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How to find joy when life seems awful

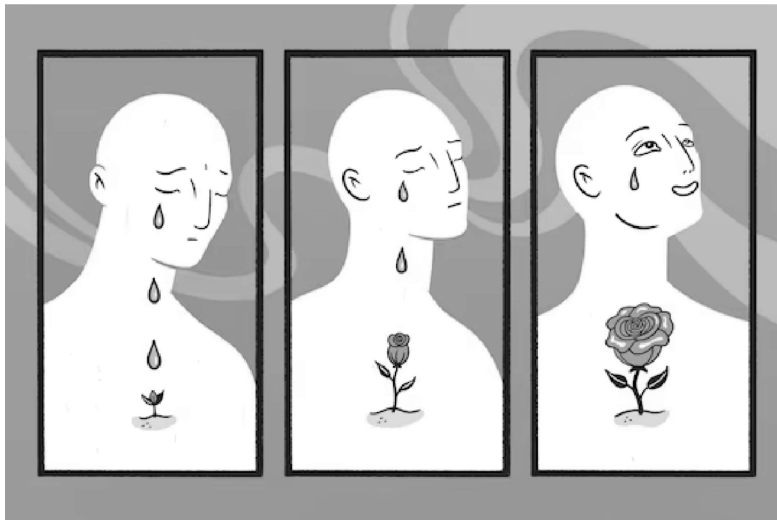
My sister was dying of ovarian cancer, and the sadness was overwhelming. But there were moments of joy too, and I'm holding onto them.



Perspective by [Steven Petrow](#)

Contributing columnist

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(Elizabeth von Oehsen/The Washington Post)



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As my sister's birthday approached this spring, Julie told us she wanted a party. Our family loves celebrations, everything from bat mitzvahs to graduations, weddings, and — especially — birthdays. We can't stop ourselves from giving speeches, usually a mix of toasts and roasts that go on too long and are filled with innuendo, a long-held grudge or two, and tears of joy.

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I probably should mention that Julie had been diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer, which had spread, in late 2017. Her surgeon told us to expect five years if we were lucky, which we were. Julie's cancer stabilized, allowing her to move into what I call overtime as that date came and went November.

Eventually, though, the cancer spread, and a few days before her birthday in April she decided to stop treatment — but she'd been given the gift of time, as had those of us who loved her.

Her birthday celebration suddenly morphed, now a combined birthday bash and — what should I call it? A going-away party? We knew it had to be especially festive despite the prognosis.

“We'll have games,” one of my nieces exclaimed. One close family friend had spent the week feverishly fashioning a globe-shaped piñata, with interior wooden supports covered by layers of papier-mâché, painted in teal (the official color of ovarian cancer advocates). The stenciled lettering read, “Beat The S--- Out Of Cancer.”

Frankly, it was a sight to behold — and to destroy.

Creation and destruction, joy and sorrow, celebration and grief. I wondered: How do we simultaneously hold such diametrically opposed emotions — joy with sorrow and loss lurking the periphery?

Julie took the first whack at the piñata, We clapped. We hooted. We hollered. We each got our turn with the plastic bat, laughing uproariously as we released years of rage and pain. Whack! Whack! Whack! Finally the teal globe burst



Julie Petrow-Cohen, center, with daughter Jessica, left, and wife Maddy Petrow-Cohen on a hike near their home in Maplewood, N.J., last year. (Courtesy of Jessica Petrow-Cohen)

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open, littering the deck with Kit Kats, gummies, pansy seed packets and other goodies.

Next up were the speeches, the heart and soul of our parties. But what to say at your sister's last birthday? I didn't know. All I understood was that this party was another gift to us — a way to celebrate the day, to celebrate her life.

Julie and her wife Maddy's firstborn, Jessie, explained that she'd been interviewing her "mama" to learn more and preserve memories.

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Steven Petrow, left, with brother Jay, sister Julie and their mother, Margot, on her 84th birthday in February 2016. (Caroline Petrow-Cohen)

“What has really come out of that interviewing is her own sentiment that one of the most important things in life is to be of service to other people, to orient your life, your path and your interactions around helping others,” Jess said. “That’s such a beautiful foundation to have been raised on, and I feel immensely lucky that you are my mom.”

Their younger daughter spoke next. Then Julie's best friend, the keeper of secrets, toasted and roasted her as they held

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each other. Wait a sec. We were laughing.

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Our brother Jay hoisted an oversized portrait of Julie that he'd painted when she was 16. "Last summer, we were [all] hiking in Colorado while Julie was doing chemotherapy," he said. "She just throws her energy out there and then she gets it back. Just an amazing person. Julie's handled her illness with so much grace and strength." Then Jay turned to Julie, held her and said, "I love you."

Later that day a pleased Julie would tell me, "It was like my memorial service except that I got to hear everything." I replied, trying to dredge up a bit of my usual humor, "People seem to like you, too."

We were inhabiting a liminal space between life and death, a space large enough to hold both our joy and our sorrow. I probably should be embarrassed for remembering what the pop-culture poet [Khalil Gibran](#) — whose books I read as a teen — wrote about all this, but I'm not: "When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight."

When my turn came to say something, I chose not to rely so much on words. Instead, I asked everyone to hold hands, and to send our love directly to Julie.

I also tried to address my own confusion about holding joy and sorrow together, recalling what Angela Williams Gorrell, an academic, minister and author of "[The Gravity of Joy: A Story of Being Lost and Found](#)." It recounts how, after starting a new job at Yale University, three close family members died within a four-week period. She asked, Can joy be found in the face of illness or loss? Her answer surprised me.

Joy, she wrote, "has grit, it isn't fluffy or ephemeral. Joy is what we feel in our bones when we feel connected to what is good, beautiful, meaningful." And "grief doesn't just vanish

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because joy comes. Instead, joy has a mysterious capacity to be felt alongside sorry and even ... in the midst of suffering.”

I looked at our friends and saw tears and heard sobs. But I also noted the reverberation, the whispers of joy at being together, at supporting Julie in the short time left. “How lucky are we?” I asked myself, as we moved on to the two birthday cakes, inadvertently symbolizing celebration and grief.

Julie Petrow-Cohen died on June 30, with her family by her side.

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