

## The Radical Act of Letting Things Hurt by Maria Popova

“Grief is a force of energy that cannot be controlled or predicted,” Elizabeth Gilbert reflected in the wake of losing the love of her life. “Grief does not obey your plans, or your wishes. Grief will do whatever it wants to you, whenever it wants to. In that regard, Grief has a lot in common with Love.”

Like love, grief swells into an entire inner universe that comes to color the whole of the outside world. Like love — that rapturous raw material for most of the songs and poems and paintings our species has produced — grief lives itself through the grieving and can’t but speak its truth. Unlike love, our culture meets the voice of grief with an alloy of disquiet and denial. We want to make the sadness go away, to lift the sorrowing heart out of its sorrow immediately. Often, we mistake for personal failure our inability to salve another’s grief or mistake for their failure the inability to snap out of it on the timeline of our wishes.

Art by Jacqueline Chwast from *I Like You* by Sandol Stoddard — a vintage serenade to friendship.

When psychotherapist Megan Devine — creator of the excellent resource *Refuge in Grief* and author of its portable counterpart, *It’s OK That You’re Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn’t Understand* (public library) — watched her young, healthy partner drown, the sudden and senseless loss suspended her world. As it slowly regained the motive force of life, she set out to redirect her professional experience of studying emotional intelligence and resilience toward better understanding the confounding, all-consuming process of grief — the process by which, as Abraham Lincoln wrote in his immensely insightful letter of consolation to a bereaved friend, the agony of loss is slowly transmuted into “a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have known before”; a transmutation in which skillful loving support can make a world of difference — support very different from what we instinctively imagine helps.

Art by Valerio Vidali from *The Shadow Elephant* by Nadine Robert — a subtle meditation on what it actually takes to unblue our sorrows.

In studying how people navigate intense grief — the loss of loved ones to violent crime, suicide, disaster, infant death, and other abrupt catastrophic traumas — Devine arrived at an arresting insight. Again and again, she observed that our most intuitive impulses about

helping those whose suffering we yearn to allay — by cheering them up, by reorienting them toward the lighthouses in their lives amid the darkness — tend to only deepen their helpless anguish and broaden the abyss between us and them. And so she began to wonder what does salve the immense sorrow we encounter in the world and experience in our own lives.

This is what she learned: