

Option B

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Facing Adversity,
Building Resilience,
and Finding Joy

SHERYL SANDBERG
ADAM GRANT

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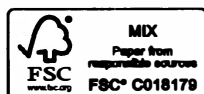
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In loving memory of David Bruce Goldberg

October 2, 1967–May 1, 2015

I will always love you, Dave

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Introduction

THE LAST THING I ever said to him was, “I’m falling asleep.”

I met Dave Goldberg in the summer of 1996 when I moved to Los Angeles and a mutual friend invited us both to dinner and a movie. When the film began, I promptly fell asleep, resting my head on Dave’s shoulder. Dave liked to tell people that he thought that meant I was into him, until he later learned that—as he put it—“Sheryl would fall asleep anywhere and on anyone.”

Dave became my best friend and L.A. began to feel like home. He introduced me to fun people, showed me back streets to avoid traffic, and made sure I had plans on weekends and holidays. He helped me become a bit cooler by introducing me to the internet and playing music I’d never heard. When I broke up with my boyfriend, Dave stepped in to comfort me even though my ex was a former Navy SEAL who slept with a loaded gun under his bed.

Dave used to say that when he met me it was love at first sight, but he had to wait a long time for me to become “smart enough to ditch those losers” and date him. Dave was always

a few steps ahead of me. But I caught up eventually. Six and a half years after that movie, we nervously planned a weeklong trip together, knowing it would either take our relationship in a new direction or ruin a great friendship. We married a year later.

Dave was my rock. When I got upset, he stayed calm. When I was worried, he said that everything would be okay. When I wasn't sure what to do, he helped me figure it out. Like all married couples, we had our ups and downs. Still, Dave gave me the experience of being deeply understood, truly supported, and completely and utterly loved. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life resting my head on his shoulder.

Eleven years after our wedding, we went to Mexico to celebrate our friend Phil Deutch's fiftieth birthday. My parents were babysitting our son and daughter in California, and Dave and I were excited to have an adults-only weekend. Friday afternoon, we were hanging out by the pool playing Settlers of Catan on our iPads. For a refreshing change, I was actually winning, but my eyes kept drifting closed. Once I realized that fatigue was going to prevent me from securing Catan victory, I admitted, "I'm falling asleep." I gave in and curled up. At 3:41 p.m., someone snapped a picture of Dave holding his iPad, sitting next to his brother Rob and Phil. I'm asleep on a cushion on the floor in front of them. Dave is smiling.

When I woke up more than an hour later, Dave was no longer in that chair. I joined our friends for a swim, assuming he'd gone to the gym as he'd planned. When I went back to our room to shower and he wasn't there, I was surprised but not concerned. I got dressed for dinner, checked my email, and called our children. Our son was upset because he and his friend had ignored playground rules, climbed a fence, and ripped their sneakers. Through tears, he came clean. I told him that I appreciated his honesty and that Daddy and I would dis-

cuss how much he would have to chip in from his allowance for a new pair. Not wanting to live with the uncertainty, our fourth grader pushed me to decide. I told him that this was the kind of decision that Daddy and I made together so I'd have to get back to him the next day.

I left the room and went downstairs. Dave wasn't there. I walked out to the beach and joined the rest of our group. When he wasn't there either, I felt a wave of panic. Something was wrong. I shouted to Rob and his wife Leslye, "Dave isn't here!" Leslye paused, then yelled back, "Where's the gym?" I pointed toward some nearby steps and we started running. I can still feel my breath and body constricting from those words. No one will ever say "Where's the gym?" to me again without causing my heart to race.

We found Dave on the floor, lying by the elliptical machine, his face slightly blue and turned to the left, a small pool of blood under his head. We all screamed. I started CPR. Rob took over from me. A doctor came and took over from him.

The ride in the ambulance was the longest thirty minutes of my life. Dave on a stretcher in the back. The doctor working over him. Me in the front seat where they made me sit, crying and pleading with the doctor to tell me that Dave was still alive. I could not believe how far the hospital was and how few cars moved out of our way. We finally arrived and they carried him behind a heavy wood door, refusing to let me through. I sat on the floor with Marne Levine, Phil's wife and one of my closest friends, holding me.

After what felt like forever, I was led into a small room. The doctor came in and sat behind his desk. I knew what that meant. When the doctor left, a friend of Phil's came over, kissed me on the cheek, and said, "I'm sorry for your loss." The words and the obligatory kiss felt like a flash-forward. I knew I was experiencing something that would happen over and over and over.

Someone asked if I wanted to see Dave to say good-bye. I did—and I did not want to leave. I thought that if I just stayed in that room and held him, if I refused to let go, I would wake up from this nightmare. When his brother Rob, in shock himself, said we had to go, I took a few steps out of the room, then turned around and ran back in, hugging Dave as hard as I could. Eventually, Rob lovingly pulled me off Dave's body. Marne walked me down the long white hall, her arms around my waist holding me up and preventing me from running back into that room.

