

SORROW'S
Words

WRITING EXERCISES
TO HEAL GRIEF

BY SHEILA BENDER

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Pictures © Sheila Lauder

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First Edition, 2013

ISBN 978-1-943224-00-5

Category: 1. Writing and Editing Guide. 2. Counseling and advice services.

I. Author: Bender, Sheila. II. Title: Sorrow's Words: Writing Exercises To Heal Grief

Writing It Real, 394 Colman Drive, Port Townsend, WA 98368

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Preface

We Need No Barriers

IN THE MONTH AFTER MY SON SETH BENDER DIED IN A snowboarding accident, I thought that in mourning, I would give up my “best thing,” which was writing, because it felt selfish now to write. What was more important than losing my son? How could I write anything worthy of this loss? How could I do anything but sit with my grief, sorrow, and horror—those things we fear and come to believe won’t happen to us? Part of sitting with these emotions for me was reading the stories of other parents who had lost their children. They were the people whose company I sought. Experiencing the effects of their writing on me, I began to write about my own son’s dying.

As I wrote, I had to learn to live again, now in his memory, with his memory, and with those who had also loved him and

those who would have loved him had they known him. Years before Seth died, I had tutored a high school student who told me that after her best friend died, she began to believe that she had to live for two by making her contributions to the world count double. By leaving early, Seth handed me this job. If I were going to heal from this loss, I had to bring his spirit into the world along with mine. I pulled out a postcard he had written home one summer from camp telling us how he was carrying the heaviest load on his bike for his group's campsite and how he was dodging bees as he printed the words on the postcard. That was my son, brave, practical and dedicated. It was not enough that I had given birth to him and that by age 25 he was interested in making contributions to the groups to which he belonged. I would have to contribute more than I might have had he been here. In this way, I could feel his presence with me, in me, around me, and always.

When relatives and writing group members told me that reading my writing about loss helped them through grief of their own and also helped their friends know how to be with them, I decided to finish a book and seek publication. When the development director of our local Marine Science Center interviewed me about the Seth Bender Memorial Camp Scholarships for children that we had begun in Seth's memory, I knew if I did publish the book, I would donate proceeds from its sales to this scholarship fund. I enjoyed the idea that more kids would get to experience the outdoors Seth loved. *A New*

Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief came out in 2009. Soon after, I began teaching Writing Grief as a class in-person, to groups, and online, guiding new and experienced writers in what I had done—use the poetry of masters to free my own voice and find the love and beauty that life is, even when anger, hurt, fear, guilt and loneliness clamor for expression.

In *Sorrow's Words: Writing Exercises To Heal Grief*, I hope to inspire you to write from your loss because it will help you know you can survive loss, and in doing so, grow strong, grow deep, and grow in loving. The photographs in Chapter Three as well as the cover photograph are by Port Townsend, WA photographer Sheila Lauder. No stranger to loss, she generously allows me to use her photographs in my writing classes. We hope those we have included here capture feelings not only of loss but of renewal.

felt his presence and the loss of his presence. This left me feeling disturbed until I could soothe myself with writing that held him.



Try This #1

Think about the many times you have told the story of your loss. Now write this story. Write the narrative and description of your loss. Then write about your desire to write about the loss and the concerns you have about this kind of writing. All of this is part of what you must explore to discover a way to speak your grief.

Here are some questions to consider as you write:

- What loss are you writing about? Tell as much about it as you want to.
- How long has it been since you suffered the loss?
- What are your hopes for writing about your grief? What are your fears?
- Have you been writing already?
- If you have already been writing, include a passage or two or some lines from that writing that stand out for you now and write about why they do.

night,” Dylan Thomas pleaded) and then a way to accept the work I had to do.

I envied the words of French poet Robert Desnos in his poem “The Voice of Robert Desnos,” included in Hirsch’s book. (You can read the entire poem online at Poets.org.) Here is a sample from the poem translated by William Kulik in which Desnos attempts to move a woman he has loved and lost:

I call to me those lost in the fields
old skeletons young oaks cut down
scraps of cloth rotting on the ground and linen
 drying in farm country
I call tornadoes and hurricanes
storms typhoons cyclones
tidal waves
earthquakes
I call the smoke of volcanoes and the smoke of
 cigarettes
the rings of smoke from expensive cigars
I call lovers and loved ones
I call the living and the dead

Repeating the phrase “I call” and allowing oneself to direct that call far and wide felt powerful to me. I decided to write an “I call” poem of my own, thanking Robert Desnos for the model:

In grief, we perceive the world differently, more personally. To me, it is as if creation wants us to know that we are part of something large and beautiful, and that if we allow this meaning in, peace arrives.

The snippets of perception and time that arise in our writing are part of what can help us perceive that whole. In writing from loss, we evoke our anger, our fear, and our sorrow and learn, I think, that grief is another door to love.



Try This #15

There are several ways to use the writing you have done since your loss to find that door.

Look through your writing and find five or so of your most often repeated words. Choose three of them that carry the most charge for you right now, and write a passage or two under each of those three words. After you've written under the words, make a list of three things you can say about yourself with conviction after writing from your associations with these words. Can you think of a title for the whole of this writing in parts (each with one of the words as a subtitle)? Perhaps, "Now" will turn out to be a good title.



Grief's Moments

I.

The moon is in partial eclipse.
Where do I find the light of loved ones,
those here and those already gone?

II.

In a recent dream, I walked
from my bedroom to the living room
and outside the window saw a large
coyote sitting in our deck rocking chair.
The animal ran from the chair
into our garden as I approached
the window glass. When I decided
to turn away, he came back.

III.

My son at five or so telling his dad to give
him some elbow grease so he could
do a good job helping his grandmother clean.

IV.

Been in the garden today, pruning boysenberry vines.
Sweet plumb berries, harsh thorns, green, green leaves.