

Praise For The Difference

"This remarkable anthology offers true inspiration for us to connect with hope in humanity and become wiser beings. The beautiful, life-changing and profound stories in this book are a must-read."

Dr. Edith Shiro, author of *The Unexpected Gift of Trauma: the path to Posttraumatic Growth*.

"Ten deeply personal stories about loss, courage and transformation that will inspire you and help you look at your own life differently. Each story is unique and yet all speak to the strength and resiliency of the human spirit."

Eva Ritvo, MD, psychiatrist, author, and co-founder of *The Bold Beauty Project*.

"This beautiful anthology of personal stories, edited by Rosemary Ravinal and Achim Nowak, captivates the reader with a profound sense of purpose, courage, and resilience. With each intimate, passionate account of life's journey, you're sure to unlock the authentic version of yourself. *The Difference* is a must-read for anyone seeking inspiration and fulfillment in life!"

Dana P. Rowe, musical theater composer, author, and leadership coach.

"These powerfully vulnerable stories in *The Difference* remind me that one of the most profound tools of the healing trades is the affirmation of our human capacity to transform pain into purpose. I am deeply touched by the authors' journeys and inspired by their transformations. Their stories are a gift of hope and possibility."

Dr. Linda Lausell Bryant, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, NYU Silver School of Social Work.

"A true treasure! These stunning personal stories of strength, courage, and hope are exactly what we need today to inspire us to reach for the stars. They assure us that we can do it!"

Patricia Gussin, New York Times best-selling author of *Medicine and Mayhem: The Dr. Laura Nelson Files*.

"The Difference is life changing. It's no surprise that when I received the summary of the book to review I was going through a time of enormous stress and loss. Perfect timing. Just the advanced copy helped me to get grounded in truth and find some peace in one of the most difficult times in my life. Thank you for this book."

Jordan Adler, dream broker and author of the best-selling book, *Beach Money*.

"The honesty and raw beauty of the writing in *The Difference* touched me deeply. It compelled me to consider all the choices I have made in my own life. What a wise and inspiring book it is!"

Luis Gallardo, founder & president, World Happiness Foundation.

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THE Essays on Loss, Courage, and Personal Transformation **DIFFERENCE**

Achim Nowak & Rosemary Ravinal

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Balboa Press
A Division of Hay House
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.balboapress.com
844-682-1282

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Print information available on the last page.

ISBN: 979-8-7652-4142-4 (sc)
ISBN: 979-8-7652-4144-8 (hc)
ISBN: 979-8-7652-4143-1 (e)

Balboa Press rev. date: 04/22/2023

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Foreword

I was honored when Rosemary and Achim generously asked me to write a foreword to their book, *The Difference: Essays on Loss, Courage, and Personal Transformation*. First, because I have such warm regard for the two of them. But also because I think there's so much insightful value packed between their book's covers that we all need to consider and understand.

What moves me so profoundly about this anthology is that it's not only instructive and prescriptive, but also restorative. Rosemary and Achim have done us an enormous favor by tackling the yeoman's task of collecting universally relevant tales and presenting them to us in a thoughtful and organized manner. These are stories that we can all use as mirrors to our own experiences, guideposts for our future life travels, and soothing salves for our souls.

How do I know this? Even before I journeyed through all the stories, the headings for the book's three main sections—*Loss, Courage, and Personal Transformation*—prepared me for the voyage. The first heading is something that all of us have experienced and will continue to experience. The second two headings are attributes we all need to develop.

Oscar Wilde cautioned us, "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all." Thanks to our authors' insightful work, we can discover how to elevate our own lives beyond the uninspired norm decried by Wilde. Throughout this book, the stories have the power to inspire us to turn

our losses into springboards to the better life for which we all yearn.

When I was a little boy, anytime my brother, sister, or I would complain about something we didn't have, my grandmother Mollie would say, "Don't compare." Having come to the United States as a small child with a family escaping the violent pogroms of Eastern Europe, Mollie believed that the only way to live her life was to look forward to and savor every small pleasure that came her way. According to my grandmother, each person's life was exclusively their own, complete with personal triumphs, failures, hopes, dreams, and disappointments. Mollie's empathetic worldview shaped my own.

Remembering my grandmother's admonishments helped me as I read *The Difference*. Instead of observing other people's stories from the comfortable distance between me and the page, I was able to experience their losses and discover new ways of dealing with my own memories of loss.

Like you, I have lost important people in my life, but not with the drama that Carl Ficks, Jr. experienced. Nor have I been uprooted from the country of my birth as Rosemary Ravinal was. Still, their stories of love and loss gave me new ways of looking at what I have lost and what has been taken from me as well as what I still hold dear.

