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About the Book

After the sudden death of her husband, Sheryl Sandberg felt certain that she and her children would never feel pure joy again. “I was in ‘the void,’” she writes, “a vast emptiness that fills your heart and lungs and restricts your ability to think or even breathe.” Her friend Adam Grant, a psychologist at Wharton, told her there are concrete steps people can take to recover and rebound from life-shattering experiences. We are not born with a fixed amount of resilience. It is a muscle that everyone can build.

Option B combines Sheryl’s personal insights with Adam’s eye-opening research on finding strength in the face of adversity. Beginning with the gut-wrenching moment when she finds her husband, Dave Goldberg, collapsed on a gym floor, Sheryl opens up her heart—and her journal—to describe the acute grief and isolation she felt in the wake of his death. But *Option B* goes beyond Sheryl’s loss to explore how a broad range of people have overcome hardships including illness, job loss, sexual assault, natural disasters, and the violence of war. Their stories reveal the capacity of the human spirit to persevere ... and to rediscover joy.

Resilience comes from deep within us and from support outside us. Even after the most devastating events, it is possible to grow by finding deeper meaning and gaining greater appreciation in our lives. *Option B* illuminates how to help others in crisis, develop compassion for ourselves, raise strong children, and create resilient families, communities, and workplaces. Many of these lessons can be applied to everyday struggles, allowing us to brave whatever lies ahead.

Two weeks after losing her husband, Sheryl was preparing for a father-child activity. “I want Dave,” she cried. Her friend replied, “Option A is not available,” and then promised to help her make the most of Option B.

We all live some form of Option B. This book will help us all make the most of it.

About the Authors

ADAM GRANT is a psychologist, Wharton's top-rated professor, and the best-selling author of *Originals* and *Give and Take*. He is a leading expert on how we can find motivation and meaning, and live more generous and creative lives. Adam has received achievement awards from the American Psychological Association and the National Science Foundation and is a contributing op-ed writer for *The New York Times*. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and their three children.

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Sheryl is donating all of her income from this book to OptionB.Org, a non-profit initiative to help people build resilience and find meaning in the face of adversity.

Join the Option B Community at facebook.com/OptionBOrg and option.org.

Option B

Facing Adversity,
Building Resilience,
and Finding Joy

SHERYL SANDBERG
ADAM GRANT

WH

ALLEN

*In loving memory of David Bruce Goldberg
October 2, 1967–May 1, 2015*

I will always love you, Dave

Introduction

THE LAST THING I ever said to him was, “I’m falling asleep.”

I met Dave Goldberg in the summer of 1996 when I moved to Los Angeles and a mutual friend invited us both to dinner and a movie. When the film began, I promptly fell asleep, resting my head on Dave’s shoulder. Dave liked to tell people that he thought that meant I was into him, until he later learned that—as he put it—“Sheryl would fall asleep anywhere and on anyone.”

Dave became my best friend and L.A. began to feel like home. He introduced me to fun people, showed me back streets to avoid traffic, and made sure I had plans on weekends and holidays. He helped me become a bit cooler by introducing me to the internet and playing music I’d never heard. When I broke up with my boyfriend, Dave stepped in to comfort me even though my ex was a former Navy SEAL who slept with a loaded gun under his bed.

Dave used to say that when he met me it was love at first sight, but he had to wait a long time for me to become “smart enough to ditch those losers” and date him. Dave was always a few steps ahead of me. But I caught up eventually. Six and a half years after that movie, we nervously planned a weeklong trip together, knowing it would either take our relationship in a new direction or ruin a great friendship. We married a year later.

Dave was my rock. When I got upset, he stayed calm. When I was worried, he said that everything would be okay. When I wasn’t sure what to do, he helped me figure it out. Like all married couples, we had our ups and downs. Still, Dave gave me the experience of being deeply understood, truly supported, and completely and utterly loved. I thought I’d spend the rest of my life resting my head on his shoulder.

Eleven years after our wedding, we went to Mexico to celebrate our friend Phil Deutch’s fiftieth birthday. My parents were babysitting our son and daughter in California, and Dave and I were excited to have an adults-only weekend. Friday afternoon, we were hanging out by the pool playing Settlers of Catan on our iPads. For a refreshing change, I was actually winning, but my eyes kept drifting closed. Once I realized that fatigue was going to prevent me from securing Catan victory, I admitted, “I’m falling asleep.” I gave in and curled up. At 3:41 p.m., someone snapped a picture of Dave holding his iPad, sitting next to his brother Rob and Phil. I’m asleep on a cushion on the floor in front of them. Dave is smiling.

When I woke up more than an hour later, Dave was no longer in that chair. I joined our friends for a swim, assuming he’d gone to the gym as he’d planned. When I went back to our room to shower and he wasn’t there, I was surprised but not concerned. I got dressed for dinner, checked my email, and called our children. Our son was upset because he and his friend had ignored playground rules, climbed a fence, and ripped their sneakers. Through tears, he came clean. I told him that I appreciated his honesty and that Daddy and I would discuss how much he would have to chip in from his allowance for a new pair. Not wanting to live with the uncertainty, our fourth grader

pushed me to decide. I told him that this was the kind of decision that Daddy and I made together so I'd have to get back to him the next day.

