Resilience After Unimaginable Loss
by On Being

Sheryl Sandberg + Adam Grant, Image by Christophe Morin / Getty Images

The following is the audio and transcript of an onbeing.org interview between Krista Tippett and Sheryl Sandberg.

Krista Tippett, host: Sheryl Sandberg's name is synonymous with Facebook and Silicon Valley success, and she's the voice of Lean In. Today, she joins us with vulnerability and frankness, together with the psychologist Adam Grant. He was there for her after the shocking death of her young husband, David Goldberg, while they were on vacation in 2015. Adam's friendship — and his data — helped Sheryl find her way to what deep resilience might mean for herself and her children, and even daring to reclaim joy. There is so much learning here for all of us, for facing the unimaginable, and for becoming more practically caring towards the loss that is woven into lives all around us at any moment.

Ms. Sheryl Sandberg: When I saw people that I knew were facing real adversity, I would say, "How are you?" figuring if they wanted to talk, they would talk. But it's so hard to bring this up. "Well, how am I? OK, my husband just died. It's hard to get out of bed in the morning. I don't know how to parent my children alone. And I'm quite certain I'll never feel a moment of happiness again." I mean, that's not an answer to the question, "How are you?" But if you say to someone, "How are you today? I know you are suffering. If you want to talk about it, I'm here," then people can bring it up.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

Ms. Tippett: Sheryl Sandberg is the chief operating officer of Facebook. Adam Grant is a professor of psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. They've previously written together about gender and working life. Now they're launching a book and a non-profit together called Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy.

Ms. Tippett: Where I think I'd like to start with the two of you is to ask about the religious and spiritual background of your life. And I've, over time, come to understand that phrase, "the spiritual background of your life," as very expansive. And, if looking back, you see this notion of what you understand resilience to be now in there, either taught to you or embodied, perhaps, with other names. So, Sheryl, do you want to start?

Ms. Sandberg: Sure. I was raised in kind of an odd mix of reform and conservative Judaism. My parents kept a kosher home. We celebrated Shabbat. My bat mitzvah was something that I took very seriously, my parents took very seriously. Religion was something that gave kind of a structure, I think, to life's the calendar holiday. Judaism starts on a different calendar year, and I believed that the year started around when school started in September, October with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

And I think, when I lost Dave and lost Dave so suddenly, religion is, in many ways, the first place you turn because it gives you some things you're supposed to do. Religion told us that we were supposed to sit shiva, meaning people came over to the house. Religion told us how we were going to perform the burial.

There's this — in Judaism, when you bury someone, you lower a casket into the ground, and the people themselves, the people closest to them, shovel dirt on the casket. And I buried my grandparents, so I had done that before. And in the face of something so sudden and so tragic, the traditions around the burial, the funeral, the shiva, impossible though they were to live through, I think, were actually very important and very comforting because without them I just would have not known what to do. That was, I think, hugely important because death ushers in such nothingness, such blank — I thought of it as a void, sucking you in and pushing on my chest so I could barely breathe. And religion was something to hang to in that void.

Ms. Tippett: There's a lot there we'll keep going with as we move forward. Adam, how do you think about the roots of resilience in your childhood and if there's a spiritual way that you see that?

Mr. Adam Grant: As I think back to my childhood, I feel like there were a lot of moments where I felt like I didn't have answers to the hardest things that happened in my life. Like Sheryl, I remember losing my grandparents and not knowing where to turn for explanations, for understanding, for meaning. And I think, in a way, it's one of the reasons I was originally so drawn to psychology.

Ms. Tippett: Mm. Interesting.

Mr. Grant: I was trying to figure out, like, how do we make sense of something that is impossible to really understand, especially as a kid? And looking back, I guess it was going to synagogue and asking those kinds of questions that really got me interested in resilience in the first place. I don't think I realized it at the time, but looking back, I was constantly asking, like, what happens to people after they die? And how do we make sure that our lives are as meaningful as possible? And I think, in some ways, that's a question of, given the human condition, how do we find resilience?

Ms. Sandberg: Can I add a little bit?

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, absolutely.

Ms. Sandberg: The other place religion really matters was this period of mourning, so this shloshim period. And so when Dave died, the rabbi — my rabbi and another rabbi who's a friend told me that the period of mourning for a spouse is 30 days. And they're supposed to kind of have that sense of wrapping up shloshim for a spouse. And that really led me to think about where I was at that 30 days which is what led me to do that Facebook post that was a very important part of the story of my recovery and this book. But again, it was

rooted in religion, that there was religious meaning to that 30-day period.

Ms. Tippett: I see how it created a container, obviously, for you to mourn, but also to reflect. I mean, and you wrote this stunning three sentences: “I have lived 30 years in these 30 days. I am 30 years sadder. I feel like I am 30 years wiser.”

