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What's the connection between grief and grievances? The question has been with me ever since I read Edith Eger's "The Choice: Embrace the Possible." The author reveals decades of struggle with guilt and grief over her mother's death, for which she felt responsible—erroneously, to be sure, but it took years of insight and therapy to recognize that.

Eger also discloses certain grievances as she ponders that her mother was never present for her three daughters. "Her grief was like a fourth child, ever in need of tending," she writes, explaining that her mother's grieving centered around her own mother who died unexpectedly when she was a nine-year-old child, sharing a bed with her mother. One morning the child woke up to discover her mother's body cold to the touch. The woman had stopped breathing during the night. The child was immediately put to work carrying out the family responsibilities of her deceased mother.

On another note, I recall my eldest as a young man saying he would not father any children to spare them the miseries of his growing-up years.

I was dumbfounded to hear this. Your childhood was so much easier than mine, I wanted to say. You never suffered the near-starvation of a postwar existence under foreign occupation. Your mother did not fall ill when you were fourteen, leaving you to shoulder her responsibilities while continuing to attack you verbally and physically. Much less did she die on you when you were eighteen with little brothers and a distraught father to look after.

Those were my reactions. Walter, however, had lived through experiences and incidents that were true in their own right. They extended into deeply-felt grief and valid grievances.

Grief hit him in his last year of high school with his friend. Walter and David each owned a horse. They decided to become large-animal veterinarians, perhaps working with wildlife, since they had lost the naturally human fear of large, sometimes unpredictable, animals. They would study biology at a nearby university, California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, and, on graduation, apply to the veterinary college at University of California at Davis.

But David fell ill with a fast-progressing bone cancer and could no longer attend classes. The boys thought he'd complete his high school work from home, but that proved impossible in the face of severe illness and approaching death.

One day I drove Walter to the house of his friend. He wanted to extend some last words of comfort; I hoped to connect with his mother who, I imagined, was beside herself with anguish.

On our arrival, David's mother told us, her son could not bear to have anyone witness the ravages of his illness. The cancer had eaten away his right jaw, leaving his face horribly disfigured.

Walter pleaded with the friend outside his bedroom door to please allow him to enter. The boy wouldn't yield. "Go away," he said, likely in tears. The house was in chaos, the family in turmoil; we outsiders were making things worse. We had no choice but to leave.

On the way home, Walter sobbed that he'd wanted to let David know he'd remember him always. He'd tell him he would carry on for the two of them. Whatever David's face looked like didn't matter; he wanted to impart sympathy. Why his friend deprived him of a last goodbye was beyond his understanding.

When we got home, life resumed with our household's usual routine, which revolved around the needs, wants, and dictates of the boys' father, a man hardly interested in the pain and confusion of his children. Walter's brothers were younger than he; he didn't confide in them.

So kept his grief and grievances to himself. He paid a price when anguish turned into anxiety in college and vet school. At every semester's end, he was convinced he'd flunk out. It scarcely helped when he learned he was still in; the next round of exams was always just around the corner. In his first year of undergraduate studies, a biology professor told him he'd have "an ice cube's chance in hell" to get into vet school. From then on stress and anxiety became a way of life.

I recently mentioned the deceased friend to my firstborn. He recalled David's rather unusual last name and said he still thinks of him. Time has lessened the pain of grief, but his grievances? He didn't say; instead, he alluded to conflicts with his only child, then in her late teens.

"I love her so much, and she wants nothing to do with me," he said, almost sobbing as he once did over David.

What could I say? Children sever their family ties to find their own way? A poor cliché. Life is difficult? As if he didn't know! I kept mum, likely appearing insensitive.