And so began the rest of my life. It was—and still is—a life I never would have chosen, a life I was completely unprepared for. The unimaginable. Sitting down with my son and daughter and telling them that their father had died. Hearing their screams joined by my own. The funeral. Speeches where people spoke of Dave in the past tense. My house filling up with familiar faces coming up to me again and again, delivering the perfunctory kiss on the cheek followed by those same words: "I'm sorry for your loss."

When we arrived at the cemetery, my children got out of the car and fell to the ground, unable to take another step. I lay on the grass, holding them as they wailed. Their cousins came and lay down with us, all piled up in a big sobbing heap with adult arms trying in vain to protect them from their sorrow.

Poetry, philosophy, and physics all teach us that we don't experience time in equal increments. Time slowed way, way down. Day after day my kids' cries and screams filled the air. In the moments when they weren't crying, I watched them anxiously, waiting for the next instance they might need comfort. My own cries and screams—mostly inside my head but some out loud—filled the rest of the available space. I was in "the void": a vast emptiness that fills your heart and lungs and restricts your ability to think or even breathe.

Grief is a demanding companion. In those early days and weeks and months, it was always there, not just below the surface but on the surface. Simmering, lingering, festering. Then, like a wave, it would rise up and pulse through me, as if it were going to tear my heart right out of my body. In those moments, I felt like I couldn't bear the pain for one more minute, much less one more hour.

I saw Dave lying on the gym floor. I saw his face in the sky. At night, I called out to him, crying into the void: "Dave, I miss you. Why did you leave me? Please come back. I love you . . ." I cried myself to sleep each night. I woke up each morning and went through the motions of my day, often in disbelief that the world continued to turn without him. How could everyone go on as if nothing was different? *Didn't they know?*

Ordinary events became land mines. At Parents' Night, my daughter showed me what she had written eight months before on the first day of school: "I am a second grader. I wonder what will happen in the future." It hit me like a wrecking ball that when she wrote those words, neither she nor I would ever have thought that she would lose her father before she finished second grade. *Second grade.* I looked down at her little hand in mine, her sweet face gazing up at me to see if I liked her writing. I stumbled and almost fell, pretending to her that I'd tripped. As we walked around the room together, I looked down the entire time so none of the other parents could catch my eye and trigger a complete breakdown.

Milestone days were even more heart-wrenching. Dave had always made a big deal of the first day of school, taking lots of pictures as our kids went out the door. I tried to muster enthusiasm for taking those same pictures. The day of my daughter's birthday party, I sat on the floor of my bedroom with my mom, my sister, and Marne. I didn't think I could go downstairs and survive, much less smile through, a party. I knew I had to do

it for my daughter. I also knew I had to do it for Dave. But I wanted to do it *with* Dave.

There were moments when even I could see some humor. While getting my hair cut, I mentioned that I was having trouble sleeping. My hairdresser put down his scissors and opened his bag with a flourish, pulling out Xanax in every possible shape and size. I declined—but really appreciated the gesture. One day I was on the phone complaining to my father that all the griefbooks had dreadful titles: *Death Is of Vital Importance* or *Say Yes to It*. (Like I could say no.) While we were on the phone a new one arrived, *Moving to the Center of the Bed*. Another day, on my drive home I turned on the radio to distract myself. Each song that came on was worse than the one before. “Somebody That I Used to Know.” Awful. “Not the End.” I beg to differ. “Forever Young.” Not in this case. “Good Riddance: Time of Your Life.” No and no. I finally settled on “Reindeer(s) Are Better than People.”

My friend Davis Guggenheim told me that as a documentary filmmaker, he has learned to let the story reveal itself. He doesn’t start each project knowing where the tale will end because it has to unfold in its own way and in its own time. Worried that I would try to control my grief, he encouraged me to listen to it, keep it close, and let it run its course. He knows me well. I searched for ways to end the sorrow, put it in a box, and throw it away. For the first weeks and months, I failed. The anguish won every time. Even when I looked calm and collected, the pain was always present. I was physically sitting in a meeting or reading to my kids, but my heart was on that gym floor.

“No one ever told me,” C. S. Lewis wrote, “that grief felt so like fear.” The fear was constant and it felt like the grief would never subside. The waves would continue to crash over me until I was no longer standing, no longer myself. In the worst

of the void, two weeks after Dave died, I got a letter from an acquaintance in her sixties. She said that since she was ahead of me on this sad widow's path, she wished she had some good advice to offer, but she didn't. She had lost her husband a few years earlier, her close friend had lost hers a decade before, and neither of them felt that time had lessened the pain. She wrote, "Try as I might, I can't come up with a single thing that I know will help you." That letter, no doubt sent with the best of intentions, destroyed my hope that the pain would fade someday. I felt the void closing in on me, the years stretching before me endless and empty.

