



## 235: On Grief and Healing with Amanda Held Opelt

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 235. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Today, I'm glad to talk with author, speaker, and songwriter Amanda Held Opelt. She writes about faith, grief, and creativity. And she believes in the power of community ritual, shared worship, and storytelling to heal even our deepest wounds. Amanda is well acquainted with grief after experiencing a profound season of loss, including when her only sister, Author Rachel Held Evans, died suddenly in 2019.

I first started following Amanda's work after watching online as she delivered the eulogy at Rachel's funeral. Her words and stories about her sister have stayed with so many of us since hearing them that day. So when I learned she had written a book about her own grief as well as grief rituals from around the world, I knew I wanted to have this conversation with her on The Next Right Thing. If you find yourself in the midst of the fog of grief or want to grow in your understanding of what grievers are going through, listen in.

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Emily:  
Amanda, welcome to The Next Right Thing.

Amanda Held Opelt:  
Emily, thank you for having me.

Emily:  
I'm so glad you're here. Well, for years I have been writing about and talking about the simple soulful practice of doing the next right thing in times of confusion, hesitation, or decision fatigue, but I've discovered we need this practice of knowing and doing one next right thing at a very practical and somatic level, perhaps most of all, when we're grieving. And you write beautifully, I might add, about rituals of grief and healing in your brand new book, *A Hole in the World*. Would you be willing to begin today by telling us in what ways was exploring these grief rituals, your next right thing?

Amanda Held Opelt:  
Well, I think probably like most people who have experienced a catastrophic life changing loss, the disorientation of that experience, you're just not really sure what to do next, you're not sure what to say, you're not sure what to do with this kind of complex storm of emotions that you're experiencing. And so for me, learning about what people throughout history and in various cultures have done as their next

right thing, as their next step, it really helped me first, I think, to identify and name some of the emotions I was experiencing as complex as they were. And then, like you said, it gave something for my body to do, for my hands, my feet to do when, like you said, I really had no clue. I think I've said it multiple times to many people in many conversations, grief makes novices of all of us no matter how prepared we may be with a sound theology of suffering or ... No matter how much kind of emotional fortitude we may think we have, we're all beginners when it comes to mortality and losing someone we love. And so this kind of script of here are some things to do and to say when you have no idea what to do and say, I just found to be really practically helpful.

Emily:

You share at the beginning of your work about several losses that you suffered right in a row. And I'm curious. I know there are so many people who are experiencing loss even as we speak or who either have just come out of a new reality before and after if you will, or getting ready to enter one. So I'm curious if you would just give us a little bit of context as to what precipitated your real need to write this work.

Amanda Held Opelt:

Right. Well, I think part of my story is just what a beautiful, and blessed, and charmed childhood I had. I had a very stable household growing up. I had a life that was very much free of trauma. So I don't know why I thought that my life, that had been fairly easy and privileged up into a point, would continue that way into perpetuity. But I just kind of deep down thought that's how it would always be. I thought that people who experienced trauma or sudden death of someone young that they loved, I don't know, I just kind of thought of that as something that happened to other people and didn't happen to me. I had this illusion of safety, but then starting in my early to mid 30s, just kind of a series of losses occurred in my life.

It started with the loss of my grandmother, who I was really close to. She lived near me and she passed away while I was on a work trip in East Africa. And so I wasn't able to get a flight out of Congo in time to be home for that funeral in order to grieve that loss. Shortly after that, another work trip took me to a war zone, Northern Iraq. This was during the time that Iraqi forces were trying to retake control of the country from ISIS. And so the organization I was with set up a field hospital to minister to the sick and dying who were coming out of that city, that war torn city. So just seeing the wounds of war firsthand and the trauma that had been inflicted on people led me to experience my own almost secondary or vicarious trauma to some degree. The losses became even more personal. Then shortly after that, I experienced my first of what would end up being three miscarriages after a season of infertility.

