

The Geography of Sorrow by Tim Mckee

For a man who specializes in grief and sorrow, psychotherapist Francis Weller certainly seems joyful. When I arrived at his cabin in Forestville, California, he emerged with a smile and embraced me. His wife, Judith, headed off to garden while Francis led me into their home among the redwoods to talk.

I had wanted to interview Weller ever since the publisher I work for, North Atlantic Books, had agreed to publish his new book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. Over the previous few years my father, grandfather, grandmother, father-in-law, and sister-in-law had all died, and I'd also moved across the country and was missing the friends and community I'd left behind. I'd been living with a free-floating state of unease, but I'd largely sidestepped direct encounters with my losses.

In his book Weller invites us to view grief as a visitor to be welcomed, not shunned. He reminds us that, in addition to feeling pain over the loss of loved ones, we harbor sorrows stemming from the state of the world, the cultural maladies we inherit, and the misunderstood parts of ourselves. He says grief comes in many forms, and when it is not expressed, it tends to harden the once-vibrant parts of us.

Weller's own experience with grief began at the age of fifteen, when his father suffered a massive, disabling stroke, dying eight years later. The long process of dealing with his sorrow eventually led Weller to his current vocation. Today, at fifty-nine, he uses what he learned whenever he sits down with a client in his psychotherapy practice or facilitates one of the grief retreats he organizes. Having been a therapist for more than thirty years, Weller says, "I sometimes think my work is simply to let people feel their losses."

Weller holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and two master's degrees — in clinical psychology and transpersonal psychology — from John F. Kennedy University. He trained with the West African healer Malidoma Somé for two years in the U.S. and then accompanied Somé back to his home country of Burkina Faso for further study. Somé and Weller then taught together for five years. Somé says, "Weller guides us into the difficult geography of sorrow and brings much-needed medicine to a culture . . . [that denies] the daily losses that surround us."

In addition to his practice, Weller is a staff member at the Commonwealth Cancer Help Program, which supports cancer patients who have a life-threatening diagnosis. In 2002 he founded WisdomBridge, which seeks to combine the wisdom of traditional cultures with insights from Western spiritual, poetic, and psychological perspectives. He leads rituals designed to help participants release their grief through writing, singing, and movement. For the last seventeen years he has led the year-long Men of Spirit initiation program through WisdomBridge. Weller has also taught at Sonoma State University, the Sophia Center in Oakland, California, and the Minnesota Men's Conference.

Our conversation at Weller's small kitchen table lasted several hours. He often quoted philosophers, poets, and sages, saying he'd committed many verses to memory because they helped him in his work. At one point I reminded him of an earlier offer of lunch. We laughed as we realized that we'd become so intent on our discussion, we'd forgotten to eat.

McKee: You say our society is averse to grieving. How so?

Weller: Expressing grief has always been a challenge. The main difference between our society and societies in the past is how private we are with it today. Through most of human history grief has been communal. The Pueblo people of the Southwest, for example, have "crying songs" to help move grief along. The Mohawk traditions have the "condolence ritual," where they tend to the bereaved with an elegant series of gestures, such as wiping tears from the eyes with the soft skin of a fawn. The healers in those traditions know it is not good to carry grief in the body for a long time.

But now we're asked — and sometimes forced — to carry grief as a solitary burden. And the psyche knows we are not capable of handling grief in isolation. So it holds back from going into that territory until the conditions are right — which they rarely are. The message is "Get over it. Get back to work." Again and again in my practice clients come to me with a depression that is more of an oppression: a result of so many years of sorrow that have not been touched with kindness or compassion or community. You're left with an untenable situation: to try to walk alone with this sack of grief on your back without knowing where to take it.

In traditional cultures people were often given at least a year to digest a major loss. In ancient Scandinavia it was common to spend a prolonged period "living in the ashes." Not much was expected of you while you did the essential work of transforming sorrow into something of value to the community. The Jewish tradition observes a year of mourning filled with observances and rituals to help the grieving stay connected to their sorrow and not let it drift away. Most people today might get a week of bereavement leave, at best, and then everything should be fine.

In this culture we display a compulsive avoidance of difficult matters and an obsession with distraction. Because we cannot acknowledge our grief, we're forced to stay on the surface of life. Poet Kahlil Gibran said, "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." We experience little genuine joy in part because we avoid the depths. We are an ascension culture. We love rising, and we fear going down. Consequently we find ways to deny the reality of this rich but difficult territory, and we are thinned psychically. We live in what I call a "flat-line culture," where the band is narrow in terms of what we let ourselves fully feel. We may cry at a wedding or when we watch a movie, but the full-throated expression of emotion is off-limits.

McKee: How can we make ourselves more receptive to that downward journey?

Weller: The bias against going down arises from our cultural conditioning. Christian mythology teaches that resurrection and ascension are the proper directions for a spiritual life. The very earth is seen as a fallen place, and our bodies are perceived as fallen objects that can be redeemed only by the soul finally getting out of this tawdry place and moving on to its final reward. You rise above, getting better, higher, and lighter. But low-lying places of regression, of descent, of lamentation are not less sacred. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "No matter how deeply I go into myself / my God is dark, and

like a webbing made / of a hundred roots that drink in silence.”

Right now your heart is beating in utter darkness inside your chest. You were conceived in the dark of your mother’s womb. Everything that is happening aboveground is because of what’s happening below, in the shadows. We have to descend into the dark, yet we are continually trying to climb out of it. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake said we have to go to heaven for form and to hell for energy, and marry the two. There is vitality in that move. I notice a kind of anemia in a certain sort of New Age spirituality. There’s not much blood in it. It lacks the black earth of what in Spanish is called *duende*: the erotic, juicy energy that makes things shimmer. Blake knew that much of that energy is cut off from our lives and relegated to hell. So we have to go into the shadows and bring it back out. Our hyperpositive tendencies want us to do a spiritual bypass around the mess of it all, but it’s there in that mess that we are most human.

Ascent and descent should vitalize each other: when you polarize them, you end up splitting off what is “good” from what is “bad.” We praise success and despise failure. We value strength and devalue weakness. But then every time we encounter defeat, inadequacy, or loss, we’re at war with ourselves, and that’s a bitter fight. A client apologized to me the other day for “going backward” in his work with me, as if forward were the only acceptable direction. But the psyche moves every which way. It’s our job to follow its lead and be curious about where it is taking us.

Think about how much energy we expend trying to deny and avoid these parts of ourselves. What if all that energy were available to us again? We would laugh more. We’d know more joy. Life is asking us to meet it on its terms, not ours. We try to control every minute detail, but life is too rambunctious, too wild. We simply can’t avoid the losses, wounds, and failures that come into our lives. What we can do is bring compassion to what arrives at our door and meet it with kindness and affection. We can become a good host.

McKee: You’ve said that anesthesia and amnesia are the two primary “sins” of modern society.

Weller: We go numb to try to cope with the fact that we have not been granted what we need to thrive. The levels of addiction in our society are off the charts, and I’m not just talking about alcohol and drugs; I’m talking about shopping, working, sex. Addictions are an attempt to cope with intolerable states. The meager lives we are asked to live, in which we are often reduced to “earning a living,” are themselves intolerable. We are meant to have a more sensuous, imaginative, and creative existence. As children we are enchanted with the world, yet as adults we end up, as poet Mary Oliver said, “breathing just a little, and calling it a life.” That’s the anesthesia.

McKee: And the amnesia?

Weller: We are living in what writer and cultural critic Daniel Quinn calls the Great Forgetting. Many of us have forgotten that we’re a part of an ecosystem, a watershed. We’ve forgotten that we’re kin to all the other animals. We’ve forgotten that we need each other. We have forgotten what I call the “commons of the soul.”

For thousands of years we were nourished by being members of a community, gathering around the fire, hearing the stories of the elders, feeling supported during times of loss and grief, offering gratitude, singing together, sharing meals at night and our dreams in the morning. I call these activities “primary satisfactions.” We are hard-wired to want

them, but few of us receive them. In their absence we turn to secondary satisfactions: rank, privilege, wealth, status — or, on the shadow side, addictions. The problem with these secondary satisfactions is that we can never get enough of them. We always want more. But once we find our primary satisfactions, we don't want much else.

Though primary satisfactions are rare in our culture, we do experience them. We can remember what that felt like and let our longing for that state become our compass, telling us what direction we need to go to get back to those satisfactions. We can find them through our friendships, by spending time in nature, by risking being vulnerable with someone we trust.

McKee: A minute ago you spoke of the "soul." How do you define that word?

Weller: I don't use soul in a religious sense but rather the way psychologists Carl Jung and James Hillman and the Romantic poets like Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake use it: to speak of the experience of depth in our lives. Soul invites the marginal, the excluded, and the unwelcome pieces of ourselves into our attention. Soul is often found at the edges, both in the culture and in our lives. Soul takes us down into the places of our shared humanity, such as sorrow and longing, suffering and death. Soul requires that we be authentic, revealing what lies behind the image we try to show the world, including our flaws and peculiarities. Soul doesn't care at all about perfection or getting it right. It cares about participation. Soul is revealed in dreams and images, in our most intimate conversations, and in our desire to live a life of meaning and purpose.

McKee: You say we are "hard-wired" to want those primary satisfactions. Does that mean they are part of how we evolved?

Weller: Yes. Our biology and our psychology were shaped together over a long period of time to help us survive as a species. For the vast majority of human history we have lived in a tribal or village context. That's where our primary satisfactions took shape. From the moment we are born, we expect to be a part of a tribe; to step out of our enclosure in the morning and see many pairs of eyes looking back at us; to find those people there to meet us and to affirm us; and to go and gather food with them and build a fire and perform the rituals the community needs. When that doesn't happen, we feel a great emptiness, even if we aren't consciously aware of it. And then we blame ourselves for the emptiness, asking, What's wrong with me?

