

## Interview with Leslee Tessmann, author of “Sacred Grief: Exploring a New Dimension to Grief”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Leslee Tessmann, who is here to talk about her new book “Sacred Grief: Exploring a New Dimension to Grief.”

*Leslee Tessmann is the author of “Sacred Grief: Exploring a New Dimension to Grief,” which is scheduled for publication early this spring (March). Leslee also lectures and teaches workshops on the concepts explored in her book, as well as on spirituality, communication, and recovery issues. She has a passion for exploring the power of language and its impact on how we experience life. Her college education focused on psychology and sociology and fueled her intrigue with the complexities of the human brain and mind. Leslee’s writing and speaking offer a powerful blend of sharing her personal experience while presenting concepts such that people are left with new insights, paradigms, and possibilities. Born and raised in Wisconsin, Leslee later moved to Seattle, Washington, where she lived for 31 years until moving to Houston, Texas in 2003—a change that contributed significantly to the unfolding of “Sacred Grief.”*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Leslee. I’m glad you could join me today. Will you begin by telling us why you chose the title “Sacred Grief”? Why do you refer to grief as sacred?

**Leslee:** The idea of ‘sacred grief’ entered my thoughts just after my father died in 2004. For quite some time before that, I’d been exploring some new practices to keep myself in the moment, really awake and curious about everything I was experiencing. Those practices led me to start honoring every moment, so when my father died, it occurred to me that I could honor the deep grief brought on by his death. So I decided that I wasn’t going to miss out on a single moment of it and declared it sacred. I went on to discover that I could actually allow the grief to unfold in a friendlier, kinder way than I’d ever grieved before. Prior to that, my experience of grief was quite difficult. Rather than consider it sacred, I had a lot of negative thoughts and comments about grief. In fact, I remember telling people that I hated the grief process. For many years I did everything I could to resist the emotions that come with grief—especially the pain. It took a lot of effort and energy to keep the lid on it all, and suppressing it took a tremendous toll on me physically and spiritually. Now, with declaring the grief ‘sacred’ I brought an element of kindness and compassion to the process and began to relate to it as something that was working for me rather than against me. Consequently, grieving the death of my father has been extraordinary and unlike any other period of grief I’ve experienced.

**Tyler:** Tell us a little bit about the losses and grief in your own life.

**Leslee:** My earliest losses occurred when I was about 13 years old. There were a string of deaths that all hit me hard. First my grandmother died, then within the next year and a half, a neighbor’s son that I’d grown up with died in a car accident, a girlfriend was murdered, and a young man I cared for in junior high school drowned. As I grew older, there were losses associated with geographic moves, two rapes, three divorces, two babies lost in early pregnancy, the ending of a 12-year business I’d owned and operated, and grief associated with my daughter going through drug and alcohol treatment and my own recovery from alcoholism. It was a lot to deal with when I finally started to work with the grief, rather than resist it.

In the past few years, two significant losses were associated with moving from Seattle to Houston and the death of my father the following year. The transition from one community and city to another was far more than I expected. I was awake enough to pay attention to what was happening emotionally, so I managed to allow myself to move into my grief fairly quickly. However, I can’t say that I didn’t create a fair amount of suffering with that event. I

questioned myself and why things had gone the way they'd gone and eventually began to be gentle with myself and less judgmental about what was happening. When my father died, I had this new awareness about at least being curious about my grief, so with his death it seemed almost natural to take that to the next level, so to speak, and declare the grief 'sacred.'

**Tyler:** What did you personally find most helpful in dealing with your grief?

**Leslee:** Well, I finally started talking about what I was going through. I started attending Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous in 1989 (programs to help people and their families deal with issues involving alcoholism and codependency) where I received tremendous support and found a safe place in which to talk about and process the grief. I also saw a therapist for quite some time, and there were several books that were helpful.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us what you learned during those meetings? Would you recommend them to other people dealing with grief, or would you suggest they go to a group specifically for those dealing with loss and grief?