Similarly, I have never stepped into a boxing ring like Malissa Smith. Nor have I had to overcome cultural parenting norms the way Dr. Lynne Maureen Hurdle did. Yet, reading their stories of bravery gave me new insights into what others have done to overcome their obstacles and challenges. My fondest hope is that their tales have begun to backfill a wellspring of courage that I can draw on when I need that quality the most.

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Finally, the collected stories of transformation had additional significance for me because I have been thinking and writing about this subject for a while. My latest book, *Is That All There Is?*, explored how successful people change their lives for the better. All three people featured in the Personal Transformation section of the book you're about to read—Mark J. Silverman, Dr. Tom Garcia, and Achim Nowak—supplemented my recent research and added to my quiver of viable strategies and proven techniques for creating fundamental change in my own life.

Without a doubt, these conversations cover difficult issues. Facing these crossroads in your life might seem to be a daunting task, but don't worry. Both Rosemary and Achim have accepted the responsibility to serve as your casting directors and tour guides. Doing this, they've assembled a group of people who have lived through the sorts of experiences that best-selling authors and award-winning screenwriters spend a lifetime searching for. And then they've stitched their stories together into a compelling narrative that will help you navigate your own journey and find your way to the mountaintop.

In fact, one of Mark Silverman's practices might be your best directive for continuing through the pages that await you. When Silverman tells us to "consume uplifting and inspiring content," he could very well be talking about reading *The Difference*.

And as Dr. Tom Garcia shares in his story of redemption, you are never alone. Although Garcia is writing about the many forms of support he found throughout his own travails, he likewise could just as accurately have been referencing this volume.

Thanks to Achim and Rosemary's gentle guidance, you too can relieve the darker parts of your life's journey, find meaning deep within them, and emerge triumphantly into the light. And even

with my grandmother’s words (“Don’t compare!”) ringing in my ears, I envy your upcoming journey of discovery.

– **Bruce Turkel**

Author, Corporate Branding Expert, and Hall of Fame Speaker

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Introduction

This anthology began with a deceptively simple premise: what forces have made a difference in the lives of successful and influential people?

We are blessed to know many gifted and fascinating humans and began to assemble a group of possible contributors with vastly different life stories. We were honored with the enthusiastic response to our request for unvarnished personal memoirs about life-changing shifts, triggers and catalysts that made a difference in their life trajectories.

We selected eight storytellers. Each one has experienced loss, faced dramatic personal transformation, and demonstrated courage beyond measure. Individually and collectively, they inspire millions of followers around the world to lead more authentic, wholehearted, and expansive lives.

The questions we posed were meant to prompt honest reflection and offer real-life examples to inspire others.

- *If you were to pinpoint the ONE factor or experience that invoked the greatest personal transformation in your life, what comes to mind?*
- *What made the biggest difference and left a lasting effect?*
- *What sort of explorations do you suggest for others who may desire to make a conscious and profound change?*

The personal narratives we received from our eight contributors thrilled us and motivated us to add our own essays.

We invited colleagues who we knew to be both superb writers and exceptional thinkers, and this is, indeed, what they delivered. Their stories are presented here in their own words. Their writings capture their unique voices: highly personal, vulnerable, raw, and deep. Their insights into how their lives transformed resound with timeless and transcendent wisdom and offer lessons for anyone who seeks a rich, purposeful, and fulfilling life.

As we combed through these marvelous essays, it quickly became evident that there were three shared themes. The biggest surprise, perhaps, was how many of our authors wrote about loss in its many forms – the loss of a fellow human being, the loss of an identity, the loss of a culture, the loss of a long-held belief – and how our resolve to embrace and move through the pain and grief of loss irrevocably impacts everything that follows.

We kept returning to the experience of loss as THE singular galvanizing force for some of our authors. We received multiple stories about unexpected personal courage, and how the courage to follow “the road less traveled” yielded extraordinary returns. And we found stories that mirrored the archetypal hero’s journey through darkness into a deep spiritual awakening. Here is what’s in store for you in this anthology.

THEME 1: LOSS

Carl Ficks, Jr. had an impressive career of over three decades as an attorney, partner in multiple law firms, and head of corporate and donor relations for a hospital. A series of painful personal losses challenged Carl to face an uncomfortable truth: He was done with practicing law. In his essay “Rage Against the Dying of the Light,” Carl describes how his encounter with multiple losses

propelled him to pursue an entirely different line of work that mines his untapped passions.