Ms. Sandberg: Yeah. I mean, it was a long 30 days, right? The longest of my life by far. And I was, in many ways, marking those days because every single one was just a victory to live through. It wasn’t just the grief. Grief can be so overwhelming. I felt like I was sucked into a void where I would never really be able to catch my breath. My brother-in-law described it as a boot sitting on his chest. But it was also the isolation because I always had very friendly, easy relationships with neighbors, colleagues. When I dropped my kids off at school, I would say hi to everyone. When I went to work, we’d chat before and after meetings.

And that all went away after Dave died because I think people were afraid to say the wrong thing, so they often said nothing at all. So as I moved through those days, I was feeling increasingly isolated. I would go to work and people just looked at me like I was a ghost, or they were a deer in the headlights. They didn’t know what to say. And so as that 30-day period approached, I wrote this Facebook post based on my journals, which expressed how I felt, and the night before I went to sleep thinking, “There is no way I’m posting this thing. It is too raw, too revealing.”

Ms. Tippett: Really?

Ms. Sandberg: Oh, yeah. No, I definitely wasn’t going to post it. But then I woke up the next morning, and my religion told me this was supposed to be kind of the end of mourning. And it was not, and it was not going to be. And I felt so overwhelmingly awful that I thought, “You know what? I might as well post this thing because things can’t get worse.” And it really made a difference. Because a friend of mine at work said that she’d been driving by my house and not coming in. She started coming in. People at work admitted they were terrified, when they saw me, of saying the wrong thing.

Strangers posted about their experiences. A woman posted from the NICU that she just gave birth — or she had one surviving twin, and one had died. And so she was struggling to find the strength to give the surviving twin a wonderful life. And other people posted on them, and I felt less alone. People weren’t walking up to me and saying, “How are you?”

Ms. Tippett: Right. Or not walking up to you because they didn’t know what to say.

Ms. Sandberg: Correct. Exactly.

Ms. Tippett: And this book you’ve written together — I’m so happy to talk to both of you because one thing that radiates from the pages is it’s not just that you’re co-authors; it’s that you’re friends, right? That it grows out of friendship. And in fact, I mean, Adam got on a plane and came out to be with you.

Ms. Sandberg: Twice.

Ms. Tippett: Twice. [laughs] So did not walk away. You’d gotten to know each other together with Dave, right? When Dave was CEO at SurveyMonkey. And it sounds like that Adam started talking about resilience right away — that you thought that this was about the ability — could you endure this pain? But the question, Adam, you were asking is

instead ask how you can become resilient. And there's this language in the book — "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." Such a helpful image, and new.

Mr. Grant: Yeah. I guess, for me, this started when Dave and I really connected. And Dave was one of the leaders I really looked up to, but also as a husband and a father, the kind of person that I wanted to be.

And I mean, it was just devastating for all of us when we got the news. And I remember talking with my wife, Allison, about whether I should go. It might be a time that it would be difficult for people to have company. And she said, "No, of course you go." So I flew out. And I remember being at the shiva afterward, and people were starting to leave, and Sheryl and her family and some close friends were there. And she said, "Stay." And Sheryl's question was, "What do I do for my kids? How do I help them?"

And all of a sudden, I felt like all these hours I've spent learning about psychology, about how to deal with tough situations, there was a purpose to those hours all of a sudden. And maybe I had some knowledge that I could share that would help her kids through it. And so we started talking about, what do we know about resilience? Where does it come from? How do you help kids find strength in just the worst of situations?

Ms. Sandberg: Dave gave me a lot of amazing things, and one of the things Dave gave me was Adam. I mean, Dave had a lot of speakers at SurveyMonkey. Adam was the only one he ever invited over for dinner. We were very protective of family dinner. But he said, "This guy's incredible. I invited him over for dinner." Which — I don't know if Dave ever did that. And Adam and I started talking about his work, and I asked him, "Have you ever cut your data by gender?" And then we started talking about gender, and we started writing together. We wrote four New York Times pieces together before Dave died.

And when Dave died, I was in a total fog. I didn't invite anyone to the funeral. People came. And I was so relieved Adam was there. And I just looked at him, and I said, "What do I do to get my kids through this?" Like, there has to be — for me, the research is incredibly comforting because there's my experience, there's other individual experience, but if people have studied this and figured out what works on large numbers of people, that's better.

And Adam just followed up. He said, "Yes, there's research, and I'm looking at it, and I…" And he would literally send me research summaries, like, "OK, there's been one longitudinal study of children who've lost fathers or" — sorry — "who have lost parents and gone through divorce. Here's what it says." And for me, that was incredibly comforting. And then I started calling him more and more with, "OK, here's what happened today, and here's how I feel, and it's never going to feel better." And Adam would say, "That's called permanence. That's one of the traps."