**Leslee:** The first thing I learned was the value of reaching out for help. I discovered that I didn't have to get through my challenges by myself. I also learned how to listen and not give advice, as well as how to be vulnerable and take the risk to share what I was thinking and feeling without worrying about what someone thought of me. There are guidelines for confidentiality, not giving advice, and "taking what you like and leave the rest." I also learned the value of participating in a group of people going through similar situations. I started to feel connected to life and people again, and it made a tremendous difference in helping me learn new behaviors and deal with my codependency. Processing grief at times was a natural part of the experience. I was doing therapy at the same time so I was getting the benefit of two very different but extremely valuable settings. Twelve-step programs are designed to address issues related to alcoholism and codependency. If that's something a person is dealing with (whether the loved one is alive or deceased), it's an excellent setting for recovery and healing.

If alcoholism is not a factor in the death of a loved one, I suggest exploring a grief support group at a hospice center, hospital, church, treatment center, or any other local agency. There are many wonderful organizations that provide support to loved ones and families impacted by illnesses such as AIDS, SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome), cancer, Alzheimer's disease, suicide, and leukemia. These are just a few—the list of local and national resources is extensive.

I've participated in all three—12-step programs, private therapy, and a grief support group at a local hospice center. They all altered and contributed to my life and well-being significantly.

**Tyler:** Many people lose loved ones. Why do you think your losses motivated you to write this book?

**Leslee:** They seemed to have led me to my calling. I've discovered that my purpose in life has to do with writing and teaching about grief and helping people 'be' with and work with deep grief. If we're lost in our grief due to our resistance to the pain (and I can assure you I was very lost in my grief for a substantial portion of my life) and all our opinions about what it should and shouldn't be like, we can get stuck. If we're stuck and not moving on with our lives, we don't take time to explore what our purpose in life is and move on to fulfill that. One of the greatest gifts from all the losses and grief I've moved through is a deep capacity for compassion and a respect for what it takes to get through difficult times and go on to live life such that we can fulfill our destinies and make a difference in the world. Now I want to share that message with others so that I might contribute to and make a difference to others fulfilling their purpose in life. I guess you could say that writing "Sacred Grief" is me walking my talk.

**Tyler:** In the book, you talk about creating a relationship with grief. Will you explain what you mean by "relationship"?

**Leslee:** Because we are human beings who have language, we actually have a relationship to everything and everyone. Our words give us our experience of the people, places and things around us because they form our opinions, thoughts and assessments. Those thoughts and assessments create the reference point from which we relate to anything and everyone and we begin to live from an almost automatic thinking process based on our opinions of what we like and don't like. For example, consider the word 'bug.' For some human beings, a bug is another life form and fascinating to watch and observe (especially to small children!) so their relationship to bugs is based on intrigue and curiosity. Yet for others, bugs can be frightening or at the very least inconvenient to remove from one's home so the relationship to bugs would be sourced from fear rather than from curiosity. Same word or object, yet two very different relationships and experiences.

Now, let's apply the same theory to grief. For many people, particularly in the Western world, the word 'grief' brings to mind pain and lots of uncomfortable, to say the least, physical sensations and emotions. Again, because we have language we have opinions about which emotions and physical sensations we would rather feel. We usually want the 'good' kind of emotions like happiness and joy, so our relationship to grief is sourced from a preference not to feel pain, sadness, anger, or all the emotions that arise when one grieves. When they do arise, we actually end up adding to our suffering by resisting the experience of our grief. However, in some countries—particularly in Eastern cultures—the word grief evokes something completely different. Instead, it symbolizes an energy that heals, honors what's happening in the present moment, and opens one's heart to an experience that includes love and joy as much as pain and suffering. Same word or experience, yet two different relationships and experiences.

The key point to what I've just described is that because we have language, we can create whatever kind of relationship we want to anything, anyone, at anytime—including grief.

**Tyler:** Grief is generally associated with death, but isn't it true that any loss can be a cause of grief and grief work may be needed?

**Leslee:** Definitely. Since life is a series of beginnings and endings, it's highly probable that one would experience many losses in a lifetime. Besides the death of a loved one, there are losses associated with job and career changes, events such as Hurricane Katrina and, the destruction of the New York Trade Towers, one's children growing up, retirement, geographic moves, losing a limb, and even the loss of one's safety and sense of normalcy after serving in the military during times of war. I've never been in the military or fought in a war, but I have experienced being raped. That simple act turned my world completely upside down and I later grieved the loss of not only my sense of safety, but of my own ability to trust myself and my intuition. I also eventually grieved the loss of many moments of my life due to the dissociation, or 'checking out' I did mentally to survive those traumatic events. In every instance I just described, there is most likely some degree of grief work to be done.

