

# A Pilgrim's Way through Grief

*A Guide to A Night on Buddy's Bench*



By Ira Baumgarten

In collaboration with Hospice and Palliative Care Association of New York

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*“**Buddy’s Bench** provides a springboard for discussion of various overarching themes: the idea of a “safe space” (the bench) from which the bereaved can find a source of strength and centering following a loss.”*

- Community Hospice Bereavement Counselor

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## Collaboration with Hospice Palliative Care Association of New York State

All profits from the sales of the educational package of *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* and *A Pilgrim’s Way through Grief* will go to HPCANYS.

“Most stated in reading ***A Night on Buddy’s Bench*** that death/dying/loss is universal and this book reflected these truths perfectly.

- Coordinator of Bereavement Service

# Dedication

*A Pilgrim’s Way through Grief* is dedicated to my brother, Mark Lewis Baumgarten (1/7/1948 – 5/1/2017), who allowed us to accompany him on his path toward death and helped us all to remember the preciousness of each day.



“Come to your death as an angel to wrestle instead of an executioner to fight or flee from, turn your dying into a question instead of an edict. What shall my time of dying be for? ...Dying turns into something you live.

- Stephen Jenkinson, *Die Wise: A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul*

“ We are not human beings having a spiritual experience: we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

-Teilhard de Chardin

## Introduction: A Hero’s Journey

Confronting our own death, or being with another while they are dying and grieving afterward, is all part of the human condition. Often, people are terrified because it is the first time they have been in death’s realm. Facing our own grief or another’s grief is often done alone. In our awkwardness, in the presence of loss, we aren’t sure of what to do or say.

*A Night on Buddy’s Bench* was written to be shared. Readers have said that the book has been both a way to reveal their own experiences of dealing with death and a way to open the door to hearing others’ stories.

One reader wrote:

“Over the past decade, I have experienced several losses, but none that rocked my world as much as the sudden death of my 57-year-old husband. Going through the grieving process was like a rollercoaster ride I wanted to get off of but couldn’t. I had to sit through it and feel and think. Time didn’t make it go away; it just lessened the pain. When I read *A Night On Buddy’s Bench*, it made me realize that sitting with your feelings and memories is a very healing time. I started to recognize the subtle shift that had taken place: from regretting the times that I would not be able to spend with my loved ones to embracing all the times I did have. Those are times that can never be taken away.”

Stepping toward our own or another’s grief makes us pilgrims. All steps and all stumbles are critical to our path.

Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist whose work covers many aspects of the human experience, tells us that when we become a pilgrim on our own life’s path, that is a hero’s journey – and for some, a spiritual journey. It is where we are called away from our ordinary world to another place, a place of mystery and of unknowing. Often it is a place at the edges where borders are formed, where one world ends and another begins. The hero is confronted with a life-changing challenge, seeks guidance from a higher power, or another person, or from some place deep within, and then wrestles with the demons and angels past and present that arise from within the soul, to then finally return home transformed in a new and profound way.

*A Pilgrim’s Way through Grief* is written to offer a guiding hand along the way:

**Section One: *The Journey*** explores the story of *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* and my own journey as a pilgrimage.

**Section Two: *The Practice*** explores ways to use *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* in grief work with yourself and others.

*That the silent presence of your death  
Would call your life to attention,  
Wake you up to know how scarce your time is  
And to the urgency to become free  
And equal to the call of your destiny...*

*That you would gather yourself  
And decide carefully  
How you now can live  
The life you would love  
To look back on  
From your deathbed*

- John O'Donohue, *Blessing for Death, To Bless the  
Space Between Us*



## Section 1: My Recent Hero’s Journey of Loss and Discovery

*A Night on Buddy’s Bench* was written as a rising sail to lead us gently downwind through grief and loss. As I prepared to write this short guide to support readers in their own preparations toward dying or with grief for lost loved ones, I didn’t anticipate that I, again, would face into strong winds, with sails fluttering, trying to find direction...

The call came at night; these kinds of calls tend to pick after dark to bring their message. My brother’s friend phoned us to say that my 68-year-old brother, Mark, was quite confused; he was putting on his shirt as if it were a pair of pants. He was losing weight, and he couldn’t manage on his own anymore. We bought round trip tickets from Albany, New York, to Tampa, Florida; canceled appointments, and two days later, we were in the “Sunshine State.”

Thus began a three-month odyssey.

Soon after we arrived in Tampa, my wife, Nadine, and I sat with my brother at his kitchen table. Being novices to the world of early onset Alzheimer’s disease, we tried to explain to Mark the best we could that we’d find a place to take care of him. Nadine sensed my brother’s agitation and asked him, “What is your worst fear, Mark?” He answered, “That you’ll leave me.” Then my caring wife reached across the table and grabbed both of my brother’s hands, looked him in the eyes, and said the words that would change our lives: “Mark, we are never going to leave you.”

In that one second, Nadine had also grabbed me by the heart and took me across a bridge I wasn’t anticipating. Even though my brother and I never spent more than a few days a year together in our adult lives, I would become his primary caretaker. We agreed that Nadine would return home to find Mark the best place to live, and I would have to close down Mark’s life as he knew it, pack the few things that could fit in his compact Hyundai Elantra, and prepare to drive him back to New York, to a home near us that would provide his care.

