
GRIEF TRAVEL

GRIEF TRAVEL

How to plan a meaningful trip after loss

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INTRODUCTION

A companion on the road of grief

This book was born from the same sorrow that shaped *Wild and Holy*—a journey through Italy that began as a pilgrimage and became a profound encounter with grief, guilt, and grace. As I walked through ancient ruins, candlelit cathedrals, and quiet olive groves, I discovered something unexpected: that movement itself—across landscapes and inner thresholds—can help us carry what feels too heavy to hold in one place.

Grief Travel is not a memoir like *Wild and Holy*; instead, it is a companion guide for those who feel the pull to move while mourning. It's for anyone who senses that being in a new place, even for a short time, might offer fresh perspective, ritual, or rest. Whether you are planning a sacred pilgrimage across the world or a quiet afternoon retreat just miles from home, this book is here to support you.

You'll find practical advice, reflection prompts, simple rituals, and gentle encouragement to help you prepare for your journey—wherever it may lead. These pages were written with love for those who want to travel not to escape grief, but to walk with it, honoring its presence and allowing it to unfold along the way.

Let this be your guide and companion—a small lantern to hold as you make your way through the beautiful and broken terrain of love and loss.

WHAT IS GRIEF TRAVEL

Grief in motion

In 2009, my husband and I set off for a long-planned “second honeymoon” in Italy. It was meant to be a celebration — a dream vacation through the sacred art and sunlit streets of Rome, Florence, and Assisi.

But just hours before we boarded the plane, I received devastating news: a young patient of mine had died from H1N1 flu. His sudden death shattered my heart and triggered a second wave of sorrow — unhealed grief and guilt still lingering from my father’s suicide twenty years earlier.

I considered canceling the trip. The weight of grief was so disorienting, so heavy, I wasn’t sure I could bear it in a foreign land. But I went. And what unfolded over the next two weeks was nothing like what I had imagined — it was deeper, darker, more painful, and, paradoxically, more beautiful than any vacation I had ever taken.

That trip became my first experience with what I now call grief travel.

Grief, which had arrived as an uninvited companion, ultimately became a sacred guide. I didn't know it at the time, but I was mourning — not just grieving — and the streets of Italy became my sanctuary.

The full story is told in *Wild and Holy: A Journey Through Grief, Guilt, and Grace in Italy*. But what I share here is what came after.

Since that first fateful trip, I've returned again and again to travel as a form of healing—for losses large and small. I've grieved the deaths of loved ones, the heartbreak of aging, the ache of a world in crisis. I've mourned silently while walking through cathedrals and vineyards, museums and mountain trails.

Because grief doesn't only arrive after death.

It comes after a retirement.

A diagnosis.

A move.

A fractured friendship.

A child's pain you cannot fix.

A life you thought you'd have.

And in every case, I've found that grief needs movement—and travel can be the container.

TRAVEL AS A FORM OF MOURNING

One of the greatest misunderstandings about grief is the belief that time alone will heal it. But grief—the inner, emotional experience of loss—doesn't simply disappear. It needs somewhere to go. That outward movement is called mourning.

Grief vs. Mourning: The Essential Distinction

Grief is internal. It's the wordless ache, the private sorrow, the emotional wound.

Mourning is external. It's how we give voice to grief — through ritual, storytelling, prayer, movement, tears, pilgrimage, or community.

Grief happens to us. Mourning is what we do with it.

Why Mourning Matters

Without mourning, grief has nowhere to go. It stays trapped in the heart, the body, and the psyche—unspoken, unprocessed, unresolved.

Mourning alchemizes grief. It transforms pain into meaning, silence into expression, loneliness into communion.

Psychologically, mourning is essential for integrating loss. Spiritually, it has been practiced for centuries through sacred rites, shared rituals, and personal acts of remembrance.

A REFLECTION FROM MY JOURNEY

In Italy, I began to understand this difference.

I had carried grief for decades — but I had never mourned.

The novena prayers I spoke in ancient chapels were more than spiritual gestures. They were acts of mourning. Each step I took, each candle lit, each whispered prayer gave my grief form and direction.

Through art, architecture, food, ritual, and beauty — I was creating space for my sorrow.

And that is what grief travel is.

It is not to distract or escape from sorrow. But grief travel is a way of honoring the sorrow, by moving with it, not away from it.

Grief is the pain we carry, mourning is the action we take. And travel is a particularly effective form of mourning.

WHY TRAVEL HELPS GRIEF

When I first discovered how transformative travel could be in the midst of grief, I didn't have a framework for understanding it. I only knew that something shifted. Movement helped. Beauty helped. Being somewhere new gave me space to feel what I hadn't been able to feel before.

But over time, I've come to see that grief and travel are natural companions — and science offers us some language for why.

Grief as Change-Maker

Grief reshapes us. It lowers our defenses, disrupts our identity, and softens our fixed ways of seeing the world. In the wake of a loss, we are more open — more vulnerable, yes, but also more receptive to transformation.

Travel, too, is a change-maker. It asks us to leave behind the known and step into the unfamiliar. It invites humility, curiosity, and presence — precisely the qualities that grief, when honored, can awaken in us.

Together, grief and travel become a kind of alchemy. As one disorients, the other reorients.

As one breaks us open, the other helps us begin to reassemble.

“ *From loss there can be gain.*

— TRANSFORMED BY TRAUMA: STORIES OF
POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Bret Moore describe this phenomenon as post-traumatic growth: the idea that intense disruption can spark not just survival, but transformation. According to their research, challenges to the usual way of living can set in motion an exploration of new ways of thinking and navigating life.

Grief is one such challenge. Travel offers one such exploration.

