

Sonja Anita West

Dr. Martin Sanders and Dr. Rob Reimer

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### Grief Journal

In the twentieth anniversary expanded edition of their book *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, authors John W. James and Russell Friedman state:

Grief is the normal and natural reaction to loss of any kind...The problem is that we have all been socialized to believe that these feelings are abnormal and unnatural.

While grief is normal and natural, and clearly the most powerful of all emotions, it is also *the most neglected and misunderstood experience, often both by the griever and those around them.* (2017, 3)

The authors go on to define grief as “*the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior*” (James and Friedman 2017, 3). In his video, “Grieving the Seasons of Your Life,” Dr. Walborn says that to grieve is simply “to express sorrow” (YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUba7ZAQLnU&t=54s>), and states, “We must grieve the painful losses of the past seasons of our life before we can effectively embrace the present and the future.”

Although there had been deaths in our family when I was growing up, the first loss that deeply affected me was the death of my maternal grandmother, Alma James, on April 10, 1984. Although we only saw her on occasional summers, I loved my grandma dearly. We looked forward to hearing her voice during weekly calls and reading the messages to us that she included in the letters she wrote to my mother, not to mention the dollars she would enclose, one for me and one for my younger sister. She never forgot our birthdays; she would make sure to

send each of us a card, inside of which were two one-dollar bills—one for the birthday girl, and one for the other sister so she wouldn't feel left out.

Every few years, we would travel to Pinewood, a tiny town about sixteen miles from Sumter, so my mother could spend time caring for my grandmother, who struggled to get around due to ulcers on her legs. It was quite the culture shock for us city kids: no indoor plumbing or TV, overwhelming heat and no fans or air conditioning, bugs as large as kittens, watching my mother slaughter chickens for dinner, restricted activity on Sundays because my grandmother took the Sabbath very seriously. Yet, we enjoyed helping to take care of my grandmother, making sure that she didn't move around too much and that we brought her whatever she needed, while my mother cooked, did the wash, kept the house clean, and did the yard work.

What made my grandmother's death so difficult to deal with was seeing how it devastated my mother. When she got the news, she stood in the middle of the living room and cried out, not just because her mother was dead, but because she had no money to go home to South Carolina for her funeral. She knew my grandmother wasn't well, and she had hoped and prayed that she could scrape together enough money to travel to South Carolina to see her again, but it wasn't to be. Thank God for my cousin who stepped in and offered to help my mom get back home. But we could not go with her, not just because it was financially impossible, but because my mother didn't want us to miss school. In fact, she made us go on to school the day we got the news. I still don't know how I made it through that day; all I remember is being in a fog and going through the motions. Only my closest friends knew what had happened. I didn't even tell many of my teachers because I didn't want to seem like I was making excuses or trying to dodge assignments.

My mother was also upset about leaving us in the care of our father, whose alcoholism had grown progressively worse. She worried if he would be able to care for us. One of our uncles volunteered to check on us if things got difficult—which they did.

What's more, my grandmother's death came just as college acceptances were coming in. My grandmother, who only got a third-grade education and who insisted on sending her own children to school instead of keeping them out to pick cotton, never found out that her granddaughter had been accepted to every university to which she had applied and had earned a full scholarship to two of the institutions. She didn't get to see me graduate from high school or any of the other things my sister and I would accomplish. To this day, I treasure the few items that belong to her: a string of pearls, a housedress, and one of the last birthday cards she ever sent me with the message scrawled, "One dollar for you and give a dollar to Sister."

On March 7, 1998, my father, Johnnie Lee West, died after a brief battle with pancreatic cancer. The sense of loss I experienced upon his death was vastly different than the grief I felt when my maternal grandmother passed away. The relationship between my father and I was strained to say the least. I was born while he was stationed in Germany serving a two-year stint in the Army. By the time he returned, I was well past my first birthday. To me, he was a stranger. According to my mother, after my father was honorably discharged, we left Brooklyn, where my mother had been staying with her sister and brother-in-law, and returned to the one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan's East Village that my parents had settled in after they married and came to New York. Not used to the strange place or the strange man who was staying with us, I crawled under the kitchen sink and refused to come out, crying when my father tried to come near me. To him, I suppose I was a stranger as well; he had gone into the Army as a husband, not even married for two years, and came out as a husband *and* a father. The distance between us

was never closed. Sometimes, I've wondered if the added responsibility of being a parent of one, then two children, made his drinking worse.