So just the anxiety of that, the physicality of that experience, the grief and the mystery in some ways of what had happened, why did we lose these babies, was something I struggled to grapple with. And then finally, what was probably the most life altering loss was the sudden death of my only sister. My older sister, who was perfectly healthy, 37 years old, she had a three-year-old and a one-year-old, became ill with the flu. She struggled to recover and started having brain seizures and died very suddenly. And to rebuild our family life after a loss like that was just ... Again, it was like you said. It was one of those before and after, like an Adam bomb goes off in your life and you don't even know where to start. And all of this happened over the course of about three or four years. And so just not even having a minute to kind of catch your breath from one hit to the other, that's really what precipitated the journaling, the reflection, the study of scripture, digging deeper into what scripture has to say, and honestly, what does history have to tell us about grief and how people have handled these kind of losses in the past?

Emily:

Well, thank you for sharing all of that with us, Amanda. I think it's helpful to hear the specificity of where you write from and where you are sitting really on the front row of devastating loss. I watched the funeral from beginning to end and two things struck me. Your family intentionally held a funeral, from what I

could tell, not a celebration of life. And your eulogy, the way you spoke of your sister, something shifted in me that day and I can't even articulate it. I won't try, but I will just say, I think that was one of those moments where you think about decisions that must have been made behind the scenes. Your family did not have to choose to allow the world into that room, but allowing us to participate from a distance in that funeral ritual was a gift I don't think a lot of us knew to ask for. So on behalf of the internet, I thank you for that decision.

Amanda Held Opelt:  
Right.

Emily:

But you say yourself, speaking of ritual, that ritual is not magic. And I love this line. You write, "But what it is is like smooth stones stretched across a rushing river. They provide the next right step across the torrent and set our bodies in motion." And you say you needed time honored traditions and tested rituals. You said, "Almost something that has been done before me, that has been tried and tested." Curious if you could just give us a little taste of some of those rituals that you have studied and explored. There's some really interesting and fascinating rituals. I would love to hear if you could share what some of those are and then I have a question about maybe what the opposite of those would be.

Amanda Held Opelt:

Yeah. I think the ritual that first grabbed my attention was the ritual of Irish keening. And for those who aren't familiar, keening is the practice of wailing at a funeral. Wailing is practiced all over the world and still currently practice in many cultures. But Western culture has really gotten away from this practice of wailing, of this really emotive, expressive form of grief. We tend, in the West, to try to be a little bit more subdued in our grief. We like decorum and dignity per se, in our grief. But what the Irish used to do, this is back before the 1950s when the practice started to die out, is they would have women in the community that would serve as these lead keeners and they would come into the home where the wake was. So at an Irish wake. You can imagine from some of the stereotypes. You have the whole community there, there's food, there's drinks, they're paying tribute to the person who died, but the wailers would come and they would kind of initiate the climax of the wake, which was a time of just public crying.

They would sometimes sing songs, attribute to the person that had died, but mostly it was just moans, and groans, and screams, and people would literally lose it together in community, completely fall apart. And they would cry and pay tribute to the one who had just died, but they would also be crying over loved ones that they had lost 10 years ago, five years ago, acknowledging that those griefs still stay with us. And what struck me about this practice was just how different it was from our funerals. As much as we tried to be honest about the reality of Rachel's loss at her funeral, again, we called it a funeral, we named that she had died. We used that vocabulary to be honest about how devastated we were. We still kind of kept it together. I think if you were to really just fall apart and wail and weep at a funeral, people would say, "Well, that person's not okay. They're not handling themselves." Whereas the Irish would say, "Wait a minute. If you don't cry, if you don't fall apart, you're probably not being honest with yourself about how truly awful this is."

So that was one, again, that I think just kind of named an emotion that existed in me that I was trying to stuff down, and that was anguish. That was just complete despair and that was a feeling I didn't want to feel. And so I was stuffing it, and stuffing it, and stuffing. Other rituals that I studied, like covering mirrors, which is the practice of when someone dies. The superstition is you cover the mirror because if you see your reflection next, you'll be the next one to die. Or the ritual of telling the bees. Which is the belief that if you don't tell the bees if someone in the household had died, then the bees will fly away or they'll die too.