I've spent time with West African healer Malidoma Somé in his village in Burkina Faso. When a child is born there, all the children gather around the house to sing a welcoming song. In the Native American Blackfoot tradition the welcoming ritual presents the newborn to the cosmos. The Okanagan people from British Columbia speak of relationships with a word that means "our one skin." These practices help our psyche settle into this body, this life. There are many tribes today that have an active ritual life. Their members don't have to deal with loss, suffering, illness, or death alone. Consider how different that is from going to see a private-practice therapist.

When I was in Malidoma's village, every night at dusk the commons would swell with people, and they would laugh and share stories and millet beer and food, and the kids would play and then lie down on the ground and fall asleep, and the young children who were nursing could go to any mother for milk. Here we have "happy hour," when we can go to the bar and have half-priced drinks; there they have an actual happy hour.

When modern people engage in grief rituals, they often say it feels familiar, as if they've

done this before. Yes, we have, for more than two hundred thousand years. And then, within the past few hundred years, it practically disappeared. That's a profound loss.

McKee: What does ritual do for us?

Weller: It takes us out of our familiar mode of functioning and into an altered state of consciousness. Getting there is not easy, however. Before I learned to conduct rituals to help people express their grief, I had to participate in many such rituals myself. It wasn't until my third time that I shed my first tear. I carried an enormous amount of grief in my body from decades of shame, but because I was self-conscious, I worked hard to keep it under wraps. After all, I was a therapist. And letting go of it frightened me.

At the first two rituals, when I witnessed fifty people on their knees, side by side, weeping together, it triggered some ancestral memory, but I couldn't find my tears. At the third I was still feeling stuck when a man came up to me and placed his hand on my shoulder, and that was it: I fell to my knees and cried for hours. The dam had broken.

The psychiatrist R.D. Laing said we arrive here as Stone Age children. In other words, we inherit at birth the entire lineage of our species. And yet now it's "normal" to cry alone in our room — or not to cry at all.

During the grief ritual you go off by yourself to weep, and when you return, the group welcomes you back and thanks you for helping to empty the communal cup of sorrow. How many of us have ever been thanked for our grief before? We think of grief as a burden we lay on someone else. But what if it's actually a gift?

Of course, the tears might not come. It's hard to cry on demand. In a circle of thirty people, perhaps only a few of us might really grieve. But the others can support those individuals and thank them heartily — because they helped everyone. And the next time it might be you or me. We have to learn to think like a village. The ritual isn't just about me doing my personal work; it's about making it possible for others to do their work. We all need attention from the group; there's nothing wrong with that. And we also need to grant attention, to bear witness.

You don't need to wait for a grief ritual to work with your sorrows. Call some friends together to share stories and simply listen to one another — not to offer any advice but to make room for the unacknowledged pieces of our lives.

McKee: Are there any constructive ways to endure pain in private?

Weller: Inevitably we will be alone much of the time with our grief, and that solitude can be rich, as long as we know we are held somewhere, somehow, by others. Our friendships and our community enable us to go into that dark space alone.

The Irish philosopher John O'Donohue had a concept he called the "reverence of approach." He said, "When we approach [things] with reverence, great things decide to approach us." What if, instead of trying to outmaneuver grief, we came to it with reverence? Grief is not a passive state you're "getting through." You must find a way to engage it, to sit with it, to mull it over.

I think of grief as a visitation: something that comes to us. What if we treated it as worthy of our consideration and time?

McKee: I had one of those visitations not long ago. My wife, our nine-year-old son, and I were creating an altar for deceased family and friends on the Day of the Dead. I felt sad for the people we've lost but also fortunate that my life had intersected with theirs, even if only for a short while. I went to bed feeling alive and full.

Weller: If we have both an adequate level of companionship in our sorrow and periods of solitude that aren't about distraction or avoidance, then grief will transform itself into tender melancholy. This life we have is incredibly short, but we've been blessed with it. When we shut off our grief, we forget that. To let grief work its alchemy on you yields gravitas, by which I mean the ability to be present with the bittersweet reality of life, which always includes loss. There's no way to be spared sorrow. I wouldn't even wish that upon someone. But we shouldn't get stuck in our grief; it's not a permanent address but a companion that walks beside us. Everything I love, I will lose. That's the harsh truth. You either have to shut down your heart — and miss the love that is around you — or wrestle with that truth and come out the other end. There is indeed such a thing as joyful sorrow.

The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.

And we must have compassion for ourselves, too. When I lead workshops on self-compassion, I begin by saying, "This is a weekend in non-self-improvement." [Laughter.] We're so driven to make ourselves "better" all the time, as if the better we became, the more people would like us. We are mercilessly hard on ourselves for our losses, our defeats, our wounds, our failures, the parts of us that don't measure up.