In a way, we lost my father years before he passed away. Over the years, his alcoholism strained his relationship with the entire family. After I went away to college, my parents separated, and my father went to stay with one of his drinking buddies. She was the one who urged him to go to the hospital when his health began to deteriorate. He was diagnosed with late-stage cancer that had metastasized to his liver and other organs and given four weeks to live. Four weeks to the day, he passed away in a hospice down the block from where I now live, while I was attending a Christian education conference. Since it was the era before cell phones were popular, I didn't find out that he had passed until I returned home. I sat on the edge of the bed and bawled like a baby. More than his death, I suppose I grieved the end of the possibility that our father-daughter relationship could ever be mended. I grieved the fact that I never knew that he loved me or that he was proud of me.

My father's death was followed by the loss of several family members who had been like father figures to me. My uncle, Herbert "Herbie" James died less than a year after my father did, in February of 1999. He was the uncle who bet my mother that she couldn't get me to walk by my first birthday. She did, and he made good on the bet, buying me my one and only tricycle.

Another uncle, Thomas Dow, passed away a few years before I graduated from seminary. It was his home in which my mother stayed while she was pregnant with me because my aunt thought it wasn't safe for my mother to live on her own apart from family at such an important time in her life. Because I spent the first year and more of my life in his home, I thought he was my father. I even called him "Daddy." He kept up with his paternal duties as my sister and I grew up, giving us money, taking us to the store to buy us treats when we visited him and my

aunt in Brooklyn, and coming to check on us when my mother went South following the death of my grandmother.

My cousin, Nathaniel “Butch” Logan, collapsed and died in the street from an apparent heart attack on February 13, 2014. However, we didn’t find out until Valentine’s Day. His adult children went looking for him when he didn’t return home. He had been taken to the morgue where his children had to identify him. He was one of those older members of my extended family who helped take care of me while my father was in the army.

We lost both of my South Carolina uncles, Matthew “Tom” James and Leon James, in the intervening years as well. My uncle Tom, as he was known, died during a major hurricane in South Carolina. He was found dead in a bathtub. The circumstances surrounding his death have been a family mystery for years. It’s thought that a neighbor’s son, who was on drugs, had come into the house to rob it and had killed my uncle, although there was never an investigation, making his death a, even greater tragedy. My uncle Leon died on my sister’s birthday from complications from diabetes; both of his legs were amputated shortly before his death, a physical blow from which he never recovered. With the death of my uncle Tom, with whom he was very close, and the double amputation, he seemed to lose the will to live. They, along with my uncle Buster, who died in the late seventies, were the ones who spoiled us when we visited my grandmother in the summer. My uncle Leon was the only one who drove, and he would ask, “Who wants to take a ride?” We would squeal our assent and pile in the car for a ride to nearby Manning for ice cream or to Sumter to do the grocery shopping at the Piggly Wiggly. My mother would always chastise my uncles for adding sweets and treats to the list; they would just laugh, tell my mother to let us have what we wanted, and delight as we enjoyed ourselves.

A little over a year after my cousin Butch died, his mother, Mattie Dow, died on October 31, 2015. She was the sister with whom my mother lived while pregnant with me. In fact, she gave me my first name. My mother has always said that my aunt also passed on her love of shopping—especially for shoes.

On Maundy Thursday morning, April 1, 2021, I got the call that my longtime friend, Pam S. Long, had passed less than a month after her father's death. We had met at work more than twenty-five years ago and formed a fast friendship along with three other women. We called ourselves the Ladies, and our friendship endured even though we found ourselves miles apart over the years. Pam's roommate found her dead in her room in their San Francisco apartment—the same day that the condolence gift we ordered arrived. More heartbreaking was *how* she died. The medical examiner discovered a chemo port in her arm. We would later find out that she had been suffering from advanced ovarian cancer, and she hadn't told anyone, not even her family. The grief we have felt over her death has been compounded with anger: at her for not telling of us and at ourselves for not having been more observant that she had lost a great deal of weight over the last few months.

