

Esther Perel: *This week, I want to bring something different to you. We talk about grief in the sessions with couples, we talk about grief and aliveness in the sessions with the individuals in the Esther Callings, but I wanted to actually have a conversation about grief itself. About this most complex emotion that can regulate an entire relationship, especially when it is acute or completely repressed and I thought about it because I was hosting a clinical conference actually called Sessions Live on Mating in the Meta Crisis.*

So in this conference, I wanted to go back to the origins of my thinking about the erotic and something that is not always so obvious is that so much of my work on eroticism actually minds itself in my work on grief and loss and trauma. And to have even a more developed thinking and approach to the subject of grief. I wanted to invite one of the people that I've learned from the most in this area, and that's Julia Samuel, who is a British psychologist who has written a seminal work actually called Grief Works, in which she really developed an entire approach of dealing with grief, acknowledging the grief, expressing the grief, putting the grief aside, if possible at all to reengage with life, to experience this yin yang between loss and new birth or new experiences.

So you'll hear me present some of the origins of my thinking in this conference, and then I invite Julia Samuel to really bring in that complimentary piece. It's one thing to know that we need to be able to reconnect with creativity, with playfulness, with imagination, the essential ingredients of the erotic that help us stay connected to life. But what Julia is highlighting is that if you don't grieve, you actually cut a lifeline to anything that will then enable you to feel alive again.

I define the erotic way beyond a repertoire of sexual technique or sexual urges or toys and accoutrements. I look at eroticism as the qualities of vitality and vibrancy that make us feel alive.

And I came to thinking about the importance of the erotic when I was working on *Mating in Captivity*, which is about 20 years ago. Next year is the 20th anniversary. And it was a very specific moment. I was talking with my husband Jack Saul who at the time had co-founded the *Center for Treatment for Victims of Torture and Political Violence*. And I said to him, how do you know when people who have suffered like that are once again going back to living, enter the world again? And we started talking about three aspects. You know that you are getting back into living when you are once again able to take risks. Because if you take risks it means that you're not trapped in a constant state of contraction and vigilance. Risks is an active engagement with the unknown.

And you know that you are once again leaping into the world when you are able to play again. Because play is a state of unselfconsciousness and freedom. And you know that you are entering in the world again when you are able to be creative, because creativity starts from a place of safety, but then projects you into a place of mystery.

And I thought this actually fits my story very well. My parents, maybe many of you may have heard me talk about them, but they are at the root of a lot of the work that I do. Were, both of them, the sole survivors of their entire family that was decimated in the Holocaust, the Jewish Holocaust. They both had spent five years working in slave labor camps and concentration camps, and then at one point met on the day of liberation, walking on the street together. And, um, when they came out of the war, they were in their early twenties. But something happened which made them come out with a fierce determination not just to survive, but to live.

And so they carried the weight of unspeakable loss, but they clung to joy and beauty and sensuality, and especially humor, dark humor I have to add as if their lives depended on it. Because I spent years asking to them, how did you wake up day after day? What made you wanna continue living? It was kind of the, you know, a breakfast conversation in my house, but it also meant that there were stories of, of, amazing stories of resilience in the face of unimaginable adversity. You know, when you live with it, it's not, you don't think of it as weird, it's, it's only when you go to your friend's houses that you realize this is not everybody else's breakfast conversation, you know?

In my community, I often noticed that there were two groups. It was in Antwerp, in Belgium, and I often thought that there was those who did not die. The whole community was a, a community of Jewish Holocaust survivors. So it, you could really do a kind of an ethnographic study. Those who did not die and those who came back to life.

I think you can apply this to all trauma for every group on this planet. This is, it is my origin story, but it is not at all exclusive to my story. And those who did not die were people who often lived very tethered to the ground. They couldn't really trust. The world was a dangerous place. God forbid you would be playing because if you're playing, you're not being vigilant, you're not on guard, you're not watchful. So you don't. And you couldn't take any risks and therefore even every couch was covered in plastic.