Addictions are an attempt to cope with intolerable states. The meager lives we are asked to live, in which we are often reduced to "earning a living," are themselves intolerable. We are meant to have a more sensuous, imaginative, and creative existence.

McKee: My son attended five funerals by the time he was five: those of his grandfather, his great-grandfather, his aunt, our neighbor, and the newborn daughter of friends of ours. Some people found it odd that we brought him, but not to bring him seemed more peculiar to me. Do we shield children too much?

Weller: People frequently tell me they were not allowed to go to a relative's funeral as a child, and they are still angry over it; they wanted to say goodbye. I've worked with cancer patients who are also young parents, and most try to keep a brave face in front of the children. I'll often ask if they think it might confuse their son or daughter to see Mom smiling but know she isn't OK. The child may start to doubt his or her own experience. I'm not saying the parent should weigh the child down with difficult emotions, but children need to know that what they're sensing is real, that the sadness and concern they're feeling is appropriate.

Funerals are meant to honor our loss and put it back into a communal context, where it belongs. Without a funeral, the child may carry the grief privately, as something shameful that does not belong. Of course, many funerals today don't give mourners enough permission to weep and wail. We deny death so readily.

McKee: At the funeral for our friends' newborn, there was a moment when their three-year-old daughter began to wail: such a tiny person with such huge grief. It makes me sad to remember the sound, but it was also beautiful.

Weller: There are few human expressions more genuine than a cry of grief. We don't have to wonder what that person is experiencing. It is the soul revealing itself: Right now I am just broken by this loss. It's also powerful because we almost never hear it in this country. Many cultures, but not ours, have keepers whose job it is to sound the note that opens the gate, so that we can all enter sorrow together.

McKee: Can you give an example of what we might gain by embracing grief?

Weller: I remember one man I worked with who struggled with depression and addiction. He was married and had children but felt separate from his family. He also carried a degree of shame that made it difficult for him to make friends or let his wife get close. He told me that his parents had divorced when he was young, and he had rarely seen his father after that. I could tell that the grief had made a hole in his heart, and he had no way to heal it, so feelings of unworthiness had rushed in to fill the empty space.

One day, as we were working, the man reflexively placed a hand on his chest, and I suggested that he pause and notice what was happening there. He said he felt a tightness. I asked him to listen to that tightness and see what it might be about. After a few moments he told me that he saw a young boy in the woods playing hide-and-seek, and no one had come to find him. He couldn't remember if this was a real memory or not, but there was truth in it: no one had come to look for him in his time of sorrow, and he had been hiding ever since. He was able to tell the boy that he was there and that we had found him. And he was able to bring that experience home and share it with his wife. Now, that's grief leading to intimacy.

McKee: The physician Gabor Maté believes that the suppression of sorrowful emotions in childhood greatly increases the risks of addiction, cancer, heart disease, and suicide later in life.

Weller: The number-one cause of death in this country is heart disease. Physically that has to do with our diets and our lifestyles, but I also see it metaphorically: our hearts are hurting because we do not metabolize our grief. Instead we avoid it, neglect it, push it into a corner.

There was a study done beginning in the 1960s of a town in Pennsylvania called Roseto, an Italian American quarry community where extended families often lived together under one roof. Researchers were interested in Roseto because the heart-disease rates were much lower than in the surrounding towns. They looked at smoking, exercise, diet, and environmental factors but found no obvious cause for the reduced rates. The researchers finally had to conclude that the multi-generational families and communal rituals contributed to the townspeople's heart health. Then in the seventies more Roseto residents started moving into single-family homes, and young people left town for college or the big city. Slowly the social fabric began to unravel, and heart-disease rates in Roseto rose to match the national average. The researchers, it seemed, had been right: it wasn't good habits or diet that had been protecting people's hearts for all those decades; it was connection.

McKee: You've said there is a grief that is less overt than the death of a loved one: the sorrow that comes from "the places that have not known love." Could you elaborate?

Weller: We were raised in a culture whose systems — educational, familial, religious — declared parts of us to be unacceptable. In my family, if I wanted to earn approval, I had to cleave off anger, sensuality, enthusiasm, and sorrow. They all had to go! When we are made to feel ashamed of our feelings, we lose our connection to those vital parts of ourselves. And we can't mourn that loss because we can't grieve for something that we now regard with contempt.