Being new to this personal care assistant role, I thought I’d give my brother a treat. Mark loved hot tubs, a holdover from his California days in the sixties. I took Mark to the local YMCA, but I didn’t anticipate the effect that 104-degree water would have on his low blood pressure. After a few minutes, he went totally limp, and I had to quickly lift him out of the steamy hot tub. I placed him in his walker, turning it into a wheelchair, pushed him into the Men’s locker room and told him, “Don’t move” – which was quite the direction since he was close to being unconscious. I ran into the lobby wearing just my dripping bathing suit, in search of a vending machine. I couldn’t get back to Mark soon enough, and as I watched him sip the drink, I thought *Yay for Gatorade! And its magic electrolytes!* He slowly recovered and smiled.

Now dressed, I glanced over and saw that he couldn’t manage to get his pants on, so I started to help him get dressed. We both couldn’t figure out why we couldn’t pull his pants all the way up.



Finally, I noticed that Mark was stepping on the end of his pants, preventing our ability to lift them. All I could think of in this tragic comedy was to whisper to Mark, “How many Jewish men does it take to put on a pair of pants?” His grin instantly grew two inches wider and we both laughed, forming an unspoken bond. We were now a team.

I became aware we were blocking a row of lockers and several men were watching and waiting. I tried to rush my brother, to rush myself, and then I heard a stranger lean over and say, “Don’t worry, take your time.” And then, I started to cry. Until that moment, I didn’t know that you could actually laugh and cry at the same time. I said to myself, *An angel in the men’s locker room, wow, who would have thought.*

As brothers, our longest trip together had been to the supermarket to get Thanksgiving groceries. Now we were on a road trip – not only traveling a thousand miles from Tampa, Florida, to Hoosick Falls, New York, but also across valleys and streams, over mountains that as brothers, together, we had never traversed before. Our route north was planned to allow Mark a chance to have short visits with key family members and friends in his life. Hugs were exchanged, well wishes were given for Mark’s new home, all expected to stay in touch, and none of us thought this was a final goodbye.

As we entered the final phase of our 1,300-mile trip and crossed from Pennsylvania into New York State, where my brother and I were born and grew up, we shared a common moment of coming home.

Right as we passed the sign that said WELCOME TO NEW YORK STATE, Van Morrison’s “Into the Mystic” began playing on the radio. Mark perked up and started singing along loudly, unprompted, and I, without realizing it, joined in and together we sang:

*Hark, now hear the sailors cry  
Smell the sea and feel the sky  
Let your soul and spirit fly into the mystic  
And when that foghorn blows I will be coming home  
And when that foghorn blows I want to hear it  
I don’t have to fear it*

This moment is now seared into my brain and heart forever.

When we started our journey together, I thought we were beginning a new phase of life that would last years. But once we had arrived at his new home for assisted living, Mark (who had always done things his own way) had a different idea. After many nights of not sleeping, confusion and agitation, he decided that a long, long sleep was a better alternative.

Reflecting back, I realize that in those few months, in facing his death together, a new and profound intimacy was discovered. He had an angelic peacefulness in his final days of rest, and as Nadine and I sat next to him, we would be forever grateful that he allowed us to be “his brother’s keepers.”

In *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*, the old man goes to the bench to *smell the sea and feel the sky*. When he arrives at the bench as the mist engulfs him, the foghorn is blowing off in the distance and he wants to *hear it... not have to fear it*. Only after Mark passed away six weeks later, after we sang that song together, did I know how prophetic and profound that border crossing was. I can now see that all those hours sitting side by side in the car as we drove through the night, through fog and rain, was our way of sitting on Buddy’s Bench, waiting for the sun to rise out of sea.



“ *Still somehow besides each other  
Through the night is dark  
With wind that loves  
To clean the bones of ruins,  
Making further room for light”*

- John O’Donohue, *Blessing for a Sibling*

# A Pilgrim’s Way through Grief – The Journey

In this section, we will examine the journey through the three phases in *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*.

- Phase one involves **The Call to Go to the Bench**, to face one’s own or another’s death.
- Phase two is **Being on the Bench**, wrestling with loss and grief, making meaning.
- Phase three is the **Returning Home From the Bench**, transformed, holding grief and gratitude together.

“ *It is crucial to be mindful of death – to contemplate that you will not remain long in this life. If you are not aware of death, you will fail to take advantage of this special human life that you have already attained.*

-Dalai Lama, *Advice on Dying and Living a Better Life*



In Native American legend, the owl “calls us by name” and then escorts our spirit to the other side.

# The Call to Go to the Bench

We are called to death’s doorway in many different ways.

With my Dad, we saw a long steady decline for over a year. At the end, we all wanted his suffering to be over. With my Mom, it was a sudden, unexpected stroke, and since she was the Queen Mother over a tribe of extended family and friends, the common belief was Esther would outlive us all. With my brother Mark, while we knew both his mental and physical capabilities were becoming more and more constricted, death was not on our mind when his caretaker called to tell us she wanted to bring Hospice in for an assessment. A week later, he was gone. With my best friend in high school, over forty-five years ago, his drowning was a traumatic event that stayed with me for the rest of my life.

