INSIDE STORY

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Moving Through Grief—How Loss Transformed My Science

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What good is knowing, unless it is coupled with caring. Science can give us knowing, but caring comes from someplace else.[1]
Robin Wall Kimmerer

Her name means *movement*—something I discovered only 6 years after I held my dead child in my arms. And yet, she was not moving. That stillness would set in motion a journey that would transform not just my grief but my entire understanding of healing and science. Noa had died 2 days earlier while in my womb, at 37 weeks of gestation. After 2 full days of labor, we held her in our arms. Her 2 older sisters, age 5 and nearly 3 years, came to say both hello and goodbye.

Noa was wheeled away to the morgue on February 22, 2019. In the frenetic aftermath of those early days, time was a slow blur—I was physically depleted, we planned her funeral and bought our own cemetery plots, threw a 3-year-old birthday party, and woke up early each morning to the flickering light of a memorial candle.

A month passed, and my grief and trauma symptoms persisted. As a psychiatric epidemiologist involved in clinical trials for trauma-affected populations, I knew this 1-month marker was significant. I sought clinical services: support groups and psychiatrists. They offered evidence-based solutions, such as mindfulness, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, narrative exposure therapy—approaches I was professionally committed to. Yet none addressed the true cause of my suffering: Noa's loss.

In fact, in many ways, I did not want my suffering to go away. The deep emotional pain I carried was the only connection I had to the physical pain I experienced during those days in February 2019 when everything changed. Somehow, if I held onto it, I could hold on to Noa. I was deeply attached to the fog that was slowly burying me.

Three years prior to her death, I took a job at the Center for Indigenous Health (CIH) at Johns Hopkins. My PhD in epidemiology and implementation science helped me advance major clinical trials at CIH in partnership with Tribal communities. I brought my Western-trained scientific brain to CIH's work, often listening to my Indigenous colleagues but still very grounded in the notion of evidence-based solutions. At the time, I saw these as separate worlds—the knowing of science and the relationality of traditional practices. For example, early on, I learned about the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—planted together in Indigenous farming methods. At the time, I viewed this practice through my epidemiologist's lens: an efficient agricultural system. I did not yet understand how this wisdom later would help me make sense of my own family's growth through loss.

Seven months after Noa's loss, during a work trip, my colleagues recognized the fog consuming me. They arranged a healing ceremony for me from a traditional medicine man. I remember feeling the deep care inherent in this invitation to experience their traditions. Ceremonial healing practices have been part of Indigenous communities since time immemorial. After the ceremony, I could feel the fog lifted—while nothing could fix my loss, I finally understood that I could let go of the pain and still be connected to Noa.

It was not just the ceremony; it was the support and wisdom from several of my colleagues. They hugged me, shared stories with me, and reminded me that even though Noa physically had passed on, she was with me. They gave me reassurance that by letting go of the pain, I would not let go of her. That by choosing to live my life fully and create memories in her honor, I keep her spirit alive. It is through embracing joy, rather than sorrow, that I can stay connected to my daughter Noa.

This shift in perspective created space for new movement in our lives. Eighteen months after Noa's death, our fourth daughter was born during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Jewish tradition, we named her in honor of her sister, with a middle name meaning "the one who heals" in Hebrew. Each morning to this day, she leans her heart against mine for several moments. In these still points of connection, I feel both her heartbeat and Noa's presence, a reminder that healing does not mean leaving our grief behind but allowing it to move with us in new ways.

Through this journey, Noa's spirit has made me a better and more authentic scientist—one who understands that scientific rigor and deep compassion are essential partners. This transformation manifests in my work in suicide prevention, in which my intimate relationship with grief has taught me that evidence-based interventions must be coupled with profound human understanding. When working with communities touched by suicide, I bring not just my scientific training but also my lived experience of how grief transforms us.

It was not the evidence-based interventions that have helped me heal. While these offered tools to manage my symptoms, my true healing emerged through relationships. The wisdom, caring, and compassion from my colleagues let me see a path forward. Healing is not individualistic; it is a relational process. This insight has helped me transform my research: I now recognize that effective mental health support must honor the relational paths people take toward healing, not just the clinical pathways that are prescribed.

As I continue to work toward generating evidence to support community-based mental health interventions and their implementation, I do so with deep appreciation for Indigenous knowledge systems. These systems represent rigorous, empirical practices developed over generations, incorporating sophisticated under-

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standing of ecological relationships, human interactions, and spiritual well-being. While non-Indigenous science may provide the data necessary for evidence-based practice, Indigenous sciences provide holistic frameworks that uplift the relational nature of the human experience. Both distinct approaches should be valued. At times, it may be in the braiding of these approaches—not choosing between them—that we find powerful paths to healing.

What I have learned from Indigenous ways of knowing extends beyond my work with Tribal communities. The wisdom that healing requires both scientific knowledge and deeply human connection has profound implications for how to approach mental health care in all communities. In my suicide prevention work, I have seen how this braiding of evidence-based practice with cultural wisdom and compassion creates more effective and meaningful interventions. The scientific evidence tells us what may work, and the human connection—the caring that comes from "someplace else," as Kimmerer notes[1]—helps us understand how to make it work in ways that truly matter to people.

Sometimes I think of my 3 living girls like the corn, bean, and squash sisters. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer asks whether we should consider a fourth sister, the planter, who prepares and tills the land and protects the others.[1] While I know the presence of Noa's spirit cannot be scientifically proven, I also know that she is this fourth sister in our family. It is this kind of wisdom that I, as a professor in public health, strive to honor in my research, practice, and teaching.

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Additional Information: I am not Indigenous. It is important to note that my colleagues invited me into these spaces to share their practices and learn from this wisdom and have supported me in my writing of this story. The knowledge shared here, or any traditional knowledges, are sacred and should not be taken without permission. Consistent with this, I have intentionally not described details of certain aspects of my healing journey. I aim to hold myself accountable to all Tribal nations. As part of my accountability, I work to support and uplift Indigenous researchers and programs. Personally, I give annually in Noa's honor to Indigenous-led groups working on health and healing for Tribal communities. I give thanks to the past, present, and future stewards of the land and respect all Tribal nations' sovereignty and right to self-determination. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to my colleagues and friends who have shared their own cultural teachings and personal stories with me to support my recovery. They are generous beyond belief, and I am so thankful. Additionally, Claude Sonnet 3.7 (Anthropic) was used on February 22, 2025, for support in understanding where to shorten the essay and proofreading. I take full responsibility for the content of the article.

1. Kimmerer RW. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions; 2015.