Shame is a rupture in the connective tissue that joins us to the people who matter in our lives. I remember one time when my son was a toddler and he came into the kitchen full of energy, shouting, "Daddy! Daddy!" I turned to him and said, "Stop it!" and he ran to his bedroom crying. I knew right away that I had shamed him. So I put my breakfast down, went into his bedroom, looked him in the eye, and said, "You wanted something from me, and I didn't give it to you." And he told me that he felt as if I didn't want to be his daddy anymore. That's how fast the rupture can occur. I told him I was sorry that I'd gotten angry at him; that he was good and beautiful. And we hugged. As I walked out of the bedroom, I thought, What would have happened if I hadn't gone in there? Somehow he would have been left with the idea that I didn't want to be his father anymore — and, worse, that it was his fault; if he hadn't been so exuberant, so in need of attention, I wouldn't have pushed him away.

Through trauma, rejection, abandonment, and neglect, the unacceptable pieces of us have been cast into what I call the "wasteland." They become our outcast brothers and sisters. When I first went into therapy, I said I had parts of myself that I wanted to get rid of. The therapist just looked at me and said, "Uh-huh." [Laughter.] I was certain that if I could do away with the weak, needy, shameful, inadequate parts, then I would be accepted into the circle of community. Then I'd be tolerable. Thankfully I failed miserably at my objective! [Laughs.] And those outcast parts of me actually became ways to connect with others: when I could confess to being fallible, that's when I found the world.

McKee: When I was in high school, I went on a class trip to Yosemite National Park for a week. It was difficult: lots of backpacking in the cold and snow. On the last night the counselors and teachers built a bonfire and asked us each to find a stick and say something as we tossed it into the fire. Most of us spoke earnestly but superficially. Then one girl said she'd been going through a hard time at home, and she broke down sobbing. Every person whose turn came after hers spoke from the heart. By the end all seventy-five of us were crying.

Weller: She broke the spell. We are aching to go into these hidden places and reveal them, and that girl couldn't help herself — her cup was so full, she had to spill it. Luckily there was a moment when she had permission to say to an entire circle of people, "This is who I am. This is what I carry," already, at that young age. That's a life-changing — life-saving — event.

McKee: Not all places are safe for spilling, though.

Weller: Yes, we have to be careful where we share these more painful parts of ourselves. There's a wonderful line from the German poet Goethe: "Tell a wise person, or else keep silent, / because the mass man will mock it right away." We have to be wise enough to know when and where and with whom to speak: Is this friendship solid enough to tolerate what I'm about to pour into it, or will I crack the vessel? That takes great discernment. We suffer sometimes from what I call "premature revelation." [Laughter.]

But shame keeps most people from sharing at all. My clients in therapy often tell me they don't want to burden others with their problems. I'll ask how it would make them feel if a friend called and said, "I'm having a really hard time today. I just need to talk with someone." Usually they say they would feel honored by the friend's trust, but they can't imagine the reverse: that maybe a friend would feel honored if they trusted the friend. In healthy cultures one person's wound is an opportunity for another to bring medicine. But if you are silent about your suffering, then your friends stay spiritually unemployed.

In Navajo culture, for example, illness and loss are seen as communal concerns, not as the responsibility of the individual. Healing is a matter of restoring hózhó—beauty/harmony in the community. The San people of the Kalahari say, "When one of us is ill, all of us are ill." They do an all-night healing ritual for the entire community four times a month.

That girl in your class initiated a call and response. She put out this call, "I am in pain," and the rest of you responded.

McKee: Do you see any significant differences in the way men and women experience grief?

Weller: Some. I'll have to make generalizations, but I've observed trends.

The men of our fathers' generation were probably some of the loneliest who ever walked the planet. This is part of the bitter legacy of rugged individualism. As men in this culture, we are given one archetype to follow — the solitary hero — and we never know when to set it down. So we have men who are old enough to be elders but are still acting with this youthful, foolish bravado. We don't get beyond a certain preoccupation with the self and step across that threshold — as the old traditions encouraged us to do during initiation ceremonies — into a much broader role of caring about the children and the village. If most men's primary concern in their fifties or sixties is their own rank or status, we're in serious trouble.

By contrast, women have a little more freedom to escape that oppressive silence, particularly among other women. But one of the primary questions that come up for women in my practice is: Do I matter? What a great loss. Women are immensely valuable to community, yet many have been reduced to doubting their status.

McKee: You call grief an act of protest against living "numb and small." What do you mean by that?

Weller: A lot of us associate grief with a state of deadness or numbness, but that's not grief at all. Grief is wild; it's a feral energy. So when people really open up to grief, the last thing they are doing is operating in a polite or socialized manner. It is an eruptive state. What we require, once again, is sufficient time to express the full measure of the grief we are carrying.

One of the most important things we can do right now in this culture is to grieve, because it is a protest against the collective agreement to turn our backs on what is happening. Just look at the headlines: earthquakes caused by fracking; multiple communities in distress following the killing of African American men by police; more and more economic inequality; carbon-dioxide levels going over four hundred parts per million. It is easy to shut down. What we need are people who are willing to feel this and to respond. As James Hillman said, "Outrage is a sure sign of a soul awake."

