

Dying with His Eyes Wide Open

A Memoir of Love and Grief

Kathryn L Kaplan, PhD



CHRISTMAS LAKE PRESS

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *DYING WITH HIS EYES WIDE OPEN*:
A MEMOIR OF LOVE AND GRIEF

Death and grief are universal, and this book touches on these truths in relatable ways that are entertaining, instructive, and poignant. It made me appreciate more what members of my family have gone through when losing their spouse and consider how I can be not just more empathetic but more actively aware, understanding, and supportive.

— Dr. Parker T. Gordon

An elegiacally beautiful account of a loving, compassionate, brilliant woman accompanying her beloved and remarkable husband to the Valley of Death. After the shattering recognition that he will never return, Dr. Kaplan mourns him reverently and profoundly, then finds a way to keep him in her life as she rebuilds her world without his physical presence.

— NBD, Psychotherapist

In all my thinking, talking, and writing about Practice, not once has it dawned on me that *grieving* is a practice we all must do across our lifespan. Now, Kathryn, through her introspective and moment-to-moment narrative, reveals why learning to grieve is as fundamentally vital a practice as learning to love. Indeed, grieving is loving unbound by the moment, and the brave practice of grieving she exemplifies results in personal growth and development of a kind that no other way of being can.

— David S. Fearon, Ph.D., author with the late
Peter B. Vaill of *On Practice as a Way of Being* and
host of *Practice? Podcast*

At times gentle. At times searing. Always compelling. Dr. Kaplan has given us a rich, fast-moving account of her feelings and thoughts while her beloved was alive, and after his death.

— Nancy B., Consultant to organizations

Kathryn Kaplan's brave and heartfelt memoir about the loss of her beloved husband, Patrick, is both raw and touching—a poignant read with drawings and photos that lend a visual window into their life together.

— Debra Green, author of *The Convention of Wives*

Kathryn Kaplan steps into the holiness of grief, portraying the depth and complexity of the loss of a loved one with honesty, vulnerability, and a unique way of organizing her confused and confusing emotions. A welcome guide for anyone grieving the loss of a loved one and for those who support them.

— Sandy Prins, MA-ECSE, Grief Counselor

A radically honest, beautifully written book about the journey through the end of life with a partner or spouse, and an insightful guide to the personal experience of loss and grief for those who study it.

— Judith Stevens-Long, Ph.D., Emerita, Fielding Graduate University, California State College, Los Angeles

Kathryn Kaplan has opened a door wide with the publication of *Dying with His Eyes Wide Open*, to anyone who wants to deepen their knowledge or understand their emotions when confronting death and grief. By meticulously recording the events around her partner's diagnosis and death in the full context of his life and their life together, the difficult, the painful, the hurts and the wondrous moments, she allows her readers to make visible for themselves grief in all of its variations and nuances. A remarkably rich and deep work informed by a lifetime of self-reflection and questioning.

— Eric Manheimer, MD, Former Medical Director at Bellevue Hospital, Clinical Professor at the New York University School of Medicine, and author of *Twelve Patients: Life and Death at Bellevue Hospital*, the inspiration for the NBC drama, *New Amsterdam*

With wisdom Kathryn guides us on how to stay engaged and loving through the journey of adjusting to the loss of a loved one. She opens her heart as a friend, and you will not be alone in your feelings as her words and personal experiences guide and comfort you.

— Judy, Psychotherapist

Kathryn presents her story “to grieve, to heal, to make meaning of our life together.” The experience she shares is unique yet universal, personal yet applicable to others, loving and harsh, and deeply inspiring.

— Sharon A Thorne, M.Ed.

A powerful story of love, loss, grief, courage, and hope. Kathryn's true grit leads to her discovery that joy transcends sorrow and gives her a renewed sense of purpose as she embarks on her third career in the service of others as a grief counselor.

— Nancy Xenakis, DSW, LCSW, MS Adjunct
Faculty, Silver School of Social Work, New York
University Guest Support Coordinator, Toni's Kitchen

This new book by Dr. Kathryn Kaplan is a loving and unflinching exploration of the challenges and possibilities of grief. Part memoir, part guide book for professionals and lay people alike, *Dying with His Eyes Wide Open* invites us to walk with Kathryn as she moves into and through her deep loss, neither abandoning the love and life she had, nor becoming mired in or clinging to the past. Instead she points to the strength and creativity we all have to face loss with our eyes wide open, bringing that loss forward into the next chapter of our lives.

— Howard Rossman, Founder and President, Civic
Leadership Foundation

I'm not sure which aspect of this book will help heal more hearts—the intimate look into Kathryn's decades-long love story with her husband, the clippings of journals and deeply moving art pieces, or the more practical notes on how to support the grieving heart. A must read for anyone who has ever loved and lost, the whole book will settle into the bones of the reader and extend its grace.

— Rev. Rebecca Liston

Written from a sacred place where pain and love coexist—this book is a work of art.

— Dianne Galasso, LMSW, CGP, Psychotherapist,
Certified Grief Professional

This book is an extraordinary gift and blessing for anyone grieving (or anticipating) the death of a loved one. Walking with Kathryn as she journeys, we experience how a gradual emerging into a reconfigured solo life can (slowly, with time) blossom in the midst of profound, continuing sorrow and loss.

