

Anne Lamott on Grief, Grace, and Gratitude by Maria Popova

On the grace of redefining ourselves and redefining okayness when life throws us its merciless curveballs.

“Grief, when it comes, is nothing like we expect it to be,” Joan Didion wrote in her magnificent meditation on the subject. But oftentimes, grief doesn’t exactly come — not with the single-mindedness and unity of action the word implies. Rather, it creeps up — through the backdoor of the psyche, slowly, in quiet baby steps, until it blindsides the heart with a giant’s stomp. And yet it is possible to find between the floorboards a soft light that awakens those parts of us that go half-asleep through the autopilot of life.

That’s precisely what Anne Lamott — one of the most intensely original writers of our time — explores in *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace* ([public library](#) | [IndieBound](#)), the same magnificent volume of reflections on grief, gratitude, and forgiveness that gave us Lamott on the uncomfortable art of letting yourself be seen.

From the very preface, titled “Victory Lap,” Lamott stops the stride:

The worst possible thing you can do when you’re down in the dumps, tweaking, vaporous with victimized self-righteousness, or bored, is to take a walk with dying friends. They will ruin everything for you.

First of all, friends like this may not even think of themselves as dying, although they clearly are, according to recent scans and gentle doctors’ reports. But no, they see themselves as fully alive. They are living and doing as much as they can, as well as they can, for as long as they can.

They ruin your multitasking high, the bath of agitation, rumination, and judgment you wallow in, without the decency to come out and just say anything. They bust you by being grateful for the day, while you are obsessed with how thin your lashes have become and how wide your bottom.

She recounts one spring-morning hike in the Muir Woods with her friend Barbara, who was being slowly snatched from life by Lou Gehrig’s disease — “you could see the shape of her animal, and bones and branches and humanity” — and Barbara’s girlfriend of thirty years, Susie. Lamott writes:

When you are on the knife’s edge — when nobody knows exactly what is going to happen next, only that it will be worse — you take in today. So here we were, at the trailhead, for

a cold day's walk.

Dead Huon pine, 10,500 years old, from Rachel Sussman's 'The Oldest Living Things in the World.' Click image for more.

In the trees, "so huge that they shut you up" and with a way of silently speaking volumes about time and mortality, Lamott finds strange assurance:

The trees looked congregational. As we walked beneath the looming green world, pushing out its burls and sprouts, I felt a moment's panic at the thought of Barbara's impending death, and maybe also my own. We are all going to die! That's just so awful. I didn't agree to this. How do we live in the face of this? Left foot, right foot, push the walker forward.

Noting the groups of foreign tourists on the trail, she echoes Lucinda Williams — "you do not know what wars are going on down there, where the spirit meets the bone" — and writes:

Who knows what tragedies these happy tourists left behind at home? Into every life crap will fall. Most of us do as well as possible, and some of it works okay, and we try to release that which doesn't and which is never going to. ... Making so much of it work is the grace of it; and not being able to make it work is double grace. Grace squared. Their somehow grounded buoyancy is infectious, so much better than detached martyrdom, which is disgusting.

In a sentiment reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's assertion that "a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living," Lamott considers how people like her friend Barbara — people on the precipice of death and yet very much alive — find the grace of making-it-work:

They are willing to redefine themselves, and life, and okayness. Redefinition is a nightmare — we think we've arrived, in our nice Pottery Barn boxes, and that this or that is true. Then something happens that totally sucks, and we are in a new box, and it is like changing into clothes that don't fit, that we hate. Yet the essence remains. Essence is malleable, fluid. Everything we lose is Buddhist truth — one more thing that you don't have to grab with your death grip, and protect from theft or decay. It's gone. We can mourn it, but we don't have to get down in the grave with it.

In one of the book's final essays, titled "Dear Old Friend," Lamott revisits the subject — of

redefinition, of okayness, of grace in the face of death:

We turn toward love like sunflowers, and then the human parts kick in. This seems to me the only real problem, the human parts — the body, for instance, and the mind. Also, the knowledge that every person you've ever loved will die, many badly, and too young, doesn't really help things. My friend Marianne once said that Jesus has everything we have, but He doesn't have all the other stuff, too. And the other stuff leaves you shaking your sunflower head, your whole life through.

She recalls bearing witness to her friend Sue's experience — a friend younger than she but "already wise, cheeky, gentle, blonde, jaundiced, emaciated, full of life, and dying of cancer." Shortly after Sue received her final fatal diagnosis, Lamott recounts the New Year's Day phone call in which Sue gave her the news:

I just listened for a long time; she went from crushed to defiant.

"I have what everyone wants," she said. "But no one would be willing to pay."

"What do you have?"

"The two most important things. I got forced into loving myself. And I'm not afraid of dying anymore."

With her signature blend of piercing wisdom administered via piercing wit, Lamott writes:

This business of having been issued a body is deeply confusing... Bodies are so messy and disappointing. Every time I see the bumper sticker that says "We think we're humans having spiritual experiences, but we're really spirits having human experiences," I (a) think it's true and (b) want to ram the car.

Small Victories is monumental in its entirety, a trove of gently whispered truths that jolt you into awakesness. Couple it with Lamott on why perfectionism kills creativity and how to stop keeping ourselves small by people-pleasing.