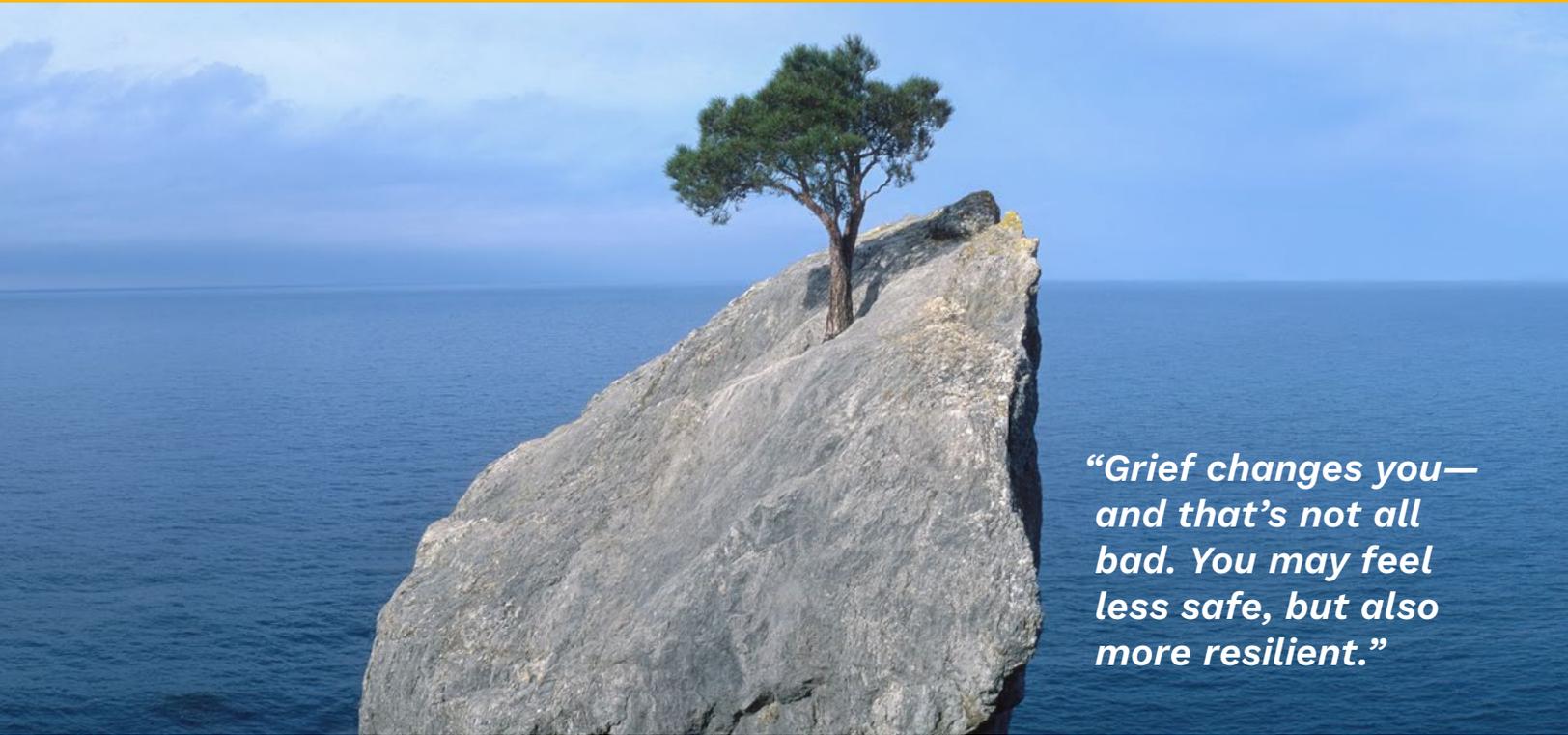




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*“Grief changes you—
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more resilient.”*

A Companion Guide for Lawyers Living With Grief (and Those Who Walk Beside Them)

By Douglas Querin

The Oregon Attorney Assistance Program extends its deep appreciation to Oregon attorney, Matt Smith, for his courage and generosity in writing a very personal account of his experience with grief. In “A Lawyer’s Guide to Practicing Law Through Grief,” Matt shares some learnings he has gleaned since the loss of his young son over 20 years ago.