The beauty of working with grief is that you quickly realize it is not solely your grief. I may have personal stories of sorrow — we all do — but I am also weeping for what is happening to the forests. And watching the California countryside wither in this drought breaks my heart. If I'm willing to register the losses of the world around me, I can become an advocate for the earth.

I remember driving through Northern California and coming across a clear-cut. The shock of that just hit me. Some psychologists would say that's projection: I'm reacting to my own wounds, my own internal clear-cut. But what if the world is speaking through us, and one of our spiritual obligations is to be open to the cries of the earth?

Racial and economic justice still eludes us. The wealthiest among us are buying elections. Climate scientists suggest that humanity may face near-term extinction. What was once solid and reliable is becoming shaky and unpredictable. The cumulative weight of all of this is staggering. We experienced similar anxiety during the Cold War, but the difference now is that a wider range of threats are contributing to our fears. And no matter what circumstances we face, we must do our own inner work and our communal work, just to be able to show up to address the crisis.

The anima mundi — the soul of the world — is trying to speak. It's telling us that its capacity to mend itself is at risk. And we are a part of the anima mundi, intimately tangled in this net of events. We think we're somehow separate from nature because we live in cities, drive cars, and look at computer screens all day, but we're still entangled in the earth. Michael Sendivogius, a fifteenth-century alchemist, said, "The greater part of the soul lies outside the body." My soul is entwined with those Douglas firs and the redwoods and the sorrel and the raccoon and the fox.

McKee: What do you think about taking antidepressants or antianxiety medications to deal with grief and suffering?

Weller: There's a place for them. Depression is a serious illness. Sometimes, if we've been carrying an emotional pain lodged in the body for too long, it begins to alter our physiology, and we lose the ability to respond. Antidepressants and antianxiety medications don't resolve the problem, but they can make it possible for us to work on it. And hopefully the need for medication is temporary.

But another thing I tell my clients is that I have no interest in improving their lives. What I want is to deepen their capacity to listen to what their symptoms are asking of them. Whether it's a cut to the skin or a wound to the soul, it will worsen through neglect. Hillman said that depression is a symptom of a culture that is addicted to speed and action and doing. In depression the psyche says, "I'm not moving another step forward. I'm stopping right here until you pay attention to me."

McKee: I once went to a psychotherapist who noticed during our sessions that I had the tendency to catch myself whenever I started to talk about something emotional. My reflex was to keep my composure.

Weller: That reflex comes from not being seen in formative moments of pain and sorrow. When there's no one there to say, "I see the pain you're in," some piece of us breaks off. We disassociate ourselves from that piece, and it remains silent until we have an experience that resonates with it. Then it can take over, possess us in a sense. Suddenly you are a five-year-old boy trying to catch his tears and tighten his belly and not show

that he is scared or sad or hurt.

It doesn't matter what age you are chronologically. Even as a fifty-nine-year-old man, I can turn back into a five-year-old boy very quickly.

In my work I try to transfer the grief from the child's hands to the adult's hands. If that younger self inside you is the only one who responds to grief, then you end up doing what I call "recycling grief," because that younger self doesn't have the capacity to handle it.

The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give.

McKee: Where does your interest in grief come from?

Weller: I often say that I never volunteered for this position; I got drafted through personal losses. The first was when my father had a massive stroke when I was fifteen, and he lost the ability to speak. It was the end of my youth. I don't think he and I had ever had a real conversation, and now we never would. He died when I was twenty-three. For years after that, I might start to cry at odd moments, even though I hadn't been thinking about him at all. I called these "Dad attacks," and I had no defense against them.

The other loss was of my sense of self. For much of my adult life I have felt disconnected, worthless, not a real participant in life. I was performing the role of Francis, the dutiful son, husband, and father. Whatever was expected of me, that's who I tried to be. My only concern was approval. Did I do it right? Did I meet your expectations? I couldn't say what I needed. I had to please everyone else, because if I failed, the punishment was banishment — or so it felt to me. I couldn't stand to be alone, but I didn't want anyone to get too close either: Would they like me? Would they pull away? I remember a friend of mine saying, "You never look me in the eye." It was true. I was too ashamed. I couldn't risk the possibility that she would see how awful I felt inside. I was trying to slip through life without getting caught. My tombstone was going to read, SAFE AT LAST!

Finally, out of desperation, I asked my friends to help me break free from the prison I was living in. They put me through an intense ritual that woke me up. I had to express all the grief that I had been repressing. I cried every day for months. It was an intense time, but since then I've been truly inhabiting this life that I have been given.

My failure to experience my life for so long became a source of tremendous sadness for me: to have missed four decades of an already short existence. I remember sitting on the couch with my wife, sobbing, and saying, "I just got here, and it's almost time to go!"

To fully inhabit this life, I first had to grieve all that I had lost. If we cannot cross that threshold of grief, we live separate from our most vital self. When I finally broke through, I was able to allow my wife and friends to be there for me, and I wept for a long time. It was like a slow baptism.