— Robyn L. Posin, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist,
Author of *Go Only as Fast as Your Slowest Part Feels Safe to Go* and *Choosing Gentleness: Opening Our Hearts to All the Ways We Feel and Are in Every Moment*

DYING WITH HIS EYES WIDE OPEN

A MEMOIR OF LOVE AND GRIEF



PATRICK J. KNOWLTON

DECEMBER 19, 1954-APRIL 21, 2021

KATHRYN L KAPLAN, PHD



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DEDICATION

To Dr. Alma Huerta

Without her exquisite guidance, encouragement, and love,
I could never have traversed Patrick's illness and death
or made meaning of my life
through grief and moving forward
toward joy and wholeness.

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PREFACE



It's been two years, and I'm still not ready. Still not ready to confront my Patrick pile. Not ready to unearth the unspeakable things I've buried in the gray plastic woven basket that sits to the left of my glass tabletop desk: all the medical reports, records of blood transfusions, medication lists. All the dark blue folders filled with daily itemized hospital bills. Did you know that in Mexico's private hospitals you must pay each day before the billing staff changes shifts, or the patient will have to leave? No exceptions, no excuses. I can't bear to look at the disgusting, vivid photo the surgeon took of Patrick's colon filled with tumors. Why have I kept it? I won't reread the sympathy notes, all the well-meaning, futile expressions of sorrow sent by friends. Some offered lovely memories. I hope none went unanswered. The x-rays—flimsy plastic sheets, confirming in stark black and white the disease that killed my husband—are too big for the basket and stashed

underneath. I will never look at them. They do not reveal what was inside Patrick any more than the surgeon's dreadful picture. And then there are my typed attempts at saving my sanity by filling the hole in my life with words, writing my way through grief.

All this documentation of death has been mulching, decomposing until I could become composed enough to face it. And I am composed. Composed enough to know that I will never be ready, that no one ever is, that now is as good a time as any, that if I don't do it now, I will do it never. You can't just stuff sorrow into a basket. It eventually overflows. So, I sit, staring at my laptop, summoning the courage, mulling endlessly over the end, waiting endlessly to begin.

Finally pulling items from the pile, I feel like throwing up. I am heartsick, seasick, sinking, but I steady my breathing and tell myself, "You can do this." Patrick always said I was his rock, but now I see that he was my rock too. Now I must stand on the firmness, the steadfast resolve, the clear and calming equanimity he maintained, even as he was grieving, to the very end. Still, as I spread things out on the floor, there is something disorienting about shifting this mass from vertical to horizontal, allowing my grief to expand again and to take up space. Yet also, there is something soothing about sorting through memories, enlarging them in my mind so they don't shrink and ultimately vanish.

How do I transform our shared past into treasures for my solo future? Not easily, and not without really feeling the pain of Patrick's loss, over and over, for as long as it takes. I breathe again. I must be spacious, flexible, and kind to myself during this process. I must find the positive in the negative and be present in such painful absence. Patrick is gone, but I am ever so grateful to have someone worthy of my grief and to have had the love we shared for thirty years. It is time to move forward—I know this—but it will take all my strength, courage, and love to find my way on a circuitous path that only I can walk.

Honestly, part of my willingness to embark on this tortuous journey comes from having just finished my book, *Becoming Visible to Myself: An Unexpected Memoir*. In that book, a thorough excavation of my life, I came to terms with the origins of narcissism in my family and traced its damaging impact on my work and relationships, while acknowledging the positive gifts I received from my parents. The energy of completion—copyediting, proofreading, formatting, designing—gave me a jolt, and I decided to ride the wave before it dissipated. Part of what made the book unexpected was the Epilogue, devoted to the shock of Patrick's emergency surgery, cancer diagnosis, and our facing of the end—which came so quickly—together. This book picks up where the first one left off, but not in a linear way. Grief is not linear. Just as death creates a disruption

in the order of things—an inexplicable absence, a reversal of time back to before the dead one was living, a sudden zero where before there was a one—writing out grief does not follow a predictable pattern. So, I keep circling back, picking up old memories I had forgotten, turning them over and over until I can see them not as loss but as gain, and trying to make something beautiful out of the most emotional and chaotic time of my life.



I discovered how to become visible to myself by reviewing my journals—dozens of black spiral notebooks I had kept for twenty-five years. Filled with scribbles, quotes, stick drawings, and symbols, these pages were my personal treasure chest that—as with so many aspects of myself and especially my self-worth—I had kept buried at sea. Rereading each journal was an act of salvaging and salvation, bringing precious insights to the surface. I heard my voice, my wisdom, in a way I hadn't at the times when I'd been writing. When I processed the journals as a whole piece of work, I found overarching themes that led to my finally being able to tell my story. Similarly, my approach to grieving has involved two types of writing: one in real time as I attempted to get through each day with all its horror, numbness, and disbelief; the second when I went back and re-viewed all I had written over the two years

since Patrick's death, trying to make sense of the senseless, to manage the unmanageable. This means some of what you will be reading here is raw and written *to* Patrick, while at other times you will encounter considered reflections on finding meaning in retrospect.

