

The background of the entire cover is decorated with numerous horizontal, wavy brushstrokes in various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to a deeper cerulean. These strokes are scattered across the white background, creating a textured, artistic feel.

*"After a loved one dies, my patients' families will sometimes say they wish there was some sort of chaplain in the community they could call up for guidance.... Now I can give them this book."*

—Kerry Egan, author of *On Living*

# THE ALPHABET OF GRIEF

Words to Help in Times of Sorrow

ANDREA RAYNOR

Praise for  
*The Alphabet of Grief*

“Reading Andrea Raynor’s *Alphabet of Grief* is like sitting down for a cup of coffee with a wise and gentle friend. Raynor understands what it means to grieve, and she reminds us of the larger wisdom of our faith and the story of our lives. After a loved one dies, my patients’ families sometimes wish there was a chaplain in the community they could call for guidance and comfort after the hospice team says good-bye. Now I can give them this book. It is wise, luminous, down to earth, and enormously comforting.”

—KERRY EGAN, author of *On Living* and *Fumbling*

“There are no perfect words when someone grieves, which is why *The Alphabet of Grief* provides a wonderful way to move through the process with bite-sized wisdoms. Raynor’s personal, alphabetical blueprint allows us to take sorrow and loss at our own pace to come out on the other side.”

—LEE WOODRUFF, *New York Times* best-selling author

“Andrea gently guides the reader through the ins and outs of grief. This book teaches what you may experience in grief and how to help someone navigate through it. Knowing profound grief myself, I found comfort in the words *living on* as a way to honor my son Chase.”

—REBECCA KOWALSKI, mother of seven-year-old Chase who lost his life in the Sandy Hook Elementary tragedy

“In this compelling and comforting book, Andrea Raynor uses her finely honed wisdom from years of ministering to the grieving to

accompany us down a path of exploration and healing. You will nod in recognition of the truth being shared and shed healing tears of gratitude for the profundity in these pages.”

—FATHER EDWARD L. BECK, CP, CNN religion commentator  
and author of *God Underneath: Spiritual Memoirs of a  
Catholic Priest*

“Each short essay in *The Alphabet of Grief* is profoundly moving and insightful. For example, Andrea’s piece on ‘Dinner’ becomes nearly luminous as she narrates how death redefines our ordinary. We linger with her in such vivid detail that the helpful meditations and affirmations at the end of each section arrive almost as an afterthought. As a health-care chaplain, Andrea has a wealth of experiences to draw upon, but she doesn’t hold back personally, bravely processing her own grief for her father. You and I are the recipients of this treasure.”

—RT. REV. GEORGE E. PACKARD, retired bishop for the armed  
services and federal ministries, the Episcopal Church

“Compassionate and inspiring, *The Alphabet of Grief* provides a framework to process the multifaceted emotions surrounding the loss of a loved one. Raynor empathically caresses our bleeding hearts and gives practical suggestions to soothe our pain. This book is a blessing to anyone who has ever lost a loved one. For those who have been spared such a loss, Raynor’s words will reaffirm the commitment to love with abandon.”

—THERESA JOSEPH, coauthor of *Everyday Mystic: Finding  
the Extraordinary in the Ordinary*

“A beautifully written self-care guide to live by when a loved one has died, this book offers practical wisdom I will use on a daily basis when counseling hospice families in anticipation of the death of a beloved. Andrea’s inspirational stories will help the grieving make sense of their personal expression of emotions during this sacred and vulnerable time.”

—MARY LANDBERG, hospice RN, MPH, and CHPN and  
author of *Enduring Love: Inspiring Stories of Love and  
Wisdom at the End of Life*

“Andrea Raynor’s thoughts and words lead the reader to understand death and love in a new way—the way that leads to healing. I commend this book to those who are grieving, to those who help others going through that journey, and to professionals who may use it as a resource.”

—REV. DR. BILL SHILLADY, executive director of the United  
Methodist City Society

“Andrea Raynor writes about grief with such compassion that you’ll feel as if she has wrapped you in a warm blanket. Her alphabet touches on all aspects of grief. In acknowledging the breadth and depth, Raynor shows us that we will get through it, each at our own pace. Everyone who has suffered a loss should read this book.”

—ANNABEL MONAGHAN, author of *Does This Volvo Make  
My Butt Look Big?*

THE  
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OF  
GRIEF

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*For SORCHA*  
*Grief brought you to me—*  
*love keeps you close.*

The life given us by nature is  
short, but the memory of a  
well-spent life is eternal.