Whether our call to go to the bench is sudden or prolonged, we should be gentle with ourselves on the journey.

*In A Night on Buddy’s Bench, the old man always felt reassured to know that he could go to the bench in the middle of the night if he’d wanted to, but the old man had never actually walked to Buddy’s bench in the dead of night. For forty years, he just rolled over in his bed and went back to sleep. Tonight was different.*

When the old man walks to Buddy’s Bench in the dead of night, he invites us to join him in stepping out of the ordinary and into the unknown, into both the light and dark of our souls and the world around us. Often when we step

up to the threshold of death with someone, or in facing our own end, we may find ourselves feeling numb and not ready to address what is happening; or we may feel a great yearning for the past to return; or be stuck in despair and helplessness. Understanding that these are all natural stops along the journey helps us understand the depth of this pilgrimage. In answering the call to go to the bench, the old man shows us that being mindful helps us discover meaning in the loss we’re facing.

When I began to face death directly, I found courage to go deeper into what I felt, permission to not know and to look at my foibles and awkwardness as necessary steps to be taken. I saw my fear as a gateway to step through. When I have stayed in that place with loved ones who were on the cliff of dying, I have found that the closer we went to the edge, the more alive I felt. The air seemed charged with vitality. We had truly stepped out of the ordinary into the unknown. Time seemed to operate on a different plane.

My mom, Esther, the practical public health nurse, was living independently at ninety-two, and had made all her wishes known about what she wanted at the end of her life. When confronted with life-threatening strokes, she kept asking us through slurred speech in her hospital bed, “*Take me home; take me home.*” A Jewish mother to her core, her kitchen table was her Buddy’s Bench. In answering her request, we said, “*Mom, if we take you home, we are taking you home to die.*” She said some of her last spoken words: “*Better to die happy.*”

She helped us to step toward death with her. She called us to the bench.

# Being On the Bench: Wrestling with Death

“ *Suffering, learning how to suffer, is how you make meaning from what seems random, chaotic and pointless. This is what I mean by wrestling. Meaning comes from this kind of wrestling.*

- Stephen Jenkinson: *Die Wise: A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul*

I was drawn to write *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* as a way out of my own disorientation with grief. While grieving, I struggled with what was required of me in the present, because I wanted so much to return to the past to be with those whom I lost. It’s like a strong ocean undertow that pulls you back into the next oncoming wave. Writing became a way to turn dying into something I could begin to live with.

## Wrestling a Tragic Loss Alone

My first deep wrestling with death came at nineteen, when John, one of my best friends, drowned. In *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*, the question that the old man asks the Spirit at the bench is one I’ve asked all my life: “*Why did he die so young?*” I was a lousy wrestler in gym class and lost matches on purpose

so I wouldn’t have to continue. With the loss of my friend, I would finally have to really learn to wrestle – but this was a different kind of match. I could not bring him back. We could no longer paint houses together; we could no longer go on double dates, and we could no longer console or celebrate each other’s search for the perfect love. I was washed by waves of grief and anger, each bigger and stronger than the ones they followed.

I desperately needed to find the “meaning” Stephen Jenkinson spoke of. How could I turn John’s death into something I could live with? How could I find meaning in surviving?

Not long after John’s funeral, when an acquaintance said he felt hopeless about the world, without even thinking I started screaming at him: “How can you be hopeless? You’re alive, only death is hopeless.”

In *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*, the old man discovers his own answers after confronting a long-held loss:

*To breathe is to live. It’s the greatest blessing we have...  
Breath means life. Life means possibility. Possibility  
means a thousand ways to connect to what is around  
us in any given moment.*

## Wrestling Death in Community

When word of my mother’s return home from the hospital went up and down Main Street where she lived, neighbors came to meet the ambulance bringing her to her apartment. Friends pitched in to set up the hospital bed and bring in the medical equipment. We turned her living room into an expanded bedroom so we all could gather around her. It would take a village to help her die happily.

The next morning, as my Mom slipped more and more away from us, the Hospice social worker came to visit. We shared our stories of Esther with him, her special qualities, her quirks, and how she was a lighthouse for many of us when we were lost at sea. He advised us to talk with Esther, to let her know we’d be all right and that she could let go. He also told us that we shouldn’t feel afraid to discuss any unresolved feelings we had with Mom. He said in her own preparation for dying, she might be processing the same things. He encouraged us to wrestle with my Mom’s passing right up to the end. My brother took that direction and talked with my Mom about an old hurt he had been harboring for many years. As the social worker left us, he said, “You know, she might just be growing into her wisdom.” As he left the apartment, a stream of steady visitors came to say their goodbyes, sing songs, tell stories, and read poetry. It was a gathering my Mom would have loved – or I should say, loved – until the end.

