

The Ripple Effect By Rebecca Soffer
End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018

Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

Hi everyone. I am here to talk about discontinuity. About everybody sitting here in this room, anybody watching online and about the immense value in sharing our personal stories in a way that is honest, and raw, and vulnerable — as a means to build bridges between us.

Earlier this year, I embarked on quite an adventure in the form of a national tour for my book, *Modern Loss: Candid Conversation About Grief*. Beginners, welcome! Now this was a really exciting time for me and my co-author Gaby Birkner. It was really exciting to like, I don't know: a.) Have a book come out! b.) With a publisher! c.) That people had heard of! It was pretty exciting to fantasise about getting four neigh, five consecutive hours of sleep away from my baby back home in New York City. I didn't, but that's another story. [Chuckles] But **[00:01:00]** mostly, it was exciting because I finally was gonna put my theory to the test that our online readers were going to get a chance to meet other kindred spirits and form a meaningful personal connection at our events.

I mean *Modern Loss* was about to go full on IRL. I just spent the last several years sharing it at a lot of screens, needing increasingly stronger glasses, and looking at likes and comments and prayer hands like whatever this is, I don't know like "praise these."

[Crowd Laughing]

And it was obvious that we were helping people by what we were doing at *Modern Loss* but what wasn't exactly clear was how [chuckles] and most important if they were helping each other.

I went into the book tour assuming that the live events were going to be more meaningful than anything we had done beforehand. Well, turns out I had a lot to learn about community and about the bonds that grief creates by its democratic **[00:02:00]** nature alone. In the end, what I learned is that a combination of in-person and virtual communities gives us the best chance to reach the broadest range of people and to help them deal with the widest range of experiences but it only works if we're willing to open ourselves up and share stories with candor and listen to other stories with the same level of honesty.

But first let me just take a step back for a minute and tell you why I'm involved in any of this stuff in the first place. I'm highly aware that I'm standing in a room full of amazing professionals. And many of you have chosen to work in the death and dying and grief fields and for that I thank you deeply. Give yourselves a round of applause.

[Crowd Applauding]

Okay, stop. Now, stop. Coz I'm on a timer. [Chuckles] I feel now that it's like 3 o'clock in the afternoon, I feel comfortable enough with you to share that I would've actively not chosen to do something like this with my life. I was on track to produce political **[00:03:00]** satire for a living...where it's like a living. You guys seen a comedy pay check? It's like a living, not even healthcare. But you know, we all know that the universe doesn't give a flying fig about what

your specific plans in life are. It certainly didn't give a flying fig about mine, which was getting to build a life that heavily featured my parents, Shelby and Ray, who I was really close with.

In November, I'm sorry, labor day in 2006. I was winding down a pretty great camping trip with my parents in upstate New York in the Adirondacks. It was amazing. The day started with me jumping into the middle of Lake George; taking a swim with my mom; laughing and talking about plans for the fall; and it ended with me slumped onto a hospital floor in the middle of Jersey... and with my mom in the morgue. They dropped me off a few hours beforehand at my apartment in New York City and [00:04:00] continued on to my hometown in Philadelphia and shortly after they swerved to miss something in the road on the New Jersey turnpike, and the car flipped several times over and my mom was killed immediately. At least that's what I tell myself. Now I have a lot of amazing people in my life but my mom, I'm an only child. She was my person. I mean, look at her, that was ____ like George when I was a little bit younger than then and her life ended that day. And for a long time I honestly had no clue how mine was going to continue in a way that was meaningful or happy. And I like being happy and I like being full of meaning.

Fast forward to November 2013, Gaby and I had just launched our website, *Modern Loss*. And we had done it well, enormously almost insultingly pregnant. Talk about leaning then [00:05:00] or crazy. Now by that point, I felt pretty well versed in the cornucopia of absurd and embarrassing and gut-wrenching experiences that grief just serves up on a daily basis, right? Because by the point, I hadn't just lost my mom! In 2010 right before the holidays, December 17th, coming up on the anniversary, my dad took a cruise to the Caribbean and late one night, he had a heart attack, and he came back dead. And I was 34.

