

CAPE HOUSE

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A conversation with Julie Lange Groth

Q. *What were the circumstances surrounding your son's death? How old were you when he died and how did his death affect you?*

When Justin died I was a 46-year-old single mother of three with a mortgage and a failing business. He was a lovable, freckle-faced 16-year-old with a huge heart and a quirky sense of humor. I had dropped him off at school that sunny September morning without a clue that would be the day that changed everything forever.

After school, he and some friends were fooling around with nitrous oxide (laughing gas) in the basement of our home and he overdosed. After three days and nights in a coma, he was declared brain dead.

Losing Justin flattened me. Some days it was all I could do to keep breathing. For almost a year I was emotionally disabled, eviscerated by grief, unable to save my business from bankruptcy and incapable of finding new employment. My home went into foreclosure and my car was repossessed, but none of it mattered because Justin was gone. Meanwhile, my father was dying a slow, brutal death from colon cancer. He was buried on my birthday a year after Justin died.

The year between Justin's death and my dad's was a purgatory of sorrow, doubt and confusion. For the first time in my life, I understood how it might be possible for someone to contemplate suicide. I understood how a strong, intelligent, middle-class person could decline into homelessness and hopelessness. But it also was a time of deep transformation. Ultimately, it birthed me into a new life of meaning, growth and joy.

Q. *Why did you write this book?*

In my work as a shamanic healer, I noticed that many people sought my help because they were feeling blocked, inexplicably weary, and unable to make decisions or move forward in their lives. In many cases, the problem was simply that they were weighed down by unresolved grief from some past loss.

We all experience painful losses in life that affect us deeply, and we may believe we have put them behind us. But there are many types of losses that leave deep and lasting scars, including divorce, the end of an important friendship, a miscarriage, a debilitating illness, home foreclosure or getting fired. Unfortunately, our culture does not make room for us to grieve our losses.

We are expected to soldier on and bury our feelings. But this unresolved grief, which almost everyone carries, can keep us stuck, make us sick and keep us from living our best lives.

In the years after my son's death, shamanism was a powerful avenue of healing for me. It brought me some huge, unexpected breakthroughs. My deep gratitude for these gifts made me to want to share what I learned through my work as a healer and author.

Q. *As you discuss in your book, your grief journey was emotionally complex and included the death of other family members, including your father and mother. What was the most challenging point in all your losses?*

Relationships between parents and their children are primal and complex. Our entire sense of who we are springs from our beliefs about and perceptions of one another, which also are deeply influenced by earlier generations. Before we are even capable of conscious thought, we form impressions about our goodness and worthiness of love through our parents' eyes, voices, and touch. And parents see their successes or failures reflected in their children.

In my book, I talk about the passing of my parents, twenty years apart. For me the biggest stumbling block to grieving both their deaths was the unfinished business between us. And I see this again and again in my work with grieving people. It's amazing how things that happened decades earlier can linger in the heart and cloud our feelings about the most important people in our lives.

Emotions unaddressed, words left unsaid, disappointments and misconceptions can accumulate and weigh us down, almost as if they had physical mass, blocking our grief process and often causing emotional, mental or physical illness. When this happened to me, shamanism offered me a way to work through these inner conflicts and push through to the deep love that was there at the heart of things all along.

Q. *When did shamanism first enter the picture for you?*

I had no particular spiritual beliefs at that time Justin died. I saw myself as an agnostic, someone who didn't pretend to know the source or purpose of creation. But from the moment Justin passed, I began to sense larger, loving forces operating in my life. In my moments of greatest despair, I felt invisible hands holding me up, and when I was destitute, providence intervened with just what I needed, whenever I needed it. I came to think of this as grace. It's the only word I could think of to describe being held in the loving arms of a power far greater than I am.

Synchronicity brought me many unexpected gifts and surprises during those first few years, and one of them was a new friend who told me about shamanism and taught me how to connect with the spiritual realms during a type of drumming meditation called journeying.

Not long after meeting her, I began my formal training with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. What I learned and experienced was powerful medicine for me as a grieving mother and it helped me heal on many levels.

Q. *You did some therapy after your son died. Did shamanism help you in a way therapy didn't?*

Seeing a therapist was one of the most helpful things I did for myself after my son died. My therapist encouraged me to keep a journal, and write about my dreams and feelings. During our sessions she helped me to untangle their subconscious meanings. Keeping that journal enabled me to later write my first book, *Life Between Falls: A Travelogue Through Grief and the Unexpected*, which chronicled my grief journey.