What the Science Says About Travel

Beyond anecdotal insight, there is growing evidence that travel has measurable benefits for the body, mind, and spirit — especially in times of stress or transition:

- Stronger immune function — due to exposure to diverse microorganisms
- Improved creativity — from novel sensory input and problem-solving
- Reduced stress and depression — through movement, nature, and disconnection from daily pressures
- Increased happiness — planning a trip has been shown to boost well-being even before the travel begins

“ *There are lots of psychological benefits from change of venue ... the mind can reset, as does the body, with stress relief the main outcome.*

— DR. MARGARET J. KING, CENTER FOR
CULTURAL STUDIES & ANALYSIS

Travel Near Water: A Special Kind of Reset

Author Wallace J. Nichols, in his book *Blue Mind*, explores the power of being near water to calm the nervous system and restore emotional balance. He writes that being near, in, on, or under water can make us happier, healthier, more connected, and better at what we do.

In grief, when emotions are turbulent and the world feels disordered, travel to coastal places, lakes, or rivers may offer a kind of emotional grounding — a way to return to a calmer state of being.

Experiences Over Things

A 2010 Cornell University study found that people derive more lasting happiness from experiences than from material possessions. In grief, this matters. Because what we crave is meaning, not distraction. What we need is connection, not accumulation.

Travel gives us stories, not souvenirs; encounters, not just events.

Travel Helps Us Move with Grief

When we grieve, everything in us resists the new reality. We long for what was. We don't want to change — and yet we must.

Travel helps us practice that change. It gets us out of our stuck routines and invites us to see the world — and ourselves — with new eyes.

Grief opens the heart.

Travel opens the world.

Together, they open a path to healing.

WHO DOES IT HELP – AND WHO NOT

Not every grieving person is ready to travel.

In the early days of loss — when everything feels raw, surreal, and unbearable — the idea of packing a suitcase or navigating airport security may feel impossible, even cruel. And that's okay.

Grief travel is not meant to be a prescription.

It's an invitation to a gentle path that may feel right — but not right away.

Some people find that travel helps after the initial fog of shock has begun to lift. Others may feel called to go somewhere immediately — to walk, weep, pray, or simply escape. And some may find that home is the only place they can be for a long time.

If you're not ready to move outward, you're not doing it wrong. You're honoring your own rhythm — and that, too, is sacred.

Signs You Might Be Ready for Grief Travel:

- You feel a desire to mark or ritualize your loss in some way.
- You're able to tolerate emotional triggers and waves of sadness without becoming destabilized.
- You're yearning for beauty, spaciousness, or solitude.
- You want to reconnect with something larger than yourself — nature, history, art, culture, the sacred.
- You're seeking meaning, integration, or simply a change in perspective.

Signs You Might Not Be Ready Yet:

- You're still in deep shock or denial.
- Daily functioning feels nearly impossible.

- You're struggling to eat, sleep, or regulate your emotions.
- You're unable to make basic decisions or feel overwhelmed by logistics.
- You're dealing with unresolved trauma that may surface intensely in unfamiliar environments.

Grief travel can be profoundly healing — when the timing is right. If you're not there yet, this book can still be a companion. It may prepare the way for a future journey, or offer comfort through stories, insights, and ideas that affirm your path, wherever you are.

You don't have to go far to mourn. Sometimes the longest pilgrimage is the one within.

HOW TRAVEL HELPS YOU PROCESS GRIEF

Providing a container for our sorrow

A few years after our first Italy trip, my husband and I were traveling abroad again when we received devastating news: our beloved brother-in-law had died suddenly back home. We were stunned. And unable to change our flight reservations to return immediately, we had no choice but to continue our travels—grief-stricken, aching to be with family.

To our surprise, something began to shift in those days. As we wandered unfamiliar streets and absorbed unfamiliar landscapes, we found unexpected comfort. Without knowing it, we were practicing grief travel again. And it was offering us solace.

You might wonder how travel could help someone in the depths of grief. Isn't it a distraction, a detour, a way of avoiding the pain?

But what I've discovered is quite the opposite. Travel can be a container for grief — one that supports, awakens, and even transforms us.

Here are some of the ways I've learned that travel can support the grieving heart:

LEAVING THE COMFORT ZONE

The death of a loved one changes everything. It pulls the ground out from beneath our feet and leaves us longing for a return to the old normal — the life we once knew. But there's no going back. Grief asks us to live in new terrain — and that's where travel becomes an ally.

When we leave our comfort zone and enter unfamiliar territory, we begin to practice navigating change. We build tolerance for uncertainty. We stretch ourselves. We grow.

Travel gently rehearses what grief demands: adaptability, presence, and openness to a world that no longer looks the same. When you're in a place where even the grocery store feels unfamiliar, your nervous system starts to accept that change is survivable.

In this way, travel accelerates the grieving process — not by forcing it, but by offering a new rhythm to move with.

GAINING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Travel exposes us to new ways of living, loving, and mourning. In every culture, we see the universal thread of loss — and the many ways people respond to it.

I'll never forget standing in the middle of Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, surrounded by thousands of gravestones. Each one was a tribute to someone deeply loved and deeply missed. As I walked among them, my tears flowed freely.

And then I realized:

“I am human in every way. This grief is what it means to be human. I have come to this life to learn to love — and to grieve what I have loved.”

Grief connects us to the great human story. Travel reminds us that we are not alone in our sorrow. It opens our hearts to both the fragility and the beauty of being alive.

DISCOVERING SMALL MOMENTS OF JOY

After my father's death, I spent years in numbness — wrapped in a fog of grief that dulled my senses and dimmed the world.

But travel began to awaken me again.

- The scent of fresh croissants in a French boulangerie.
- The song of a bird echoing through the Swiss Alps.
- The mist of an Icelandic waterfall on my face.
- A spontaneous operatic solo in a quiet Italian piazza.
- The cool taste of German beer on a warm afternoon.

These sensory moments didn't erase my grief — they coexisted with it. And they reminded me that I was still alive. Still capable of joy.

Grief and joy are not opposites.

They are companions. One opens the door to the other.