More recently, I've felt a sense of loss as I, along with my sister, have been taking care of my mother. It has been extremely difficult to watch the physical decline of a once energetic, self-sufficient woman who worked as a housekeeper to support the family when my father's alcoholism caused him to lose his job. Due to rheumatoid arthritis, osteoporosis, and other physical conditions, she is in nearly constant pain and has a very limited range of motion. She is no longer able to cook for herself, do any household chores, can barely dress herself, or go to church regularly. Sometimes, she sits and simply moans or cries due to the pain. At other times, she lashes out. One night, as I was helping her get ready for bed, she said to myself and me,

“You just don’t know the pain I’m in.” All I responded was, “I know.” Whether she thought I was belittling her condition or was just frustrated, she dismissed me with a sharp “Go.” My sister gave me a quizzical look, which I could barely make out for the tears that welled up in my eyes. I turned and went to my room where I cried myself to sleep.

I think I’m not only grieving in advance for the day that she’s no longer with us, but for the loss of the woman she once was. She mopes a lot and her appetite is not what it used to be, and I wonder if she’s giving up on life, despite her assurances that she’s grateful to “be in the land of the living.” In addition to being dependent on my sister and me to do a great deal for her, she’s no longer physically and emotionally the mother she used to be. We’re more like the parents. I also grieve the loss of the family’s history—and secrets—that she holds. As much as possible, I’ve sat with her to find out more about our family, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Unsurprisingly, the most significant and life-defining relationships of my life have been with my parents, albeit for different reasons. Although my father was in the household for most of my life until he died, I still consider myself to have been raised in a single-parent household. My father rarely interacted with me or my sister, except to tell us to get away from him because he was tired from working all day or to bark at us not to change the channel from one of his favorite shows, even though he would doze off as soon as he sat in his favorite chair.

I remember one time when I wanted to go to a school dance. As I usually did, I asked my mother for permission. She had decided to take a different approach and try to involve my father in the parenting duties. She told me to ask him for permission. Although I had a feeling how it would go, I did as she asked. Yet nothing could prepare me for his withering response: “I don’t care.” I never asked his permission to do anything again.

I can't recall my father ever telling my sister or me that he loved us or that he was proud of us until one Father's Day several years after his death. My mother produced a letter that he had written before he died and insisted that we each read it. It produced a fresh wave of grief within me, as I wondered my father why couldn't ever just *tell* us how he felt. I figured that it was because his parents had not been affectionate with him or his siblings. Nevertheless, during the milestones of my life, I've always wrestled with the nagging question: "Are you proud of me, Dad?"

My father's alcoholism led to numerous fights between him and my mother, and some of them escalated to physical violence. Despite the positive role models offered by uncles and older cousins, I still was leery about relationships and marriage. For a while, I remember thinking that I never wanted to marry because of what I had seen and heard in my parents' marriage. By time I decided that I wanted to be married, I had established so many standards for the ideal mate—looks, height, educational credentials, job, income, no kids or baby mama drama, no drinking or smoking. Reflecting on it, I think I wanted someone who was everything my father *wasn't*. Also, by having a laundry list of standards that no one could possibly meet, it allowed me to dismiss potential partners without much consideration. It also made it easier to shut myself off from the possibility of a relationship—it was not my fault that no one could meet my standards; I'm not being picky, I'm being selective. Over the years, I admit I've been attracted to men who are unavailable for one reason or another, perhaps another way of avoiding a relationship where I could be hurt the way I was hurt by my father. Yet, I've wondered why I haven't been able to find a mate.

On the other hand, my mother was the loving and engaged parent. My mother was never told "I love you" or shown physical affection by her mother (her father died before she was

born). But as she watched how the white families she worked for as a girl lavish their children with physical and verbal affection, she vowed to do the same if she ever had kids. The way my mother showed affection to us proved to be an example to my older cousin, who often hugged, kissed, and told her two sons that she loved them, breaking a cycle that had existed for generations.

