations*. According to Archer, "It involves going over the same themes, and often the same material, again and again without much goal-directed progress."¹

How do we make it stop? They tell us that we can't really suppress the thoughts—they'll just reappear. We could try to distract ourselves from them—for example, by doing the DPM oscillation stuff described in the last chapter. However, it's hard to distract ourselves from these flashbacks. They seem to hit us whenever and wherever they want. So, distraction alone won't work.

This leaves us with Kübler-Ross's idea of focusing on the painful memories and then tackling them directly. It's called "telling the story." Remember, she said, "Recalling the scene of the crime against your heart...often and in detail helps dissipate the pain."

Unfortunately, she does not tell us how to tackle these intrusive memories. I found that just recalling a scene won't make it go away—it just keeps returning. And the grief bursts don't go away on their own; they must be popped first. So grief theory gives us some ideas, but no effective solutions.

¹ John Archer, *The Nature of Grief* (Routledge, 1999).

The *New York Times* Had the Answer

The solution was in the *New York Times*. I stumbled upon it completely by chance; it was pure serendipity. Let me explain. About two months after Jeri's death, the paper ran a long article that covered, in great detail, the death of cancer patient Deborah Migliorea.² Strangely, I felt better after reading this article even though it had absolutely nothing to do with grieving. It was all about dying. Why would an article on dying help me grieve better? The answer is that, like most people, I was a death virgin. I was not familiar with death. Unfortunately, the first death I had witnessed up close was that of my soulmate, Jeri. The article helped me better understand Jeri's end-of-life process, which had been tormenting me. It was an eye opener.

You may remember from Chapter 3 that death is typically a messy organic process. It's the body shutting down slowly. It's not the Hollywood version of instant death. It takes time and effort for the engine to shut down. The scenes of the death we have witnessed can leave us with deep feelings of guilt and remorse that haunt us in the form of grief bursts. We expected a sanitized death. Instead, we experienced a natural process, and we tend to blame ourselves for the messy outcome. We wish we could have done more for our dying lover. We go through endless "what ifs" and "if onlys," revisiting every aspect of the death.

The only way to break out of this endless loop of ruminations is to better understand death, which is why the *Times* article was so helpful. It was my first in-depth article on that subject. After this, I read everything I could find on death. The result is Chapter 3. To deal with grief bursts from the last days, you must learn about death.

How It Comes Together

Once you understand the death connection, the cure for grief bursts from *the last days* is quite simple. Here's what may work for you:

² Anemona Hartocollis, "At the End, Offering Not a Cure but Comfort," *New York Times*, August 20, 2009.

Grieving a Soulmate

- ***Learn about death and the end-of-life process.*** Start by re-reading Chapter 3, which contains almost everything you'll need to know about dying. This is the chapter I wish I had read both before and after Jeri's death. Reading it before would have helped me better navigate Jeri's death. Reading it after would have spared me some of the grief bursts from the last days. At least, I could have popped them faster. If reading Chapter 3 is not enough for you, then check some of the references in that chapter.
- ***Revisit the scene of the crime, over and over again.*** Once you understand death better, you can follow Kübler-Ross's prescription of "recalling the scene of the crime." Go over the story of the last days, as often as it takes. Try to reconstitute the events that led to the death. Replay the death scene in your mind. Revisit the body at the morgue; look at pictures, if you have them. Try to surface anything you may find disturbing. Eventually, you'll have a very clear picture of what really happened during these days. You may want to use my account of Jeri's death as an example. It's the level of detail you'll need.
- ***Capture the grief bursts and then deal with them one at a time.*** Typically, the grief bursts from the last days are associated with a tangle of emotions—anger, guilt, sadness, fear, and despair. Instead of untangling these emotions, try to focus on the flashback itself. It usually pinpoints the source of your grief burst. You must also deal with all the "if only" and "what if" thoughts that are linked to a grief burst. Remember, you did the best you could at the time with the information you had. Your newly-acquired knowledge of death will help defuse most of your ruminations. If you still have lingering questions, then try to research the answer. If you can't find the answer, then don't hesitate to call your soulmate's doctors to get some form of resolution. After all, your mental well-being is at stake. Each issue you resolve will pop the corresponding grief burst. In my experience, a grief burst does not return after it is popped.....

Chapter 8

My Grief Cure for Survivor's Guilt

*"The most I ever did for you was to outlive you,
But that is much."*

— *Edna St. Vincent Millay*¹

My *survivor's guilt* grief bursts would hit me every morning, shortly after I woke up. I felt guilty to be alive another day without Jeri. I felt guilty that Jeri was not here to enjoy another beautiful Hawaiian morning. I would look at the ocean and the deep sobbing would start—she would not be surfing today. I felt guilty to have survived my lover. Why hadn't I gone first? I almost went first last year, but she kept me alive. Why couldn't I have done the same for her? As her caregiver, I felt guilty for having let her die—I failed her. Her death was a horrible crime. I was the witness and I had no place to report it. Why did she have to die so young? It didn't seem fair. It also didn't seem fair that I would live, when she had died.