REMEMBERING WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Travel offers a front-row seat to humanity: its kindness, its heart-break, its hope.

I've watched strangers help each other carry groceries, light candles for loved ones, or kneel in prayer at the same chapel I had just exited in tears. Across every border, I've witnessed the same truth:

Love is what matters.

And grief, I've come to believe, is a form of love — stretched across the veil of absence. It hurts, because it's real. And it heals, because it's holy.

To honor the ones we've lost, we must carry our grief with grace — not by silencing it, but by living fully through it.

Travel has helped me do that.

To wander in strange places and find comfort there.

To love this life, no matter what it brings.

Rather than stay tightly wrapped in sorrow, I've learned to walk forward — tear-streaked and wide-eyed — into the mystery of a world still bursting with beauty.

TYPES OF GRIEF TRAVEL

Let your soul choose the path it needs most

Grief is not one-size-fits-all — and neither is grief travel. Each journey through sorrow is unique, shaped by the kind of loss we've experienced, the season of life we're in, and the inner terrain we must cross to heal.

Some grief trips are restful.

Some are physically demanding.

Some bring clarity, others mystery.

Some help us say goodbye. Others help us say hello again in a new way.

In this chapter, I offer six different types of grief travel — not as rigid categories, but as helpful containers. You may recognize one that speaks to your heart now, and find yourself drawn to another in the future. Let your intuition guide you.

1. RESTORATIVE GRIEF TRAVEL

When you need shelter, softness, and support

If you are in the early days of grief — raw, exhausted, and disoriented — you may need nothing more than rest and refuge. This kind of travel is not about adventure or discovery, but about being held.

Stay with family or friends who can offer you comfort, nourishment, and emotional safety. This is not a time to push yourself — it's a time to let others care for you while you gather strength.

Example:

After my father's death, my husband, children, and I returned to my hometown. My cousin welcomed us into her home and nurtured us for a full week — cooking, caring for the kids, and staying up with me as I cried through the night. I left her home feeling steadier, more grounded, and a little more whole.

When to choose: If you feel emotionally fragile and in need of warmth, not solitude.

2. CONTEMPLATIVE GRIEF TRAVEL

When you're ready to be alone with your sorrow

Once the initial shock of grief softens, you may feel called inward — to reflect, process, and simply be with your emotions. This is the essence of contemplative grief travel.

You might visit a meditation or healing retreat center, a quiet resort, or a remote natural setting that allows for solitude and

introspection. Bring journals, music, spiritual books, art supplies — anything that helps you stay connected to your inner world.

Example:

Years after my father's death, I spent a solo weekend at a hot springs resort in the mountains. There, I confronted old fears, allowed buried anger to rise, and discovered a surprising tenderness — forgiveness — waiting on the other side.

When to choose: If you feel ready to go deep within and can tolerate being alone with your emotions.

3. PHYSICALLY ACTIVE GRIEF TRAVEL

When your body needs to move your sorrow

For some of us, movement is the only way grief can find its way through. Physical activity helps metabolize emotional pain — turning stuck energy into motion.

Consider hiking, walking pilgrimages, biking, kayaking, or even guided adventure travel. These kinds of trips offer a powerful combination of challenge, nature, and emotional release.

Example:

I once joined a 60-mile fundraising walk for breast cancer research, motivated by friends who had died and a niece newly diagnosed. During training and the walk itself, I had countless sacred encounters — with fellow walkers, with nature, with my own soul. The walk became a moving prayer.

When to choose: If grief feels like agitation, restlessness, or overwhelm — and your body craves motion to find peace.

4. COMMEMORATIVE GRIEF TRAVEL

When you want to honor a loved one's memory

Sometimes, the most healing journey is the one that reconnects you to someone you've lost — by walking where they once walked, or visiting places that hold shared memories.

Commemorative grief travel allows you to mourn through remembrance. It's especially powerful near anniversaries, birthdays, or sacred dates.

Example:

After her son Ryder's death, Shelley Buck and her family traveled to Bali — a place that had been transformative for Ryder himself. By retracing his steps, Shelley received signs, synchronicities, and deep healing. She returned home with a sense of peace she hadn't thought possible.

My story:

For years after my father's death, I returned to the mountain cabin he had built — his favorite place on Earth. There, by the stream he loved, I felt his presence. The pain didn't disappear, but it softened into something sacred.

When to choose: If you long to feel close to someone you've lost and want to honor their life in a tangible way.

5. INFORMATIVE GRIEF TRAVEL

When you're searching for answers or meaning

Sometimes grief leaves us with questions — about the past, about our loved one, or about the forces that shaped their life and death. Informative grief travel allows you to seek understanding through history, research, or cultural immersion.

Visit ancestral homelands, historical sites, or places tied to trauma, mystery, or legacy. Let curiosity lead you toward insight.

Example:

When I began researching my father's death by suicide, I discovered that his WWII experiences may have played a significant role. On a later trip to Normandy, I visited Omaha Beach and other sites where he had served. Walking those beaches deepened my understanding of his pain — and allowed me to finally feel a kind of forgiveness and compassion that had eluded me before.

When to choose: If grief has left you with unresolved questions or a longing to make sense of the past.

6. INTUITIVE GRIEF TRAVEL

When you follow a hunch and let wonder be your guide

This kind of travel doesn't begin with a plan. It begins with a nudge — a quiet voice inside that says: "Go here." And then lets the experience unfold.

Intuitive grief travel asks you to trust the mystery. To wander. To let places find you.

Example:

While in France, I felt compelled to take a bus to a nearby village I knew nothing about. Wandering its quiet streets, I stepped into a church and was met with angelic music — a soloist rehearsing. I sat, tears streaming, and let the music hold me. That one unplanned moment changed the entire trip.

When to choose: If you're drawn toward mystery, magic, and the unexplainable — and you're open to signs, symbols, or sacred surprises.