I left the room and went downstairs. Dave wasn't there. I walked out to the beach and joined the rest of our group. When he wasn't there either, I felt a wave of panic. Something was wrong. I shouted to Rob and his wife Leslye, "Dave isn't here!" Leslye paused, then yelled back, "Where's the gym?" I pointed toward some nearby steps and we started running. I can still feel my breath and body constricting from those words. No one will ever say "Where's the gym?" to me again without causing my heart to race.

We found Dave on the floor, lying by the elliptical machine, his face slightly blue and turned to the left, a small pool of blood under his head. We all screamed. I started CPR. Rob took over from me. A doctor came and took over from him.

The ride in the ambulance was the longest thirty minutes of my life. Dave on a stretcher in the back. The doctor working over him. Me in the front seat where they made me sit, crying and pleading with the doctor to tell me that Dave was still alive. I could not believe how far the hospital was and how few cars moved out of our way. We finally arrived and they carried him behind a heavy wood door, refusing to let me through. I sat on the floor with Marne Levine, Phil's wife and one of my closest friends, holding me.

After what felt like forever, I was led into a small room. The doctor came in and sat behind his desk. I knew what that meant. When the doctor left, a friend of Phil's came over, kissed me on the cheek, and said, "I'm sorry for your loss." The words and the obligatory kiss felt like a flash-forward. I knew I was experiencing something that would happen over and over and over.

Someone asked if I wanted to see Dave to say good-bye. I did—and I did not want to leave. I thought that if I just stayed in that room and held him, if I refused to let go, I would wake up from this nightmare. When his brother Rob, in shock himself, said we had to go, I took a few steps out of the room, then turned around and ran back in, hugging Dave as hard as I could. Eventually, Rob lovingly pulled me off Dave's body. Marne walked me down the long white hall, her arms around my waist holding me up and preventing me from running back into that room.

And so began the rest of my life. It was—and still is—a life I never would have chosen, a life I was completely unprepared for. The unimaginable. Sitting down with my son and daughter and telling them that their father had died. Hearing their screams joined by my own. The funeral. Speeches where people spoke of Dave in the past tense. My house filling up with familiar faces coming up to me again and again, delivering the perfunctory kiss on the cheek followed by those same words: "I'm sorry for your loss."

When we arrived at the cemetery, my children got out of the car and fell to the ground, unable to take another step. I lay on the grass, holding them as they wailed. Their cousins came and lay down with us, all piled up in a big sobbing heap with adult arms trying in vain to protect them from their sorrow.

Poetry, philosophy, and physics all teach us that we don't experience time in equal increments. Time slowed way, way down. Day after day my kids' cries and screams filled the air. In the moments when they weren't crying, I watched them anxiously, waiting for the next instance they might need comfort. My own cries and screams—

mostly inside my head but some out loud—filled the rest of the available space. I was in “the void”: a vast emptiness that fills your heart and lungs and restricts your ability to think or even breathe.

Grief is a demanding companion. In those early days and weeks and months, it was always there, not just below the surface but on the surface. Simmering, lingering, festering. Then, like a wave, it would rise up and pulse through me, as if it were going to tear my heart right out of my body. In those moments, I felt like I couldn’t bear the pain for one more minute, much less one more hour.

I saw Dave lying on the gym floor. I saw his face in the sky. At night, I called out to him, crying into the void: “Dave, I miss you. Why did you leave me? Please come back. I love you ...” I cried myself to sleep each night. I woke up each morning and went through the motions of my day, often in disbelief that the world continued to turn without him. How could everyone go on as if nothing was different? *Didn’t they know?*

Ordinary events became land mines. At Parents’ Night, my daughter showed me what she had written eight months before on the first day of school: “I am a second grader. I wonder what will happen in the future.” It hit me like a wrecking ball that when she wrote those words, neither she nor I would ever have thought that she would lose her father before she finished second grade. *Second grade*. I looked down at her little hand in mine, her sweet face gazing up at me to see if I liked her writing. I stumbled and almost fell, pretending to her that I’d tripped. As we walked around the room together, I looked down the entire time so none of the other parents could catch my eye and trigger a complete breakdown.

Milestone days were even more heart-wrenching. Dave had always made a big deal of the first day of school, taking lots of pictures as our kids went out the door. I tried to muster enthusiasm for taking those same pictures. The day of my daughter’s birthday party, I sat on the floor of my bedroom with my mom, my sister, and Marne. I didn’t think I could go downstairs and survive, much less smile through, a party. I knew I had to do it for my daughter. I also knew I had to do it for Dave. But I wanted to do it *with* Dave.

There were moments when even I could see some humor. While getting my hair cut, I mentioned that I was having trouble sleeping. My hairdresser put down his scissors and opened his bag with a flourish, pulling out Xanax in every possible shape and size. I declined—but really appreciated the gesture. One day I was on the phone complaining to my father that all the grief books had dreadful titles: *Death Is of Vital Importance* or *Say Yes to It*. (Like I could say no.) While we were on the phone a new one arrived, *Moving to the Center of the Bed*. Another day, on my drive home I turned on the radio to distract myself. Each song that came on was worse than the one before. “Somebody That I Used to Know.” Awful. “Not the End.” I beg to differ. “Forever Young.” Not in this case. “Good Riddance: Time of Your Life.” No and no. I finally settled on “Reindeer(s) Are Better than People.”