*The thing is  
to love life, to love it even  
when you have no stomach for it  
and everything you’ve held dear  
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,  
your throat filled with the silt of it.  
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat  
thickening the air, heavy as water  
more fit for gills than lungs;  
when grief weights you like your own flesh  
only more of it, an obesity of grief,  
you think, How can a body withstand this?  
Then you hold life like a face  
between your palms, a plain face  
no charming smile, no violet eyes,  
and you say, yes, I will take you  
I will love you, again.*

- Ellen Bass



# Returning Home From the Bench, Transformed: Holding Grief and Gratitude Together

“ *When I die, if you need to weep, cry for someone walking the street beside you. You can love me most by letting hands touch hands, and souls touch souls... So when all that’s left of me is love, give me away.*

-Rabbi Allen Maller, “When All That’s Left”

When I returned to my father’s grave a week after his burial, I wanted him to know that I would be the dutiful son. I would take care of Mom who at the time was 84. I would look after their property. As I started to recite a litany of things I would do and take care of, all of a sudden, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It felt like my father’s hand; its tender tap suggested to me to stop my list making, to listen, to be still. Then I heard a long *Sssh* in my ear. He then spoke to me in a clear soft whisper: “*Just love.*”

In those two sweet words, he gave me not only a key to living, but also permission to not have to keep trudging alone through grief. He helped me to see that living and sharing my grief could expand my and others’ hearts. Even after his death, his lessons on how to be a man continued.

As I walked away from my Dad’s grave, I felt for the first time that I was able to hold grief and gratitude, one in each hand, at the same time. Going forward, I wouldn’t have to deny one in order to experience the other.

The gift of grief is a great paradox. When we face it head on, when we allow ourselves to wrestle with it, when we allow it to flow through us, it can release us to be in touch with the rhythms of life, where strength and courage to endure can be found.

A friend of mine, who received an award as a Hospice volunteer, shared *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* with his family on the day of his wife’s funeral:

“We sat around the big table in the dining room, the grandchildren were playing in another room. There was plenty of coffee and there was deep, heavy sadness piling up in the room. That’s when I remembered, I have *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*. No one objected when I said I was going to read to them. I picked up *Buddy’s Bench* and with the turning of each page, a new presence grew. There were others who shared our grief. It was never going to make sense and we would never truly understand, but like the old man, we could feel all of the loss and sadness, experience what actually did happen and be alive. We could be sad and we could be whole.”

Wholeness was beginning to return to my friend, alongside his deep grief.

Even though we may stumble and fall, even bruise ourselves, in taking the hero’s journey, it is only in stepping toward death fully, wrestling as we go, that we will be able to return holding the grief and gratitude that in the end may bring us peace. Just as my Mom said at the end of her journey, “Take me home, better to die happy.”

*As the old man walked down the path to his cabin, he gazed over the rocks and sea. The rising sun made a parade of diamonds on the water. He began to sing a song he wrote as a young man. It was a tune he hadn’t sung in a very long time.*

*Oh sun, I love you so,*

*I made a deal with you no one knows.*

*If you get up every morning, so will I.*

*If you get up every morning, so will I.*

*Oh sun, I love you so.*

*Oh sun, I love you so.*





“ All in all, *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* is a representation for me of our life’s review and purpose but the unanswered questions remain... and that is okay... I will use the book with grieving individuals and in my work with my grief support group. It provides beautiful analogies and metaphors for dying, death and life.

– Hospice Bereavement Counselor

“ The major life questions we ask can remain unanswerable. I appreciate how *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* provides both a yes/no response to that dilemma... There is a thread of continuity throughout the story that provides peace and inspiration.

– Hospice Minister

## Section 2: A Pilgrim’s Way through Grief – The Practice

### This section:

- Provides tips on how to use *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* as a source of comfort for the dying, as well as for the person in grief
- Describes approaches for using the book in group settings, be it a book club or a hospice training
- Explains how to use *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* as a springboard for journaling and creating art as transformative expressions of grief and loss

### Author Notes:

I wrote *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* to create a sacred space to comfort us.

The book was designed in picture book format to slow down the reading and to allow the reader to contemplate and look at the pictures before turning to the next page. As in a children’s book, it welcomes you to read it out loud to yourself or another.

The audio version was created on the counsel of Hospice: in our final stages of dying, even though we may be unconscious, hearing remains. The audio version was produced to bring all of the sounds and music that are in the story to life. Listeners have said it has helped them to go even deeper with their own reflections.

The book was written in a dreamlike style to be open to a range of interpretations and beliefs. My hope is that no matter the faith of the reader, the story will allow each person’s spiritual path.

At the end of life, we often pose life questions that don’t have easy or specific answers. Some say that the power and learning comes as much from forming and pursuing the question as from the actual answer.

As I continue to face loss and grief, the question the old man went to the bench to ask: “*Why did he die so young?*” has taken on new meaning for me. I now realize that question can arise when we lose someone of any age.



# Using *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* to Comfort Individuals

Often when we are with a dying person, we don’t know what to say or what to do. For some, *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* became a much-needed tool during an extremely delicate time. Here are some ways you can gently guide others in their path through grief:

*B* Giving or reading *Buddy’s Bench*.

One reader gave this book to a friend: “Before he died, he told me that he read it every day, first to ease his grief from his wife’s death, and then to help confront his own terminal illness.”

Facing a pending death can be one of life’s hardest realities. For many people, the sharing of the book was their way to join with the person at the threshold of death.

*B* Playing the audio version is a way to spend time in a meditative and peaceful state with the person who is dying.