I called Adam Grant, a psychologist and professor at Wharton, and read the devastating letter to him. Two years earlier, Dave had read Adam's book *Give and Take* and invited him to speak at SurveyMonkey, where Dave was CEO. That evening, Adam joined us for dinner at our home. Adam studies how people find motivation and meaning, and we started talking about the challenges women face and how Adam's work could inform the issue. We began writing together and became friends. When Dave died, Adam flew across the country to attend the funeral. I confided to him that my greatest fear was that my kids would never be happy again. Other people had tried to reassure me with personal stories, but Adam walked me through the data: after losing a parent, many children are surprisingly resilient. They go on to have happy childhoods and become well-adjusted adults.

Hearing the despair in my voice triggered by the letter, Adam flew back across the country to convince me that there was a bottom to this seemingly endless void. He wanted to tell me face-to-face that while grief was unavoidable, there were things I could do to lessen the anguish for myself and my children. He said that by six months, more than half of people who lose a spouse are past what psychologists classify as "acute

grief.” Adam convinced me that while my grief would have to run its course, my beliefs and actions could shape how quickly I moved through the void and where I ended up.

I don’t know anyone who has been handed only roses. We all encounter hardships. Some we see coming; others take us by surprise. It can be as tragic as the sudden death of a child, as heartbreaking as a relationship that unravels, or as disappointing as a dream that goes unfulfilled. The question is: When these things happen, what do we do next?

I thought resilience was the capacity to endure pain, so I asked Adam how I could figure out how much I had. He explained that our amount of resilience isn’t fixed, so I should be asking instead how I could *become* resilient. Resilience is the strength and speed of our response to adversity—and we can build it. It isn’t about having a backbone. It’s about strengthening the muscles around our backbone.

Since Dave passed away, so many people have said to me, “I can’t imagine.” They mean they can’t imagine this happening to them, can’t imagine how I am standing there talking to them rather than curled up in a ball somewhere. I remember feeling the same way when I saw a colleague back at work after losing a child or a friend buying coffee after being diagnosed with cancer. When I was on the other side, my reply became, “I can’t imagine either, but I have no choice.”

I had no choice but to wake up every day. No choice but to get through the shock, the grief, the survivor guilt. No choice but to try to move forward and be a good mother at home. No choice but to try to focus and be a good colleague at work.

Loss, grief, and disappointment are profoundly personal. We all have unique circumstances and reactions to them. Still, the kindness and bravery of those who shared their experiences helped pull me through mine. Some who opened their hearts are my closest friends. Others are total strangers who offered

wisdom and advice publicly—sometimes even in books with horrible titles. And Adam, patient yet insistent that the darkness would pass, but that I would have to help it along. That even in the face of the most shocking tragedy of my life, I could exert some control over its impact.

This book is my and Adam's attempt to share what we've learned about resilience. We wrote it together, but for simplicity and clarity the story is told by me (Sheryl) while Adam is referred to in the third person. We don't pretend that hope will win out over pain every day. It won't. We don't presume to have experienced every possible kind of loss and setback ourselves. We haven't. There is no right or proper way to grieve or face challenges, so we don't have perfect answers. There are no perfect answers.

We also know that not every story has a happy ending. For each hopeful story we tell here, there are others where circumstances were too much to overcome. Recovery does not start from the same place for everyone. Wars, violence, and systemic sexism and racism decimate lives and communities. Discrimination, disease, and poverty cause and worsen tragedy. The sad truth is that adversity is not evenly distributed among us; marginalized and disenfranchised groups have more to battle and more to grieve.

As traumatic as my family's experience has been, I'm well aware of how fortunate we are to have a wide support system of extended family, friends, and colleagues and access to financial resources that few have. I also know that talking about how to find strength in the face of hardship does not release us from the responsibility of working to prevent hardship in the first place. What we do in our communities and companies—the public policies we put in place, the ways we help one another—can ensure that fewer people suffer.

Yet try as we might to prevent adversity, inequality, and

trauma, they still exist and we are still left to cope with them. To fight for change tomorrow we need to build resilience today. Psychologists have studied how to recover and rebound from a wide range of adversity—from loss, rejection, and divorce to injury and illness, from professional failure to personal disappointment. Along with reviewing the research, Adam and I sought out individuals and groups who have overcome ordinary and extraordinary difficulties. Their stories changed the way we think about resilience.

This book is about the capacity of the human spirit to persevere. We look at the steps people can take, both to help themselves and to help others. We explore the psychology of recovery and the challenges of regaining confidence and rediscovering joy. We cover ways to speak about tragedy and comfort friends who are suffering. And we discuss what it takes to create resilient communities and companies, raise strong children, and love again.

I now know that it is possible to experience post-traumatic growth. In the wake of the most crushing blows, people can find greater strength and deeper meaning. I also believe that it is possible to experience *pre*-traumatic growth—that you don't have to experience tragedy to build your resilience for whatever lies ahead.

I am only partway through my own journey. The fog of acute grief has lifted, but the sadness and longing for Dave remain. I'm still finding my way through and learning many of the lessons included here. Like so many who've experienced tragedy, I hope I can choose meaning and even joy—and help others do the same.

Looking back over the darkest moments, I can now see that even then there were signs of hope. A friend reminded me that when my children broke down at the cemetery, I said to them, "This is the second worst moment of our lives. We lived