My friend Davis Guggenheim told me that as a documentary filmmaker, he has learned to let the story reveal itself. He doesn’t start each project knowing where the tale will end because it has to unfold in its own way and in its own time. Worried that I would try to control my grief, he encouraged me to listen to it, keep it close, and let it run its course. He knows me well. I searched for ways to end the sorrow, put it in a

box, and throw it away. For the first weeks and months, I failed. The anguish won every time. Even when I looked calm and collected, the pain was always present. I was physically sitting in a meeting or reading to my kids, but my heart was on that gym floor.

“No one ever told me,” C. S. Lewis wrote, “that grief felt so like fear.”¹ The fear was constant and it felt like the grief would never subside. The waves would continue to crash over me until I was no longer standing, no longer myself. In the worst of the void, two weeks after Dave died, I got a letter from an acquaintance in her sixties. She said that since she was ahead of me on this sad widow’s path, she wished she had some good advice to offer, but she didn’t. She had lost her husband a few years earlier, her close friend had lost hers a decade before, and neither of them felt that time had lessened the pain. She wrote, “Try as I might, I can’t come up with a single thing that I know will help you.” That letter, no doubt sent with the best of intentions, destroyed my hope that the pain would fade someday. I felt the void closing in on me, the years stretching before me endless and empty.

I called Adam Grant, a psychologist and professor at Wharton, and read the devastating letter to him. Two years earlier, Dave had read Adam’s book *Give and Take* and invited him to speak at SurveyMonkey, where Dave was CEO. That evening, Adam joined us for dinner at our home. Adam studies how people find motivation and meaning, and we started talking about the challenges women face and how Adam’s work could inform the issue. We began writing together and became friends. When Dave died, Adam flew across the country to attend the funeral. I confided to him that my greatest fear was that my kids would never be happy again. Other people had tried to reassure me with personal stories, but Adam walked me through the data: after losing a parent,² many children are surprisingly resilient. They go on to have happy childhoods and become well-adjusted adults.

Hearing the despair in my voice triggered by the letter, Adam flew back across the country to convince me that there was a bottom to this seemingly endless void. He wanted to tell me face-to-face that while grief was unavoidable, there were things I could do to lessen the anguish for myself and my children. He said that by six months, more than half of people who lose a spouse are past what psychologists classify as “acute grief.”³ Adam convinced me that while my grief would have to run its course, my beliefs and actions could shape how quickly I moved through the void and where I ended up.

I don’t know anyone who has been handed only roses. We all encounter hardships. Some we see coming; others take us by surprise. It can be as tragic as the sudden death of a child, as heartbreaking as a relationship that unravels, or as disappointing as a dream that goes unfulfilled. The question is: When these things happen, what do we do next?

I thought resilience was the capacity to endure pain, so I asked Adam how I could figure out how much I had. He explained that our amount of resilience isn’t fixed, so I should be asking instead how I could *become* resilient. Resilience is the strength and speed of our response to adversity—and we can build it. It isn’t about having a backbone. It’s about strengthening the muscles around our backbone.

Since Dave passed away, so many people have said to me, “I can’t imagine.” They mean they can’t imagine this happening to them, can’t imagine how I am standing

there talking to them rather than curled up in a ball somewhere. I remember feeling the same way when I saw a colleague back at work after losing a child or a friend buying coffee after being diagnosed with cancer. When I was on the other side, my reply became, “I can’t imagine either, but I have no choice.”

I had no choice but to wake up every day. No choice but to get through the shock, the grief, the survivor guilt. No choice but to try to move forward and be a good mother at home. No choice but to try to focus and be a good colleague at work.

Loss, grief, and disappointment are profoundly personal. We all have unique circumstances and reactions to them. Still, the kindness and bravery of those who shared their experiences helped pull me through mine. Some who opened their hearts are my closest friends. Others are total strangers who offered wisdom and advice publicly—sometimes even in books with horrible titles. And Adam, patient yet insistent that the darkness would pass, but that I would have to help it along. That even in the face of the most shocking tragedy of my life, I could exert some control over its impact.

This book is my and Adam’s attempt to share what we’ve learned about resilience. We wrote it together, but for simplicity and clarity the story is told by me (Sheryl) while Adam is referred to in the third person. We don’t pretend that hope will win out over pain every day. It won’t. We don’t presume to have experienced every possible kind of loss and setback ourselves. We haven’t. There is no right or proper way to grieve or face challenges, so we don’t have perfect answers. There are no perfect answers.

We also know that not every story has a happy ending. For each hopeful story we tell here, there are others where circumstances were too much to overcome. Recovery does not start from the same place for everyone. Wars, violence, and systemic sexism and racism decimate lives and communities. Discrimination, disease, and poverty cause and worsen tragedy. The sad truth is that adversity is not evenly distributed among us; marginalized and disenfranchised groups have more to battle and more to grieve.