Gratefully, I have rediscovered Grace, or rather, it has worked its magic and re-found me. Synchronicities and serendipities have blessed me so that I could proceed on this grief journey in ways I could not have done on my own. Most noteworthy is Dr. Alma, the palliative care doctor who guided Patrick and me until the end. But then, it wasn't the end. She offered to be my mentor and recommended me for the thanatology program she had taken and thought I'd benefit from. Thanatology? It's the study of death and dying, grief and grieving. It's also a word that's hard to pronounce and totally unfamiliar. It's actually easier to say in Spanish, *tanatología*. I hadn't known Dr. Alma was a thanatologist—a grief counselor—or that I was going to become one too.

The thirteen-month diploma program was on Zoom—my first experience with that medium—four hours every other week. Out of the twenty-four women in the course, I was the only one who spoke English and struggled to keep up with the all-Spanish curriculum. I spent hours and hours translating PowerPoint slides and articles, transcribing notes, trying to find ways to contribute. I revisit this later in the

book, but the program provided me with both a framework for understanding what I was going through as well as distractions and frustrations to siphon off some of the pain of loss.

I also read a lot during these two years—no surprise as reading is one of my primary coping strategies. Borrowing from Pema Chödrön's latest book, *How You Live Is How You Die*, my latest observation is: how you cope is how you grieve. One thing I have noticed with my new grief support clients is if you're someone who immediately calls your best friend when you have a challenging situation at work or in the family, you will probably find that confiding in friends about your loss is a more direct way of facing your new reality. If you have had success working with therapists to move through problems—be they addiction, divorce, or toxic relationships—you might find looking for an empathic professional to be most helpful. If you keep a journal, expressing your turmoil and reflections, writing might be the key to your learning how to keep going. If you are a meditator, you might turn to that practice to be aware of your thoughts and feelings moment by moment and to provide a container for your experience. You might pray, spend time in the cemetery, or go for long walks. You might try to work off the angst on the treadmill, binge-watching Netflix, or hiding under the covers. As Anne Lamott affirms, everyone gets through, but we all find our way differently.

What has most helped me, and what I now offer my clients—and you, my readers—is accompaniment. Someone who can be with you in your pain, who meets you wherever you are at your own pace without judgment. Loving empathy and respect go a long way to help you begin trusting yourself again, or perhaps in a way you never did. This new (as opposed to renewed) self-trust is a silver lining I would give up in a heartbeat if I could have Patrick back, but that's not an option. I can only acknowledge his loss and accept the gift. What is possible is learning to live in a physical world where he doesn't exist, learning to integrate my earthly body with my emotional rollercoaster, changing insights, and spiritual grounding. Grieving, for me, is a journey of becoming whole when that seems impossible because daily companionship with your beloved is gone.

This book serves as a form of accompaniment. It highlights what I have been through, offering permission for you to find your way, *your* way. It starts at the end of Patrick's life and the first eleven days following. Then I take a U-turn to review our thirty-year relationship, attempting to make who we were understandable and vivid. As the weeks go by, I recount the busyness of death: the death certificate, closing accounts, planning a ceremony. Quotes, my drawings, and journal entries are woven throughout as I share the activities and insights that accompanied me on my ever-spiraling path of discovery. Once, when I was hit by a car while crossing the

street to my apartment, it took twelve weeks until I started marking my healing in months. The same is true here. Months four through seven took me into new territory, and I took a deeper dive as the months turned into seasons. The second year of grieving had a tone and consciousness all its own. At the conclusion, I leave you with an extensive, although not exhaustive, list of books and resources.

Death is a turning point. As with a river that meanders, you will be carried along at the mercy of its flow on a minute-by-minute basis. Wet, cold, scared, drowning—you can try to float, swim, tread water, or get out on dry land. There is no right way. There are no workarounds. It hurts to lose someone you love, no matter who they are, how it occurs, or when. Each journey is unique because no one intimately knows your relationship and what you feel inside but you, and no one can take away the pain that is part of grieving. Sobering—and true.

One goal of composing this book was to write a tribute to Patrick, to let him know his life and death mattered. Reviewing one's relationship in detail is a powerful way to process loss. By doing so, I am metabolizing my pain and filling myself with nuanced recollections that keep his gifts alive in my own cells. While feeling better or even somewhat whole may not seem possible right now, I offer you inspiration to courageously honor your beloved and grieve on the page

so that eventually their memory will be indelibly inscribed within you—available to you always as a blessing.

Grief is messy, personal, unique, and full of sorrow. I am sharing my story because doing so helps me integrate my experience with honesty and acceptance. I hope it will resonate with you on your grief journey, deeply and authentically. Emotions are what connect our hearts, not circumstances. We don't need to be fixed, take a shortcut, or rush. We never forget what lives in our soul, but as time passes, if we do the hard work, the truth that our beloved existed is a salve. I want you to know Patrick, to know us. I want you to know how he—and then I—came through. In sharing, it is my hope that you will meet your own resilience and new reality with love, guided by your own inner light.