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] OK.

Ms. Sandberg: No, but for me, the research and the data — I'm not saying it would be for everyone — but for me, it was unbelievably helpful. So, personalization, blaming myself. I blamed myself that Dave died. The early reports were that he died falling off an exercise machine, so I thought if I only found him sooner, he would be alive. And my brother is a neurosurgeon, so this is his field. And he sat there with me, at first patiently and increasingly with more anxiety and passion in his voice. "Sheryl, Dave did not die falling

off an exercise machine. If Dave fell off an exercise machine, he would've broken an arm, not died. He did not die that way."

And then, when we got the autopsy report, and it was coronary artery disease, you know, it wasn't diagnosed. And should I have known? And then, when I finally got over, "OK I'm not a doctor. It's not my fault I didn't diagnose a disease that his doctors didn't diagnose," I blamed myself for disrupting my mom's life, disrupting the Facebook client meetings, disrupting Adam's life. And Adam said to me, "If you don't get over the personalization, you are not going to recover. And if you don't recover, your kids can't recover. That's what psychologists know."

Ms. Tippett: I think you said somewhere that he told you to ban the word "sorry." That you were always saying, "Sorry, sorry, sorry." [laughs]

Mr. Grant: Oh. [laughs]

Ms. Sandberg: Yes. But the reason that was so important was he could prove it. He said people have studied this. And forgiving yourself is a really hard thing, but if you tell me if I don't forgive myself, my kids are never going to recover, I'm willing to do anything. So Adam just kept weighing in at these critical moments with, "Here's how to think about this. Here's what we know."

[music: "Small Memory (Tunng Remix)" by Jon Hopkins]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today I'm with Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and psychologist Adam Grant.

[music: "Small Memory (Tunng Remix)" by Jon Hopkins]

Ms. Tippett: And Adam, I want to ask you. I started hearing this term "resilience" emerging a few years ago, kind of early 21st century, often in the context of social infrastructure — resilient ecosystems, resilient cities. Like after Hurricane Sandy, how do you — how to rebuild and plan — assuming that the unexpected catastrophe will come, but planning so that what knocks out one part of the system won't bring down the whole thing. And you're talking about resilient human beings. And I'm curious about — is this a term that has had kind of a new birth or renaissance in psychology as well?

Mr. Grant: Yeah, it is. So, it started to gain a lot of traction in the 1990s, late '90s, when Marty Seligman, a colleague of mine here at Penn, pioneered this whole initiative on positive psychology. And he said, "Look, as psychologists, we know a lot about how to treat suffering. We can help people become less depressed and less anxious, but we don't know a whole lot about how to help people flourish. And it's nice to cure some of the worst ills that people face in their lives, but what about really living the best lives we can? How do we do that?" And there were a lot of experts who had been sort of already tackling this question, and Marty brought them together. Excuse me.

Resilience really grew out of a desire to say, "Look, it's not enough just to help people recover and try to mend them when they're broken. We need to understand how to help people find and build strength when the worst things happen to them, which they do. And it's just exploded as a field of research. There are researchers studying how to build resilience in kids, how to find resilience after divorce, after loss, how to help communities build resilience together. And part of what Sheryl and I were, I think, both really influenced by was just how much knowledge is out there that hasn't been shared more

broadly yet.

Ms. Tippett: And it's a new paradigm in American culture. And the three of us, in very different ways, are great examples of — I think we were probably born into this world of, "be successful, be powerful," and the whole, like, American self-made man thing. And this is actually being reality-based and saying, "Don't expect that things will always progress and always get better because life is not like that."

And Sheryl, I think about you. You are the chief operating officer of this incredibly powerful company and force in the world. I mean, you, as a human being and as a professional person, you create order out of the constant potential of chaos. And so I've got to imagine this was also a paradigm shift in your approach to your life as Dave's death opened up just the ground beneath your feet.

Mr. Grant: Krista, I have to say — I don't think Sheryl will tell you this — but her co-author on Lean In, Nell Scovell, who edited this book with us, once told me that just for a day she wanted to own Sheryl's brain because it would be so convenient to have a brain full of color-coded sticky notes all perfectly organized. And we all live in constant envy of that.

Ms. Tippett: But so, even more so, it must be just — it must've been such a shock to your system.

Ms. Sandberg: It is such an astute question because, yes, until this happened, certainly I'd faced challenges. Everyone does. I'd gotten divorced very young, and that was something that was hard for me to get over and process. But there was no order to this because it didn't make sense that a grown, healthy man who woke up in the morning and went on a hike could just die — literally could go to the gym and die — and out of nowhere at 47 years old. And my story, and I think the story of so many people facing hardship is this balancing between no control, no order, accepting the grief, accepting your emotions, and trying to find things we can do that give us some sense of control.