As traumatic as my family’s experience has been, I’m well aware of how fortunate we are to have a wide support system of extended family, friends, and colleagues and access to financial resources that few have. I also know that talking about how to find strength in the face of hardship does not release us from the responsibility of working to prevent hardship in the first place. What we do in our communities and companies—the public policies we put in place, the ways we help one another—can ensure that fewer people suffer.

Yet try as we might to prevent adversity, inequality, and trauma, they still exist and we are still left to cope with them. To fight for change tomorrow we need to build resilience today.⁴ Psychologists have studied how to recover and rebound from a wide range of adversity—from loss, rejection, and divorce to injury and illness, from professional failure to personal disappointment. Along with reviewing the research, Adam and I sought out individuals and groups who have overcome ordinary and extraordinary difficulties. Their stories changed the way we think about resilience.

This book is about the capacity of the human spirit to persevere. We look at the steps people can take, both to help themselves and to help others. We explore the psychology of recovery and the challenges of regaining confidence and rediscovering

joy. We cover ways to speak about tragedy and comfort friends who are suffering. And we discuss what it takes to create resilient communities and companies, raise strong children, and love again.

I now know that it is possible to experience post-traumatic growth. In the wake of the most crushing blows, people can find greater strength and deeper meaning. I also believe that it is possible to experience *pre*-traumatic growth—that you don’t have to experience tragedy to build your resilience for whatever lies ahead.

I am only partway through my own journey. The fog of acute grief has lifted, but the sadness and longing for Dave remain. I’m still finding my way through and learning many of the lessons included here. Like so many who’ve experienced tragedy, I hope I can choose meaning and even joy—and help others do the same.

Looking back over the darkest moments, I can now see that even then there were signs of hope. A friend reminded me that when my children broke down at the cemetery, I said to them, “This is the second worst moment of our lives. We lived through the first and we will live through this. It can only get better from here.” Then I started singing a song I knew from childhood: “Oseh Shalom,” a prayer for peace. I don’t remember deciding to sing or how I picked this song. I later learned that it is the last line of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for mourning, which may explain why it poured out of me. Soon all the adults joined in, the children followed, and the wailing stopped. On my daughter’s birthday, I did get off my bedroom floor and smile through her party, where to my total shock I saw that she was having a great time.

Just weeks after losing Dave, I was talking to Phil about a father-child activity. We came up with a plan for someone to fill in for Dave. I cried to Phil, “But I want Dave.” He put his arm around me and said, “Option A is not available. So let’s just kick the shit out of Option B.”

Life is never perfect. We all live some form of Option B. This book is to help us all kick the shit out of it.

1

Breathing Again

*You must go on,
I can't go on,
I'll go on.¹*

—SAMUEL BECKETT

ABOUT A YEAR after Dave died, I was at work when my cell phone buzzed. An old friend was calling, and since nobody calls anyone anymore, I figured it must be important. It was. My friend had horrible news about a young woman she mentors. A few days earlier, the young woman had gone to a birthday party, and as she was leaving she noticed that a coworker needed a ride home. Since he lived nearby, she offered to drop him off. When they arrived, he pulled out a weapon, forced her inside, and raped her.

The young woman went to the hospital for a rape kit exam and then reported the attack to the police. Now my friend was looking for ways to provide comfort and knew I'd met this young woman, so she asked if I would talk with her and offer support. As I dialed her number, I felt nervous about whether I'd be able to help someone recover from something so violent. But as I listened to her, I realized some of what I'd learned about overcoming grief might resonate with her too.

We plant the seeds of resilience in the ways we process negative events. After spending decades studying how people deal with setbacks, psychologist Martin Seligman found that three P's can stunt recovery:² (1) personalization—the belief that we are at fault; (2) pervasiveness—the belief that an event will affect all areas of our life; and (3) permanence—the belief that the aftershocks of the event will last forever. The three P's play like the flip side of the pop song “Everything Is Awesome”—“everything is awful.” The loop in your head repeats, “It's my fault this is awful. My whole life is awful. And it's always going to be awful.”

Hundreds of studies have shown that children and adults recover more quickly when they realize that hardships aren't entirely their fault, don't affect every aspect of their lives, and won't follow them everywhere forever. Recognizing that negative events aren't personal, pervasive, or permanent makes people less likely to get depressed and better able to cope.³ Not falling into the trap of the three P's helped teachers in urban and rural schools:⁴ they were more effective in the classroom and their students did better academically. It helped college varsity swimmers who underperformed in a race:⁵ their heart rates spiked less and they went on to improve their times. And it helped insurance salespeople in difficult jobs:⁶ when they didn't take rejections personally and remembered that they could approach new prospects tomorrow, they sold more than twice as much and stayed in the job twice as long as their colleagues.

On my call with the young woman, at first I just listened as she described how she felt violated, betrayed, angry, and scared. Then she started blaming herself, saying it

was her fault for giving her colleague a ride home. I encouraged her to stop personalizing the attack. Rape is never the victim's fault and offering a coworker a ride was a completely reasonable thing to do. I stressed that not everything that happens to us happens *because of* us. Then I brought up the two other P's: pervasiveness and permanence. We talked about all the good in other areas of her life and I encouraged her to think about how the despair would feel less acute with time.