Tyler, it's also interesting that you used the word "work" because that's exactly what Freud called it when his grief-work theory suggested the importance of expressing grief and detaching emotionally from the deceased in order to recover full function. In fact, research has shown that not completing one's grief work can impede personal growth and development. I can see that in my own life. My capacity for intimacy, social skills, communication skills, to name a few, were impaired tremendously by my unwillingness to grieve. Now, I don't think that my choice not to grieve was completely conscious, but it was still a choice that had a huge ripple affect on me and the people in my life.

**Tyler:** Leslee, in terms of grief over the loss of a loved one, I'm interested by your comment of emotionally detaching ourselves from the deceased. Do you think having a spiritual or religious viewpoint is essential or at least helpful in dealing with grief? I mean, if you believe your loved one is in heaven, or that they are watching over you, how does that affect grief?

**Leslee:** The issue or challenge to detach emotionally from a loved one who has died has more to do with the nature of the relationship that existed prior to the death than having some kind of spiritual or religious viewpoint. According to Dr. J. William Worden, a psychologist who has spent more than 30 years researching, writing and lecturing on issues of life-threatening illness and life-threatening behavior, the third task of grief is to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. Completing this task eventually leads to the emotional detachment I spoke of in the prior question. There are issues to confront that have to do with adjusting to how we function in the world, how our loved one's death affects our sense of self, and how the death affects our beliefs, values and perceptions of the world.

For example, a woman who was married for most of her life may find herself grappling with the confusion that comes with learning to take care of herself, her home, and perhaps a family without the support of her husband. Making these adjustments will allow her to move on to the fourth task and start the process of placing the energy she gave to her marriage to new relationships and activities. She may still miss her husband, but her life will be filled with new interests and purpose.

Our belief systems will certainly impact our grief process but accepting some deaths comes more easily than others whether or not those beliefs include spiritual or religious viewpoints. We might get angry at or question God (or whatever it is that we call that source). We might question if something we said or did may have caused the death of a loved one. Either way, grief is grief. It's unfamiliar territory each time and that's the beauty of it. Every time we grieve, there are gifts to be gleaned, compassion to be cultivated, and beginnings and endings to be honored.

**Tyler:** Leslee, what do you feel sets “Sacred Grief” apart from the other books that have been written on coping with grief?

**Leslee:** A lot of the books that have been written in the past 15 years or so have focused primarily on surviving and understanding the grief process. Some of those books were written more for the interventionist or therapist and are not easy reading for the ordinary reader. They are all valuable books that had us take huge strides forward in working with grief. However, as far as I’ve been able to ascertain, “Sacred Grief” is the first book to look at this universal experience as a relationship rather than a process. It delves into a previously unexplored dimension to grief as part of our life force rather than a process and opens the door to treating both the grief process and ourselves with compassion and kindness. You might even go so far as to say that “Sacred Grief” explores not only our humanity, but grief’s humanity as well. By grief’s humanity, I mean that this natural healing process has some intuitive sense to slow us down, cry tears, express feelings—all the things that allow our lives to unfold naturally. It’s like a friend who cares for us and is there to help us to heal so that we can keep expanding into our fully actualized selves.

The other aspect that makes “Sacred Grief” unique is the exploration of the ripple affect of unresolved grief. It looks at the global impact of unfulfilled, unexpressed lives on the well-being of the planet. Given the events that are unfolding around the world, I’m confident that the book’s final chapters on compassion and global responsibility are not only timely but essential to the quality of our lives and the future of our planet.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us a little bit about the organization of the book and why you included a study guide in it?

**Leslee:** The book has 10 chapters that start with sharing my personal story as a case study with the intention to bring new awareness to where someone might be in his or her own unresolved or current grief. The first half of the book takes readers step-by-step through an exploration of their current relationship to grief, the myths and opinions we have about grief, a discussion about context and its impact on how we experience our life followed by a look at the suffering we create out of our preference for certain experiences over others, and then wraps up with exploring a very interesting phenomenon I call “mischief”—the aspects of our grief that are sometimes hidden from our conscious mind and “trick” us into thinking we’re experiencing something else.