This sidebar distills the central lessons Matt offers. He cautions that his suggestions are just that—suggestions for consideration. They are not rules to be rigidly followed or uniformly applied. They are the product of both the successes and failures he experienced as he navigated, and continues to navigate, completely foreign territory.

For those grieving, his observations offer permission and flexibility. For the supportive friends and colleagues of someone grieving, they provide valuable insights.

For the Lawyer Grieving a Significant Loss

- 1. Go easy on yourself.** The loss of a loved one can be mentally, emotionally, and physically overwhelming. Its impact can be significant. Cognition, memory, sleep, emotional volatility, and physical health are all frequently affected. Personal and professional productivity will suffer, and that is not failure.
- 2. Practice self-care.** Your self-care and self-compassion are paramount. Tend to yourself, not to eliminate grief, but to mitigate its adverse impact when possible.
- 3. Get help.** Statistically, lawyers have a habitual disinclination to seek and accept help when needed or offered. Grief is different. Seek help when you need it. Accept help when it is offered. Let others carry what you cannot.
- 4. There is no “right” way to grieve.** Grief is personal, nonlinear, varied, and often unpredictable. How you experience it may not be identical to how another family member experiences it. The idea of stages of grief may be helpful, but should not be rigidly applied. Grief rarely manifests in discrete steps.
- 5. Do not compare your grief to anyone else’s.** Your timeline, reactions, and needs are your own. Comparing your grief with that of others is seldom helpful.
- 6. Do not confuse self-reliance with strength.** Lawyers are trained to fix problems, but grief is seldom fixable by lawyerly practices or individual willpower. More is needed. Professional help, peer support, and grief groups can materially improve outcomes. The Oregon Attorney Assistance Program is an invaluable, free, and confidential resource.

- 7. Beware of overworking.** Immersing yourself in work may bring short-term relief, but often it delays healing, affects personal health, and impairs relationships with important others.
- 8. Expect triggers—and plan for them.** Anniversaries, holidays, professional settings—as well as small things like sounds and smells—can provoke sudden waves of grief. Develop coping tools (e.g., breathing, pausing, stepping away) and give yourself grace when emotions are triggered.
- 9. Grief changes you—and that’s not all bad.** You may feel less safe, but also more resilient. Over time, the pain softens, memories rebalance, and a “new normal” emerges.
- 10. Meaning helps.** Grief can be transformed into meaningful connection and purpose by giving back, honoring the deceased, writing, journaling, creating, or serving others.

For Those Seeking to Support the Grieving Lawyer

- 1. Do not judge, measure, or direct.** Avoid timelines, comparisons, or advice about how someone should be grieving—even if well-intended.
- 2. Listen more than you speak.** Being present matters more than words. “I’m here,” followed by silence, is often enough.
- 3. Avoid platitudes and spiritual explanations.** Statements like “Everything happens for a reason” or “God needed them” often cause more harm than comfort.
- 4. Offer specific, practical help—and be persistent.** Areas where help is frequently needed: grocery shopping, meals, scheduling, work coverage, and necessary errands. Ask, then follow through.

**5. Expect anger or withdrawal—
and don't take it personally.**

Grief often displaces outward pain. Your ability to stay emotionally steady can make a profound difference.

6. Remember the long term.

Extending support weeks or months later—when others' attention often fades—can be especially meaningful to the person grieving.

Matt's article is a gift. It teaches us that grief does not disqualify us from practicing law—but it does require humility, community, and compassion. We sincerely thank you, Matt, for that insight, and for the willingness to share your journey. ●

– DOUGLAS S. QUERIN
JD, LPC, CADC I
Senior Attorney Counselor, OAAP



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