Recovering from rape is an incredibly difficult and complicated process that differs for everyone. Evidence suggests that it's common for rape victims to blame themselves and feel hopeless about the future.⁷ Those who can break this pattern are at lower risk of depression and post-traumatic stress. A few weeks later, the young woman called to tell me that with her cooperation, the state was moving forward with prosecuting the rapist. She said she thought about the three P's every day and the advice had made her feel better. It had made me feel better too.

I'd fallen into these three traps myself, starting with personalization. I immediately blamed myself for Dave's death. The first medical report claimed that Dave had died of head trauma from falling off an exercise machine, so I worried incessantly that I could have saved him by finding him sooner. My brother David, a neurosurgeon, insisted that this was not true: falling from the height of a workout machine might break Dave's arm, but it wouldn't kill him. Something had happened to make Dave fall in the first place. The autopsy proved my brother right: Dave had died in a matter of seconds from a cardiac arrhythmia caused by coronary artery disease.

Even once I knew Dave had not died from neglect on a gym floor, I still found other reasons to blame myself. Dave's coronary artery disease was never diagnosed. I spent weeks with his doctors and the doctors in my family poring over his autopsy and medical records. I worried that he had complained of chest pain but we had missed it. I thought endlessly about his diet and if I should have pushed him to make more improvements. His doctors told me that no single lifestyle change would definitely have saved him. And it helped when Dave's family reminded me that his eating habits were much healthier whenever he was with me.

I also blamed myself for the disruption his death caused to everyone around me. Before this tragedy, I was the older sister, the doer, the planner, the leaner inner. But when Dave died, I was incapable of doing much of anything. Others jumped in to help. My boss Mark Zuckerberg, my brother-in-law Marc, and Marne planned the funeral. My father and sister-in-law Amy made the burial arrangements. When people came to pay their respects at our house, Amy nudged me to get up and thank them for coming. My father reminded me to eat and then sat next to me to make sure I actually did.

Over the next few months, the thing I found myself saying most often was, "I'm sorry."⁸ I apologized constantly to everyone. To my mom, who put her life on hold to stay with me for the first month. To my friends who dropped everything to travel to the funeral. To my clients for missing appointments. To my colleagues for losing focus when emotion overwhelmed me. I'd start a meeting thinking, *I can do this*, only to have tears well up, forcing a quick exit with a hasty "I'm so sorry." Not exactly the kind of disruption Silicon Valley is looking for.

Adam finally convinced me that I needed to banish the word "sorry." He also vetoed "I apologize," "I regret that," or any attempt to weasel my way past the ban. Adam explained that by blaming myself I was delaying my recovery, which also meant I was

delaying my kids' recovery. That snapped me out of it. I realized that Dave's doctors had not prevented his death, so it was irrational for me to believe that I could have. I hadn't interrupted everyone's lives; tragedy had. No one thought I should apologize for crying. Once I tried to stop saying "sorry," I found myself biting my tongue over and over and started letting go of personalization.

As I blamed myself less, I started to notice that not *everything* was terrible. My son and daughter were sleeping through the night, crying less, and playing more. We had access to grief counselors and therapists. I could afford child care and support at home. I had loving family, friends, and colleagues; I marveled at how they were carrying me and my children—quite literally at times. I felt closer to them than I ever would have thought possible.

Going back to work helped with pervasiveness too. In the Jewish tradition, there is a seven-day intense mourning period known as shiva, after which most regular activities are supposed to resume. Child psychologists and grief experts counseled me to get my son and daughter back to their normal routines as soon as possible. So ten days after Dave passed away, they went back to school and I started going to work during school hours.

My first days back in the office were a complete haze. I had worked as the chief operating officer of Facebook for more than seven years but now everything felt unfamiliar. In my first meeting, all I could think was, *What is everyone talking about and why on earth does this even matter?* Then at one point I was drawn into the discussion and for a second—maybe half a second—I forgot. I forgot about death. I forgot the image of Dave lying on the gym floor. I forgot watching his casket being lowered into the ground. In my third meeting of the day, I actually fell asleep for a few minutes. As embarrassed as I was to find my head bobbing, I also felt grateful—and not just because I wasn't snoring. For the first time, I had relaxed. As the days turned into weeks and then months, I was able to concentrate for longer. Work gave me a place to feel more like myself, and the kindness of my colleagues showed me that not all aspects of my life were terrible.

I have long believed that people need to feel supported and understood at work. I now know that this is even more important after tragedy. And sadly, it's far less common than it should be. After the death of a loved one, only 60 percent of private sector workers get paid time off—and usually just a few days.⁹ When they return to work, grief can interfere with their job performance.¹⁰ The economic stress that frequently follows bereavement is like a one-two punch. In the United States alone, grief-related losses in productivity may cost companies as much as \$75 billion annually.¹¹ These losses could be decreased and the load could be lightened for people who are grieving if employers provided time off, flexible and reduced hours, and financial assistance. Companies that offer comprehensive health care, retirement, and family and medical leave benefits find that their long-term investment in employees pays off in a more loyal and productive workforce.¹² Providing support is both the compassionate *and* the wise thing to do. I was grateful that Facebook offered generous bereavement leave, and after Dave died, I worked with our team to extend our policies even further.