The second half of the book delves deeper into our humanity and collective consciousness. Chapter six opens with a discussion about authenticity and the challenge to create an environment in which to do our grief work. After that there is a discussion about exploring the mysteries grief presents and our resistance to ‘hanging out’ in the uncertainty of those mysteries. From there the focus shifts to the gifts of completing our grief work. Chapter 8 discusses what’s possible when we allow ourselves to have it all—the ‘good’ feelings and the ‘bad’ feelings. That chapter sets the stage to exploring the value of working with our own pain and grief as a means to open our hearts, expand our capacity for compassion, and allow ourselves to let in the rest of the world. “Sacred Grief” wraps up with a timely and powerful discussion of the ripple affect of unresolved grief at a global level. Each chapter builds on the next and is specifically designed to move the reader from seeing themselves as an individual to consider and claim their collective place in the world.

I’ve included a study guide of reflective questions at the end of the book to help the reader explore what might be possible if they were to create a new relationship to their grief. The study guide is designed to be used with a therapist or in a group setting and can be referred to after each chapter as one reads the book, or when one is finished reading the book in its entirety. I debated a lot about where to put the study guide and then settled on placing it where readers could make a choice and trust their instincts as to what would work best for them. The feedback I’ve received is that taking time to reflect on and answer the questions has a powerful and positive impact on the reader.

**Tyler:** People who experience grief are often misunderstood; consequently, those who are grieving may feel something is wrong with them, causing them to beat up on themselves. What advice would you give people who are concerned with how others view their grief?

**Leslee:** I would tell them that grieving is a deeply personal experience. Everyone’s experience of grief is different and the more we can honor and respect our own way of moving through grief, the more we will expand our capacity to allow others to express grief in their own way. This is especially true when families are dealing with the loss of a parent or sibling. Since each person had a different relationship to the loved one that died, each person will experience different emotions and duration of grief. For example, in my family, I’m the youngest daughter and second-youngest of six children, and I’ve been divorced or single longer than any of my siblings. After my father died, I realized how much I leaned on him for the male energy missing in my life—even though we lived 2,500

miles apart. Consequently, my relationship to my father was very different than the others who all have spouses and probably detached more naturally from my dad as they grew up.

Remember how I mentioned the impairment of growth and development? Well, I strongly suspect that my early unresolved grief played a big part in the many failed relationships I experienced, as well as the depth of my connection to my father. We were very close and it seemed like I was having a much tougher time right after his death than the others. That frustrated me because I began to feel like something was wrong with me. After I started going to a grief support group, I worked through a lot of my grief and realized that it was okay if we all grieved differently. That didn't mean that we loved him any more or less than each other—we just grieved the loss differently.

**Tyler:** Leslee, what is an appropriate way to express grief publicly?

**Leslee:** There is no such thing as an 'appropriate' way to express grief. There are opinions and myths about what is and isn't okay, but if we want to live fully expressed lives, then we have to come to terms with choosing to be vulnerable and okay with letting other people know what's going on for us. You could say that society has determined the rules—or myths—for what's appropriate. For example, one rule might be that it's okay for women to cry but not okay for men. However, to believe or buy into that statement is not to take responsibility for choosing to allow our thoughts to prevent us from being authentic. There are no rules, except the ones that we make up. Now, it's true that job demands can impact how and when we show our emotions. It can be challenging to set aside one's grief and stay focused on the task at hand. Arriving at a solution to working with intense feelings and emotions will still require us to be vulnerable, even if it's only to give our coworkers or employers a 'heads up' that we might step out to the restroom or outside for air to take a few moments by ourselves, allow some painful sensation to pass, and then bring ourselves back to work.

The bottom line here, Tyler, is that we always have a choice about whether we are going to be authentic or inauthentic. It's much easier to lay that responsibility on society or other people's opinions and rule. But the freedom comes with taking responsibility for and honoring our self-expression, including during times of deep grief. I take a hard look at this issue in Chapter 6 of "Sacred Grief." It's an important issue to address and getting clear about what has us choose to be inauthentic is the access to being authentic.