CONCLUSION: WHICH JOURNEY IS YOURS?

As you can see, grief travel takes many forms — and each can be healing in its own way. You may resonate with one type now, and explore another in a different season of life. There is no wrong path.

Ask yourself:

“What is my heart asking for?”

“What do I need in this moment of loss?”

“Where am I being drawn?”

This book will help you answer those questions. For now, trust that your soul knows what it needs. And when the time is right, your path will begin to unfold — one step, one mile, one breath at a time.

HOW TO PLAN GRIEF TRAVEL

Begin where you are and go where your heart leads

This chapter will give you some basics tips for planning your meaningful travel after loss.

WHAT TO BRING: PACKING WITH INTENTION

Grief travel isn't just about where you go — it's about how you go. Packing for a grief journey is different from preparing for a typical vacation. It's not just about being prepared for the terrain — it's about honoring the inner journey you're on as well.

Think of packing as a quiet ritual. What will support you, nourish you, comfort you, and help you stay connected — to yourself, to your grief, and to your loved one?

Essentials for the Journey

Even a short trip benefits from a little planning. Before you head out, take time to gather:

- Maps or downloaded directions (especially in areas with poor signal)

- List of destinations or stops if your grief trip includes more than one location
- Cash or change for entrance fees, tolls, or donations
- Water and snacks to keep your body grounded
- Sunscreen, hat, or rain gear depending on location and season
- Hiking boots, walking shoes, or weather-appropriate layers
- Any required medications or comfort items (e.g., tissues, eye drops, etc.)

Bring a Journal and a Pen

“Your grief has things to say — give it a place to speak.”

A journal is one of the most important items you can bring. It gives your inner world space to unfold. You might write down memories, prayers, reflections, or simply observe what arises as you move through the landscape.

You don't have to write beautifully. Just honestly. Grief is messy, and so is healing. Your journal is meant to be a companion, not a literary masterpiece.

Bring a Camera or Use Your Phone Intentionally

Photographs can serve as sacred markers on your journey — helping you remember not just where you went, but what you felt.

Take photos that capture meaning, emotion, or light — not just scenery. Return to them later when you want to reflect on your progress or share your journey with others.

Optional ritual: Take one photo each day that symbolizes your grief, your growth, or your loved one's presence.

Sacred Items for Ritual and Remembrance

You may also want to bring a few meaningful objects for moments of quiet connection. These small items can turn any location — a park bench, a chapel pew, a forest glade — into a sacred space.

Consider packing:

- A votive or flameless candle
- A photo or small memento of your loved one
- A favorite poem or sacred text
- A music playlist that evokes memories or healing
- A smooth stone or feather to leave as an offering
- A small scarf or cloth to lay out for a moment of remembrance
- A letter to your loved one (to read aloud, burn, or bury)

You don't need to carry much — just what speaks to your soul.

Optional: Ritual Kit for the Road

Some travelers find it helpful to create a portable ritual kit, especially for longer trips or pilgrimages. This could include:

- Essential oils or incense
- A travel-sized altar cloth
- A small journal specifically for messages to your loved one
- A tiny bowl or vessel to hold water, earth, or flowers from meaningful places

Whatever you bring, let it reflect your unique grief — and your unique love.

A Final Note

You don't need to be perfectly prepared to begin your grief journey. But bringing a few intentional items can help you feel supported and grounded as you go. Pack with care and reverence.

Let every item you carry remind you:

“I am walking through grief — and I am not alone.”

WHEN TO GO:

Trusting the Timing of Your Grief

One of the most common questions people ask is:

“How soon should I travel after a loss?”

The answer, of course, is: It depends.

Grief is not linear. Some people are drawn to travel almost immediately after a loss. Others need time — weeks, months, or even years — before they're ready to leave the familiarity of home.

There is no “right” time. Only your time.

Listen to Your Inner Readiness

Rather than forcing a specific date, listen for signs of readiness. You might notice:

- A growing restlessness or longing to move
- A desire to mark a milestone, like an anniversary or birthday
- A pull toward a certain place — without knowing exactly why
- A craving for solitude, nature, or beauty
- A whisper from your intuition: “It’s time.”

And if you feel resistance, fatigue, or emotional fragility — that’s okay too. It may not be time yet. Trust your pace. Grief has its own calendar — and it doesn’t follow the seasons or holidays.

Travel Around a Milestone — or Not

Some travelers feel called to plan their trip near:

- A loved one's birthday or death anniversary
- A personal milestone (retirement, surgery, divorce, diagnosis)
- A religious or cultural holiday
- A transition point, like the start of a new year

These dates can add meaning and emotional weight to the journey — but they can also feel overwhelming. If the pressure to “make it meaningful” becomes too much, consider choosing a quieter moment instead.

There's power in traveling when no one expects it — when the world is rushing by, and you choose to slow down, to reflect, to honor something that only you know.

Seasons of Grief, Seasons of Travel

The time of year you travel may also shape your experience:

- Spring invites renewal and gentle hope
- Summer offers light, warmth, and openness
- Autumn reflects release, letting go, and inward turning
- Winter may support rest, reflection, and silence

There's no perfect season — only what feels resonant for you now.

Ask yourself:

“What is the season of my grief?”

“Do I need light and color — or quiet and stillness?”

Practical Considerations

In addition to emotional readiness, consider:

- Crowds vs. solitude: Do you want company or quiet?
- Cost and availability: Are there times of year when travel is easier or more affordable?
- Work and caregiving commitments: Can you take time off without added stress?
- Weather and accessibility: Will the environment support your comfort and safety?

A meaningful trip doesn't require ideal conditions — but a little forethought can help ease the journey.

Final Reflection

You don't have to rush and you don't have to wait until the perfect moment. You only have to notice what is stirring in you — and respond with care.

Grief, like a tide, will let you know when it's time to move.

And when it does, you'll be ready — even if you're still afraid, still uncertain, still tender.