My mother also instilled in us discipline and a spirit of excellence. We were expected to *do and be* our best; if we couldn't do that, we were expected to *try* our best in whatever we did, especially when it came to education. She wanted us to have every advantage that she didn't have. Having grown up in the racist, segregated South, she also knew that our brown skin would cause us to be thought of and treated as less than. She knew that my sister and I were usually the only one or one of a few African Americans in our classes and were not expected to excel at the same level as our white classmates. However, over the years, cultivating that spirit of excellence has fed my need to be a perfectionist.

My mother was our spiritual center in our younger years. We didn't attend church as kids, except when my older cousin took us to an occasional service. That didn't prevent my mother from leading us in reciting the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 at bedtime. In the morning and evening, we often saw her reading the Bible; on Sundays she would listen to or watch church services or sing hymns as she made dinner.

But perhaps the greatest lesson was about the love of Christ through her actions. She taught us to treat people as we would want to be treated, even people who would curse and spitefully use us. When my father was hospitalized and diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, my mother visited him every single day, despite the fact they were separated and she was often exhausted from a long day of cleaning houses. She later told us that there were times when

she visited my father, and he would be apologetic for the things he had said and done during their marriage. Other times, he would call her names, accuse her of being with other men, and otherwise berate her. Yet, she would return to the hospital the next day, making sure that he was being properly cared for. She continued her daily visits when my father was moved to hospice care, chastising him when he lashed out against the staff. She was even at his bedside during his final moments, and she made all the arrangements after he passed away. To this day, I don't know how she did it.

My mother also refused to lay sole blame on my father for the disintegration of their marriage. She has often told my sister and me that she wonders if she had been more “into the Lord” during their marriage, perhaps things wouldn't have ended as they did. She has owned her part in the failure of their marriage, and even has asked God for forgiveness for her failings. Even now, I wonder how she can make such statements, but she has taught me that relationships are not one-sided; each person must be accountable for their actions.

It was what she heard from us about our father after his death that encouraged her to share the letter she wrote. We might not be able to forget all the things we had seen and experienced, growing up with an alcoholic in the home, but she wanted us to forgive. She wanted us to understand that our father was unable to deal with his demons to be the parent we needed and expected him to be. She wanted us to know that in his own way, he *did* love us, and he was certainly proud of us. She wanted us to be free from bitterness.

Another source of grief has come from the fact that I never had the opportunity to give birth to a child. I was brought up with the ideal of having children within the confines of a marriage. Currently, I'm not married—a loss in and of itself—but I am past my childbearing years. I grieve over the fact that I will never experience the journey of pregnancy, or the joys of

being able to lavish unconditional love on another human being from the beginning of their lives, to be the kind of mother my mother has been to me. Watching those around me become parents has not only made me grieve, but has also made me feel a jealous.

Also, as I have been taking care of my mother, I've been thinking about the possibility that I won't have anyone to take care of me in my older years. I know of people who have aged or suffer from a long-term condition, and must depend on a sibling, friend, or compassionate saint to help them or care for them, either because they have no children of their own or because there has been some sort of breach between them and their families. In short, I grieve the possibility of being alone as I get older.

In addition to grieving over the loss of my relationship with my late father well before his death, I also grieve over the loss/nonexistence of relationships with his side of the family. When we visited my maternal grandmother in South Carolina, we were obligated to spend at least one night with my paternal grandparents. They were not very grandmotherly or grandfatherly at all. They never seemed to be very happy to see us when we arrived for our visit. My granddad would sit scowling on the porch, barely eking out a grunt in response to our greeting. That would be the longest night of our lives; we were always so happy to see my uncle's car when he arrived to pick us up and take us back to my maternal grandmother's home where we would be appropriately spoiled. When my paternal grandparents passed away—Grandma West in 1986 and Grandpa West in 1993—I was upset, but not nearly as devastated as when my maternal grandmother died.