One reader wrote: “I am about to play *Buddy’s Bench* for my father. He is now in comfort care. I am so grateful to get to spend time with him despite him not being more than semi-conscious. So very sad - it helped to have this.”

Another said: “When my brother was dying, he went into a deep sleep for about five days before he passed away. At the point we realized that he would not be returning to us, my wife and I played the audio version. Looking back now, it was as much for us as it

was for him. It allowed us to sit in quiet, listen to the journey of the old man, imagine my brother having a similar dream or preparation as he laid in a deep sleep before us.”

*B* Sharing the book is a way to be with someone who is grieving. It is a conversation in and of itself.

A friend brought the book with her when she returned home to Sweden for her grandmother’s funeral and gave the book to her mother as a gift. Her mother wrote me and said: “I was so happy to read *Buddy’s Bench*. I felt so calm... I liked the sound of everything in the harbor, the mist, the waves, the seabirds, the music, and the owl. The music was so nice to hear. First I read the book, then I played the audio version, and then my daughter read the book out loud and we just listened to the music. It gave me such a feeling of well-being.”

Another reader wrote, “After my mother’s passing... was an incredibly difficult time for me. The gift of the book helped ease the pain.”

*B* Sharing the book can be a gentle way to start a conversation.

- ?* After the story has been read or listened to, you can start with a general question:

*“What touched you or what did you identify with in the story?”*

*B* Using *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* with Someone with Dementia

Caregivers who have shared the book with patients who were in stages of dementia have witnessed those whom they are caring for receive comfort in the pictures. A wife who shared the book with her husband wrote, “I have read *Buddy’s Bench* to my husband and, although it’s hard to tell anymore what he is thinking or feeling, he seemed calmed by it and touched some of the illustrations.”

A reader wrote me to say that when she went to visit her mom in the nursing home, her mother was sitting peacefully looking at the watercolors in the book.

“*These bodies are perishable, but the Dweller in the bodies is eternal.*”

- Bhagavad Gita



🌀 Discussing the themes in *Buddy's Bench*.

🌀 Nature as a Refuge for Grief

Readers have often said that the presence of nature in the story provides peace and comfort. Many find the island and ocean setting as a sacred place and can easily imagine being there as they read or listen to the story. In that way, the book, especially the audio version, is a guided meditation.

One reader said, “It was so wonderful to read the book in bed, looking out the window at the mountains with the big rain clouds dripping down on the house. It really made my Dad’s death sink in – in a good way.”

❓ Is there a special sacred place where you would want to go to contemplate, in order to find solace?

🌀 Talking with a Departed Loved One

It has been said that memories are not only images of lost loved ones coming back to us; they are also the spirits of loved ones visiting us.

In the story, the old man finds solace in his conversations with his deceased wife. Hospice volunteers who have shared the book say it gives the reader permission to admit and to share how they have talked to deceased loved ones. Readers have shared how important these conversations are, imagined or real, in keeping the lost person present.

One book club participant shared: “One cannot misinterpret the overall theme and importance of ‘just love.’ It is echoed throughout the book in the old man’s conversations and thoughts and is incorporated in the old man’s brief conversation with his wife. I find this very reassuring, as I think we all would like to think that our love for others lives on after we and they die, and that they will be there to guide us to the next state when we leave this world and these shells behind.”

❓ A question you can ask someone who has lost a loved one: “*What would you want to say to or ask that person if you could?*”

🌀 Finding Meaning at the End of One’s Life

In *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* as the old man prepares to leave the bench, the sun is rising out of the sea. The young man asks him, “*What have you seen and learned out here?*” The old man passes on his experience and his wisdom as he gives the young man his lifelong-treasured piece of blue sea glass. Sharing the story of *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* can allow the discussion on what has been meaningful in a person’s lifetime and what would be meaningful now, in facing the end of one’s life.

❓ A question you could ask someone who is contemplating the end of his or her life: “*Tell me, what has been important to you in your life? What would have meaning for you now? Is there anything you would like to pass on?*”

“ The two wings of the bird flying to enlightenment are compassion and wisdom.

- Buddha





# Using *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* with Groups

I find it is helpful if participants have a chance to read and/or listen to the book ahead of time so that they can digest the story and be with their own feelings before sharing their own experiences with death and dying. One Bereavement Counselor Coordinator describes her use of *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* with her hospice volunteers this way:

“My goal for the session was to allow the volunteers to ponder their own personal losses in relation to the book. Many individuals reported that reading the book allowed them to look at their losses through a very different lens. It seems to me that in our society, which appears to be quite grief-adverse, that a book such as this serves as an important catalyst for discussion. Volunteers stated that they could envision using the book as a tool in the homes of the patients they serve.”

Another Hospice worker said the book “would be really helpful for stimulating conversations for 11th hour volunteers, for the vigil volunteers that are with people at the end – they want to be able to talk about what the dying person is experiencing.”

With one book club, after a few members commented on something in the story, the rest of the evening was spent talking about their own personal losses and experience. A member of that group wrote afterward: “It was one of the most rewarding evenings our book club has shared. Deep discussion ensued and as a result of personal sharing on the topic, we felt that this book

would be of great benefit to other book clubs and also those who work with the dying, as it serves as a catalyst for those dying or fearing death to share feelings they might otherwise not do.”