The best time to go is when you feel the quiet yes in your soul.

And if you don't hear it yet — just wait. It will come.

SOLO VS. COMPANION TRAVEL

Who Should You Bring — If Anyone?

Once you've decided when to travel, the next important question is:

Should I go alone, or with someone?

Both solo and companion grief travel can be powerful — but they offer very different experiences. Your choice may depend on your emotional needs, your personality, your grief style, or simply what feels most doable at this moment.

Let's explore both options.

Traveling Solo: The Gift of Sacred Solitude

Traveling alone can offer something rare in our modern lives: uninterrupted space for your own thoughts, emotions, and spiritual reflection. It allows you to be fully present with your grief — to move at your own pace, follow your own instincts, and rest when needed.

Benefits of solo grief travel:

- Total freedom and flexibility
- Deeper inward focus
- No need to “perform” or protect others from your emotions
- Opportunities for spontaneous reflection, prayer, or ritual
- Greater connection to your intuition and inner guidance

Challenges of solo travel:

- Loneliness may intensify at times
- No one to help with logistics or practical tasks
- Emotional vulnerability can feel overwhelming
- Safety concerns in unfamiliar places

Solo travel invites you to become your own companion — to hold yourself with love, courage, and compassion. It's not always easy, but it can be profoundly empowering.

Traveling with a Companion: Support in the Journey

Some grief travelers feel more comfortable being with someone they trust — especially in the early stages of loss, when emotions are raw and the world feels unstable. A well-chosen travel partner can provide emotional grounding, logistical help, and quiet presence during difficult moments.

Benefits of traveling with a companion:

- Shared meals, memories, and laughter
- Someone to talk to or lean on if grief arises
- Extra support with navigation and planning
- Greater sense of safety and structure

Challenges of companion travel:

- Less personal space and solitude
- Emotional rhythms may not match
- Risk of feeling responsible for the other person's comfort
- Harder to follow spontaneous inner nudges

Choose your companion wisely.

Not everyone is able to hold space for your grief — and that's okay. Look for someone who:

- Respects your need for quiet
- Doesn't try to "fix" or distract you
- Knows how to sit with emotion without judgment
- Can care for themselves when you need time alone

You might consider inviting:

- A close friend who has walked through grief themselves

- A sibling or relative who shares your loss
- A spiritual mentor or teacher
- A fellow traveler on a similar healing path

Or you might explore group grief retreats or pilgrimage journeys, where others understand what you're carrying.

Can You Do Both?

Some travelers find a hybrid approach works best:

- Begin the trip with someone, then spend time alone
- Meet up with a companion partway through
- Take solo day trips within a longer shared journey

This flexibility allows you to balance connection with solitude — and adjust as needed along the way.

Final Reflection

You don't need to decide right away and you don't have to commit to one way forever.

You only need to ask:

“What will serve my grief right now?”

“What do I need — space, or support?”

Whatever you choose, let it be an act of self-honoring.

You're not trying to get it “right” — you're trying to heal.

Whether you walk alone or with a companion, grief will travel with you — as teacher, as witness, as guide.

Let the journey carry you where you need to go.

PREPARING THE HEART

Grief travel is not just a physical journey — it is also a soul journey. And like any sacred pilgrimage, it asks us to begin with intention. Before you pack your bags or print your itinerary, take some time to reflect.

Set an Intention for Your Journey

Ask yourself:

- What do I hope to receive from this journey?
- What am I ready to let go of?
- What memory, emotion, or insight am I being asked to carry forward?

Setting an intention doesn't mean having a rigid goal. It simply means being clear about your inner purpose.

Are you seeking rest?

Closure?

Connection?

Forgiveness?

Understanding?

There is no wrong answer — only the truth of what your soul is asking for now.

Before you go, consider spending a few days journaling, praying, or meditating with your intention in mind. Read poetry, sacred texts, or books that align with your grief and your hopes for healing. These quiet acts of preparation will open space in you — making your journey more resonant, more meaningful.

. . .

Accept Your Emotions as They Are

During your grief journey, you may feel:

- Deep sorrow
- Unexpected joy
- Numbness
- Frustration
- Peace
- Confusion

You may feel all of these things — sometimes in the same hour. Let them come. Let them go. Do not judge yourself for how you feel — just be present to what is arising.

On one grief trip, I wept uncontrollably in a garden. On another, I laughed out loud when we took the wrong train but ended up in a perfect location anyway. Both were sacred.

Your emotions are messengers. Take time to reflect on what arises by journaling, walking quietly, or simply breathing deeply into the moment.

NOTICE THE SMALL THINGS

Some of the most powerful signs and connections will come in small, quiet ways.

- A bird singing in the trees
- A familiar scent in the air
- A book left open to a meaningful passage
- A sudden patch of sunlight or shadow

These subtle symbols often go unnoticed — but when you're grieving, you may find your awareness becomes heightened, more open to beauty and mystery.

On my visit to the botanical garden, I saw my mother in a scripture garden, heard her in a chickadee's song, and felt her joy in a tiny waterfall.

These gentle signs helped me remember that love continues — even when life has changed.

FIND YOUR OWN UNIQUE PATH

No guidebook — including this one — can map your soul's journey exactly. Your path is yours alone.

As you travel:

- Go slowly
- Listen deeply
- Be flexible
- Trust your instincts
- Let obstacles become teachers, not detours

Grief is not here to punish us — it is here to shape us, soften us, and invite us into deeper love.

“Grief comes into our lives to change us and help us grow — but that doesn't happen easily.”

So be gentle, stay curious and open to the mystery. And may your footsteps lead you to peace as you walk the road ahead.

PIGRIMAGE AS GRIEF TRAVEL

A sacred journey to remember, to feel, and to become

PILGRIMAGE: A PRACTICE OLDER THAN MEMORY

Throughout history, people from nearly every culture and faith tradition have undertaken pilgrimages — sacred journeys to places imbued with meaning, beauty, or divine presence. These journeys have served many purposes: healing, penance, thanksgiving, devotion, transformation.