As a therapist I began to see grief at the heart of almost every problem people brought into my office. No matter what had happened in my clients' lives, it could be traced to a loss: of their childhood, of a relationship, of a parent, of their health, of a marriage, of a child. I knew how to address such losses through therapy, but it wasn't until I started

learning about ritual that I found the architecture, the choreography, that allows grief to be fully expressed. We need to have a safe encounter with what's most vulnerable in us. We don't get that in our day-to-day life. There are certain things that can happen only within the container of ritual, where the neglected, repressed parts of us are invited to speak.

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McKee: How has the quality of your relationships changed since your breakthrough?

Weller: Every few months I get together with three good friends for a meal, and we share poetry. There are no "we won't go there" subjects. In the past I wouldn't let anyone see me in a vulnerable position. Now I'm willing to let myself be seen no matter what is in my heart.

A little while ago I got an e-mail saying that a man I knew had just shot himself. I came out to the living room, where my wife said, "You look stricken." I was, absolutely. Over the next few days I heard about four more suicides. At around the same time, my uncle died, my cat died, and the editor of my book, whom I loved, died. I was swimming in this sea of death. Before, I might have tried to handle it myself and not let anyone know, but instead I told my friends about it. I found the courage to reach out in the face of loss.

Grief is not an abstraction. You can't think your way through it. You have to have a physical encounter with it. It's a bodily experience. We need to feel the tightness in our chest or belly before we can engage with it meaningfully. The loss may have happened many years ago, but these hurts haven't noticed that a single day has passed. And when I can really access the grief, I'm almost back in that moment, with just a hairbreadth of separation from it. But that small distance is essential. Jung said that we cannot heal what we cannot separate ourselves from. If I'm still caught up in the loss, the part of me that initially experienced it will be the first to respond. But if I can get a little distance from it, then I am with this experience, not in it.

We have to be in the correct relationship with sorrow. If we drown in it, nothing happens. If we get too detached, nothing happens. We need the right amount of attention and separation to turn our grief into something vital and life-serving.

McKee: What about when we can't name the source of our pain? Can we still be "with" it?

Weller: The origins of grief can be obscure, and sometimes they are unnecessary to discover. But even if I can't fully name the source of the sadness, I can still have a sensation in my body. I can hold that with mercy and not go in with a magnifying glass to see what it's about. The source might reveal itself, but it's more important that I give the sorrow the attention it has been wanting.

McKee: I lived in South Africa for five years, and I noticed, especially in rural areas there, that the question "How are you?" often elicited a long, in-depth response, because people weren't worried about giving "too much information."

Weller: Mythologist Michael Meade says there are three layers of experience. The first is the social layer: "Hey, how's it going?" "Fine, how about you?" The second layer is difficult emotions such as grief, anger, rage, envy, violence. The third layer is deep soul contact, true intimacy. Meade says that you can't go from layer one to layer three without going through layer two, and we avoid layer two at all costs. We stay on the surface, where we talk about the weather and who's doing what on Capitol Hill. We need a way, as a community, to get through layer two. Otherwise, when there's a tragedy, how are we going to deal with it? If we don't chew on these subjects, they chew on us.

McKee: You've said that grief can be handed down through generations. How does that happen?

Weller: Most of us in this country can trace our ancestry to a village setting: languages, foods, traditions, and a particular geography where our ancestors may have lived for thousands of years. They knew that terrain mythically and spiritually, and suddenly there was this upheaval, and they were jettisoned across the ocean to another continent.

In my family my parents spoke German, but they didn't teach the language to their children. Why? Was it some kind of shame attached to two world wars? I'm not sure, but their native tongue had a secrecy to it. They spoke the old language when they didn't want us to know what they were talking about. I could often tell that their conversation was heated, and my inability to understand their words left me feeling excluded from my parents' concerns and, by extension, my heritage.

So there was a rupture in the family line: we lost something. I certainly lost the ritual processes that had sustained my ancestors' culture.

The second part of ancestral grief for white people in the U.S. has to do with what many of our European ancestors did when they got here. They decimated an indigenous population through war and disease. They brought slavery to this continent. We have not reconciled with the indigenous people of this country or the people we brought here from Africa. That grief is still there in our collective psyche. We've barely touched it. Some other countries with similar histories are beginning to deal with such griefs. The Canadian government recently apologized to its indigenous people, though now it's backtracking. Australia has done some symbolic work with the aboriginal people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was significant. But the ancestral grief is thick in the U.S.

The third piece of ancestral grief is the pain that is passed on generationally. I see this a lot in my practice. Someone will be carrying a shame that began in some prior generation: a pregnancy from a rape, for instance. When that child born of rape grows up and has children, the pain can be passed on. I recently listened to a psychologist by the name of Joy DeGruy talk about her research on how the generational effects of slavery show up in the lives of African Americans. This unresolved grief casts a long shadow.