Amanda Held Opelt:

So it's kind of those rituals to me are rooted in superstition, but they also name the fear that we all experience in the aftermath of death. This kind of encounter that we have with our precarity, with how fragile life really is, and just doing anything you can to kind of control the situation. So while I might not actually put into practice some of these rituals ... Although I could tell the bees. My husband is a beekeeper. So I suppose we could go and put the bees in mourning and tell them when anything bad happens. The thing that helped me most in studying the ritual was naming the emotion that was happening, that I was struggling to identify and just giving me kind of this guidance that you need to tend to this. There's a woman named Dr. [Inaudible 00:13:51] that talks a lot about creating encounters for your pain. You need to create an encounter with your pain so that you can process it, so that you can work through it. Because as long as we ignore, and stuff, and distract ourselves, we won't really truly know how we're feeling.

Emily:

It's almost like you're giving us some back doors to enter into our grief in ways that are just kind of ... Like telling the bees. I've not heard of that before, until I read that chapter. And it's such a strange ... it's almost funny in a way. It kind of makes you smile. Like, "I'm going to go tell the bees now." There's sort of a refreshing perspective there because grief is already ... Everything is so upside down. That, "Well, let's just go tell the bees." And I think that posture really it's telling the truth. All of these rituals are bringing us in different ways to find a way to somehow stop trying to kid ourselves and tell this painful truth. Would you agree with that?

Amanda Held Opelt:

100%. I think what's interesting is as Christians, we tend to look down on superstition a little bit. And I totally understand that because it's not helpful to believe things that aren't true or to live in fear of things that cannot harm us. But what I actually like about a superstition and learned from these superstitions was that they at least acknowledge and name the mystery of death. We don't have high tolerance for mystery as American modern evangelicals and even just modern Americans. Now we have germ theory. We know how to like pinpoint what it is that a person dies from. And so there's a little bit maybe less scientific mystery around mortality, but there is still deep existential mystery around mortality. Again, I don't know that we acknowledge that communally together, about how scary, and big, and frightening that can feel. Whereas a superstition kind of leans into our child likeness in some way that I found really interesting and tried to be curious about and lean into. Again, I don't know that I'll practice some of these superstitions, but I am learning to make space for my own lack of understanding and make space for mystery in a new way.

Emily:

You've touched on this already, but I'll ask the question and see if you have anything to add. What would you say is the opposite of grief rituals and what impact does practicing the opposite of these rituals have on the grieving and healing process?

Amanda Held Opelt:

Right. I think any mechanism that we use to numb is a way of avoiding those important encounters that we need to have with our pain. Now, listen, I want to be careful and say that I am not saying that it is wrong to sometimes just take time away from your sorrow. And if that means that you want to watch reruns on Netflix or you need to listen to music and just not think about it. I read a lot about psychologists who talk about this healthy oscillation between encountering your grief and stepping away from it, stepping back from it, because if we were fully immersed in it 24/7, we probably couldn't survive that, but I'm afraid we've leaned too far into the numbing, into the avoiding such that we never encounter our pain. So again, some of these numbing mechanisms that we use, busyness, performance, honestly ... And I'm just being really vulnerable here, is sometimes I think writing this book was kind of either a healthy

coping mechanism or maybe a way of avoiding my pain by approaching it academically. But in other ways, it also forced me to encounter my pain and created space for that. So there are lots of things all of us do to numb our sorrow. And I would say that's the opposite of a grief ritual. That's an avoidance ritual, and we're very good at those.

Emily:

No kidding. I'm so glad you said that, Amanda, and thank you for that little peek into your own process, because, and you mentioned this in your writing, that maybe one day in the future, you will regret having written a book only three years in to this process. But I actually think, just speaking as from writer to writer, this was a snapshot. This was a true snapshot in your own grief and healing journey and anyone who goes through a deep loss, which I would venture to say at some point in our lives, most of us will, that we need those witnesses along the way in every step of the process. So sure. 10 years from now, might you write a different book? Yeah. But man, we need this one and I'm so glad that you have coped well, my dear, deciding to write it, and as you said, to approach it in an academic way, which I think is a curious way of saying it, but look at you experiencing it as you've had to face it in maybe in your own grief ritual of writing through kind of this backdoor way.