And in that first bucket, I learned a lot. My friend Davis Guggenheim who makes documentary films, he and his wife, Lisa, came and slept over early on. And he just looked at me and said, "Sheryl, when I film movies and I do documentaries, I can't write them in advance. I have to let the story unfold." He knows me well. He said, "Sheryl, your grief has to unfold. You can not put it in a box and wrap it up. There is no sticky note for this. There is no Excel spreadsheet. You have to let this happen." My rabbi told me to "lean into the suck." Not what I meant by "lean in," but what he was saying was you have no control over your feelings here. And learning to accept the lack of control that I have was a huge part of this for me.

But then on the other hand, in the void, in the grief, in the isolation, as the mother of two grieving children — my children were 7 and 10 — and they lost their father overnight — you want something to do. So there were moments where I was just desperate for anything I could do, which I think did give me some sense of hope and some sense of control. And that's where the research and the steps I could take came in.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah. Well, so let's talk about some of those practical learning, those tools for living that you've written about. And I mean, some of them are — like, you were surprised early on that Adam counseled you to focus on worst-case scenarios, which you said…

Ms. Sandberg: Oh, no. This was crazy.

Ms. Tippett: You said it's a fine, old Jewish tradition so it made sense on some level, but it didn't make sense on another. [laughs]

Ms. Sandberg: I mean, Adam looked at me and said, "You should think about how things could be worse." And I thought to myself, "Dave just died suddenly. How can things be worse?" And he said, "He could've had that cardiac arrhythmia driving your children." I mean, in that instant, to this day, when I say that, I feel better. I'm like, OK my kids are alive. I'm fine. Literally. Because think about the devastation I felt with Dave, and the devastation of losing all three of them in one instant, which happens. And all of a sudden, you're better.

And you would think that when you're trying to find a way forward, you want to think about happy thoughts, but actually, what you want to do is find gratitude, gratitude for what's left. And one way of doing that is think about how things could be worse. And that really did work, because the minute I thought about the fact that I'm lucky to still have my children alive, what I found was gratitude. Thank god my children are alive. And I can raise them, and I can raise them to know who their father was, who their father would've wanted them to be.

Ms. Tippett: Adam, do you know, scientifically, how this is grounded in our psyches?

Mr. Grant: Yeah. Well, maybe.

Ms. Tippett: It's a strange way for us to be, but how does it work?

Mr. Grant: I wish I had a good answer to that. I will tell you that long before I read the research on it, we had a close family member, Jeff Zaslow, who was killed in a killed in a car accident. And I had a really hard time just dealing with how something so horrible and senseless could happen to someone so good. And Allison, my wife, has a background in psychiatry, and she was the one who taught me to consider how things could be worse. And I had the same reaction at the time that Sheryl did, like, "This is one of the most awful things that could happen to a person, to a family. How can you imagine it being worse?"

And after that, I got really curious about — "How does that work?" And I think there's an evolutionary story to be told about it, which is that we're wired to pay attention to bad things. Like, prehistorically, if you see something moving in the jungle, and you're like, "Huh, it's orange with black stripes and sharp things coming out of its mouth, I wonder if that could be a tiger," you would die. Whereas, if you were immediately were like, "Tiger. Run," you would live and sort of survive and pass on your genes.

I think because of that, a lot of times bad is stronger than good. And when something bad happens, it's really hard to replace the negative thoughts with positive ones. And so it's almost like the — thinking about how things could be worse, it's a trick that we use to capture our attention because we're so good at focusing on what's going wrong that then we can sort of take advantage of that wiring as opposed to trying to work against it.

Ms. Tippett: And Sheryl, as you said, you have drawn — both of you — you've drawn on a lot of data but also a lot of other stories. I mean, there's a chapter called "The Elephant in the Room." But what strikes me about that also is — and I think probably starting with that first Facebook post you wrote 30 days after Dave's death — it's not just that the elephant is in the room but that you realize that unfathomable grief and loss are all around — walking around in all kinds of lives all around us. Did that take you to

something…

Ms. Sandberg: Absolutely.

Ms. Tippett: Because you tell so many stories of things then people share with you or that you learn or that you see or take in in a different way.

Ms. Sandberg: No, absolutely. What happens is that when bad things happen, we deal with the repercussions of that, the grief, the loss, the cancer treatments, the chemotherapy, the nausea, the financial hardship of a parent going to prison. But then we also deal with all of the things that come from silence, isolation, lack of support, in many cases, shame. If you want to silence a room, get diagnosed with cancer. No one knows what to say. And you're right that there is a lot of adversity and a lot of hardship all around us. And it is not quiet in a room. It is an elephant, and it is following us. And what it does is it cuts us off from the human connection we need to get through things when we most need it.