Of course, all this stuff is irrational, but try to tell that to a grief burst. Most of them are irrational by nature. They stem from unresolved emotions. In this case, all the guilt was self-directed anger. I was angry that my soulmate had been eliminated. I was angry that my life was spared and hers wasn't. It seemed like nature was arbitrary and capricious. I was a bit older than Jeri, so I should have gone first. To sum it up: I was the survivor. I felt guilty to be alive. The grief bursts would remind me of that, every single morning. In this chapter, I will tell you how I eliminated these grief bursts so that I could continue to live for both of us.

¹ Norma Millay (editor), *Collected Poems Edna St. Vincent Millay* (Harper, 1956).

Chapter 9

My Grief Cure for She's Gone Forever

*I feel it when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.*

—*Alfred Tennyson*¹

The death of a soulmate can abruptly shatter your world beyond comprehension. One moment I was enjoying the most complete relationship two people could have; the next moment I was alone on this earth. Death created absolute nothingness in one instant. It's no wonder that my "separation distress" alarms went haywire. I kept searching for Jeri; I wanted my soulmate back. Of course, I couldn't get Jeri back, so I started yearning for her. But her absence was everywhere, so I began to despair. Pretty soon, I was in grief burst hell.

This time, I was being attacked by the *she's gone forever* grief bursts. For some odd reason, they would strike around noon every day. They came like clockwork—they became my lunchtime grief buddies. They brought with them the deep sobs of despair. I just couldn't believe Jeri had left me forever. I missed her voice, her touch, her presence, her laughter, and the list goes on and on. There was no way to reach her—no phone, no e-mail, and no forwarding address. Where did she go? She left a gaping hole in her wake. My world was a scene of pure devastation. Was there a way out of this despair? Could I continue to live without her? The answers are in this chapter.

¹ Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 1849.

Chapter 10

My Grief Cure for Self-Pity

“A soulmate is somebody with whom one has a feeling of deep and natural affinity, love, intimacy, sexuality, spirituality, and/or compatibility.”

— Wikipedia

My *self-pity* grief bursts were accompanied by howling sobs of pain—I had just lost my entire support system. It was gone—flushed away. I was feeling really sorry for myself. I had surveyed my loss and it was huge. I had lost my partner in life. In this chapter—the fourth in the grief-burst popping series—I’ll show you how I dealt with these grief bursts. But first I’d like to take a closer look at the nature of the soulmate support system.

Soulmates: Life Partners in a Chaotic World

We live in a complex, fast-changing, random, and increasingly uncertain world. The modern soulmate relationship is an entirely new kind of life partnership with no historic precedent. It’s designed to tackle *all* of modern-life’s challenges, including the need for companionship, raising children, dual careers, gratifying sex, owning a home, building a nest egg, shopping, constant repairs, paying the monthly bills, taking care of elderly parents, mutual caregiving, finding meaning in life, and the list goes on.

This tightly-knit unit made up of two people is adaptive, agile, and nimble. In addition, it is incredibly mobile and self-contained. For example, the pair can be relocated anywhere, at a moment’s notice, should the conditions require it. They’re wired to resume their life in the new destination without missing a beat. It’s a truly amazing, modern concoction. It can take on almost any challenge our

Grieving a Soulmate

tumultuous world throws at it. There's never been anything like it before. You may be asking: What makes this incredible unit work?

A Village in a Soulmate Capsule

First and foremost, the soulmate relationship is held together by romantic love. Love fuels the relationship: it provides the binding glue, and maintains the functional equilibrium. It allows the couple to unconditionally give to each other. They do not maintain balance sheets of who does what for whom. A soulmate relationship is an exquisitely fine-tuned division of labor between two people who are in love. In the old days, it took an entire village to fulfill the roles that are now assigned to this unit. You may remember Hillary Clinton's telling us "it takes a village to raise a child." Well, the same can be said of the myriad of other tasks that soulmates routinely provide—including mutual caregiving, working multiple jobs, and taking care of elderly parents in the age of chronic disease.

Soulmate Attachment Bonds

In Bowlby's terms, a soulmate relationship consists of multiple attachment bonds between two adults. Unlike dysfunctional marriages, the bonds in a soulmate relationship are fully functional; they're all in good working condition. It's a healthy relationship. So the bonds that would once glue together an entire village are now binding just two individuals. As you would expect, the bonding is tightly-coupled and highly-concentrated. These tightly-knit bonds replace the entire network of distributed village-style bonding. This is another way of saying that soulmates put all their eggs in one basket. In my case, the basket had just broken, and there were grief bursts of the *self-pity* variety.

