In this episode of *Insights at the Edge*, Patrick O' Malley and Tami Simon basically discuss how ***there is no one path to grief,*** and that we each have a unique way of grieving because we have a unique relationship and attachment with the person who has died and also because our wiring and personalities vary. They also discussed how Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five-step model leading to a mythic type of closure and Western culture's imbalanced emphasis on positivity and completion has created *a cage* for many people in which they feel ashamed both about the intensity and the length of the experience that they're having with loss. Patrick O' Malley provides a new framework for grieving that is based on telling and listening to our shared stories of loss and grief and he also talks about the shift that happens when we view grief as a function of how deeply we love. He believes that 'listening with deep attention and compassion literally changes something in the brain of the person being heard' and points out that there is scientific evidence now that show that deep acknowledgment and recognition opens up the mind and creates new neural pathways. Patrick O'Malley has written this book as a result of his experience with providing grief counseling and education for over 35 years and his own story of loss and grief. In 1981 his baby son died and his work and book were born out of that loss. He discusses how initially he had latched onto Elizabeth Kübler-Ross model, a psychological model that has become embedded in the culture, believing that after moving through the 5 stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, he would reach closure. He soon realized that it was not happening for him, nor for many of his clients, who had seeked grief counseling, and he soon came to understand that what people really wished was for was to tell their story of loss to an attuned other in a safe context. During the interview he mentions that the book is 'the outcome of these years and years of my own transition and transformation as a grieving parent and as a therapist. There's the rich, deep understanding that happens even today with folks who just desire to have acknowledgement for their loss and understand that they're not getting it wrong—that their loss is based on their attachment to their loved one that is a unique attachment and something to be honored. So, all the feelings that come with loss are really, in essence, an expression of that love and that sacred story that connects them with the one who has died'.

I think that many of us, when we consider serious losses, not necessarily concerning the death of a loved one (Patrick O' Malley mentions the importance of understanding all living loss in the same way) realise that sadness or moments of grief may arise over and over

even after years have gone by and we may not have thought about the loss or the person for a long time. We carry the people we love or haved loved within us even if we are not always consciously aware of it. Bonds do not die or dissolve because someone has died or is not in close proximity anymore. Deep bonds of attachment or love do not necessarily require physical presence because we hold the other in our heart. They may break in this lifetime, but we can still love the people we have lost and cherish our relationship with them after they have passed away or have left. People who are important to us become part of our inner conversation and remain there after they die. They influence our thoughts and emotional reality, they remain part of our inner experience, and they become part of a shared identity of the living members of a family, for instance. Therefore, during the process of grief there should be room for honouring bonds of emotion with the deceased and creating new meaning. Patrick O' Malley refers to an ongoing relationship between the living and the deceased, the idea that when grief comes up in our life, it's part of a relationship between us and the deceased, and that our bonds don't stop after death. He suggests that the steps and stages in the closure model seem to almost imply that the bond is broken because of death and that there is no more ongoing relationship, but he firmly believes in enduring bonds and that honoring of the relationship, remembering, thinking, writing, rituals, whatever those are continues that relationship in this lifetime.

I will share a story about a loss I experienced many years ago, when one of my teenage students suddenly died. She was a 15 year old girl in one of my FCE classes, whom I was fond of and cared about. It happened in August, I think, because we were waiting for the official exam results. Actually, a few days prior to her death and the results coming out she had phoned me to ask about the date the results would come out and I remember having felt a bit worried, believing that she may have failed and thinking how this would upset her or ruin her holidays. Meanwhile, I had people staying over for the summer and was immersed in this experience, when another student and classmate of hers phoned and told me that she had died and that the funeral was to take place in an hour or so. I still remember the trip in the taxi to the church more clearly than anything else, what I was wearing and how I stayed glued in my seat. I was functioning on automatic pilot trying not to think, not to cry, not to fall apart and show emotion in public, all my effort being on just getting there and then back home, where I could fully grasp what had happened. When I reached the church her father, who was a priest had already started the church

service. As I looked at the motionless young girl and watched him move through the procedure, through my stream of tears, I kept wondering how on earth he was doing it, and initially, concluded that it must be his faith that was keeping him going. Later at home, it occurred to me that it may have simply been his deep love for her and the sense that their bond had not broken – a different kind of continuity was at play. This was perhaps his way of saying goodbye to her and making sure that everything was done with care. During the following months I also realised that my grief was more deeply seated than I had thought, even though I had no place to speak of it. It surfaced everyday during the next school year, since I was reminded of her every time I looked at the desk she had been sitting in for the whole previous year. Then I gradually, thought of her less and less, but I remember years later when I had bumped into her older sister in the street I had accidently called her by her sister's name, even though she too had been my student and I had not forgotten her name. It had caused a lot of embarrassment and guilt on my part because I felt that I had made her feel uncomfortable. It seemed like a Freudian slip, somehow remnants of my grief had simply emerged too quickly for me to process or censor. Over the years moments of grief have resurfaced out of the blue as it may appear, but I learnt to view it as part of the attachment that had taken place during the years I had been her teacher. I have also found that often sadness or grief, which may not be salient in our conscious experience, surface during meditation and sitting with them instead of pushing them away or getting distracted allows for a small shift or a different understanding or level of acceptance to occur. Patrick O' Malley believes that there is no timeline for grief, and that even though one may have less intensity and less frequency as time goes by, it is common for us to experience 'an absolute moment of despair and sadness 10 years from today'. He claims that 'our loss is a part of our life story, and that story will be with us for our life' and that 'the intensity of our loss is directly connected to the amount of our love, and if we are able to see that, then the self-judgment falls away, the self-criticism dissipates'. He claims that probably one reason that Elizabeth Kubler Ross's stage model became so embedded in the culture was because it was simple and sequential and we all try to find a foothold in the chaos that loss brings, but it would be more helpful to say that 'certainly any of these stages can happen to anybody, but if they don't happen you didn't grieve incorrectly. And if they do happen, it's another way of describing your experience'. He explains that the metaphor of the cage that he has used in his book, describes the fact that believing that

this is the only way to walk through loss or grieve can limit people's ability to own and embrace their story.