Catholics walk to Lourdes.

Muslims circle the Kaaba in Mecca.

Hindus bathe in the Ganges.

Buddhists climb toward mountaintop temples.

Indigenous peoples make offerings at ancestral lands.

While the sites differ, the intention is often the same: to leave the ordinary behind and walk toward something holy.

When Grief Becomes the Calling

Grief tears us apart. It breaks open the known world and invites us into a liminal space — between what was and what is yet to come.

In this way, grief itself is a pilgrimage, and so it makes sense that travel — when undertaken with presence and reverence — becomes a powerful way to honor it.

A grief pilgrimage is not like an ordinary vacation or sightseeing trip.

It's a movement inspired by the soul and expressed through the body.

The terrain may be unfamiliar, but the real journey happens within.

Three Elements of a Pilgrimage

Spiritual anthropologists like Martin Gray have identified three elements that give pilgrimage its transformative power:

1. The Journey Itself

The act of traveling — especially when it requires effort, sacrifice, or risk — serves as a physical metaphor for the soul's willingness to change. To walk, to move, to cross a threshold is to say: "I am ready to be transformed."

2. The Sacred Site

Whether it's an ancient cathedral, a mountain path, a hidden chapel, or your father's fishing hole — the place holds meaning. It may be significant to your personal story or resonant with centuries of devotion. It may also carry a subtle, energetic charge — what Gray calls a vibrational field that affects the human spirit.

3. The Intention of the Pilgrim

The most powerful element is you — the one who travels.

Your openness, your sincerity, your willingness to release old wounds and receive new insight are essential for the journey. A pilgrim is not a *tourist* of the sacred. A pilgrim is one who walks with devotion and purpose — even if that purpose is to grieve.

THE MINI-PILGRIMAGE: SACRED JOURNEYS CLOSE TO HOME

Not everyone can travel to Lourdes, Santiago, or Varanasi. But a pilgrimage doesn't have to involve a plane ticket.

In fact, you can create a meaningful grief pilgrimage in your own community — at a botanical garden, along a riverside trail, in an old cemetery, or even in a familiar park that takes on new meaning in light of your loss.

It's not the distance that matters — it's the intention.

How to Make Your Grief Journey a Pilgrimage

Before the Journey: Prepare the Heart

Set a clear intention: What are you walking toward? What do you hope to release or remember?

Journal, read sacred texts, reflect on your loved one, or ask for guidance in prayer or meditation. Choose a meaningful place — either one connected to your grief or one that intuitively calls to you.

During the Journey: Move with Reverence

Walk slowly and mindfully. Notice the sights, sounds, and textures around you. Return your attention to your breath — and to your

intention. Spend time at the site without rushing. Let silence, stillness, or ritual arise naturally.

Light a candle, read a poem, whisper a prayer, or simply be present. Journal about what you're experiencing — your emotions, memories, sensations, insights.

Don't try to force inspiration. Let it come when it's ready — or not at all.

Even the absence of insight is sacred.

After the Journey: Return with Gratitude

Walk back slowly. Notice how everything looks different now — even if nothing has changed.

Reflect on what arose for you during the pilgrimage. Express gratitude — for the place, the path, the memory, the grief, the presence of your loved one. Pack away the items you brought with care. They now hold new meaning.

THE GRIEF PILGRIMAGE IS NEVER OVER

Whether you walk across a continent or down a wooded trail near your home, the journey never truly ends. Every step you take in grief is sacred. Every moment of presence, of tenderness, of remembrance — is a form of pilgrimage.

You are walking a holy path simply by grieving.

And when you travel with intention, your grief walks with you — not as a burden, but as a guide.

RITUALS FOR GRIEF TRAVEL

Giving grief a shape, a gesture, and a moment in time

WHY RITUALS MATTER

If you're planning a grief journey, you may be wondering what to do when you get there.

What happens once you arrive?

How do you honor the loss that brought you here?

This is where ritual becomes your companion. Rituals give form to our deepest feelings. They help us speak when words won't come. They mark transitions — endings, beginnings, and the invisible spaces between.

This is why we gather for funerals and memorial services. We need a way to express the inexpressible — to honor our sorrow, not just silently endure it.

THE PURPOSE OF GRIEF RITUAL

Contrary to what we might fear, a grief ritual is not about “letting go” of our loved ones. It's about releasing the emotions that weigh

down the love we still carry. We don't release the people we love. We release the anger, shame, blame, or guilt that may have attached itself to our loss. When those feelings are given space to move through us — through symbol, sound, fire, water, movement — we make room for love to flow more freely again.

RITUALS ON THE ROAD

When you're traveling, you may not have access to altars or ceremonial tools. But the world offers you everything you need: rocks, water, trees, firelight, wind, flowers, silence, breath.

What matters most is your intention.

Below are five simple rituals you can adapt for any location — whether you're in a forest, on a riverbank, or sitting on the edge of a hotel bed with the window open.

1. Filling the Stone - A ritual of release

Walk slowly and mindfully outdoors — through a garden, along a beach, or down a wooded trail. As you walk, look for a stone, shell, or pinecone that draws your attention.

Hold it in your hand.

Breathe with it.

And envision pouring an emotion into it — anger, guilt, fear, regret.

Let it hold what you no longer wish to carry.

Keep it with you for as long as you need. Then, when the time feels right, place it somewhere special and whisper a prayer of release.

NOTE: I collect heart-shaped stones when I travel. Some I carry home as symbols of healing and others I leave behind as quiet offerings to the earth.

2. Gone with the Wind - A ritual of impermanence

Gather petals, leaves, dandelions, or tufts of grass. As you hold them, reflect on the fleeting nature of life. Whisper a prayer or blessing into them — for yourself, for your loved one, for the world.