And those who came back to life had kind of understood the erotic as an antidote to death. And this is the conversation in the trauma field at this moment as well, is is the place, you know, you need both. You need to deal

with the trauma, but you need to actively engage with life. If you think that you're going to deal with trauma and at the end you'll be ready to start engaging with life again, you don't really understand the erotic. That's what I learned from them. It's like these people fell in love in the camps, wrote love stories, had sex. All of that continued because it was a way to know that they were still sovereign and human.

And I have to say that in, in my house, it was taken to such an extreme that, um, sadness was basically reserved for commemorations and for religious rituals. I mean, it, it was very clearly understood that the vulnerable die. So you have to be strong. And outside of the religious rituals and the commemorations, um, it was almost forbidden, I have to say, to be sad, smothered by this insistence on strength, on rebuilding, on celebrating, and on moving forward.

I think my parents were probably terrified that if they allowed themselves to experience the beginning of their sadness, they would be drowning in a puddle of so much pain that they could never lift themselves back up. I don't think this is unique to them either.

So I definitely wanted the permission to feel the full spectrum of emotion and to hold the joy and the grief and the desire and the despair, and that's when I began to study eroticism.

And so if we contextualize eroticism for today. From the pandemic to climate crisis, to crimes against humanity to severe burnout and more, I think it's fair to say that many of us are living in a state of collective trauma. And our impulse may be to shut down or to numb ourselves with substances to disconnect, to sleep forever, to wallow in 24 hour news cycles or stuff every free moment with social media to avoid any difficult thoughts or feelings.

But today, I will invite you to try something different and in a way to embrace your erotic self. And you may think that talking about eroticism at this moment is hubris, but I tell you, it is actually essential.

Eroticism as the Mexican essayist Octavio Paz tells us, reveals us to another world inside this world. The senses become servants to our imagination, letting us see the invisible and hear the inaudible. Eroticism is an elixir of vibrancy, curiosity, and spontaneity that makes us feel alive. So when people say, I'm feeling guilty, I feel like it's almost awkward that I feel good. Don't. It's actually essential because that's what will give you the energy to address the other things. It's the counterforce of deadness. The radiance that reminds us that despite any darkness that we may endure, we are here on this planet right now.

And at all times we are on the edge of all that is possible, straddling hope and anxiety.

Eroticism isn't just the life force that makes sex great. Eroticism is what makes life itself worth living. And when times are good, eroticism is what converts the mundane into magic. And when times are tough, eroticism is what inspires us to survive despite all odds. It's why we make art and music. But it's also what makes us go into nature when we are in pain. Eroticism is, it's the orchestras in the concentration camps. It's the choirs in the cotton fields. It's the dark humor that is shared by refugees all over the globe. It's the blues. It's both the letters of longing and the poetry of heartbreak. It's the playlist that you make for a friend that's going through unimaginable loss. It's every pandemic baby that is conceived in the height of prolonged uncertainty, isolation, and grief. And it is the spirit that creates new life when death is ever present. Eroticism is having faith that the world will exist for our grandchildren, and finding real ways to contribute to that outcome even as apocalyptic scenarios seem to play out around us.

So do not think of eroticism as a hedonistic distraction from the state of the world. It is the life force that keeps us connected to our humanity, hope and pleasure, especially when we are in pain. It confirms I exist, I'm alive, I have dignity, I have a family, I have a name. Someone knows me. I have a capacity to create, to entertain, to help, and to connect with others. And this too is the reality of our world.

So I wanna introduce our next speaker, Julia Samuel. Her talk is entitled *Eros and Thanatos: Love, Grief, and the Forces that Shape Us*. Um, we met at a conference that I did with Alain de Botton about eight, nine years back in London, and it was instant. She's a leading UK psychotherapist and the primary book that Julia is known for is *Grief Works*, followed by *This Two Shall Pass*. And her latest book that I think is fantastic is that *Every Family Has a Story*. She has a podcast *Therapy Works*. Please help me welcome Julia Samuel.