For Dr. Betsy Guerra, a psychotherapist, counselor, and author, the tragic death of her young daughter in 2013 forever changed the course of her life. It moved Betsy to closely examine the powerful relationship she had to her religious faith. It also helped her realize that she had tools that had served her. As she entered the vibrant next phase of her life that embraced her grief, she used the same tools to counsel families facing their own losses.

Co-editor Rosemary Ravinal left Cuba at the age of seven in the first wave of exiles fleeing the regime of Fidel Castro. Though she made a prosperous life, raised a daughter, and had a thriving career as a communications professional and media personality in the United States, she is haunted by thoughts of her homeland and a cultural bereavement she cannot reconcile. Her desire for Cuban identity remains a nagging source of loss and longing.

THEME 2: COURAGE

Alisa Alexander is a woman of many gifts. She is a performer who can be heard on many gospel recordings, a keynote speaker, an exceptional classroom facilitator, and a professional instructional designer. In Alisa's life, these gifts were expressed in parallel lanes until one extraordinary day, when she was speaking in front of an audience of more than a thousand people and spirit moved her to sing. In an instant of courage, the separation into different paths and multiple facets of Alisa was banished.

Dr. Lynne Maureen Hurdle, a luminary in the conflict resolution world, credits the courageous act of "breaking culture" as a singular moment in her personal liberation. Raised in an African American culture with traditional narratives of what it meant to

be a mother; Lynne came face to face with the limits of these narratives when she understood that her infertility would prevent her from giving birth. The adoption of two beautiful sons, and the death of her mother, completed this liberation.

Malissa Smith wrote the first comprehensive narrative about female boxing, titled “A History of Women’s Boxing.” She is a co-host of the boxing podcast, The WAAR Room, a founding board member of the International Women’s Boxing Hall of Fame, and a juror for the weekly Ring Magazine boxing rankings. Malissa’s journey into the world of boxing began when she, as a woman in her 40s, summoned the courage to step into a boxing gym and start her training as an amateur.

Caroline de Posada witnessed the power of human transformation while managing the career of her father, global speaker and renowned author Dr. Joachim de Posada. After his death in 2015, Caroline took a leap of faith into uncharted waters. She left her career as a successful attorney and devoted herself to helping others build resilient relationships and define and achieve success. She created a supportive online community called CORE which takes a mind-body approach to physical and emotional wellness. Her mission is to inspire people to live better, follow their dreams and pursue their goals.

THEME 3: PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Everything changed for Dr. Tom Garcia when he and his wife invited his good friend John to live with them during the final years of John’s life. As he tended to his friend, Tom found himself less and less interested in his practice as a successful chiropractor. He embarked on his exploration of fire rituals and his shamanic self. This is the life Tom lives now.

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Mark J. Silverman's life has unfolded in a series of dramatic ups and equally great downs: from homelessness to making a million dollars, to losing it all again. From having a storybook family life to divorce and facing his addictions, Mark's life has been a long and extended ride into more profound and fully knowing self-love.

Co-editor Achim Nowak was handed a "you have a couple of years to live" prognosis in 1988 when he tested HIV-positive. This prognosis took him to an esoteric healing center deep in the Arizona desert where he made contact with spirit and entered an archetypal dark night of soul. When he emerged from his dark night, he left Manhattan for a small Caribbean island where he became a windsurfer. Nothing would ever be the same again.

OUR INVITATION

Enjoy the honest, rich, and captivating stories you're about to read. Savor the broad tapestry of human experience that unfolds in these pages. As you engage with each author, you will understand that the losses, the struggles, and the difficult moments are unexpected paths to hope, possibility and the common beat of life. They are, indeed, the seeds of deep and lasting personal transformation.

In gratitude for traveling and exploring with us,
– **Achim Nowak and Rosemary Ravinal**

Essays on Loss

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Rage Against the Dying of the Light

Carl Ficks, Jr.

The personal losses in Carl Ficks, Jr.'s life started to pile up after more than three decades of work as a successful trial attorney. Then came one more loss; this time, one he chose: Carl said goodbye to his lawyer life and embarked on an entirely new and entirely unrelated career.

Danish author Isak Dinesen once said, "All sorrows can be borne if you tell a story about them." I hope the stories that I share inspire you, regardless of age or obstacle, to never stop moving, learning, experimenting, exploring, or living. These are my sorrows, not unlike those experienced by many and thus not unique. They are simply ones I have embraced and repurposed as the catalyst to step into, and onto, a new stage.

DUST IN THE WIND

I couldn't forget one of our last journeys together.

