

EXCERPT



## ***A Chronicle of Grief*** ***Finding Life After Traumatic Loss***

July 21, 2020 | \$15, 168 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-3760-1

*“Within the pages of A Chronicle of Grief, Mel Lawrenz bares his heart broken with grief, yet his story is sprinkled with hope. As I write we are in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is ripping so many from the arms of their loved ones. When he wrote this book, the author would have had no inkling of what was to come. So much death . . . so much loss . . . so much trauma . . . so much grief . . . for so many individuals and families. A Chronicle of Grief could not be more timely.”—Heather Daveiuk Gingrich, professor of counseling at Denver Seminary, author of Restoring the Shattered Self*

## **This Is a Survival Story.**

I was in an unpleasant discussion at work when my cell phone sounded that simple and unobtrusive “ding” that meant a text message had arrived. A few minutes later I slipped the phone out of my pocket and read: “Eva not breathing. Pray.”

What I was looking at made no sense. I stared at the screen. My brain locked up. I felt a wave of dread wash over my body. And then adrenaline. I ducked into an empty room and used my phone to call my wife and learned that my thirty-year-old daughter was in an ambulance being whisked away to a hospital, paramedics applying resuscitation.

This is a survival story.

The worst thing that happened in my early life was the death of my father when I was four. Then, when I was a father of a high school age son who was in a near-fatal auto accident—that was the worst.

But then came the *unthinkable* worst, on that early June day our beautiful daughter collapsed and died, and all the tortures that followed. Life became even more complicated in the months that followed when I had a serious accident, and then my mother died. But the worst, the worst of the worst, was losing our daughter. The fourteen-month window when all this happened seemed too much to bear.

My first thought on that June day was that we had entered a harsh new reality. I had no say in this reality. The ground had dropped away directly in front of where I was standing, and our daughter had disappeared.

*How can this be? What do we do now? What will happen to us?*

Since that time I constantly think about the people around me who have gone through searing loss. For some, the death of a loved one; for others, divorce, being betrayed, having a dreadful disease, losing a career, being assaulted or abused, or any other experience that is overwhelming. There is so much we have to survive, and hopefully do better than just survive. How we need other people who care. How we need to be able to access our faith in God, however that works out.

I look around now and I see people everywhere who are suffering some kind of excruciating loss, and they are having a hard time figuring out what to do.

Facing traumatic loss is about keeping our sanity and taking care of those who depend on us, all the while deciding how we are going to face this new unwelcome reality. I learned at so many points that I had to look straight at the loss or I could not find comfort. On the other hand, surviving also meant using distractions and diversions in order to interrupt ascending panic, especially in those early days. We do what we have to do. It's not wrong if we have to leave the lights or television on in order to sleep. It's okay to interrupt obsessive thoughts. It's important to be honest with people who want to know how we are doing.



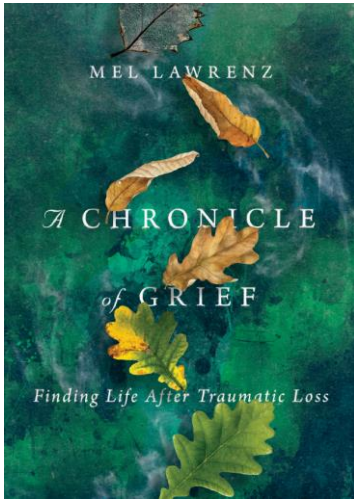
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To unload the burden, I wrote a few paragraphs each month and sent them to friends or posted them on social media. I was surprised that so many people said this writing was helpful to them. Some said it helped them know they are normal in their own reactions to a terrible loss. Others found practical help. And still others just wanted to know there is hope. No one survives on their own.

In that first year I found that writing something, about once a month, and sharing it with others somewhat lessened the weight that was smashing me into the ground. I wrote just to get some of the pain off my chest. This was not an exercise in self-reflection or the discipline of journaling. It was about survival. Taking the edge off the pain. Crying out. Proclaiming love through confessing devastation. A search for meaning, I suppose.

A lot of people responded to me and my family by suffering with us, which is, of course, the literal meaning of *sympathy*. This is the height of compassion, when someone goes beyond feeling sorry, in some mysterious way suffering *with us*.

I kept thinking about all the people slain by the pain of traumatic loss who may not know what to do to get through the most difficult days. Who do not find many sympathetic voices around them or who feel some external necessity to feel or behave a certain way. When the dam broke one day two years later and I started writing this book, I was thinking about all of us who know that life goes on but don't understand how when life itself seems cut off.