**Tyler:** The Victorians had an entire cult of mourning with distinct rules for how long one should use mourning, including different shades of black and grey depending on whether you were mourning a parent, spouse, friend, nephew etc. What do you think are some of the factors that have played a role in how our views of grief have changed since those days, and do you think the process of grief has improved or is better or less understood today?

**Leslee:** We're talking about differences in wakes, funerals, funeral directors, the mourning process, the demands of today's work environments, and the complexities of life today regarding family geography and dynamics. Sadly, rituals are different. Tyler, the mourning 'rules' you mentioned were powerful ways to acknowledge death and allow the natural unfolding of one's grief. Even the old 'rules' of women not dating or considering remarrying until a specific time had lapsed from the death of a husband or family member wasn't, in my opinion, such a bad idea. There is value in recognizing one's emotional limitations during periods of deep grief and allowing a substantial amount of time to pass before entering into a new relationship. My three divorces can attest to that. It's natural to want to fill the void left by a loved one, but it doesn't help or work to use a relationship to avoid dealing with one's pain.

Memorial services and cremation provide a different experience of mourning from one involving rituals such as visitation at a funeral home, burial in a casket, the procession to the place of final disposition, and a graveside ceremony sometimes complete with lowering the casket into the ground. None is better than the other and it's definitely a matter of personal preference. However, I think that it's important to pay attention to when a process supports us in either working with or denying death. It's really no different than some of what I've already talked about. A ritual or funeral is likely to open up the possibility of feeling intense sensations—sadness, pain, heartache, guilt, anger. If we're not willing to allow those emotions to come and go, we'll most likely find a way to minimize our discomfort. Unfortunately, avoiding our discomfort won't allow for the 'rite of passage' that will actually help mourners adapt to the changed state and cope with the sense of disruption or disequilibrium that occurs during transition.

It wasn't until my father's funeral that I experienced the value of the funeral ritual. From the first visit with the funeral director to talk about who my father was and what we wanted for his service, to the selection of a casket, our family had the opportunity to start to confront the reality of his death together. There were sad but intimate

moments with my mother while selecting flowers at the local florist. I remember weeping when a beautiful basket of fruit and arrangement of flowers were delivered to our home while my brother-in-law stood quietly by my side with reverence and compassion for my grief. At the funeral home the night before we buried him, we were all touched and comforted by all who came by and shared their stories about how my father had made a difference in their lives. To stand by his casket, touch his cheek, and say 'good-bye' to him was comforting, painful, and a peaceful way to begin to grieve his death.

Ultimately, I think the process is different, rather than improved, out of our willingness to start talking about it over the years. The kinds of losses we experience today are sometimes far more complicated than those in the past, so we need to sort it all out more. In fact, there is actually a distinction called 'complicated grief' for many losses that highly benefit from support and intervention by a professional therapist or counselor. Traumas that result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are an excellent example of this. We're already seeing and hearing about the challenges faced by military personnel who are returning from Iraq. We went through this with Viet Nam when PTSD was new and not understood like it is today. We have new resources to help people deal with that sort of complicated grief. It was probably an issue a long time ago (like in WWII), but not realized or discussed. That's one area that I would say has improved significantly.

On the other side of that is the whole issue of understanding grief. Sometimes there is no understanding why something happened, why someone died, or why we have to go through the deep pain we are going through. How do you explain events like 9-11, the Oklahoma City bombing, the shootings at Virginia Tech, or some of the horrendous crimes that our society is experiencing? It's a challenge for human beings to give up understanding why those kinds of things happen, particularly if they took the life of their loved one. However, the need and desire to understand what may never be understood frequently leads to living life lost in unresolved grief and in the endless suffering that we create ourselves by our resistance to our pain and grief. That's a tough one to admit to, but when we're able to uncover the human mechanism that promotes the unnecessary, self-induced suffering that can go on for years, we can become curious and notice what's happening, stop the thinking that's causing the suffering, surrender to our pain, and let the healing properties of grief gently move us forward. Those acts require diligence, patience, compassion, and courage. "Sacred Grief" offers insights into that human mechanism and offers a gentle, compassionate way to reduce unnecessary suffering.