And I realize having been on the other side of this, I got this wrong many times. If I had a friend — and I've had many friends who have been diagnosed with cancer over the years — I used to say, "I know you're going to get through it." And I would say it once, and not mention it again. OK. So what's wrong with that? A lot. They don't know they're going to get through it. So when I say, "I know you're going to get through it," what I'm actually doing — I thought I was being hopeful. But what I was really doing was not acknowledging the state they're in, because the little voice in their head is saying, "You don't know that I'm going to get through it. I don't know."

And then I would never mention it again because I thought if I brought it up I was reminding them they had cancer. Losing Dave taught me how ludicrous that was. You can't remind me I lost Dave. I know that. So when no one says anything, I just feel alone. It's not that I forget. And so now what I do if someone gets diagnosed with cancer — and unfortunately, this has happened many times since I lost Dave — I will say to them, "I know you don't know if you're going to get through this, and I don't know either. But you're not going to go through it alone. I'm here to help you. I'm here to do it with you." And then the next time I see them, I will ask them, "How are you feeling?" Not, "How are you?" but, "How are you feeling? How is it going? Do you want to talk about this?" And sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't, but I don't let the silence overtake our relationship.

Ms. Tippett: It's so helpful. You also have this stunning sentence from somebody named Mitch Carmody. "Our child dies a second time when no one speaks their name."

Mr. Grant: Yeah. That was — one of the things that happened in the months after Dave passed away was people started sending all sorts of stories and interviews and quotes and poems. And Sheryl shared a lot of the most moving and meaningful ones with a group of family and friends, which I think really helped us know what she was going through. And I know I was stopped cold when I read this. This was from a father who lost a child and found that afterward people were afraid to mention it, same thing that Sheryl was talking about. They didn't want to remind him, and he wanted more than anything to remember his child. And that means we have to have the conversation.

[music: "Narghile" by Randall]

Ms. Tippett: You can listen again and share this conversation with Adam Grant and Sheryl

Sandberg through our website, onbeing.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: "Narghile" by Randall]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, a frank and vulnerable conversation with Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg, and Wharton psychologist Adam Grant. After Sheryl's husband David Goldberg died suddenly at 47, she found great comfort and guidance in Adam's friendship and his research into resilience. They've just launched Option B – a book and a non-profit about the learnings that resulted.

Ms. Tippett: I want to read a paragraph from the book just because I feel like so many important, really practical tools have just been laid out, but here's another scenario you described. You said, "People continually avoided the subject. I went to a close friend's house for dinner" — and obviously, I know you're not saying that anybody means to be doing — this is just that we are — we have to learn, right? Anyway.

"People continually avoided the subject. I went to a close friend's house for dinner, and she and her husband made small talk the entire time. I listened, mystified, keeping my thoughts to myself. 'You're right. The Warriors are totally crushing it. And you know who really loved that team? Dave.' I got emails from friends asking me to fly to their cities to speak at their events without acknowledging that travel might be more difficult for me now. 'Oh, it's just an overnight? Sure, I'll see if Dave can come back to life and put the kids to bed.' I ran into friends at local parks who talked about the weather. 'Yes. The weather has been weird with all this rain and death.'"

Ms. Sandberg: That's what it felt like.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah. Those are just such everyday interactions, right?

Ms. Sandberg: Yeah. And no one meant harm by it. And I saw myself in a lot of those mis-steps that people made to me. When I saw people that I knew were facing real adversity, I would say, "How are you?" figuring if they wanted to talk, they would talk. But it's so hard to bring this up. "Well, how am I? OK, my husband just died. It's hard to get out of bed in the morning. I don't know how to parent my children alone. And I'm quite certain I'll never feel a moment of happiness again." I mean, that's not an answer to the question, "How are you?" But if you say to someone, "How are you today? I know you are suffering. If you want to talk about it, I'm here," then people can bring it up.

The other lesson here is — and this is another thing I really messed up before — is do something specific rather than offering to do anything. I used to do this all the time. If anyone was going through something hard, I would say, "Is there anything I can do?" And I meant it. I would've done anything they asked. But if you ask that question, not on purpose, but you're kind of shifting the burden to the person who needs the help.

And it's hard to ask. It's hard to ask for the big things. It's hard to ask — "Please make sure my kids and I are invited to somewhere for Thanksgiving dinner, because if it's just going to be the three of us, that's going to be unbearably sad." "Don't leave us alone for the Jewish holidays for the next 20 years." You can't ask that. Or I couldn't. Even, "God, it would be so nice to have someone bring us dinner." That's hard to ask for too.