—Taken from chapter one, "Trauma"



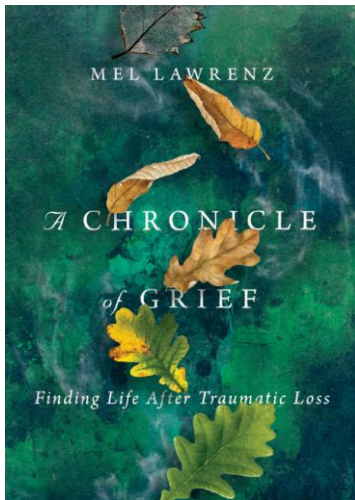
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*"This book is difficult to read—as any honest book about death and grief must be. But it is rich and indispensable to any on this hard journey or walking with another who is. Here we witness a father's crushed heart desperately reaching for grace and truth. It is a story told with searing honesty, genuine doubt, and sustaining faith. Mel is the guide we need for the journey we do not want."*

—**Scott Arbeiter**, president of World Relief

## Gone

Months down the road I knew I was facing an important issue: Would this severe separation cause me to want to separate from people or drive me to value and seek connection? I knew that in those early frightening weeks it was our connection with friends and family that got us through. We soaked up every bit of grace and love and compassion that came our way. Every card, every meal, every conversation was a lifeline. But inevitably, after a few months, our loss was old news to most people. We could see it in people's faces. It was not that they didn't care. But the pain they felt for us had subsided, and ours was still ever-present. Thank God for the handful of friends who continued to feel strongly for us and for those who had gone through a similar loss who knew better than us that the pathway is long. They keep talking to us with a knowing look.

Grieving so often pulls us in conflicting directions. We want to be left alone, but we don't want to be alone. We want to be in the company of good people, but we have a lower tolerance for the stress that can come from being around people. One moment quiet is calming, and the next moment unbearable. We want people to ask about our loss, but not if they say something insensitive.

It is not a surprise that most people are afraid of saying the wrong thing, and not surprising they avoid saying anything at all. But this is a mistake. Somehow we think that if we ask someone about their loss that we are creating pain. This is hardly ever the case. It is far, far more painful when people ignore our loss or move on after a season rather than giving us the option of talking about it. People who are in pain always can choose to answer briefly or to say they don't want to talk about it, but they will not have that option if, after a season, people suddenly seem to forget that we are walking, bleeding.

Our connection with other people is one of the most important treasures of life. We all make choices about this. We are created to have connections; though sometimes it is hard to develop good friendships or get to know our neighbors or find a church where we fit. Illness may cause us to withdraw. Hurtful experiences may turn us into turtles drawn up into our protective shells. We may isolate ourselves because we don't want to have to give anything to anybody. But that is a kind of self-imprisonment. It will cut us off from grace. If we don't ever give, we will have a hard time receiving.

One of the greatest barriers to recovering from a heart-rending loss, ironically, is the fear of recovering. This happens at so many levels. If I find happy moments again, it feels like an insult to my daughter. If I invest in relationships, am I setting myself up for disappointment when the next person is gone in one way or another? If I make it through this, will people have all the same expectations they used to have of me? I feel permanently diminished, yet stronger—which is it?

Surviving traumatic loss is like being forced to move to a new country even though we've not physically moved an inch.

—Taken from chapter three, "Gone"



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## Mel Lawrenz, *A Chronicle of Grief*

“When the unthinkable happens to those you love most, you cope, you drag your legs out of bed in the morning, you walk as in a stupor, you move one foot in front of the other, and you limp like Jacob. The limp never goes away. This book is about the horrific, tragic death of Eva, the author’s daughter, and the book is painful to read. Mel and Ingrid will limp until they die, but their limping is somehow a grace of memory that painfully reminds them of Eva. In their limping they remember Eva, they talk to Eva, they talk about Eva, they wonder and they wander, they see Eva and places she liked and they liked together. But every step, no matter how painful, is a limp with her at their side. Mel Lawrenz has been a friend for years, but I entered into his inner world in this book. Many of us are limping with Mel. At times I had to put this book down, but along the way I acquired a limp.”

—Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

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Mel Lawrenz trains an international network of Christian leaders, ministry pioneers, and thought leaders through the Brook Network. He served as senior pastor of Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin, for ten years and now serves as Elmbrook’s minister at large, teaching in North America, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He holds a PhD in the history of Christian thought from Marquette University. His books include *Leadership Today* and *Life After Grief*.

Follow him on Twitter: @MelLawrenz.



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