As a result of his long experience working with others, but also his own loss of his baby son, he has come to believe that grieving should not be labelled as depression and that human experience and emotions should not be pathologised. He also talked about the term closure believing that it replaced the initial term used by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross "acceptance". He says that ‘if closure's being defined as, "I've achieved a level in which I will no longer have an experience that I would call grief,"—that would be the most rigid definition of closure—I could go this far and say you know there may be some closures along the way—if we're going to look at that’. He adds that it is difficult to reach that state because we have so many triggers and reminders in our environment that may create a surge of emotion. I could add here that even without external triggers our inner emotional experience can emerge or arise simply because it is there, often because there is a need for us to acknowledge its presence or process it again. Patrick O’Malley’s suggests a framework, which involves ***storytelling; embracing, knowing and sharing your story***. He is encouraging people to connect with their story of loss at a deeper level, which means ‘to know that you had a unique relationship with the one you lost. It can't be anything else because it starts with your unique attachment to the one who died. And so, my encouragement is rather than trying to figure out if I'm getting it right or wrong, to really deepen into the story—to see how it has been part of your life’. He suggests our asking questions like: ‘Who was the person that you lost?’ or ‘Who did you get to be with that person that you don't get to be with anybody else?’ However, in order to complete the circle we need a place for our story of loss and grief to be acknowledged. Patrick O’ Malley says that ***‘the fullness and the richness of the sacredness of the story is at its best when there is the right kind of place for it to be received’*** and talks about a better community that knows how to be there for each others' grief because what we all need and what has becoming more difficult to find, especially, in Western societies, is presence and attuned listening and compassion and an open heart to receive others’ stories. When an individual and family grieve within larger social narratives or discourse, larger societal dynamics are in play. Societal expectations in some sense define or at least influence both the bereaved, but also their community, in terms of how to think, display emotions and behave. For instance, in Egypt women are expected to demonstrate their grief, whereas, in Bali they are discouraged. Gender differences are also prevalent in many

cultures; in Greece it was common for women and mostly elderly women to wail laments, but I do not think men ever participated. Similarly, in China, women were the ones who wailed laments, while the men sat in silence. So society, through discourse, customs and expected norms informs our ways of being in many areas of our life, including grieving and mourning. We should perhaps strive towards a community where grieving and mourning should not generate shame or be pathologised, but should be accepted or viewed as a part of our common human experience and our connectedness in the face of suffering. He additionally refers to our need to feel safe with the person we are telling our story, and I suppose that is what we all wish or hope for when we are telling our story whether that is a friend or a therapist (whose beahaviour should not violate the Code of Ethics). He says that ‘something happens where just my humanness and your humanness connect. Really, what's probably happening more than anything is just the sense of safety—that I can feel safe with this person as I tell them what's inside me, and thus we're in a relaxed, not un-painful state of mind, but we're not in an anxious state of mind that feels unsafe because we feel like we're going to get judged or criticized or abandoned in what we're doing’.

There are cultures that create more time and rituals for the ones who are grieving and help them process that over time, where there is less deep divide between negative or positive emotions, since they are all part of the human array of emotional experience and been able to sit with them increases the chance of our being more present for our lives, of living a more conscious life, of being there for others, our capacity for empathic and compassionate responses. Pathologising grief and mourning is like censoring human experience or limiting the spectrum of emotional experience. Patrick O’ Malley says that ‘In this culture, we have to fight—and I'm one of many, many voices who are trying to say we need to have a different way of treating people who grieve and not see that they are wallowing or stuck in negative emotions, or they're not being positive enough’. He talks about how he and his family have honoured his deceased son every anniversary of his death for the last 36 years and how they have recently integrated new ways after his Japanese daughter-in-law introduced a new way or ritual of honouring the deceased, where food (cookies) is offered to the deceased several times during the year. I surfed the Net and read about many diverse ways of honouring the person who has passed away, but also about the different ways different communities or cultures approach grief and mourning and how the bereaved may be supported during this phase. One example was that of Tana Toraja

in Indonesia, where funerals are raucous affairs involving the whole community and can last up to weeks and where the deceased relative is referred to as a person who is sick or who is asleep, and where there is a long transitional stage, which may reflect the time people need to come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

Finally, Patrick O'Malley talks about his friendship with Tim Madigan, the co-author of this book, and he describes how when we feel our grief in a deep and pure way, it can connect us with the other and create an intimate, deep friendship. He refers to the power of support groups as an example of how people may connect with others who have gone through loss and create a lovely, sacred intimacy. He says 'I think it's as deep a community that you can have when you have that kind of connection of love and support and compassion and reality-sharing, and telling your story with each other'.