Other testimonials:

“*The book helped me offer a vocabulary to patients who don’t have the words to talk about what they’re experiencing.*” - Hospice Director

“*I’m 70 years old and for no particular reason, always avoided facing my own death. After reading the book, I now feel ready to talk about it.*” - Book Club Member

“*There were nine of us, four of whom who had lost spouses, and all of us are of an age when we begin to contemplate mortality and loss. Sharing the sea glass was powerful yet comforting. It bound our small band of women even tighter.*” - Book Club Organizer

After reading the book, groups have also practiced having participants bring in an object, a poem, or a photo that has provided comfort through their grief to share with the group.

 Questions you can ask to facilitate discussions in a book club or with an individual:

1. *What touched you or came up for you in reading or listening to the story?*
2. *What parts of the story did you identify with the most?*
3. *Imagine you have just walked to the bench like the old man in the story. What is your experience? Is there something you want to say or ask? Do you want to just sit with memories? What do you wonder?*
4. *In your dream or fantasy of a place to go to contemplate your own life and death, where would you go?*
5. *What does “just love” mean to you?*
6. *What has given you comfort in times of loss and grief?*



# Using *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* as a Springboard for Creativity

## Creating Ritual

I have started a ritual in working with groups of bringing blue sea glass and giving each person the chance to pick one out of the basket. As they pick their piece of glass, I often ask them to share a feeling, a thought and/or a memory. Participants have said that having the piece of glass has continued to bring them comfort. Offering a person a tangible symbol representing their journey seems to help ease the pain.

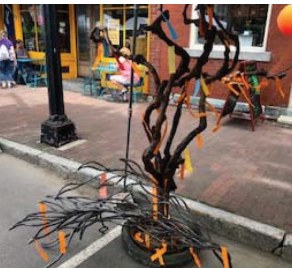
Harvard researchers Michael Norton and Francesca Gino published a study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* explaining that individuals who created a form of personal ritual or spiritual practice while grieving – whether be it writing, creating a piece of art, reviewing memories or playing shared music – reported an easier transition, felt more balance and less powerlessness.

CareFirst, a local hospice in Painted Post, New York, used *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* to create rituals to help very different communities, continents apart, heal from loss. Chelsea Ambrose, Director of Counseling Services and a Board member with the Bon Foundation, took a copy of the book to the Bon Tibetan Monastery in India to share with the student monks to help them with the grief of the loss of an elder spiritual leader. After sharing the story, students wrote blessings to their deceased leader on orange ribbons made from monk robes.

Inspired by *Buddy’s Bench*, Carly Nichols, Grief Services Manager, along with Chelsea from CareFirst, then made a Memorial Community Project. They partnered with the Art Council of the Southern Finger Lakes and had artists create a bench installation with a sculptured tree that would allow community members to sit and write a blessing or memory to a love one on similar ribbons and hang it on the tree, along with the ribbons from the students brought back from Tibet.



Tibetan Bon Monastery students writing blessings on a ribbon



CareFirst Memorial Community Project installation, Painted Post, New York

## Journaling through Grief

Ira Progoff, in his landmark book, *Journal Workshop*, states:

“Journaling is a technique of writing to access the power of the unconscious and evoke creative ability. The psyche knows what needs to be done. Journaling is an integrative and healing process. The integrity of each person’s inner process is honored in the silence. Spontaneous mourning is the internal ritual necessary before a person can be freed to take the next step in life.”

I have learned from readers that *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* can be a powerful springboard for journaling one’s own experience with loss and grief. After reading the story, I’ve asked participants to journal. Below is a journal response from a reader:

“In *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*, as the old man struggles with the loss of his boyhood friend and more recently his wife, he asks the question “What’s left for me?” The answer is “just love.” My efforts in recent years as an adoptee to reach out to my birth family and to work through all the emotions which that experience can often evoke, brought me to much the same very simple but profound conclusion. The old man reminds me that it is during these difficult passages, when we seem to have lost our emotional moorings, that we undergo some of our most meaningful transformations.”

“My mom died in December, my dad seemed to be in steep decline... Your words have filled my soul, and inspired me to write.

– A Reader





Journaling Suggestions

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Mary Oliver, describes the ritual of writing this way:

“It doesn’t have to be the blue iris, it could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones; just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don’t try to make them elaborate, this isn’t a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak. “

- ~ Journaling is just for you, so don’t worry about form, grammar and/ or spelling. You can scribble, draw and even let your tears mix with the ink on the page. This is a sacred time and there is no judgment. One word or a hundred is an opening.
- ~ Use *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* as a springboard into your journaling. One approach is to divide the story into the three phases of the old man’s Hero’s Journey to the bench: **going to, being on and returning**. Some sample questions:

- **Going to the bench:** What feelings, fears and/or past memories come to you as you decide to step toward facing death, grief and loss?
- **Being on the bench:** What would you like to resolve in order find solace and peace? What has been left undone and/or unsaid that you would like to complete?

- **Returning:** What have you learned in being a Pilgrim in grief? What would you like to bring back with you to provide comfort and strength to continue living? (See the Appendix for journaling pages.)