The hardest of the three P's for me to process was permanence. For months, no matter what I did, I felt like the debilitating anguish would always be there. Most of

the people I knew who had lived through tragedy said that over time the sadness subsides. They assured me that one day I would think of Dave and smile. I didn't believe them. When my children cried, I would flash forward to their entire lives without a father. Dave wasn't just going to miss a soccer game ... but *all* the soccer games. *All* the debate tournaments. *All* the holidays. *All* the graduations. He would not walk our daughter down the aisle at her wedding. The fear of forever without Dave was paralyzing.

My dire projections put me in good company. When we're suffering, we tend to project it out indefinitely. Studies of "affective forecasting"¹³—our predictions of how we'll feel in the future—reveal that we tend to overestimate how long negative events will affect us.¹⁴ Some students were asked to imagine their current romantic relationship ending and predict how unhappy they'd feel two months later. Other students were asked to report their own happiness two months after an *actual* breakup. Those who experienced a real split were far happier than expected. People also overestimate the negative impact of other stressful events. Assistant professors thought being denied university tenure would leave them despondent for the next five years.¹⁵ It didn't. College students believed they would be miserable if they got stuck in an undesirable dorm.¹⁶ They weren't. As someone who was assigned to the least desirable dorm in my college—twice—this study rings especially true.

Just as the body has a physiological immune system, the brain has a psychological immune system. When something goes wrong, we instinctively marshal defense mechanisms. We see silver linings in clouds. We add sugar and water to lemons. We start clinging to clichés. But after losing Dave, I wasn't able to do any of this. Every time I tried to tell myself things would get better, a louder voice inside my head insisted that they would not. It seemed clear that my children and I would never have another moment of pure joy again. *Never.*

Seligman found that words like "never" and "always" are signs of permanence. Just as I had to banish "sorry" from my vocabulary, I tried to eliminate "never" and "always" and replace them with "sometimes" and "lately." "I will *always* feel this awful" became "I will *sometimes* feel this awful." Not the most cheerful thought, but still an improvement. I noticed that there were moments when the pain temporarily eased up, like a splitting headache that briefly dulls. As I had more reprieves, I was able to recall them when I sank back into deeper grief. I started to learn that no matter how sad I felt, another break would eventually come. It helped me regain a sense of control.

I also tried a cognitive behavioral therapy technique where you write down a belief that's causing you anguish and then follow it with proof that the belief is false.¹⁷ I started with my biggest fear: "My children will never have a happy childhood." Staring at that sentence on paper made my stomach turn but also made me realize that I had spoken with many people who had lost parents at a young age and went on to prove that prediction wrong. Another time I wrote, "I will never feel okay again." Seeing those words forced me to realize that just that morning, someone had told a joke and I had laughed. If only for one minute, I'd already proven that sentence false.

A psychiatrist friend explained to me that humans are evolutionarily wired for both connection and grief: we naturally have the tools to recover from loss and trauma. That helped me believe that I could get through this. If we had evolved to handle

suffering, the deep grief would not kill me. I thought about how humans had faced love and loss for centuries, and I felt connected to something much larger than myself—connected to a universal human experience. I reached out to one of my favorite professors, Reverend Scotty McLennan, who had kindly counseled me in my twenties when my first husband and I divorced. Now Scotty explained that in his forty years of helping people through loss, he has seen that “turning to God gives people a sense of being enveloped in loving arms that are eternal and ultimately strong. People need to know that they are not alone.”

Thinking about these connections helped, yet I couldn’t shake the overpowering sense of dread. Memories and images of Dave were everywhere. In those first few months, I’d wake up every morning and experience the sickening realization that he was still gone. At night, I’d walk into the kitchen expecting to see him, and when he wasn’t there the pain hit hard. Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan thought it might be comforting to take me and my kids to a place where we had no memories of Dave, so they invited us to join them on a beach we’d never seen. Yet when I sat on a bench overlooking the ocean, I glanced into the big open sky ... and saw Dave’s face looking down on me from the clouds. I was sitting between Mark and Priscilla and I could feel their arms around me, but somehow Dave managed to be there too.

There was no escape. My grief felt like a deep, thick fog that constantly surrounded me. My friend Kim Jabal, who had lost her brother, described it as a lead blanket covering her face and body. Dave’s brother Rob said it felt like there was a boot pushing down on his chest that made it nearly impossible to get air into his lungs, one pressing even harder than when their father had died sixteen years before. I had trouble filling my lungs too. My mom taught me how to breathe through the waves of anxiety: breathe in for a count of six, hold my breath for a count of six, then exhale for a count of six. My goddaughter Elise, in a touching reversal of our relationship, held my hand and counted aloud with me until the panic subsided.