My amazing colleague, Dan Levee, he and his wonderful wife, they unfortunately lost their

son. And in the long time they were in the hospital with him before he passed away, he had some great examples. Friends would text him, “What do you not want on a burger?” “I’m in the lobby of the hospital for a hug for the next hour whether you want one or not.” Those were the people who really helped. So urging people — just do something. Just do something rather than ask if you can do anything, I think, again kicks the elephant out of the room and shows people that you are there with them.

Ms. Tippett: You quote just one of my favorite lines, also, from Annie Dillard: “How we spend our days is how we spend our lives.” Even just the ways you’ve been speaking about how to talk to people — you know, the difference between the question of, “How are you?” and then, “How are you today?” Because how we spend our days is how we spend our lives, those, I think, are tools for our working life, right? With our colleagues as well as friends or people we know outside of work.

Mr. Grant: I always thought that what mattered most in our work in our lives was the big moments, the day you got a promotion, the major success, the project that really helped other people. And in our personal lives, your wedding day, and when you get to welcome your first child. And of course, those moments are incredibly meaningful and memorable. But when I started, I guess, learning more about the evidence as a psychologist, I was struck that it’s actually not the intensity of your positive experiences; it’s the frequency that really matters for how much happiness you find in life.

And that has pretty big implications for thinking about how you plan your life, right? It’s not actually the big moments that matter most. It’s what Tim Urban the blogger says is the joy you find on hundreds of forgettable Wednesdays. And of course, it would be great to make all those Wednesdays less forgettable, but it’s actually those daily moments of joy that really matter. And one of the things that I learned from Sheryl’s experience is how hard it is to rediscover joy when something horrible happens that turns your life upside down. And the idea of giving yourself permission just to feel joy again. I remember Sheryl saying, “How can I be happy? I don’t deserve to be happy. Dave is gone.” To say, “Well, actually, that’s the last thing that Dave would want is for you to continue to be miserable.”

Ms. Sandberg: After Dave died — I think it was about four months later — I was at a friend’s bar mitzvah, and a childhood friend pulled me onto the dance floor to dance to a song I loved in childhood. And a minute in, I just burst into tears. I mean, it was embarrassing. I had to be kind of ushered out of the room really quickly. And I didn’t really know what was wrong. And then I realized what was wrong was I felt OK. I felt OK. For one minute four months later, I felt happy. And I felt so guilty feeling happy.

And the very next day, I was in Washington. My kids and I went to visit Adam and Allison and their kids. And I told Adam the story, and he looked at me and said, “Of course you haven’t felt happy. You don’t do a single thing that would make anyone happy since Dave died. You don’t do a thing.” He said, “You’re waiting to feel better to do something that will make you happy, but really it goes the other way. And what he said was, “Let’s talk about what you do. You go to work, you take care of your kids, you write in your journal, and cry. Those are all important things, but you have to give yourself permission to watch TV, play a game, even these little things.”

And that the big a-ha of — I think I was waiting to feel better to feel happy. Well, I couldn’t go out to dinner with anyone because I might cry, or I couldn’t watch a TV show because it would remind me of Dave. You actually find happiness in the small things by taking those steps. I started watching TV again. I started watching Game of Thrones again. I

decided I was going to take things back. My kids and I would take things back.

One day, I took Settlers of Catan off the shelf — Dave, last time I saw him, we were playing that game. That was the game the four of us played all the time. And I looked at my kids, and I said, “Who wants to play?” And they just looked up and said, “We do. We haven’t played in so long.” And then, my daughter went for gray, to be gray, and Dave was always gray. And my son said, “You can’t be gray. That was Daddy’s color.” And she said, “But I want to be gray.” And I said, “Yes, you can because we’re going to take it back. We’re going to be gray — you’re going to play gray in Daddy’s honor.”

And we took it back. We took back Catan. We took back gray. I took back Game of Thrones. We took back Scrabble. We took back cheering for the sports teams Dave loved. And it actually — those little things add up, not just to moments of happiness, but because you can have moments of happiness, moments of strength.

And the thing is, I really needed permission. I felt guilty. I felt guilty. And this is a common reaction to adversity. Someone dies — even when we had nothing to do with the death, we have survivor guilt. Someone loses their job, other people, if you didn’t lose didn’t lose your job — “How can I be happy when my friend’s lost their job?” Someone goes to prison — “I have my freedom; how can I be happy?” And along with all the hardship that we face, this guilt is a thief of joy. My brother-in-law, in an unbelievably generous move, called me months after Dave died crying — I could hear it in his voice — saying, “All Dave ever wanted was for you to be happy. Don’t take that away from him in death.”