I worked with a woman who was struggling with her body and sexuality. She regarded her body with contempt and couldn't tolerate intimate contact with her husband. One day I told her I didn't think this grief was hers. I thought it belonged to the generations that had come before her, and now it was showing up in her body, asking for healing. She let this sink in, then remembered the ways her mother and grandmother had neglected and rejected their bodies. She could feel this trauma that had come to her from them. So she crafted a ritual that included writing out all the lies she'd been taught on a large rock, which she then dropped into the ocean. She was able to start shedding the old story and

reclaiming the intimate part of her life.

We're not going to figure it all out: grief doesn't need to be solved; it needs to be tended. Whether it comes from our ancestors, or from what we didn't get from those closest to us, or from the parts of ourselves we shut off, or from the destruction of the natural world, our job is to mourn that loss so that we can become people who respond to the world rather than just survive day to day. If I try to figure it all out on my own, I'm just back in survival mode. Malidoma told me there is a word in his village: yielbongura. It means "the things that knowledge cannot eat." You cannot figure out grief. Knowledge cannot help you metabolize it.

McKee: You have written that there are some sorrows — especially societal ones like climate change, slavery, and the Holocaust — that can't be worked through; they must be "lived with."

Weller: This is an idea that came to me from two writers, Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman, who tell us that there is redemptive grieving, in which we are changed by the time spent in sorrow; and there is nonredemptive mourning, for the losses that communities should never forget but keep in memory through an anniversary or a ritual or a monument, like the memorials to the Rwandan genocide or the Holocaust or the Vietnam veterans. These great losses cannot be made right. They remind us that we need to live differently, so that we do not do this again.

McKee: How do other cultures integrate grief and loss into their communities more effectively?

Weller: The Irish still observe the traditional wake, where they lay out the body of the deceased in the home and alternately celebrate the person and mourn his or her passing with toasts, poems, songs, and keening. The body is never left alone during the vigil, which lasts two or three days. Then it is moved to the church for burial.

The Mexican Day of the Dead, which you mentioned earlier, is a three-thousand-year-old tradition that comes from the Aztecs. It is a way of annually honoring the ancestors and keeping the dead present in our lives.

We do have practices in our culture that help us grieve. When my father died, our house was filled with neighbors bringing food and condolences. There was a sense that we weren't alone with his death, that the community was there with us. It meant a lot. Friendship is perhaps the most essential tool we have in times of loss.

Poetry and music can play a significant role in grief. I think poets are more in touch with sorrow because they pay better attention to the psyche. Blues music is an American tradition that can help us find our way through suffering. And the choral music in churches: the requiems, the songs of lamentation — these were all designed to assist us in dealing with grief. We rarely hear them anymore.

It's up to us to devise our own rituals. What we're grieving as a culture is unique, and so our rituals need to be specific to our times. I feel that ritual rises from the earth. If we slow down and listen to the land we are on, we will know what we need to do. I don't want simply to copy another tradition, to appropriate it. I respect traditional cultures, but I can't just take their forms. They're not mine. They weren't shaped by my people, on this continent, at this time. I've done some of these emerging rituals with Malidoma, and after one he told me, "That makes perfect sense for your people, but you'd never see that in

my village!” Our rituals must speak to the particular ways we’ve been shaped, or misshaped, by our culture.

One of the values of ritual is that it has the capacity to derange us, to shake us out of the old forms. We need that derangement, because the current arrangement isn’t working.

McKee: What about weddings, graduations, church services? Aren’t those rituals?

Weller: We have ceremonies, yes, but we come out of those pretty much the same as we went in. You’re supposed to emerge from a ritual wondering what the hell just happened. Ritual connects us to spirit and soul. It can shift us out of our usual state of mind. Ceremony works to maintain and renew social bonds. We need both, but we rarely have access to rituals that are potent enough to break us open.

McKee: You write of being in “constant conversation with grief.” That sounds exhausting!

Weller: [Laughs.] What I mean is that grief is always by my side. There will be an exchange on any given day between me and this melancholy brother of mine. I might hear a sad story on the radio, or I might be driving and see roadkill on the shoulder. I want to be sensitive to the losses around me. To drop out of the conversation would mean to isolate myself, and I’m not willing to do that anymore. At times it is tiring to be open to grief, but, on the other hand, I’ve never known more joy than I do now. I remember saying to a woman in Burkina Faso, “You have so much joy.” And she replied, “That’s because I cry a lot.”

McKee: You call bringing grief and death out of the shadow our “sacred duty.” Why “sacred”?

Weller: I mean it’s our moral obligation to stay engaged. A heart that does not somehow deal with grief turns hard and becomes unresponsive to the joys and sorrows of the world. Then our communities become cold; our children go unprotected; our environment can be pillaged for the good of the few. Only if we learn to grieve can we keep our hearts responsive and do the difficult work of restoring and repairing the world.