

TED Talk

We don't "move on" from grief. We move forward with it. November 2018 Link: https://www.ted.com/talks/nora_mcinerny_we_don_t_move_on_from_grief_we_move_forward_with_it

Transcript from the speech: So, 2014 was a big year for me. Do you ever have that, just like a big year, like a banner year? For me, it went like this: October 3, I lost my second pregnancy. And then October 8, my dad died of cancer. And then on November 25, my husband Aaron died after three years with stage-four glioblastoma, which is just a fancy word for brain cancer.

So, I'm fun. (Laughter)

People love to invite me out all the time. Packed social life. Usually, when I talk about this period of my life, the reaction I get is essentially:

(Sighs)

"I can't -- I can't imagine." But I do think you can. I think you can. And I think that you should because, someday, it's going to happen to you. Maybe not these specific losses in this specific order or at this speed, but like I said, I'm very fun and the research that I have seen will stun you: everyone you love has a 100 percent chance of dying.

(Laughter)

And that's why you came to TED.

(Laughter)
(Applause)

So, since all of this loss happened, I've made it a career to talk about death and loss, not just my own, because it's pretty easy to recap, but the losses and tragedies that other people have experienced. It's a niche, I have to say.

(Laughter)

It's a small niche, and I wish I made more money, but

...

(Laughter)

I've written some very uplifting books, host a very uplifting podcast, I started a little nonprofit. I'm just trying to do what I can to make more people comfortable with the uncomfortable, and grief is so uncomfortable. It's so uncomfortable, especially if it's someone else's grief. So part of that work is this group that I started with my friend Moe, who is also a widow; we call it the Hot Young Widows Club.

(Laughter)

And it's real, we have membership cards and T-shirts. And when your person dies, your husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, literally don't care if you were married, your friends and your family are just going to look around through friends of friends of friends of friends until they find someone who's gone through something similar, and then they'll push you towards each other so you can talk amongst yourselves and not get your sad on other people.

(Laughter)

So that's what we do. It's just a series of small groups, where men, women, gay, straight, married, partnered, can talk about their dead person, and say the things that the other people in their lives aren't ready or willing to hear yet. Huge range of conversations. Like, "My husband died two weeks ago, I can't stop thinking about sex, is that normal?"

Yeah.

"What if it's one of the Property Brothers?"

Less normal, but I'll accept it.

(Laughter)

Things like, "Look, when I'm out in public and I see old people holding hands, couples who have clearly been together for decades, and then I look at them and I imagine all of the things they've been through together, the good things, the bad things, the

arguments they've had over who should take out the trash ... I just find my heart filled with rage."

(Laughter)

And that example is personal to me.

Most of the conversations that we have in the group can and will just stay amongst ourselves, but there are things that we talk about that the rest of the world -- the world that is grief-adjacent but not yet grief-stricken -- could really benefit from hearing. And if you can't tell, I'm only interested in / capable of unscientific studies, so what I did was go to The Hot Young Widows Club and say, "Hello, friends, remember when your person died?" They did.

"Do you remember all the things people said to you?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Which ones did you hate the most?"

I got a lot of comments, lot of answers, people say a lot of things, but two rose to the top pretty quickly. "Moving on."

Now, since 2014, I will tell you I have remarried a very handsome man named Matthew, we have four children in our blended family, we live in the suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. We have a rescue dog.

(Laughter)

I drive a minivan, like the kind where doors open and I don't even touch them.

(Laughter)

Like, by any "mezchure," life is good. I've also never said "mezchure," I've never once said it that way.

(Laughter)

I don't know where that came from.

(Laughter)

I've never heard anyone else say it that way. It looks like it should be said that way, and that's why the English language is trash, so ...

(Laughter)

So impressed with anyone who, like, speaks it in addition to a language that makes sense -- good job.

(Laughter)

But by any measure

...

(Laughter)

By any measure, life is really, really good, but I haven't "moved on." I haven't moved on, and I hate that phrase so much, and I understand why other people do. Because what it says is that Aaron's life and death and love are just moments that I can leave behind me -- and that I probably should. And when I talk about Aaron, I slip so easily into the present tense, and I've always thought that made me weird. And then I noticed that everybody does it. And it's not because we are in denial or because we're forgetful, it's because the people we love, who we've lost, are still so present for us. So, when I say, "Oh, Aaron is ..." It's because Aaron still is. And it's not in the way that he was before, which was much better, and it's not in the way that churchy people try to tell me that he would be. It's just that he's indelible, and so he is present for me.

Here, he's present for me in the work that I do, in the child that we had together, in these three other children I'm raising, who never met him, who share none of his DNA, but who are only in my life because I had Aaron and because I lost Aaron. He's present in my marriage to Matthew, because Aaron's life and love and death made me the person that Matthew wanted to marry. So I've not moved on from Aaron, I've moved forward with him.