Then release them into the wind. Watch them fly, drift, scatter.

What passes through our hands returns to the whole.

Let this remind you: everything changes. And everything belongs.

3. Light in the Darkness - A ritual of hope and remembrance

Lighting a candle is one of the most universal spiritual gestures — a flame that holds grief and light together.

You can:

- Light a votive in a cathedral or chapel
- Burn a piece of paper with words you want to release
- Carry a flameless tea light in your bag and use it in a hotel room or outdoor setting

A single candle is enough to pierce the dark.

NOTE: In Cortona, I lit a prayer candles for my mother in a church she never visited — and still, she met me there.

4. Letting Go and Receiving -A river ritual for grief and grace

Stand on a bridge.

Face the water flowing away from you.

Speak — aloud or in your heart — what you're ready to release.

You can even drop flower petals or leaves into the stream and watch them drift downstream.

Then turn to face the water flowing toward you.

Imagine peace, love, and healing rushing back in.

NOTE: I often gather flower petals, leaves and sticks and “fill” them with whatever I need to release. Then I toss them into the water flowing downstream so I can watch as they are physically carried away from me.

5. The Mindful Tea Ceremony - A ritual of stillness and presence

You don't need special utensils or ancient traditions.

- Make a cup of tea — with intention.
- Choose a meaningful cup or location.
- Pour with attention.
- Sip in silence.
- Give thanks for this moment, and this body, and this breath.

NOTE: I once sought refuge in a tea shop during a torrential rainstorm while traveling in Italy. The ritual I had planned for the day had to be abandoned because of the weather, but the little tearoom in the back of the shop gave me an opportunity to have a special tea ceremony instead. I dedicated it to my Mom who would have loved sharing tea with me that day!

A Personal Story: Tracey's Flowers

After my niece Tracey died at age 47, I found myself aching with guilt — for the conversations we didn't have, the visits I didn't make, the help I didn't offer.

And then, in a moment of grace, I heard her laugh — that unmistakable sound that once filled a room. I felt her beside me, and she said, “It’s all okay. I understand everything now.”

Later, walking along the Blue River, I gathered wildflowers: pink roses, lupine, columbine, chicory — every color and shape. At a small stream, I laid them on a tree stump and arranged them into a mandala. Then I released them, one by one, into the flowing water.

With each blossom, my grief softened.

With each moment, peace returned.

And all the while I heard the faintest melody of laughter floating on the breeze.

YOUR RITUAL, YOUR WAY

You don’t need to follow these rituals exactly. You might create your own spontaneously in the moment. When you feel inspired look around to see what’s in your present environment—a leaf or a special stone, a beautiful view, an evocative artwork, or just a moment of stillness.

The point is to show up with presence and love.

When you stop, when you breathe, when you honor your grief — you are performing the oldest ritual of all: remembering what it means to be human.

THE GRIEF TABLE

Food, memory, and sacred nourishment on the road of loss

WHY FOOD BELONGS IN A BOOK ABOUT GRIEF TRAVEL

Grief lives in the body. And food, too, speaks the language of the body — it nourishes, comforts, stirs memories, marks sacred moments, and brings people together.

Food shows up in the rituals of grief all over the world:

- The meal after a funeral.
- The dish your mother used to make — and that you still can't quite replicate.
- The bread shared in silence.
- The wine poured in remembrance.

Food anchors us when we're untethered. It is physical, tangible, and temporal — just like us.

Memory in Every Bite

During grief travel, food can become a portal: to memory, to connection, to love.

A pasta dish that reminds you of your father. A pastry that tastes like childhood. The scent of a spice your grandmother once used. A café where you would've taken your friend — and now you sit alone, but not empty.

You don't have to cook a full meal to enter this space.

Sometimes it's just a simple bite — eaten slowly, reverently — that becomes a grief ritual.

WHAT IS THE GRIEF TABLE?

The Grief Table is a space — real or imagined — where we:

- Set a place for those we've lost
- Eat with intention
- Share memories, even in silence
- Allow food to be a form of blessing

You can create a grief table wherever you go: in your own home, with a candle and a favorite dish, in a café on the other side of the world, or on a picnic blanket, with a view your loved one would have adored.

The act is what matters. Show up for this meal with your whole self and allow your emotions and your grief to share the table.

FOOD RITUALS WHILE TRAVELING

While traveling, you might:

- Order a dish your loved one would have chosen
- Say their name before you eat
- Leave an offering of bread or wine at a sacred site
- Buy a special ingredient to take home and cook in their honor
- Write a letter at the café table, telling them what you're tasting, seeing, feeling

The grief table is not just about consuming food — it's about creating a place you would enjoy sharing with your loved one and celebrating their presence in all the ordinary moments of your life.

TIPS FOR EMBRACING FOOD ON A GRIEF JOURNEY

Here are some reminders to help you connect with the culture and heart of the place where you are traveling:

- Learn about the food traditions of the region where you are traveling
- Order local specialties at restaurants
- Shop at Farmer's Markets for fresh produce if you plan to cook for yourself
- Attend a cooking class and learn how to make a special regional dish
- Try something new to you
- Focus on foods that are locally grown, in season, and made by hand

A SHORT REFLECTION: A TABLE SET FOR TWO

You might sit at a table one day, alone in a new city or a quiet forest, and feel a presence beside you — the one you're missing, the one you came here to grieve.

You might imagine them smiling, reaching for the bread, telling that familiar story one more time.

And you might take a bite — tears in your eyes — and taste the salt, the sweetness, the life you shared.

This, too, is mourning.

This, too, is sacred.

This is the grief table.

AFTER THE JOURNEY

Integration, reflection, and the next sacred step

COMING HOME

Every journey ends with a return. You unpack your bag. You toss clothes in the laundry.

You check your messages. You settle back into the rhythms of everyday life.