[music: “Neo” by Ryan Teague]

Ms. Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today I’m with Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg and psychologist Adam Grant.

[music: “Neo” by Ryan Teague]

Ms. Tippett: I want to talk a little bit about what you’ve learned about — let me just say — the story of you coming home from vacation to tell them that their father had died. I mean, it’s heartbreaking. It’s unimaginable. But you also experience your children, not just enduring, but moving through life. And it feels to me like this notion of resilience also changes the way you think about parenting qualitatively. This idea — “it isn’t about having a backbone, about strengthening the muscles around our backbone.” I wonder if both of you could say a little bit about that. I mean, you’re both parents. But Sheryl, you start.

Ms. Sandberg: I mean, that was — there were so many truly horrible moments. People have asked me what was the worst moment. There’s a lot of competition for that slot, right? Finding Dave, telling my kids, burying him, like, there are so many bad moments. But even with very stiff competition, the moment I sat down on that couch with my parents and my sister to tell my kids they would never see their father again, it is unimaginable, even for me, even having lived through it. And the screaming, and the wailing, and — what happened was horrible.

And then I think maybe an hour in, my son looked at me and said, “Thank you, Mommy, for being here to tell me yourself.” And then when I put my kids to bed that night, my daughter looked at me and said, “I don’t just feel bad for us; I feel bad for Grandma Paula and Uncle Rob because they lost him too.” And I thought about how in the very, very worst moments of their lives, my kids were able to think about other people. And that

gave me hope. I marvel at their resilience. I absolutely marvel.

My kids and I were just talking about what to do this Father's Day. There are these days on the calendar that just — it never occurred to me how painful Father's Day must be for millions of families, and now I know. And so months in advance, we're right now trying to get through yet another Father's Day, and my son said, "This time, why don't we go have fun? All day, we'll have fun, just like Daddy would've wanted." It's incredible.

Ms. Tippett: And you also have written that you — you stopped worrying in the same way when setbacks and disappointments come into your kids' lives, that you understand…

Ms. Sandberg: Oh, my god. Yeah. When we're having a normal kid problem — "I didn't do well on a test." "All my friends made the soccer team — the advance soccer team, and I didn't." "My lunch spilled in the water, and I had nothing to eat." That happened yesterday. I am just over-flooded with relief. I'm like, "Oh, a normal kid problem. This is not death." Literally, I'm relieved.

Those problems that seemed so big before are tiny and small and completely surmountable. And it's not just me — I'm not the only one with this perspective. My kids have it. A few weeks ago, my son's basketball team lost in the playoffs, and all the other kids were super upset. And I looked at my son, and I said, "How are you?" And he looked at me, and he goes, "Mom, this is 6th grade basketball. I'm fine."

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] Right.

Ms. Sandberg: I would never wish that perspective on anyone, especially my child. But he does have it, and it is a form of post-traumatic growth, and it is a valuable life lesson.

Ms. Tippett: Adam, how do you — I mean, you also carry around all this data and this research, and you're always immersed in it. How do you — do you apply that to your life as a parent?

Mr. Grant: Yeah. I've always wanted to be one of those psychologists who doesn't screw up my children. [laughs] So…

Ms. Tippett: [laughs]

Ms. Sandberg: Oh my god. Adam has the greatest children. They are the cutest, sweetest, smartest — they're adorable.

Mr. Grant: No comment, but… [laughs]

Ms. Tippett: So you try not to have them as research subjects and guinea pigs.

Mr. Grant: Yeah. As much as possible. But I will say the thing that psychology has underscored for me is just how important it is for kids to know that they matter. And mattering is — it's a really basic but important idea that, I think, as parents, a lot of us lose sight of, that kids need to know that other people notice them, care about them, and even rely on them. And that just becomes all the more important in the face of hardship. When you're feeling that isolation that Sheryl was describing, that lack of control, to know that other people are paying attention to you, that they're involving you in conversations, that they're letting you make some choices, and even sometimes seeking your advice is so important.

And this is one of the things that Allison and I have spent a lot of time on with our kids is just making sure that they have a say in the big decisions that we make and the small ones too. And that is a source of strength because that means they don't end up constantly looking to adults for direction every time there's a decision to make or every time something difficult happens they know that they can rely on their own judgment.

And I think that is one of the most striking things for me — just looking back to that first time I went to dinner with Sheryl and Dave and their kids is how many questions they asked their children, but also how they taught their children to ask questions of other people. I guess that's modeling, showing other people that they matter. And I think that that's such an important skill that probably we could all do a better job at teaching as parents.