Emily:

You encourage us to get lost in the landscape of grief. And I know you sort of just said there is also this there's kind of a give and take to that. And I think you recognize this is a risky and terrifying statement. What would you say to someone who already feels lost in griefs landscape and wants nothing more than to find her way out?

Amanda Held Opelt:

That's such a good question, Emily. And I think the more I live the life of the afterlife, life after the one that you loved, I think I'm learning that curiosity really does make a wonderful companion in grief. Maybe that is what led me to write the book and to study this. I was just so curious about what I was experiencing and what other people have experienced. And so for someone who's truly lost in the landscape of grief, I don't have any platitudes to offer to kind of make it better, but I will say that there are lessons to be learned in this landscape. And I don't think that makes it right. I don't think that when we learn all these wonderful lessons and become stronger through our grief, I don't think that totally ever redeems the loss. I think the loss will always be bad and we can always say that it was bad. It doesn't have to be transformed as good because good things happened after the bad thing. It will always be bad, but the good things can run in parallel to the bad thing.

You can experience joy. Like I said, curiosity and then I think patience are your greatest virtues when it comes to grief because the road is long and I believe you will always carry this burden of grief with you, but you do develop the strength to carry it. You do develop the skillset I think that's required to live a life of grief. And so to someone who's in the thick of it, who's really deep in the woods of it and can't see a way out, I would just say, be patient with yourself. You will develop the strength to carry this. Be a noticer of what God is actually doing in your life. Notice the joy. It's really hard to notice beautiful things when you're in such darkness, but try to notice the beautiful things around you. And I really do believe that God is with us. Even when we don't feel his presence like we thought we would, I still believe he is present in so many powerful ways in our sorrow.

Emily:

I'm so glad you mentioned that, the gift of presence. One of the grief rituals that I was most particularly compelled by is the Jewish practice of sitting shiva maybe because, as a spiritual director, that's the one that feels most familiar to me. That one feels like, "Oh yeah. I can do this with people." But how would you encourage this movement of presence for those of us who maybe are on the margins or on the sidelines of those who are in the center of grief? What would you say to those who want to enter into that space, but we don't know what to say, or we want to be helpful, or we don't want to ... These days, a lot of

us are really aware of saying the wrong thing and how that can cause harm, but then we go the other way and saying nothing at all. So what would you say to encourage those of us on the margins around grief?

Amanda Held Opelt:

Yeah. You've named something really important. I think I'm very nervous to tell people what not to say to a griever because I'm so afraid of making people scared to say anything at all. We talk a lot about this now, what not to say to a griever. Again, I think people are, are reacting by saying, "Well, I there's too many pitfalls. I don't want to say the wrong thing." And I can promise you that your imperfect presence is better than your absence and your imperfect words are better than your silence. And so I would say to anyone who wants to know how to be present with a griever ... Yeah. I was really, really blessed to have my friend, Shelly, who grew up in Israel, whose Jewish, share with me what the practice of shiva had met in her life. And she said the visitors of shiva look to the friends of Job on what not to do with a griever. Remember the friends of Job spent a lot of time trying to explain his suffering, trying to give him instruction on what to do next, trying to build for him, scaffolding of a theology of suffering when really what he needed was just support, presence, kindness. And so I think that's the best thing you can do.

Shelly told me that the visitors of shiva mirror the actions and the words of the griever. And so if the person that you're trying to comfort is crying, it's okay to cry with them. If the person that you're trying to comfort is laughing, then laugh with them. Grievers want to laugh too. They sometimes want to talk about other things than what they lost. And if the person that is grieving is sharing stories, then you can share stories too. And this is how it's practiced in the Shiva Home. And I just thought, you know what? That is such a good takeaway because I think anyone can hold onto that. It's hard to memorize lines to say as a condoler offering condolence, but it's easy to remember the mirror. Mirror the person who's grieving. Be with them in the way that they are being in that moment.