But if you've traveled with grief as your companion — and intention as your guide — you come home different. Even if no one else can see it. Even if you're not sure how to describe it. Something has shifted.

Reflect on the Journey

Within a few days of your return, find time to sit quietly and revisit your journal entries, photos, or reflections from your trip. You might light a candle or brew a cup of tea — and let yourself fully remember where you've been.

Ask yourself:

- Did I receive what I came for?
- Was anything revealed that surprised me?
- What emotions arose that still need tending?
- Do I feel changed in some way — even subtly?
- Is there something I need to do next — a conversation, a decision, a ritual?

Not all journeys deliver clarity. Sometimes what you return with is a deeper question, not a final answer. That, too, is part of the sacred path. Integration takes time.

Let the meaning of your journey unfold gently, like a film still developing in the dark.

What to Do with What You Found

Grief travel is not an escape — it's a rite of passage. And as with any rite, there is a moment of return. The key now is to stay present to what has changed in you.

You might:

- Create a small altar with objects, photos, or stones from your journey.
- Write a letter to your loved one describing what the journey taught you.
- Compose a reflection or poem that captures what you experienced.
- Share a meal with someone close to you and tell a story from the road.
- Schedule a follow-up ritual — a walk, a candle lighting, a quiet tea ceremony — to mark your return.

The Journey Isn't Over

One journey often leads to another. Now that you've experienced a sacred grief trip, you may find yourself drawn to plan another — whether soon or years from now. With each journey, you'll become more attuned to:

- What type of setting nourishes your healing
- Which sacred elements hold meaning for you
- How to listen for the next call to travel

Grief, like love, doesn't have an end point. It changes, deepens, and transforms. And so do we.

A BLESSING FOR THE ROAD

For those who travel with grief as their companion

Before you begin your journey—or perhaps as you pause somewhere along the way—receive this blessing as a companion for your soul. Let it travel with you not as an instruction, but as a quiet presence, reminding you that mourning itself is sacred. Whether you are setting out with trembling steps or simply imagining a journey in your heart, may these words wrap around your grief like a shawl of comfort and courage.

A BLESSING FOR THE ROAD

May this journey be gentle with you.

May the landscapes you enter—inner and outer—

receive your sorrow with kindness,

as an honored guest who brings the truth of love.

. . .

May you find spaces where your tears are welcome,
your silence understood,
your longing met with the hush of wind,
the gaze of sky,
the warmth of sunlight on stone.

If you carry a name, a photo, a strand of hair,
may it become an altar in your pocket—
a reminder that love does not end,
it simply travels differently now.

May each step, each breath, each quiet encounter
be part of your mourning.
Not something to hide,
but something to honor—
a sacred procession of memory and becoming.

And when you return,
may you not be quite the same.
May your heart be looser around the edges,
your soul steadier in its depths.
May you find that grief has not diminished you,
but deepened the well

from which your compassion will one day pour.

Travel well, dear one.

The world is waiting to hold your sorrow
and offer you something in return.

Go with grace.

APPENDIX

PACKING LIST FOR A GRIEF TRAVEL JOURNEY

- Journal and pen
 - Comfortable walking shoes
 - Photographs or mementos of your loved one
 - Small objects for ritual use (candle, stone, etc.)
 - Tissues or a handkerchief
 - Travel-friendly altar items (if desired)
 - Favorite scarf or shawl for comfort
 - Water bottle and snacks
 - Phone or camera to document your reflections
 - Flameless tealight candle (for hotel rituals)
-

CHECKLIST FOR PRE-TRAVEL PLANNING

- Choose a destination that resonates with your grief or healing journey
 - Set an intention for your travel
 - Book accommodations near a peaceful or inspiring location
 - Identify sacred or meaningful places to visit
 - Research local customs, especially around mourning and remembrance
 - Gather supplies for simple rituals
 - Arrange your schedule to allow spaciousness and solitude
 - Let a trusted friend or family member know the purpose of your trip
-

CHECKLIST FOR POST-TRAVEL INTEGRATION

- Review your travel journal
- Reflect on your intention: was it fulfilled, transformed, or still unfolding?
- Identify moments of emotional release or spiritual insight
- Create a home ritual to mark your return (e.g., light a candle, take a ritual bath)
- Begin integrating any lessons learned into your daily life
- Share your experience with a trusted companion, therapist, or group

- Plan a follow-up walk, mini-pilgrimage, or creative expression of what you received
-

JOURNAL PROMPTS

Before Your Journey (Setting Intention)

- What kind of grief am I carrying right now?
 - What do I hope to discover or release through this journey?
 - If I could speak with my loved one before I go, what would I say?
 - What fears or resistance am I feeling about this trip?
 - What is the sacred question I am holding as I travel?
-

During Your Journey

- What emotions are arising as I visit this place?
 - Have I encountered any signs, symbols, or synchronicities?
 - What am I noticing in my body as I move through these spaces?
 - What ritual or moment has felt most meaningful so far?
 - If my loved one could see me right now, what would they say?
-

After Your Journey (Integration)

- What surprised me most during this journey?

- What am I bringing home with me—emotionally, spiritually, symbolically?
- Is there anything I'm ready to let go of now that I wasn't before?
- How have I changed through this experience?
- What grief practices do I want to continue at home?
- If I were to take another grief pilgrimage, where would I go and why?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Karen Wyatt is a hospice physician, spiritual teacher, and the bestselling author of *7 Lessons for Living from the Dying*, a book of profound insights drawn from her work with patients at the end of life. Her other titles include *The Journey from Ego to Soul*, *Stories from the Dark Night*, and *The Tao of Death*. She hosts the *End-of-Life University Podcast*, featuring conversations with leaders in the field of death and dying. Known for integrating spiritual wisdom with clinical experience, Dr. Wyatt teaches that embracing mortality is essential for living a meaningful life. Her work invites us to transform grief, illness, and impermanence into gateways for awakening.