In general, we've had little or no relationship with the rest of my father's family, which is also a loss for me. My mother says that she thinks that they didn't feel that she was good enough for my father, although he was already a heavy drinker by the time they got married—not to

mention that fact that he had gotten another women pregnant. There was a great deal of dysfunction within my father's family. One of his sisters left town shortly after graduation from high school, vowing never to return. To my knowledge she remained true to her word, not even returning when my grandparents passed away. There was fighting about property that my father reportedly worked very hard for the family to purchase, only to have the land left to the youngest sister after my grandparents died. For reasons still unknown to me, another brother left town, never to return. As it stands now, no one knows where he is—or even if he's still alive. I have a whole host of cousins on my father's side who I do not know, and my relationship with my older brother is basically nonexistent. Other than meeting him for the first time down South, I've only seen him once—when he came to New York for our father's funeral. I've never met my niece and nephew or their children. I know very little of my father's family history, just hearsay and rumor. It angers me, because just as my father didn't seem to want to be bothered with me, the rest of his family seems to feel the same way.

Then, as I mentioned, there have been other moments of loss that I have only come to recognize as such as I have learned more about loss and grief. Quite a few of those moments are related to my career.

Having worked more or less steadily since getting my first job at the age of fourteen, I was devastated to find myself unemployed not once, but twice. I was terminated from my job as a copy supervisor at a reference publisher on September 14, 2001, just three days after the World Trade Center disaster. A few months prior, my manager had announced that she would not be returning from maternity leave. Everyone who reported to her, including a designer, copyeditor/proofreader who reported to me, and I were transferred to the design department. However, after a brief stint there, I was transferred to another department, led by a male vice

president and staffed with two male colleagues, while the rest of my colleagues remained in the design department. I felt shipped off.

It soon became clear that the three gentlemen had a close working relationship not unlike a mini-frat, and I was an outsider. Without getting to know me or my work, my new manager conducted a performance appraisal less than six months after I joined his department and put me on a pseudo-probation, saying that my writing needed to improve, but offering no other concrete feedback for me to do so. This was a surprise to me, as my former managers had never expressed problems with my writing. Within a month, my new manager had terminated me.

In the wake of the World Trade Center disaster, finding employment was difficult if not near impossible. What made being fired even more devastating was the fact that the company decided to deny my claim for unemployment. I had no savings and no way to pay my bills. It was only when I detailed my account of the dubious circumstances surrounding my probation and my experience being in this man's department that the company decided not to fight the claim and my benefits were reinstated.

Just as unemployment was about to run out in 2002, I got a job at a publishing company where I had previously worked for nearly seven years. I was there for about two years when layoffs started to take place. My manager assured me that my job was safe; however, his assurance proved worthless as I was let go in the second round of layoffs. In addition to being extremely angry with my manager, I was angry with myself for returning to work at this company, especially since I had been treated pretty poorly the first time, which had caused me to leave the company for another job.

These two experiences, especially back-to-back, hit at the core of who and what I was, especially because I defined myself by my job. Without one, I felt like a piece of me was

missing. I was embarrassed to admit that I was unemployed, and I did my best to keep it from as many people as possible. I was worried how people would look at me, and I didn't want to deal with their questions or their expressions of pity. I even kept my unemployment from many of my family members, because most have been hard workers, doing whatever necessary to take care of their families, from picking cotton to cleaning houses to working in factories. Having to rely on unemployment and the kindness of my immediate family made me feel like a failure.

Thanks to a colleague, however, I landed a position at the publishing company where I currently work and where I had begun my publishing career shortly after I graduated from college. I spent the first seven years working with the senior vice president/associate publisher, fiction, until she left for another opportunity. As a goodbye present we, as her direct reports, chipped in to purchase a piece of original cover art from a book written by one of her authors which was to be presented at her farewell party. Due to an appointment, I was supposed to miss the party, but decided to move things around to be present. Imagine my shock when she acknowledged each of her direct reports, except yours truly. It was so embarrassing, especially when one of the editors, who was aware of the snub, looked back at me with an expression of abject pity. Over the years, when I think about this incident, it angers me, not just because I felt unseen and forgotten, but because she has never realized her misstep or apologized—and I didn't have the courage to bring it to her attention.

Looking back on it, that wasn't the first time my former manager made me feel dismissed. Less than three months before she left, I was informed that one of my colleagues had hired an editorial assistant. However, there wasn't enough room anywhere on our floor to accommodate another department member. Since my colleague and the new assistant would be working closely together, and since my responsibilities could be performed without being in

physical proximity of the rest of my department, my manager volunteered me to move to the floor below. I felt like I had been banished, out of sight, out of mind.