Emily:

Oh, that's good. It's difficult to memorize the lines, but it's easy to remember the mirror. I love that. That's a great word. Amanda, I'm going to ask you a question I ask all guests at the end of our conversation. And then after you answer the question that I'm going to ask you, I'd love for you to just close out our time in reading a small section from *A Hole in the World*. So how does that sound? Feel good about it.

Amanda Held Opelt:  
Sounds great.

Emily:

Great. Well, Amanda, tell us, and there's no wrong answer, what is your next right thing?

Amanda Held Opelt:

My next right thing is kindness to my body. I am the kind of person that thinks that I can think my way out of any weariness. I have significantly underestimated the toll that all of this grief, not just in the particulars of my story, but we've all lived through a global pandemic and unprecedented times. And it's taken a toll on my body, not just my heart, not just my mind. I pay attention to those things well. I often do not pay attention to the fragility of my own body. That's probably a little bit of pride, but I think that's my next right thing. Sleep. We prioritize sleep as much as we can in my house with a three-year-old and one-year-old. Good food, laughter, walks, sunshine. Those things are my next right thing.

Emily:

That sounds beautiful. What lovely steps into your next right thing? Well, Amanda, close us out with some words from chapter two of *A Hole in the World*.

Amanda Held Opelt:

"You may not like who you are for a while, maybe a long while after grief. It is wise I think to cover your

mirrors after the death of someone or something you love. Suspend your expectations of yourself. Stop the performance. Stop worrying about appearances. Live fully into the new normal. Ask your friends to cover the mirrors for you. Accept grace from others and show grace to yourself. I do not think we can say of grief, this too shall pass. There is no going back. A new landscape has been carved by grief's rushing waters. And if we are to survive, we must make a home in it, however that might look. For a time, it may feel like a wilderness, but there is an invitation to wisdom and acceptance in this wasteland. There is a new you to discover and it may be a holy encounter. And in fact, the wilderness is a great place for death and rebirth, for getting lost and then being found. And sometimes, like our ancestors experience of glimpsing their reflection in a mirror for the first time, the encounter may be transcended."

Emily:  
Amen.

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Thanks for listening to episode 235 of *The Next Right Thing*. I desperately wish there wasn't a need for conversations like this for us to explore the pain and disorientation of grief and loss, but we all know there is a great need for it. And I'm deeply grateful for thoughtful artists like Amanda for doing the hard work of facing the grief and telling the truth about it.

If you want to learn more about finding hope and rituals of grief and healing, I hope you'll grab a copy of Amanda Held Opelt's brand new book, *A Hole in the World*. You can find her online at [amandaheldopelt.com](http://amandaheldopelt.com), that's O-P-E-L-T, or on Instagram @amandaheldopelt. And fun fact, she's also a beautiful vocalist and songwriter. And you can learn more about her music on her website as well. Well, as always, you can find me at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com) or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. A big thanks to the team at Unmutable for editing these episodes and Leah Jarvis for organizing our show notes.

Well, in closing, I wanted to read for you a few more final words from *A Hole in the World*. "Learning to love people in death, it turns out, is a lot like learning to love them in life. No one is perfect. No one loves perfectly. To mourn well is to hold together in the space of your heart multiple complex emotions at once. Sadness, regret, anger, longing, nostalgia, all of these are holy feelings and must not be denied. Honoring the memory of the one you loved doesn't require you to idealize them. They don't need your patronization. To honor them means to love them because of and sometimes in spite of who they really were. And to honor your own sorrow, you must love and accept yourself no matter the mistakes you've made. One of the most powerful things about the gospel is that it teaches us people do not have to be perfect to be loved, cherished, and grieved when they are gone. And I don't have to be perfect to be allowed to grieve. It is a gift to bear witness to the life of another." Thank you for those beautiful words, Amanda, and thank you for listening. I'll see you next time.