Now Gaby and I had spent years sifting through different communities online, looking for support, looking for connection, and we felt like we could just do better. What we found was what I'd like to think of community websites that were driven with kind of like a pop psychology of grief anchored and platitudes best served for a throw pillow project, you know? [Chuckles] They're in a better place, it takes a year, things involving like doors closing and windows opening and oppor — I don't know, things that just like didn't resonate [00:06:00] with me which is why I can't remember them, and we saw a white space just to serve a wider community of people who were looking to feel assured that they weren't alone even when they felt alone. A website that could publish high quality, personal essays that were narrowly focused around one aspect of the very long arc of the grief experience but anchored with the backbone of practical resources: legal; financial; therapeutic; advice columns; gift guides that included suggestions very specifically not involving at a bawl arrangements.

[Crowd Laughing]

Sorry. They hate me by now coz I'm like always — anyway sorry EA [Chuckles] and we just wanted people to be able to stand in their own story and feel drawn out of their isolation and inspired by someone else's and especially a place with lots of room for humour embodiedness and realness amongst the ugly [00:07:00] cries; and we know there are a lot of them, right? Now our readers have took off immediately and I watched as the shares and the retweets ticked upward and upward and upward and I learned what a bounce rate was, and it's like much less cool than I thought it was.

And you know I kept wondering while I was looking at all these numbers, is all of this seemingly inauthentic engagement actually real? Would it actually translate to something meaningful when we show up at these book events, are we gonna hear crickets? Well the short answer, yeah! Our book launch in Brooklyn was standing remotely. There were 230 people, we broke the attendance record for Powerhouse Arena. Even Chelsea Clinton showed up which is great

[Chuckles] and as we traveled from coast to coast on this big national tour, we realised that yeah, it became pretty clear that the accents, even the political slogans, greatly varied from place to place but the **[00:08:00]** intense need for community around grief was the same everywhere. And in fact, we were providing meaningful opportunity for people to gather and connect over their grief across the long archipelago at these events. Now at the same time, oh sorry — in Atlanta, I wanted to mention, I met a group of women and they were amazing and they looked like they'd been best friends for years, and when I asked them about it, they said, "Well, actually we all live on the same block, yeah but we only became really close when one of us saw one of the others reading the book, reading the *Modern Loss* book on the porch and I asked to borrow it because I had lost somebody. And then I lent it to the next neighbour because it turns out she had suffered a miscarriage." and etc. etc. And for the first time, we actually feel like neighbours as opposed to people who lived on the same block.

[Crowd Applauding].

It's them. They're amazing. In Austin, we did a great live story- **[00:09:00]** telling event. And two women showed up who had experienced stillbirth. They'd never met each other before and they left together. And at Kripalu, I was leading a workshop on owning your narrative. Kripalu's a retreat centre in Western Massachusetts and I met really awesome women in their twenties who had insultingly lost both of her parents within just over a year, to the same type of cancer. And I found out that she was actually inspired by that retreat to start her own personal project around loss, in interestingly an online line.

Speaking of online, around the same time that I was schlepping around the country, coz it really felt like schlepping, I was very heavily administering our closed online Facebook book group and I've started that a few months before the book came out and at the beginning, I had to seed a lot of conversations. The group was **[00:10:00]** small and people were kind of shy. But then people started inviting everybody and by the 5s and by the 10s and all of a sudden the exchanges flowed and I paid very close attention. People were kind to each other. They offered really great advice on everything from the excruciating to the absurd, they were inspiring. They shared really freaking funny stories about funerals gone wrong or all the other things you're not supposed to laugh about in casual conversation and if you wanna know my favorite, I'll tell you. It's the time that a woman's toddler deleted out "Happy Birthday!" Just as her grandfather's coffin was started getting lowered into the ground and clearly...

[Crowd Laughing]

... that's awesome! And she should definitely work in comedy. [Laughing] But yeah I mean these people were connecting with each other and it was incredible. And I saw that the online — whenever **[00:11:00]** someone joined group, they were always met with a very warm welcome and they were so glad you're here. And now, look, you can cite any study that you like about how social media is gonna totally decimate your mental health and I can point you to a couple choice of twitter feeds that are accomplishing that for some of us, but in the conversation about grief, that's just not what my experience was.