(Applause)

We spread Aaron's ashes in his favorite river in Minnesota, and when the bag was empty -- because when you're cremated, you fit into a plastic bag -- there were still ashes stuck to my fingers. And I could have just put my hands in the water and rinsed them, but instead, I licked my hands clean, because I was so afraid of losing more than I had already lost, and I was so desperate to make sure that he would always be a part of me. But of course he would be.

Because when you watch your person fill himself with poison for three years, just so he can stay alive a little bit longer with you, that stays with you. When you watch him fade from the healthy person he was the night you met to nothing, that stays with you. When you watch your son, who isn't even two years old yet, walk up to his father's bed on the last day of his life, like he knows what's coming in a few hours, and say, "I love you. All done. Bye, bye." That stays with you. Just like when you fall in love, finally, like really fall in love with someone who gets you and sees you and you even see, "Oh, my God, I've been wrong this entire time. Love is not a contest or a reality show -- it's so quiet, it's this invisible thread of calm that connects the two of us even when everything is chaos, when things are falling apart, even when he's gone." That stays with you. We used to do this thing -- because my hands are always freezing and he's so warm, where I would take my ice-cold hands and shove them up his shirt ... press them against his hot bod.

(Laughter)

And he hated it so much,

(Laughter)

but he loved me, and after he died, I laid in bed with Aaron and I put my hands underneath him and I felt his warmth. And I can't even tell you if my hands were cold, but I can tell you that I knew it was the last time I would ever do that. And that that memory is always going to be sad. That memory will always hurt. Even when I'm 600 years old and I'm just a hologram.

(Laughter)

Just like the memory of meeting him is always going to make me laugh. Grief doesn't happen in this vacuum, it happens alongside of and mixed in with all of these other emotions.

So, I met Matthew, my current husband -- who doesn't love that title,

(Laughter)

but it's so accurate.

(Laughter)

I met Matthew, and ... there was this audible sigh of relief among the people who love me, like, "It's over! She did it. She got a happy ending, we can all go home. And we did good." And that narrative is so appealing even to me, and I thought maybe I had gotten that, too, but I didn't. I got another chapter. And it's such a good chapter -- I love you, honey -- it's such a good chapter. But especially at the beginning, it was like an alternate universe, or one of those old "choose your own adventure" books from the '80s where there are two parallel plot lines. So I opened my heart to Matthew, and my brain was like, "Would you like to think about Aaron? Like, the past, the present, future, just get in there," and I did. And all of a sudden, those two plots were unfurling at once, and falling in love with Matthew really helped me realize the enormity of what I lost when Aaron died. And just as importantly, it helped me realize that my love for Aaron and my grief for Aaron, and my love for Matthew, are not opposing forces. They are just strands to the same thread. They're the same stuff.

I'm ... what would my parents say? I'm not special.

(Laughter)

They had four kids, they were like ...
frankly.

(Laughter)

But I'm not, I'm not special. I know that, I'm fully aware that all day, every day, all around the world, terrible things are happening. All the time. Like I said, fun person. But terrible things are happening, people are experiencing deeply formative and traumatic losses every day. And as part of my job, this weird podcast that I have, I sometimes talk to people about the worst thing that's ever happened to them. And sometimes, that's the loss of someone they love, sometimes days ago or weeks ago, years ago, even decades ago. And these people that I interview, they haven't closed themselves around this loss and made it the center of their lives. They've lived, their worlds have kept spinning. But they're talking to me, a total stranger, about the person they love who has died, because these are the experiences that mark us and make us just as much as the joyful ones. And just as permanently. Long after you get your last sympathy card or your

last hot dish. Like, we don't look at the people around us experiencing life's joys and wonders and tell them to "move on," do we? We don't send a card that's like, "Congratulations on your beautiful baby," and then, five years later, think like, "Another birthday party? Get over it."

(Laughter)

Yeah, we get it, he's five.

(Laughter)

Wow.

(Laughter)

But grief is kind of one of those things, like, falling in love or having a baby or watching "The Wire" on HBO, where you don't get it until you get it, until you do it. And once you do it, once it's your love or your baby, once it's your grief and your front row at the funeral, you get it. You understand what you're experiencing is not a moment in time, it's not a bone that will reset, but that you've been touched by something chronic. Something incurable. It's not fatal, but sometimes grief feels like it could be. And if we can't prevent it in one another, what can we do?

What can we do other than try to remind one another that some things can't be fixed, and not all wounds are meant to heal? We need each other to remember, to help each other remember, that grief is this multitasking emotion. That you can and will be sad, and happy; you'll be grieving, and able to love in the same year or week, the same breath. We need to remember that a grieving person is going to laugh again and smile again. If they're lucky, they'll even find love again. But yes, absolutely, they're going to move forward. But that doesn't mean that they've moved on.

Thank you.

(Applause)