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I have this thing I always say before I speak in public these days. It's become kind of a verbal talisman to guarantee I don't cry.
Bests, Michael

I say, I'm probably going to cry during this, I just thought I'd warn you that if I'm choked-up and smurfling, I'll get through it, so please don't be embarrassed. Just give me the empathy you'd give someone with a bad cold. Then, having said that.. I usually don't cry.

But it occurred to me how silly! Even thinking that me crying would ... in this crowd! Embarrass anyone.

I'm so grateful for being here today. Last year I sat on that chair right there and sobbed though all of this. Friends and strangers put their hands on me. And of course in Healing Center tradition, I was plied with tiny boxes of totally insufficient Kleenexes.

My Stephanie, you see, my partner of 10 years, My Cosmic Opposite, Who Taught Me How to Wait, never smoked a cigarette, died young of lung cancer a year and a half ago. Besides everything else about it, it was grossly unfair. (*I don't mean to imply that smokers or a former smoker like me deserve to die young. They don't. No one deserves to die young.*)

I don't mind crying in front of a crowd anymore. That's because in the rooms of the Healing Center on those dismal Thursday nights when the wound was still open and pulsing, *we got permission to express that pain. And some of us needed that.*

Crying indiscriminately in public *can* be a little inconvenient. As many of you know, lots of people get really uncomfortable when an adult- *especially a man-* is so utterly overcome by pains of the heart, he lets slip his hard-shelled mask of the everyday grown-up.

After her diagnosis, Stephanie and I got in some great travel. But she suffered. 2 years of cancer treatment, she suffered. Then another year for her to die. She suffered.

Occasionally, I felt like a hero, but most of the time, I felt like a powerless houseboy trudging in through the outer rings of hell. When she finally died, in my arms, in our bed, I was cast into the pit... alone, lost & a little crazy for awhile. But miraculously with the help of Scott, Tom, Mary, Jane, and my new friends in the Class of 2012 at the Thursday Night Crybaby Group... I started to see that there was a way up.

I'm a writer by trade and I teach writing. I've given lip service for years that Only Writing from the Heart is Real Writing- Your Heart is the key to Any Creative Endeavor. blah bliddy blah... *I SO didn't know what I was talking about... Until* being at Stephanie's side before, during, and after her death.

Notwithstanding that the whole deal was catastrophic, monumental pile of crap, it was an honor and a privilege to have been the one. I'm so grateful.

Today I'm scrubbed and scaled of so many layers of the plaque of lovelessness that had encased my heart.

The part all those people played was huge, but I gotta say... there was also the strong medicine of time. I've long believed time was my enemy, I still do, but now I know it has side that's blessed.

I don't wanna hear about "journeys."

I'm up to here with journeys-

You *take* a journey, a journey doesn't take you.

When you fall in a crevasse, *it's not a journey!*

It's a 5-alarm life crisis.

Falsetto: "*O here I am, on my journey to the bottom of an abandoned mine shaft- It's awfully dark in here...*"

And don't be talkin' to me about "silver linings." They're something people who haven't grieved ...gently suggest when they REALLY think you should be done already with this grief stuff. (*god, it's been a whole year*).

Or when you just want someone to listen and you sound so wretched, it scares them? ... so after ransacking their brains, they come up with "silver linings" as if there's such a thing as some satiny providence *you somehow managed to totally missed* hiding under the storm clouds of your despair.

However. To be honest,- for most of us, there have been good things come of these crises- and our surviving of these crises. We've all experienced them. I'm so much closer to my daughter, my grandchildren, my sister, certain friends.

Here's something I learned in our group: After losing half our sky, no matter how we choose to work our grief: even if we just decide to let time do its sweet healing...

We've worked for where we're at and who we've become.

Some days, I feel I've walked through the fire and am living proof that the intense heat of our grief can be redemptive and life-affirming. Some days.

I'm ensconced in busy-ness and have lots of people in my life, but I'm still lonely. I still have days when I do little more than wander my house, sobbing and staring into the refrigerator. I've played one Leonard Cohen album so many times, my iPod contacted Apple on its own and begged to come back.

I take nothing for granted. No one for granted. I take better care of myself.

But I still cry in the night, and in the day, and the other times, too.

It's all made me a real grown-up, but I gotta say: *Surviving your life partner's a helluva self-help program.*

Lucky for me, I was blessed by the Healing Center, and especially the friends I made there- *first*, because they get it. *And second*, I love them because *they knew instinctively they did not want to do this by themselves. That says so much about them!*

It says so much about the Center, which was ready & willing to be there for us.

Today, I remember Stephanie Taffy Spar who gave me so much. Thanks Taffy, and thank you.