Rabbi Nat Ezray, who led Dave’s funeral, told me to “lean in to the suck”—to expect it to be awful. Not exactly what I meant when I said “lean in,” but for me it was good advice. Years earlier, I’d noticed that when I got sad or anxious, often the second derivative of those feelings made them doubly upsetting. When I felt down, I also felt down that I was down. When I felt anxious, I felt anxious that I was anxious. “Part of every misery,”¹⁸ C. S. Lewis wrote, is “misery’s shadow ... the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer.”

Following Dave’s death, I had stronger second-derivative negative feelings than ever before. I wasn’t just grief-stricken; I was grief-stricken that I was grief-stricken. I wasn’t just anxious; I was meta-anxious. Small things that never really concerned me before, like the possibility of my kids getting injured riding their bikes to school, worried me incessantly. Then I worried that I was overworrying. Taking my rabbi’s advice and accepting that this completely sucked helped a great deal. Instead of being surprised by the negative feelings, I expected them.

A friend told me I had just learned something Buddhists have known since the fifth century BC. The first noble truth of Buddhism is that all life involves suffering. Aging, sickness, and loss are inevitable. And while life includes some joyful moments, despite our attempts to make them last, they too will dissolve. Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön, who broke the Zen ceiling as the first American woman to become fully

ordained in the Tibetan tradition, writes that when we accept this noble truth, it actually lessens our pain because we end up “making friends with our own demons.”¹⁹ I wasn’t going out for a drink with my demons, but as I accepted them, they did haunt me less.

A few days after Dave’s funeral, my son and daughter and I made a list of our new “family rules” and hung it over the cubbies where they put their backpacks so we’d see it every day. Rule number one was “Respect our feelings.” We discussed how the sadness might come over them at awkward times, like during school, and that when it did, they could take a break from whatever they were doing. Their cry breaks were frequent and their teachers kindly arranged for them to go outside with a friend or to the guidance counselor so they could let their feelings out.

I gave this advice to my kids but also had to take it myself. Leaning in to the suck meant admitting that I could not control when the sadness would come over me. I needed cry breaks too. I took them on the side of the road in my car ... at work ... at board meetings. Sometimes I went to the women’s room to sob and sometimes I just cried at my desk. When I stopped fighting those moments, they passed more quickly.

After a few months, I started to notice that the fog of intense pain lifted now and then, and when it rolled back in, I recovered faster. It occurred to me that dealing with grief was like building physical stamina: the more you exercise, the faster your heart rate recovers after it is elevated. And sometimes during especially vigorous physical activity, you discover strength you didn’t know you had.

Shockingly, one of the things that helped me the most was focusing on worst-case scenarios. Predicting a bad situation was usually easy for me; it’s a fine old Jewish tradition, like rejecting the first table offered in a restaurant. But during the early days of despair, my instinct was to try to find positive thoughts. Adam told me the opposite: that it was a good idea to think about how much worse things could be.²⁰ “Worse?” I asked him. “Are you kidding? How could this be worse?” His answer cut through me: “Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia driving your children.” Wow. The thought that I could have lost all three of them had never occurred to me. I instantly felt overwhelmingly grateful that my children were alive and healthy—and that gratitude overtook some of the grief.

Dave and I had a family ritual at dinner where we’d go around the table with our daughter and son and take turns stating our best and worst moments of the day. When it became just three of us, I added a third category. Now we each share something for which we are grateful. We also added a prayer before our meal. Holding hands and thanking God for the food we are about to eat helps remind us of our daily blessings.

Acknowledging blessings can be a blessing in and of itself. Psychologists asked a group of people to make a weekly list of five things for which they were grateful.²¹ Another group wrote about hassles and a third listed ordinary events. Nine weeks later, the gratitude group felt significantly happier and reported fewer health problems. People who enter the workforce during an economic recession end up being more satisfied with their jobs decades later because they are acutely aware of how hard it can be to find work.²² Counting blessings can actually increase happiness and health by reminding us of the good things in life. Each night, no matter how sad I felt, I would find something or someone to be grateful for.

I also deeply appreciated our financial security. Both my daughter and my son asked me if we were going to have to move out of our house. I knew how lucky we were that the answer was no. For many, an unexpected event like a single hospital visit or a car repair can undo financial stability overnight. In the European Union, one in four people are at risk of poverty—and this risk is heightened for women and single parents. Sixty percent of Americans have faced an event that threatened their ability to make ends meet and a third have no savings,²³ which leaves them constantly vulnerable. The death of a partner often brings severe financial consequences—especially for women,²⁴ who frequently earn less than men and have less access to retirement benefits. In addition to the devastation of losing a beloved partner, widows are often left without money for basic needs and lose their homes.²⁵ Of the 258 million widows across the world,²⁶ more than 115 million live in poverty. This is one of many reasons why it's important to erase the wage gap for women.

We need to embrace all families regardless of the different forms they take and provide the help they need to get through the hardships they face. Cohabiting and same-sex couples usually don't have the same legal protections and employment benefits as married couples. We need stronger social insurance policies and more family-friendly business practices to prevent tragedy from leading to more hardship. Single parents and widows deserve more support, and leaders, coworkers, families, and neighbors can commit to providing it.