We were on top of Table Mountain, 12,688 feet above sea level in the Weminuche Wilderness, 500,000 acres of pristine land in Colorado. Staring slack-jawed at a herd of elk in a valley below. Paul had guided me up the Highline Trail to this point on a spotless July day. There we soaked in unobstructed 360-degree views that stretched for 90 miles, drinking the silence and bathing in the brilliance of quiet.

Ruggedly handsome, stealthily intense, and wryly funny, Paul, one of my wife's brothers, had fled a very prominent and public third-generation family business in his early 40s and moved west, first to Arizona and then to Colorado. He reminded me of the legendary mountain man Jeremiah Johnson. Offices and buildings adorned with Paul's famous surname could not harness his spirit or contain his wanderlust. When Paul escaped his nine-to-five corporate prison, he came alive for the first time.

Before our trip, I'd never spent a night in the wild, but that was of no matter for Paul. He scoffed and told me that I was *in shape* and had the *right attitude*. When we met at the Durango airport the day before we set off, Paul mentioned that he'd packed my 50 pounds of gear. After I thanked him, he sternly told me to unpack the gear and repack it myself. "Why?" I asked. So I would know the contents of my pack should we encounter *difficulties*, as he put it. Paul's wilderness skills were unmatched, and the subtle unpack/repack flex was not lost upon me, his pupil for the journey.

He had invited me into one of his many cathedrals in the sky, places where he routinely found peace in good times and solace in turbulent ones. Places where he could, as Jimi Hendrix sang, *kiss the sky*. Here he was his happiest self because he was usually alone. As the husband in Tolstoy's novella *Family Happiness* says, "It's a bad thing not to be able to stand solitude." Paul loved his solitude, which he was graciously about to share with me.

Paul and I geared and gunned up, then trekked into the Weminuche with no watches, no phones, no technology; no contact with, or access to, the outside world. We hiked all day, made camp, then repeated the sequence the next morning. All without *difficulties*. This was the first time I had really, truly kissed the sky.

We emerged three days later and headed into the little mining town of Creede, where we greedily devoured bison burgers and downed a few cold beers at Kip's Grill.

Author and social commentator Jack London is said to have observed that he would rather be a meteor than a sleepy and permanent planet. He believed that man's true purpose in life is to live, not to waste time merely sustaining himself.

Paul was the brightest of meteors, rejecting both the mere sustenance offered by corporate America and the familial yoke to find his true purpose as a runner, high-altitude mountaineer, hunter, fisherman, and all-around badass.

Paul, *until he didn't*.

In late February 2014, Paul disappeared without a trace in Arizona. He was 57 years old. A massive search and rescue mission ensued, involving law enforcement helicopters; dogs; and volunteer searchers on foot, horseback, and all-terrain vehicles. The search reached its zenith the second week of March 2014. His name, as if ripped off his old office/prison door, exploded on the front page of a statewide newspaper back east, the *Hartford Courant*, with the ominous headline, "Tomasso Family Member Missing on Arizona Hike."

Missing he was. Paul was dust in the wind.

A DOUBLE WAKE

My mother married young in life, raised three kids, ran the household and worked part-time at a bank. My father firmly believed she had sacrificed her education for the good of maintaining order, and often encouraged her to return to

college. But life interfered, and she deferred the quest for a degree.

After my father's passing in 2009, my mother moved purposefully toward achieving her long-deferred goal and enrolled in a local community college. Never one to settle, she pursued her degree in earnest. Her family marveled at the effort and devotion expended by this maternal meteor to earn that diploma.

By the fall of 2013, she had accumulated enough credits to graduate. However, cancer suddenly appeared, seeking to deny my mother the opportunity to walk across the stage with her graduating class in the spring of 2014. Undeterred, my sister magically engineered a ceremony in Mom's hospital room. With "Pomp and Circumstance" filling the hushed silence, the college's President and Dean of Academic Affairs presented my mother with her well-deserved diploma. The Dean, addressing Mom's four captivated grandchildren, said, "She wanted to be an example for you, to show you that with hard work you can achieve anything you want in life." Mom responded that earning her degree at the age of 78 had made a difference in her life.

My mother was a steady presence in my life, *until she wasn't*.

Three short days later, while the search for my brother-in-law Paul continued some 2,500 miles away, her life ended. Like the glowing meteor that she was, my mother died after exhibiting to her grandchildren what it is like to LIVE.

The unbearable sadness of Paul's disappearance muscled in on the unbearable sadness of my mother's passing, both fighting for my attention, energy, and emotional reserves. At my mother's wake, as mourners passed through the line to offer their condolences, they simultaneously asked my wife, Carol,