Note: Is the modern soulmate relationship really without historic precedent? The short answer is yes. I know it sounds controversial, and I did get some flak from early reviewers, so let me elaborate. Of course, the world has always had soulmates. In pre-modern societies,

Chapter 10: My Grief Cure for Self-Pity

classical soulmates typically had a deep romantic, intellectual, and existential affinity. Often, they were spouses and economic partners. However, the classical relationship almost always took place within the context of a tribe, clan, village, small town, or extended family. So the couple had a lot of support when it came to economics, caregiving, parenting, and similar functions. In contrast, the modern soulmate team is a self-contained unit that subsumes the functions that were once provided by a village or extended family. This dramatic shift has deep implications when it comes to grieving. In the new relationship, there is no village to share the grief load. We must learn to grieve alone, which is very modern. Most importantly, we have many more roles to fill when a soulmate dies—the roles are no longer distributed among a village, clan, or extended family.

What Does Grief Theory Tell Us?

Bowlby was the first to focus on the different types of attachment bonds. In the soulmate case, the bonding is between two adult *attachment figures*. Each soulmate provides the other with comfort and a safe harbor. According to Bowlby, we need to relocate the lost attachment figure within a new hierarchy of attachment figures. In simpler terms, we need to inventory the damage and fill the missing roles.

Having said this, we all have different relationships, so the roles we need to fill are very individual. This is where I found the self-help grieving literature to be the most useful. It focuses on the practical aspects of filling the missing roles. You get from them a ton of advice on how to carry on with your everyday life routines. I will give you a brief summary of this advice later in this chapter. I also found the *Dual Process Model (DPM)* to be very applicable. Remember, they want us to oscillate between grieving and the reconstruction of our lives. We must make time for both.

Chapter 11

My Grief Cure for Deep Existential Issues

“Under normal circumstances, most of us cruise through our busy days without the slightest thought of life and death and those other annoying existential questions, like where we came from and where we stand in the grand scheme of the universe. The death of a loved one tends to peel back the curtain on those existential questions, at least temporarily, and begs us to take a larger view of the world and our place in it.”

— Dr. George Bonanno¹

This is the last of the five-chapter series on how I zapped my grief bursts. Jeri’s death shook the very foundation of my belief system. I had to re-examine my entire sense of meaning. I began to ponder the big issues of life, death, and human mortality. Most importantly, I had to ascribe meaning to Jeri’s life and her death—she was the one who had just disappeared from this earth. What was her life all about? Why did she die? How did she face her upcoming death? Was she afraid? What were her thoughts during those last moments? For some reason, all these questions were very disturbing. Of course that means they were triggers for grief bursts. This chapter deals with these *deep existential* grief bursts.

Typically, this is the time when you’ll need to see a priest or some member of the clergy. From the beginning of time, the world’s great religions have been grappling with these big issues. Death is their

¹ George Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness* (Basic Books, 2009).

Chapter 11: My Grief Cure for Deep Existential Issues

thing and they provide full coverage. Their antidote for death is an afterlife. The major religions compete with different visions of an afterlife. You can have your choice. If you belong to a religion with an after-life plan, then you can definitely skip over this chapter. Your religion is all you need. It has the answers that can help you get through this.

If you are secular with a veneer of spirituality, this chapter is definitely for you. It provides that missing framework some of us may need to grapple with these big issues from a secular perspective. I was alone and in the midst of grief bursts while dealing with these questions. I faced a massive existential crisis with nowhere to go for quick answers. It took quite a bit of time and grappling to find the answers, but when I did, *all* of my remaining grief bursts just melted away. They disappeared into oblivion, never to come back again. I was pain-free for the first time since Jeri's death. The *existential* grief bursts were the last to go. This chapter, the last of the series, is about how I got rid of them.

How Do Seculars Deal with Death?

From Bonanno's quotation, you can tell that grief theorists are aware of "those annoying existential questions." However, their solution is to leave it to your religious support system. So, besides a psychologist, you'll also need a priest. But what happens to those of us who are secular? Well, we're completely on our own. We're the uninsured with no after-life coverage. Consequently, we need to become our own philosophers. I had to reconstruct my belief system to absorb the shock of Jeri's death. How did I do that? I'll walk you step-by-step through the process using my e-mails. But before we start, let me give you a quick preview of where we're going.

Post-War Existentialism with a Spiritual Touch

I was born after World War II and came to intellectual age during the late 1960s—a time of great intellectual ferment. The reigning philosophy of that time was *Secular Existentialism*. It was based on the