Even being aware of all my blessings, I was still consumed by the pain. Four months and two days after I found Dave on the floor, I attended my kids' Back to School Night. For the first time, I drove there alone. Parents gathered in the gym and then headed into their children's individual classrooms. Dave and I had always split up to cover our son's and daughter's classes and compared notes later. Man-to-man defense. Not anymore.

I'd been dreading choosing a classroom all week, and when that moment came a wave of sadness engulfed me. I was walking toward the rooms, holding my friend Kim's hand while trying to decide, when my phone rang. It was my doctor. He said that he wanted to reach me right away because a routine mammogram had revealed a suspicious spot. My heart raced. He told me that there was no need to worry yet—*very helpful*—but that I should come in the next day for an ultrasound.

My sadness turned to panic. Rather than go to either classroom, I got in my car and fled home. Since losing their father, my children had been understandably obsessed with death. At dinner a few weeks earlier, my daughter needed a cry break and I followed her into her room. I curled up beside her on the bed and she reached for my necklace, which had dangling charms of our family's four initials. She said with determination, "I'm going to pick one." I asked her why. She said she wouldn't tell me because I'd get upset. I told her she could say anything. In a whisper, she explained, "The one I pick will die next." I felt the breath escape from my lungs. Somehow, I held it together and said, "Then let me pick." I selected the "S" and said, "I will be the next to die—and I think it will be in forty years when I am over ninety." I didn't know if that was the right thing to say (and my math was wrong) but I wanted to comfort her.

As I drove home from Back to School Night, I felt her hand as if it were tugging on my necklace. *How could I ever tell her and my son that I had cancer? And what if*

—*what if*—they lost me too? And how was it possible that a few minutes ago I was so stressed over which classroom to choose?

That evening, I was shaking and sobbing too much to put my kids to bed. I didn't want to upset them, so my mother tucked them in. My sister came over and the three of us held hands and prayed. I couldn't think of anything else to do. My mom said a few words in prayer and I asked her to repeat them again and again and again.

The next seventeen hours crawled by. I couldn't sleep, eat, or carry on a coherent conversation. I just watched the clock, waiting for my one p.m. appointment.

The ultrasound showed that the mammogram result had been a false positive. The gratitude that flooded my entire body was as overwhelming as the grief I had felt over the past four endless months. In one fell swoop, I felt more appreciation for my health and what was good in my life than I ever had before.

Looking back, I wish I had known about the three P's earlier. There were so many times they would have helped, even with daily challenges. On the first day of my first job out of college, my boss asked me to enter data into Lotus 1-2-3—a popular spreadsheet in the 1990s. I had to admit that I didn't know how. His mouth dropped open and he said, “I can't believe you got this job without knowing that.” Then he walked out of the room. I went home convinced that I was going to be fired. I thought I was terrible at everything, but it turns out I was only terrible at spreadsheets. Understanding pervasiveness would have saved me a lot of anxiety that week. And I wish somebody had told me about permanence when I broke up with boyfriends. I could have avoided a lot of angst if I'd known that the heartache was not going to last forever—and if I was really being honest with myself, neither were any of those relationships. I also wish I had known about personalization when boyfriends broke up with me. (Sometimes it's not you—it really *is* them.)

All three P's ganged up on me in my twenties after my first marriage ended in divorce. I thought at the time that no matter what I accomplished, I would always be a massive failure. Looking back, it was that failed marriage that led me to leave D.C. and move across the country to Los Angeles, where I barely knew anyone. Fortunately, one of my friends invited me to join him and his buddy for dinner and a movie. That night, the three of us went to a deli, then saw *Courage Under Fire*, where I fell asleep on Dave's shoulder for the first time.

We all deal with loss: jobs lost, loves lost, lives lost. The question is not whether these things will happen. They will, and we will have to face them.

Resilience comes from deep within us and from support outside us. It comes from gratitude for what's good in our lives and from leaning in to the suck. It comes from analyzing how we process grief and from simply accepting that grief. Sometimes we have less control than we think. Other times we have more.

I learned that when life pulls you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again.

Kicking the Elephant Out of the Room



IN COLLEGE, MOST people have a roommate or two. Some have three or four. Dave had ten. After graduation, the roommates scattered across the country, seeing one another only on special occasions. In the spring of 2014, we all got together for their twenty-fifth college reunion. The families had so much fun that we decided to spend the Fourth of July together the next year.

Dave passed away two months before the trip.

I thought about skipping it. The prospect of spending the weekend with Dave's roommates *without Dave* seemed overwhelmingly hard. But I was grasping to hang on to the life we had together, and canceling felt like giving up another piece of him. So I went, hoping that it would be comforting to be with his close friends, who were also grieving.

Most of the trip was a blur, but on the last day, I sat down for breakfast with several of the roommates, including Jeff King, who had been diagnosed years earlier with multiple sclerosis. Dave and I had discussed Jeff's illness many times with each other, but that morning I realized that I had never actually spoken with Jeff about it.

Hello, Elephant.

"Jeff," I said, "how are you? I mean, really, how are you? How are you feeling? Are you scared?"