In our online group, I saw a friendship bloom between a Texan and a Chicagoan who had met because of our Father's Day gift swap, during which I crazily matched 150 perfect strangers from all over the country who just needed an outlet for the day. I saw — gosh, what else — I saw Sia, oh wait, who's [Mumbling] I saw, yes, Kareen from Baltimore, basically nearly singlehandedly keep a couple dozen people's sane who were hanging on as they brace **[00:12:00]** themselves for their first motherless Mother's Day or a child's Mother's Day. And I watched a bunch of people consider who they might reach out to after Sia told us all about the CEO in our company. The one who just barrelled his way in and made no friends in the

process. But then his wife died of a brain tumor, and her dad had been murdered several months beforehand and she left him the *Modern Loss* book on his desk. And the next morning, he left her a note on hers that made her bawl and she told all of us, “You know, this dude was never one of us, now he’s one of my people.” And so, the joke was kind of on me. Here I was assuming that an online community is only as legitimate as the in-person one that it spurs on but in fact, I was being proven wrong over and over again by the very community that had grown up around me. More import — what I... you know a lot of us do best with in-person **[00:13:00]** and their actions, right? Especially when it comes to grief. We deal well when we can read someone’s energy in the room or read their expressions, we can hug them or share an enormous plate of fries while commiserating or for our Canadian friends, “poutine.” For others, we work best online especially when the topic is grief, which is something that so many of us go to such great lengths to avoid facing head on. Online, such as the group that we run at *Modern Loss*, we provided refreshing anonymity away from family and friends who someone might not want to burden and also a feeling of being included in the conversation even if you don’t feel like speaking up.

So what I learned from this is that *Modern Loss* has actually provided a platform where both types of people can engage. And some of us need both and I’m one of them. More important, it became very clear to me **[00:14:00]** that the most important thing is that the more we put ourselves out there, to share our stories with honesty, the more we will reap the rewards of doing so. *Modern Loss* was built on a tenet that storytelling is the change-maker. And I’m not the only person who gets that, neither is Gaby. Barack Obama gets it. He just talked about how powerful the exercise of storytelling is because after you’ve done so, you find you have a different relationship with that person than you did beforehand. A sense of something shared. A community that’s just waiting to be unearthed. Congressman Will Heard and Betty O’Rourke get it. I don’t know if you guys remember... Last winter there was this huge snowstorm that forced them to drive from San Antonio to DC, maybe you’re not like “nose” the politics like I am but I actively remember this. And they discovered all these commonalities along the way so they ended up live streaming this bipartisan road trip **[00:15:00]** [Chuckles] and it was really awesome! I don’t know how well they saw eye to eye beforehand, and I have no idea if they see eye to eye now, but I’d wager that belting out ring of fire across half a dozen states and then scarfing down donuts in front of Graceland, is gonna engender a whole lot of goodwill between two people who are on opposite sides of the aisle. Hell! Even the Quera guys get it. We start every episode looking at one of the subject matters kind of through the stereotype that they present and we end it seeing them as a human being. You guys, I don’t know about you but I feel like we are so rapidly losing any sense of commonality in this country. And we so desperately need to do the opposite and pull each other in. It is an imperative right now for us to figure out a way to build bridges. And loss, is what cuts across all the noise.

When you are dealing **[00:16:00]** with grief, you have no choice but to find where your authentic connections are. That’s a good thing for community and a really good thing for the world at large. In grief, all of our differences are levelled. We’re all going to experience loss and I just feel like if you hear someone’s story of deep grief, you’re probably gonna be less inclined to like, go to war with them. Maybe not let them into the country, I don’t know if that makes sense and — or maybe just not judge them harshly. I don’t know, just a thought. Grief is the great leveller and what we’re all loss and what I didn’t understand that night when I struggled to absorb the fact that my mom was dead, was that grief was not a black and white thing. Loss is not a black and white thing. It seemed at that night, it actually provide with so much color and so many different shades of lightness and dark and **[00:17:00]** and often when you least expect it to. So the next time you find yourself in a situation where grief is the topic at hand, whether it’s a chosen one or one that’s unavoidable, whether you’re a physician who’s done this thing a hundred times over or like, a marketing manager who’s trying to help out a buddy who’s going through a tough time, whether you’re in an online forum or at a cocktail party, just

remember, that if you can allow yourself to open up and share your story with rawness and honesty and listen to that person's with the same mindset, you might create your own ripple effect that might only alter that person's day but might alter their entire grief trajectory. One of the last things my mom said to me the night that she died was, "Take care of my girl." It was kind of her catchphrase for me coz she knew I could be marvellously and that's code for annoyingly **[00:18:00]** self deprecating. And I missed her so much, I would do anything to get her back here so that she could meet her grandchildren and she could meet my husband and she could see the absolute miracle that is my hair getting increasingly blonder...

[Crowd Laughing]

... naturally, with each passing year, thank you. But she's dead. And I do what I do, what I can do because of it. And part of that is fostering this community that has given me back so much in return. I might have lost my person the night that she died but I found my people because of it. Thank you.

[Crowd Applauding]

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