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

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## Preface

We all yearn for comfort when someone we love dies. In the immediate aftermath of death, we may find it in the company of friends and family or in the rituals of faith. But when the funeral services are over, when friends leave and the house grows quiet, many are left floundering. The unchangeable reality of loss looms like a shadow in our every days. We can feel lost and alone, even when surrounded by people who love us. Things we thought might offer some small measure of solace, or at least distraction, often fall miserably short. To what do we turn? It's rarely television—and music is often too potent an emotional trigger—so many reach for a book. When one is grieving, however, reading is quite a different experience than it was before. Those who once considered themselves voracious readers discover they cannot take in more than a few pages before losing focus. Most don't want a treatise on grief. They don't want to be educated, particularly, and they certainly don't want platitudes. They want a few simple thoughts or images to hold on to, a few stepping-stones across the river of sadness.

*The Alphabet of Grief* was written for this purpose: to offer simple but thoughtful reflections to ease the isolation and loneliness of grief. Using the letters of the alphabet as rungs on the ladder of sorrow, I chose each word based on the countless hours I have spent with grieving people. Not only have they shared with me the pain of loss

but they have also taught me about the daunting and sometimes mysterious journey of living. It is for them—for every face around the bereavement table, for everyone who has known loss—and for you that I have written this book.

Absence is to love what wind is to fire; it  
extinguishes the small, it enkindles the great.

—Roger de Bussy-Rabutin

# Absence

Just as silence can be deafening, absence can be full of presence. This is often the case after someone dies, although it may take some time to notice. The absence of one we love can press in on us, swallowing us like Jonah in the belly of the whale. When will we be spit out? When will this suffering, this darkness, cease? We listen for the phone to ring. We wait for the doorknob to turn and a familiar voice to call “I’m home!” And each moment we must take a deep breath and remind ourselves of the one thing we cannot have: the physical presence of our loved ones.

Since my father’s death, my mother cannot bring herself to sit on the stool in the kitchen where he sat as they sipped their morning coffee. Nor can she curl up in the chair in the family room where he fell asleep virtually every night watching TV. In some ways, this accentuates his absence—the empty chair, the empty place at the table—but in other ways, the space is filled with his presence. I sit on his stool and

gaze out the kitchen window, imagining his eyes taking in the blue of the sky or a bird in flight. I look at my mother reading the paper and can feel how she held my father's gaze, sitting there, elbow to elbow for almost sixty years. The hole left by his death is so profound that we begin to fill it with our longing, with our tears, and with our memories.

And yet, somehow, the heightened awareness of his absence mysteriously invokes the comfort of his presence. Like the reflection of a mountain on a still and pristine lake, he is here and not here. We are learning to live with the reflection of him. I see him reflected in my mother's tender words and in the life they shared together. My mother sees him in the way I think, in my son's athleticism, my daughter's creativity, my sister's flashing brown eyes, and in the specks of him scattered like stardust in our family and in the writings he left behind.

A reflection is no substitute for the real thing, but it can sometimes summon an aspect of the ones we are missing. It can trigger a sensory memory; it can make the distance between them and us feel not so terribly far. Instead of saying, for example, "He is not here. She is not here," we can look for the parts of them that remain. They live in our stories and in the ways our souls are connected in love. Because we can no longer hold their hands, sometimes it helps to hold something that belonged to them in order to cope with their absence. We wrap ourselves in her sweater, we wear his watch, we cuddle her beloved stuffed bear. One woman I know takes her husband's cane with her when she goes on errands. "I know it's silly," she tells me, "but

having it there next to me in the car makes me feel less alone. If I'm going out, I say, 'Come on, Vin, we're going to the store.'" Her husband's cane is a touchstone for her. By itself, it is just a cane. Imbued with her memories, it is a talisman that has the power to draw her husband near again.

We cannot change the fact that our loved ones are physically absent from us, no matter how much we hurt, no matter how much we protest or shake our fists at the heavens, but we can look for them in the clues they have left behind. The broken heart is never empty; it has been cracked open. And flowing from the cracks is a love that rises like an eternal spring within us. Nothing will replace the warmth of my father's hand resting on my mother's—but his presence fills the silence as she remembers.



**Meditation:** Today I will try to feel the presence of my loved one as strongly as I feel the absence. I will visualize a happy, perhaps even insignificant moment, remembering every detail, until warmth begins to fill my heart center.

**Affirmation:** Although my loved one is absent, I will open my heart to happy memories.



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