Mind, body and spirit are intricately connected, and a major loss can be devastating to all three. Physicians, psychotherapists and spiritual healers all have an important role to play in attending to the needs of the bereaved.

Q. *In your experience, how does shamanism most help a grieving person?*

When I work with people who've lost a child or spouse, I've heard them say things like, "I'll never be happy again," as if something had been ripped out of them, never to return. They can't imagine themselves being able to reclaim joy in their lives. While it's true that such a loss does change us in fundamental ways, grieving mindfully also can bring comfort, healing and a deeper understanding of life and our purpose in it.

Shamanism presents us with the opportunity to look within ourselves and discover the deeper meaning in what happens to us. As I describe in my book, it can help us gain the will and the strength to begin the healing process. It guides us through the hard work of grieving and it supports us as we regain our balance in life.

In my own spiritual journey through what had seemed unthinkable and unsurvivable, shamanism helped me find my way into a life of newfound meaning, self-discovery, fulfillment and happiness. What better way to honor the dead than to live a life of purpose?

Q. *Can a person explore shamanism on their grief journey and still stay true to whatever religion they follow?*

Shamanism is not a religion. It's the world's oldest spiritual practice. I've known people of many different religions whose lives are enriched by it. There is no dogma and there are no supreme authorities in shamanism. It is a way of life that embraces the interconnectedness and spiritual nature of all things and offers a means of finding answers, help and healing in everyday life, as it has since people lived in caves.

Q. *What happens on your shamanic grief retreats?*

Whether a weekend retreat or a series of weekly sessions, shamanic griefwork gives people a safe and nurturing space where they can attend to their sacred wounds with awareness and intention. Through guided meditation to the beat of a drum, time spent in nature, ceremony, and creative expression and sharing, participants open their hearts to acknowledge what grieves them. They work with it on a spiritual level to bring release, peace and healing to all areas of their lives.

I always tell participants they should not expect to complete their grieving process within a single weekend. But a retreat will help them honor their grief, unearth hidden stumbling blocks and work through them in a simple and mindful way. When they leave they'll have a roadmap to follow so that they don't get stalled on the side of the highway on their journey through grief.

Q. What's next for you in terms of advancing your writing and your view of the human experience?

It's my great honor to witness and support the courage and strength of the people I meet in my shamanic grief retreats. Through this work I'm becoming more aware of the huge burden of collective grief we carry as a culture and a planet.

As an example, a divorce is likely to cause grief in both spouses as well as in their children and other family members. But divorce often is a very chaotic experience that generates so much emotional, mental and often financial turmoil that people are inclined to just put their heads down and plow through it as quickly as possible.

There's no time for processing feelings. There's no platform for honoring everyone's grief over the loss of the marriage, the intact family unit, the home, the sense of financial security, and the holiday gatherings – all the things that make life seem normal and predictable.

All this unprocessed grief can put a terrible strain on family relationships and friendships. Over time, it can impair the future relationships of the children as well as the parents, setting in motion a pattern of dysfunction that engenders more loss and more grief through many generations. If one divorce can carry such a heavy debt of unresolved grief, imagine the impact when a hurricane flattens a whole city, a stock market crash wipes out a generation's financial security or an entire nation is devoured by war.

The cruelty that grief-scarred humans often exhibit toward one another also may be reflected in the way we treat the natural world when we clear-cut forests, pollute streams with industrial waste, blow up mountains with crude mining operations, and wipe out entire species with the careless use of chemicals. I believe that the earth, like people, also experiences grief imposed by human thoughtlessness, disrespect, carelessness and rapacious greed.

So I am thinking these days about how we can address grief in all its forms – on a personal, social and global level – to create a world where people honor their own feelings and support one another in healing their deepest wounds. In this way perhaps we could begin to reverse the great tide of grief that has been rising throughout human history.

There is an Incan prophecy about the coming of the great change, or "pachacuti," a time when people will return to right relationship with one another and the natural world, when harmony and order will be restored, and chaos and disorder ended. Perhaps we will be much more likely to attain that peaceful state of being when we are no longer carrying the burden of the collective grief of humanity.