Julia Samuel: Morning everyone. What a privilege and joy to be here and thank you so much, Esther. You are also quite a tough act to follow, I have to say. So as Esther said, I've been a psychotherapist specializing in grief for 35 years, and as Esther illustrated today, we all carry the stories that led us to become the therapists that we are today. And my story was that as a child, I was surrounded by these black and white photographs. I didn't know who these people were until I was a teenager, where I learned that my grandfather had died of cancer, that my mother's mother had died of liver disease. That the man here was my uncle who was killed in Ahrnem in the war, and the, the woman here was my Aunt Eileen, who died of an asthma attack. My mother's entire

family had died by the time she was 25. And my father, his father died of a heart attack on the Queen Mary and his brother died in a dentist chair by the time my father was 27. But in such significant losses, so traumatic, but in my family, we didn't talk about them. Not a word.

And if we did talk about them, they were minimized. There's a classic from my mother who was talking about one of her few beloved relations Martin, who had died and she rang me and she said, darling, I planted Martin today. And that was her code that she's been to his funeral.

So, as you can imagine, I inherited the emotional work my parents actually couldn't do. It wasn't, they didn't have that capacity. And understanding what I'd inherited, how it had shaped me, has taken many years, and it's an ongoing process. But it is certainly no surprise that professionally I have dedicated my practice to supporting those in grief, thinking about grief, and understanding the grief process.

So what have I learned? Love and loss, life and death. We can't have one without the other. That is the deal. It is the contract we are all born into, and yet as a culture, we try to fix death as if it's a problem to solve rather than a reality to face.

Many of us speak of it in the abstract, like it happens to people over there who pass away or get lost, and we very rarely confront our own personal reality that we will die or think about our own extinction. Saying that word and looking at your faces, I feel like I'm the party pooper, like saying the thing that no one wants to hear, but hear me out.

We tend to think that grief begins with death. But really grief begins the moment we sense something precious slipping away. Grief begins with love. When a person, a pet, a dream, a way of life is ending, knowing this won't last is where grief takes root.

And here Thanatos and Eros come into view, two forces, inextricably linked. Eros, the God of love. Thanatos, the Greek spirit of death. In Freud's terms, the life instinct and the death instinct. And the two are totally two sides of the same coin.

Thanatos enters the moment something ends. Sometimes he slips in quietly and closes the door. Sometimes he storms in and breaks everything that has come before. Sometimes he's welcome. A relief from the suffering. Thanatos is in our therapy rooms and in ourselves. He's in the person that cannot cry. He's the one that sabotages their own joy. He's not just Freud's death drive, he's

every instinct we have to withdraw from hope, from change, and from the unknown. It's when we stick to the familiar pain, having that attachment to suffering and not let it change us that we get locked in it.

I remember very recently I had a client who told me I've been running from the death of my parents for seven years. And then burst into tears because it was a relief. She realized that in running from it, she was locked in it. Because we all have this emotional bandwidth. We have pain one end and joy the other end. When we block the pain, we incrementally block the joy and then we live in this very narrow bandwidth, scrolling on our texts numbing, but we can't access the joy because we have blocked the pain. Because pain is crucially a portal.

Paradoxically, it is by allowing ourselves to feel the pain that we heal. Not blocking it. Pain is the agent of change. If you only take one thing, from what I'm saying, I want you to take that to allow our pain through our systems, grief is embodied and sometimes it is unbearable and it takes longer than we want, but our task is not to banish Thanatos for when we are supported to face the reality as it is and allow the pain, we may over time find our way back to Eros. At the heart of the paradox where Thanatos is, Eros is nearby.

Eros, as Esther talked about so powerfully the force of life desire, connection, and becoming. For when the pain releases, we may find instinctively ourselves asking what is to be born? When we release the pain, we can dare to invite ourselves to find new ways, to love, to connect, to build and to imagine.