~ Listen to the audio version in full or in part - in a quiet space - and then write.

~ Using the themes of the book, respond to these specific questions:

- What would you want to say to the person who has passed away?
- Is there a sacred place you would like to visit to find solace?
- What unresolved feeling, experience or loss would you want to write about?
- What would be your wish for your own end-of-life?
- What would you want to be remembered for?
- What is your hope for what you would want to leave behind after your death?

“ Spontaneous mourning is the internal ritual necessary before a person can be freed to take the next step in life.

–Ira Progoff



“ The day my mother died I wrote in my journal. I suffered for more than one year after the passing away of my mother. But one night... I dreamed of my mother. I saw myself sitting with her, and we were having a wonderful talk... It was so pleasant to sit there and talk to her as if she had never died... The impression that my mother was still with me was very clear. I understood then that the idea of having lost my mother was just an idea. It was obvious in that moment that my mother is always alive in me.

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear*

# Self Expression: Creating Art as a Pathway Through Grief

“ Our capacity to actually ‘create’ is where we begin to live more fully, experience transformation, and recover the core of what it means to heal. It is your authentic expression through art making, music, song, movement, writing, and other forms of arts-based imagination that are central to the equation of why creativity is a wellness practice. So go make something and be well.

- Cathy Malchiodi, PhD

A good colleague and friend of mine taught me, “Pain that is not transformed is transmitted.” Since the first human painted on caves, art expression has been a way for us to wrestle with, be with, examine and express our experience. Singing the blues and gospel music came from that deep place in the soul when one felt lost and abandoned. The singing became a form transforming the deep grief so one could continue to live.

After reading the book, Tara Mullins, director of the North Carolina State Dance Program, choreographed an original dance film called *Above the Trees* to help reconcile her grief over the loss of her grandmother.

She described the making of the piece this way:

“I created a piece inspired by *A Night on Buddy’s Bench* that has been developed into a more personal account of my daughter and grandmother. My grandmother came to me in a dream to tell me that I was going to have my daughter. The piece was inspired directly by the intersection of death and life, those that go before and those still here on earth and the connections between them – that is the theme of *Buddy’s Bench*. The piece really reflects the spirit of my grandmother, the dreams I have about her and the connection between her and my daughter that is built on love.”



A scene from *Above the Trees*. A shorter version of this piece, entitled *Gull*, has screened at film festivals around the world.

# The Journey Continues...

“ One of the central themes of a pilgrimage is internal resilience, the necessity for following a certain star not seen or perceived by anyone else, an internal migration running parallel to the outer road, keeping the journey in the world relevant and true. There is a necessity for hardiness, for shelter, for risk, for companionship, for vulnerability; for creating a more beautiful mind. Above all, a pilgrimage requires us to ask for help, to develop an ability to recognize when it is being offered, and the humor, humility and open hands to receive it.

- David Whyte, *Pilgrim*

In writing *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*, I didn’t realize until the end that I was creating a vision of my own dying as an old man – a story that would remind us that what we are going through is part of a larger, universal experience. In stepping into our grief, we are entering a sacred and intimate space that reminds us of life’s preciousness. It is a space full of complexities where at one moment the grief can feel like being in an ocean with no land in sight and no way to find shore. In another moment, we can feel gratitude for another day to be with our family and friends and seeing a sunset. By having the courage to be a pilgrim in the journey of grief, we are opening others and ourselves to many possibilities of the human experience, to more intimate connections and to healing our wounded souls. Being witness, being present to another’s and one’s own grief is what is unique to the human experience.

A few years ago, when Kathryn, a dear friend in our local community, died of a sudden heart attack in her fifties, we were all stunned and shocked. We gathered at a local home and told stories about Kathryn and what we loved about her. We didn’t know what else to do. Going home that evening felt like an earthquake had opened a huge crevice in our village. In the morning when I woke, I wrote a poem that came from all the stories told the evening before. In writing about what was shared, I felt something transform inside in confronting that old question, “*Why did she die so young?*” Later in sharing the poem with Kathryn’s family and friends, I was asked to read it at her funeral.



Kathryn

“A really nice Woman lives at the end of your street  
Her name is Kathryn  
You should meet her... ”

She will look you in the eyes  
Smile and say  
Welcome, come into my house  
I will be your friend

She will serve you tea and biscuits  
She will engage you  
She will ask you what you have read lately  
She will tell you what she is reading

Her mind continually connects new dots  
She will expand your potential  
She will want to know  
What you see between the dots  
Or whether there any to be seen

If you are a young person  
She will want to know your thoughts  
She will want you to believe you matter  
She knows that you matter everyday  
She is patient and persistent until you know too

She will start her seeds in small containers in winter  
To be ready for spring planting  
She shares her harvest each year  
We all reap what she is able to sow

She will walk a hundred miles  
Write a thousand letters  
Make many bowls of soup  
To change the world and  
To help one soul suffer less

She is the sun in a galaxy  
Family and friends do not orbit too far from her  
Yet she is glad to see you circle wide if need be  
Ready with tea when you arrive back from your journey

Did I mention?  
Forgive me if I have not  
“There is a really nice Woman who lives at the end of your street  
Her name is Kathryn – You should meet her”

The poem allowed a communal acknowledgment of a shared loss.