**Tyler:** Many people repress grief and then long after the death of a loved one, or whatever loss the person experienced, the grief can come back like a post-traumatic stress disorder. What can be done to prevent repression of grief, and how can someone cope with grief that has been suppressed?

**Leslee:** First of all, to prevent the suppression of grief, one has to be willing to admit that a loss (or many losses) has occurred and that they're grieving, and allow the process to unfold. We need to be compassionate with ourselves here because I think there is a natural waking up to ourselves and our grief. Nobody knows when it's time to do that better than ourselves. Sometimes waking up takes a long time. It certainly did in my case and I'll be the first to admit now that I have no clue when people should deal with their grief. Instead I have great compassion for what it takes to awaken to unresolved grief, and patiently begin to complete the rewarding tasks of grief.

As far as coping with grief that's been suppressed, there are many ways to get support while moving through the deep sensations of pain and emotions that might arise. As I mentioned above, finding a therapist who specializes in grief issues or a bereavement counselor can be immensely helpful. There are professionals highly trained in the complexities of grief, trauma, and PTSD. There are also ways to work with traumatic experiences such that painful memories can be re-framed, so to speak, and bring new peace and fresh insights to old memories. One well-recognized method, for example, is called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR is a technique that facilitates the accessing and processing of traumatic memories to bring these to an adaptive resolution.

Grief support groups are also an excellent place in which to process one's grief safely. It's always helpful to talk about all the thoughts and emotions that come up in a setting with others who can relate to what you're going through.

One of the toughest lessons I learned in Al-Anon and AA was that it's okay to ask for help. Sometimes I need someone to help me through the difficult times. That doesn't mean anything about me—doesn't mean I'm not strong or able to figure it out on my own. Being willing to ask for help is actually my way of acknowledging that I'm part of the collective whole and a way to claim my place in the world. It also takes a lot of courage to pick up the phone and call someone, begin therapy and the healing process, or go and check out a support group when you don't know what to expect. You might be surprised at what you discover—and it's all sacred.

**Tyler:** Leslee, I have done some grief work myself, and I've found that I think I have worked through it, and then years later, I start feeling the grief again, or at least, and I'm thinking of my grandfather here who's been dead twenty years, I still have days when I miss him. Do you think a person ever fully recovers from a loss? Is dealing with grief a life-long relationship? Or is feeling sorrow for the loss of a loved one simply a sign that that person mattered to you and still matters to you in the present. Is grief a way of honoring someone?

**Leslee:** Tyler, what I've learned is that the issue isn't about recovering from a loss, but rather about completing the tasks of grief and finding a place in our hearts, minds, or lives for who or what was lost in a way that won't prevent us from going on with our lives. Having sadness come and go is normal and doesn't mean one hasn't completed the tasks of grief. It's normal for routine happenings in our lives to trigger a memory and sadness. Anniversaries of deaths are wonderful opportunities to use rituals to honor someone we cared deeply for and contributed to our lives.

Is grief a life-long relationship? Absolutely. Life is all about beginnings and endings so we might as well make peace with our grief and create a friendly relationship to this powerful and healing aspect of our being.

One last thought—if, at some mysterious or quantum physical level, we're all connected and one collective being and consciousness, then it would make sense that there would be times when we're sad and the only reason for that sadness might be an experience we share with another human being somewhere on the planet that we'll never see or meet. If we're cultivating compassion and opening our hearts, there will be a lifetime of opportunities to share someone else's grief. That simple but generous act will contribute significantly to a world that not only works, but flourishes.

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Leslee. Before you go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about "Sacred Grief"?

**Leslee:** You can read an excerpt from the book and find out more about myself, upcoming workshops and lectures, book signings, and events at [www.sacredgrief.com](http://www.sacredgrief.com). The website also has a list of grief support resources and articles of interest that might be helpful. There's also a place to provide information if you are interested in having me speak to your group or for an event.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Leslee. I've learned a lot from you today. I wish you joy in helping others recover from their grief.

[Listen to interview on Inside Scoop Live](#)  
[Read Review of Sacred Grief](#)