Eros connects us to the parts that say I want to live. I want to matter. I want to love. Thanatos and Eros work together in partnership, not in opposition. We cannot do this alone. When something or someone significant dies, it is only through the love of others that we are able to survive.

So now turning to you, to ourselves. Can you think for just a moment, what are the losses that you have been experiencing? I call this new layer of suffering living losses. These griefs accumulate and shape our psyche. How do we manage when we are saturated? The answer is simple and challenging. We must do our own grieving. We need to do it individually, and we need to do it collectively. If we don't, we become unavailable to ourselves, to our families, to our communities, to our clients, and to the life waiting for us in the future.

So here is the paradox again, by feeling our pain, we heal and we resist. And I, I think the key thing is that needing to numb and resist the discomfort is what holds us in the discomfort. But pain is the messenger. It tells us something has changed and we must change too. Grief is not just a feeling. Grief is a form of learning. We are wired to adapt. We are wired to change. Our mind is a learning

machine. If we let it take in the data, grief updates our map. It tells us the world has altered. Our life before is gone, and we must change too.

Mental health is living in the reality as it is, not as we wish it to be, not as it was. Over time, the avoidance we do to not feel the pain does us harm individually, it does it harm to our families, trans generationally, and I think really globally and collectively.

So how do we grieve? The model that I find most helpful is the dual process. It's from Stroebe and Schut, and what that talks about is it's the movement between loss orientation that you can think of as Thanatos and restoration orientation that you can think of as Eros. And then we oscillate between the two and allow the two. Over time, we incrementally adjust. And it isn't an immersion process, so it's really intentionally going to loss, giving it some time to feel the pain, and then intentionally giving ourselves a break from the pain and moving towards being restorative. And also to recognize we don't forget and move on. We don't get over grief. We accommodate it. We build our life around it.

And I've developed these eight pillars of strength, and they're not like in the newspapers, like these eight things and you're gonna get sorted. These are more like attitudes, habits, and beliefs that when we feel like we've got this black hole that is sucking us into the ground, developing your own toolbox from these pillars of strength can help you process your grief.

So I'm gonna say it very quickly. The first one is relationship with the person or the life that has died. And the main thing about that is to recognize we have to face the reality of their death, but the love never dies. That the continuing love through bonds to that connection through memory stays with us and influences us as we move forward with our life.

And our relationship with ourselves. People who grieve, I think have a, what I call a shitty committee. You have this horrible, critical voice that says to you, you're not doing it right. Get over it. Don't make a fuss or hates everybody and they're now a bad person. The version of yourself you don't want to be. So being kind to yourself in that Kristin Neff term of being self-compassionate is absolutely key.

And time. Time warps when we're grieving, we have a longing for the past and a fear of the future. I think the Greek term of kairos time, felt time, rather than chronological time. So kairos time is what feels right is the clock we need to be following.

And as we've talked a lot about a lot, the mind body connection and emotional regulation, I put them together. We are bodies, beings, and whatever we put into our system affects our system. So what we watch, who we see, whether we move, what we eat, what we drink, all of that will affect our system. And I want you to choose things that soothe you, engage you, help you. Not things that agitate you and distress you. But also within that, remember the embodiment. We are wired to move. When we move our body, we move our mind. When we flex our body, we flex our mind.

Structure helps. Not like a police state, but having a plan, putting time in for loss orientation, for restoration orientation and having limits that we have a good no is vital. I say to everybody, what is your yes worth if you never say no?

And finally the thing that I think is really helpful is Jan Winhall's Felt Sense. We find too many words. The felt sense gets us into the wisdom of our bodies that can speak for us.

So my final thought is if we stay with this work, we grow, not despite the loss, but because of it, the very thing we feared would destroy us is the very thing that heals us. It is a catalyst for gratitude and deeper spiritual connection. Hope re-emerges not just as a feeling, but a direction and a belief that we can make it happen. So how do we heal? We learn that the people and life we love will die. But love does not. We grow through loss. We expand capacity to live, to love, and to be fully present. Thank you very much.

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