In *A Night on Buddy’s Bench*, when the old man comes to the bench in the middle of the night with his relentless question: “*Why did he die so young?*”  
The Spirit replies,

“*Why do any of us die when we do? All I know is  
when there is loss, we have a chance to feel a shared  
pain, and that can make our hearts expand.*”

*B*

The End



Appendix

*A Night on Buddy’s Bench* can be used as a springboard into your journaling. The following principles of journaling are drawn from Ira Progoff’s *At a Journal Workshop*:

- 1. Journaling is a technique of writing to access the power of the unconscious and evoke creativity.
- 2. The psyche knows what needs to be done.
- 3. Journaling is an integrative and healing process.
- 4. The integrity of each person’s inner process is honored in silence.
- 5. Strong emotions may surface.

The above principles can also be applied to any creative process – be it doing a drawing, creating a dance, and/or making a ritual. Use these pages to draw, doodle ... and “make something and be well”

**Going to the bench:** What feelings, fears and/or past memories come to you in facing death, grief and loss?

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**Being on the bench:** What would you like to resolve in order to find solace and peace? What has been left undone and/or unsaid that you would like to complete?

*B* \_\_\_\_\_

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**Returning:** What have you learned in being a Pilgrim in grief? What would you like to bring back with you to provide comfort and strength?

*A* \_\_\_\_\_

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# Hospice Resources

Hospice Foundation of America – Grief support information, what is hospice, how to choose a hospice  
<https://hospicefoundation.org/End-of-Life-Support-and-Resources/Grief-Support.aspx>

Medicare Hospice Benefit – booklet to explain Medicare Hospice services  
<https://www.medicare.gov/Pubs/pdf/02154-Medicare-Hospice-Benefits.PDF>

NHPCO Caring Info – Resource for families on grief and loss, advance care planning, caregiving  
<http://www.caringinfo.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1>

What’s Your Grief – promotes grief education, exploration, and expression in both practical and creative ways.  
<https://whatsyourgrief.com/>

*Catching Your Breath in Grief... and Grace Will Lead You Home*, Thomas Attig

*The Five Ways We Grieve: Finding Your Personal Path to Healing after the Loss of a Loved One*, Susan A. Berger

*Dying Well*, Ira Byock

*It’s Ok That You’re Not Ok*, Megan Devine

*Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande

*Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief*, Martha Whitmore Hickman

*I’m Grieving as Fast as I Can*, Linda Sones



## Hospice & Palliative Care Association of New York State (HPCANYS)

The Hospice and Palliative Care Association of New York State (HPCANYS) is a not-for-profit organization representing hospice and palliative care programs, allied organizations and individuals that are interested in the development and growth of quality, comprehensive end-of-life services. Member services include advocacy, education, public engagement, communications, peer groups, and technical assistance: The Association provides a strong, active voice for patients and their families. We advocate for public policy – both state and federal, and legislative and regulatory – that promotes accessible, quality, end-of-life care.

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## About the Author

Ira Baumgarten published *A Night on Buddy's Bench* in May of 2016. Since that time he has collaborated with HPCANYS and the National Hospice Foundation conducting educational programs and fundraisers using Buddy's Bench. This work led to the writing of the *Pilgrim's Guide through Grief – A Guide to a Night on Buddy's Bench*. Ira is also a senior trainer with the National Coalition Building Institute. He and his wife, Nadine, live in Averill Park, NY.

## For Additional Information

To request assistance with a fundraiser for your Hospice services, a book club or grief group discussion and/or for an educational workshop you can visit: [www.anightonbuddysbench.com](http://www.anightonbuddysbench.com)

Ira also would welcome your comments and experience using Buddy's Bench and the Pilgrim Guide.

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“

*You write beautifully, and I loved the organization of the guide. Each time I near my own grief, the edges become clearer and yet softer.*

- Marybeth Ezaki, MD

I have been involved with hospice and end-of-life care for over 35 years. During that time, I have read countless books on grief and loss. *A Night on Buddy's Bench* has touched me in ways that no other has. Ira Baumgarten leads readers on a journey, not judging where we are and why, letting us unfold the lessons of loss and healing. I recently reread the book after the loss of a close family member and found myself going on this very special journey through the book, gaining more insights about myself and my grief. Ira has crafted an experience that lifts us into the pages as we read, so that we can hear the owl, smell the sea, feel the wind, and feel the bench!

The workbook, *A Pilgrim's Way Through Grief: A Guide to A Night on Buddy's Bench* was a collaborative effort between the author and HPCANYS hospice bereavement providers. Coupling real-world clinical experience with the passion and compassion of Ira's own journey through grief has resulted in an exceptional guide that presents bereavement professionals with unique ways to use *Buddy's Bench* with grieving clients, both one on one and in groups. Individuals will also find it helpful to walk themselves through the guide and the book, looking for and gaining insight into their feelings and their personal grief journey. *Buddy's Bench* helps us find meaning in our losses and experience our strength and tenacity.

- Carla Bravemen, Executive Director of Hospice & Palliative Care  
Association of New York State, Albany, NY

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