Ms. Tippett: Adam, I'm also curious about the connection of this kind of collection of things we're talking about, resilience, adversity, and to your work on giving and originality. As you've lived this in friendship with Sheryl, and in your research, how does resilience flow into those things — generosity, originality, creativity?

Mr. Grant: It's really been at the heart of a lot of my work. I spent a lot of my career studying why givers burn out, what happens when generous people exhaust themselves, or just when no good deed goes unpunished. And what you need in that situation more than anything else is the strength to persevere. You need places to find energy, to rejuvenate your motivation. And as far as originality is concerned, I don't know a creative person who has not faced just extreme rejection and failure and disappointment over and over and over again.

And the ability to persist, to keep trying, to try new ideas, new ways of solving problems, is one of the strongest forces that drives whether people are able to move the world around them. And so I guess I've come to think of resilience as a critical skill for living a meaningful life and for living it according to your own values. And I think I'm now much more aware of that than I was before.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, I actually wanted to kind of come to a close with the notion of wisdom, which is connected to a meaningful life. And which, it seems to me, throughout your writing, it's that resilience is also a building block of wisdom as much as it is healing and kind of surviving and flourishing. Wisdom can be connected to things like knowledge and accomplishment, certainly, but those are things you can point at. You can point at somebody and say, "They're knowledgeable. They're intelligent. They're accomplished." But that the measure of wisdom is the imprint that a life makes on other lives around it.

And I thought of that, Adam, when I was reading something you wrote about Dave. After his death, you said, "I don't believe this happened for a reason, but it has given us all a reason to be more present parents, more loving spouses, more supportive friends, and more caring leaders. The overwhelming sentiment from everyone who knew Dave is that he inspired us to be better human beings, and he had that effect on us throughout his life, long before we lost him."

Mr. Grant: Yeah. I — gosh, there's very little to add to that. I will just say that Dave was extraordinary in many ways. And he just saw the good in everyone, and he went out of his way to be a friend to so many people. And I guess my hope is that that comes through in the way that Sheryl has gone on to help people with the wisdom that she gained, that she never wanted to gain, but she did. And I think that's a beautiful thing.

Ms. Tippett: There's this…

Ms. Sandberg: Well, one thing…

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, go on.

Ms. Sandberg: Sorry. One thing that's really at the heart of this book is post-traumatic growth. And Adam, sharing with me the research on posttraumatic growth, which I then learned — can you grow from trauma? And you absolutely can. Now, it doesn't mean you'd take the growth. I'd much rather have Dave and give back all the growth. But since that's not an option, we grow.

We grow by strengthening. I know I'm stronger than I was before because I've lived through this, and my kids do too. We grow because we have deeper relationships, more meaning. My work at Facebook has more meaning. We grow by finding more gratitude, gratitude for my kids being alive, something that really I took for granted before.

I think one of the questions we are asking in this book is, can you have pre-traumatic growth? And I absolutely think you can. I would give anything to go back and live with Dave with the sense of gratitude I have for every day that I have now. Anything. What would I have done if I had known we only had 11 years? What would I have done on that last day when we went on a hike, and he walked with the guys, and I walked with the girls? If I could go back and share with him the gratitude I feel now, that would be incredible, but I can't. But what I can do is try to live my life going forward with that gratitude and other people who haven't experienced trauma can get that gratitude now.

Two months ago, my cousin Laura turned 50, and I called her the morning of her birthday, and I said, "Laura, I'm calling to say happy birthday, but I'm also calling 'cause — in case you woke up this morning with that, 'Oh my god. I'm 50. I'm getting old' thing we all do, I want to tell you that I'm so glad you're 50 because this is the year that Dave won't turn 50. And it turns out — I'd never thought about this before, but there's only two options: we either grow older, or we don't. And it is an honor and privilege to turn 50, and I am so grateful that you are alive and in my life."

And I used to roll my eyes at birthdays and either not celebrate them, or "Oh my god, I'm getting old." If I get to grow old, I will be so grateful. And that gratitude, with all the sadness that still lingers, makes my life deeper, richer, meaningful, and in some ways, has a different kind of meaning and joy.

[music: "Rain In the Ashtray" by Mooncake]

Ms. Tippett: Sheryl Sandberg is chief operating officer of Facebook, author of Lean In and founder of Leanin.org. Adam Grant is the Saul P. Steinberg Professor of Management and professor of psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and the author of Originals and Give and Take. Their new book together has the same name as their non-profit initiative: Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy.

[music: "Rain In the Ashtray" by Mooncake]

Staff: On Being is Trent Gilliss, Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Mariah Helgeson, Maia Tarrell, Marie Sambilay, Bethanie Mann, Selena Carlson, and Rigsar Wangchuck.

Ms. Tippett: Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoe Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing our final credits in each show is hip-hop artist Lizzo.