This wasn't the first time I was physically separated from the rest of my department. About a year or so after I started, I was moved to accommodate an associate editor who had been recently hired. The office was much smaller, lacked a window, and the layout forced me to work with my back to the door. As I listened to members of other editorial teams gathering for impromptu chats around each other's cubicles and offices, I felt isolated from my own group. I wondered what I was missing outside of department meetings and one-on-ones with my manager. Although I was eventually able to move back to my original office, I often wondered if I would be banished again if someone else was hired.

After my manager left, her former boss told me that I would be moving from the editorial department to the managing editorial/digital publishing department. Once again, I was packed up and shipped off to another floor to join my new colleagues. I wound up in a cubicle just outside the women's restroom—and away from the rest of my new colleagues. The distance wasn't just physical; it was also relational. There was no lunch or gathering to welcome me, no meeting with my new manager to acclimate me. I wasn't even taken around to formally meet the people whose names had just appeared on emails over the years.

Although I've been *in* the department for eleven-plus years, I haven't really been *part* of the department. In the office prior to the pandemic, some department members didn't speak, and when there were gatherings, it wasn't unusual for people to cluster in small groups to talk, leaving no room for me to join. I remember one occasion when I was even left off an email invitation to a colleague's baby shower. There were even times when my manager would walk interns or new hires around for introduction and skip my cubicle entirely.

However, perhaps the biggest blow came about five years ago, when I was informed that the primary responsibility for which I had been hired more than a decade ago would be taken away. It was my last connection to the department where I had started. Despite the explanation that “the editorial teams [had] become more self-sufficient when it comes to list planning,” I once again felt like I was being dismissed.

The bright side to this unfortunate development, according to my manager, would be the possibility of taking on other projects that would expand my skill set and contribute to my overall career growth and development. “We have a challenge and opportunity to figure out what’s next,” he wrote in a performance appraisal, “to review options to ensure that the best possible path is taken going forward.” Those options never presented themselves. Instead, it was just more of the same-old, same-old, tasks that only benefited my colleagues. I watched as college interns, who were only with us for two to three months at a time, were assigned the projects my manager had hinted that I would take on.

For my upcoming performance appraisal, I decided to take a risk, speak up, and express my disappointment in my lack of growth as clearly and professionally as possible. Unfortunately, my feedback was not met with the response I expected. I couldn’t believe my ears as my manager basically said that given the loss of a major part of my job, I should be grateful to still have a position with the company. What I heard was, “Shut up and don’t complain.” That conversation has caused me to keep quiet in the interest of keeping the peace—and my job. Since the pandemic, my manager has made efforts to let us know that we can reach out to him with any issues, but on the rare occasions when I’ve mustered up the courage to do so, it’s been met with the feeble response to “just do your best,” instead of taking concrete steps to address and rectify certain situations.

In fact, during the first module of the DMin program, I discovered that the loss of my voice extended beyond the professional sphere and was rooted in how I grew up. In a home with an alcoholic father who was prone to fly into a fit or start an argument over little or nothing, I rarely spoke up or talked back in the interests of keeping the peace. My sister and I were also told not to talk about family issues outside the home. I've developed the pat answers of "I'm fine," "I'm okay," or lately, "It is what it is" whenever I'm asked how I'm doing—even when things are far from fine.

I've also convinced myself that it's better to watch, observe, and stay quiet in meetings than to speak up or ask questions, particularly when difficult conversations are taking place. On the occasions when I've taken the risk to speak up, have difficult conversations, or raise concerns, I often wind up feeling like what I feel or have to say is insignificant and even that *I'm* insignificant. As a result of feeling feel dismissed and disregarded by others, it's difficult for me to feel loved and valued by God.

I grieve all these losses because they have not only resulted from "*the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior*" (James and Friedman 2017, 3), but they have contributed, in one way or another, to feelings of loneliness, detachment, and isolation. I think they have also contributed to the emotional and relational walls I've built up over the years, both with others and with God. Yet I grieve the lack of intimacy I have with others and at times, with God.