

**FROM  
SH!TSHOW TO  
AFTERGLOW**



**FROM**  
**SH!TSHOW TO**  
**AFTERGLOW**

Putting Life Back Together  
When It All Falls Apart

**ARIEL MEADOW STALLINGS**



SEAL PRESS

*New York*

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*To everyone doing the work,  
even when it hurts.  
Especially when it hurts.*



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introduction

# WELCOME TO YOUR SHITSHOW!

**OH, HELLO. NICE TO SEE YOU HERE. I WISH WE WERE MEETING UNDER DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES, but here we are.**

If you're reading this, chances are that shit feels pretty messed up in your life. Things may have collapsed. A slap in the face painfully announced that who you *thought* you were just doesn't line up with your current life. Where you thought you were going is no longer on the map. There's disorientation in the atmosphere. There's probably a lot of crying, maybe not a lot of sleeping (or too much sleeping), and freaking out. Your life may have fallen apart last month or last year, or maybe it was a decade ago and the janky old Band-Aid just fell off and you realized that the injury never healed.

Regardless, this much is sure: something has shifted, drastically. You may not have seen it coming, but even if you maybe sorta did, you didn't think it would feel like THIS . . . like your skin's being peeled off and your mind is filled with screaming monkeys.

## FROM SHITSHOW TO AFTERGLOW

Like every bone in your body has cracked and yet somehow you're supposed to keep walking. Like you don't know who you are anymore. You thought you sorta had life figured out, but it suddenly became clear that you really super didn't.

Life may feel so off that your brain can't handle it. You find yourself bumping into walls, dropping things, missing the last step when you go down the stairs. Maybe you felt like you had your situation handled, but now you wake up each morning and as you remember your new reality, you think, *This is my life now? Who even am I?*

This kind of existential life-crisis shitshow is like a freeway: there are a lot of different on-ramps, but once you're on it, things move whether you want them to or not, and you can't really slow down. However you found yourself here, chances are decent it wasn't just one precipitating incident. For me, it was a triple punch.

### MY SHITSHOW, YOUR SHITSHOW

It's a good setup for a bad joke—did you hear the one about the divorced wedding expert? Did you hear the one about that offbeat lady who wrote a book about her offbeat wedding and then spent a decade supporting other people planning their offbeat weddings, who believed in nothing more than offbeat love, who then had her offbeat marriage abruptly end in the most on-beat way possible? HA HA!

So yeah, hi. I'm Ariel, and I'm the butt of that joke. I'm also the ventricles and bile and tear ducts and open palms and broken eyelid capillaries of that joke. That joke was part of my crisis, but just one part.

I'm lots of other things besides that joke . . . but many of the other things also sound like punch lines. I'm the forest-raised child of hippies who grew up to be an urban-condo-dwelling entrepreneur. I'm the brainy honors student whose stoner college goal was how little effort I could expend to maintain my A- GPA. I'm the daughter of an herbalist midwife who spent five years failing to get

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pregnant before having IVF and a C-section. I'm oh-so-iconoclastic with decades of rainbow-colored hair and weird clothes living a totally typical middle-class American life: education, career, wedding, home, family, divorce, aging.

So yeah: I'm the offbeat lady who's exactly like everyone else.

I got married in 2004 and wrote a book about it called *Offbeat Bride* while working a corporate day job. In 2007, I launched offbeatbride.com to promote the book, but the site turned into my job so I went full-time with my tiny digital media company in 2009 while breastfeeding my newborn son.

I spent years building my business, jokingly named the Offbeat Empire. It's a publishing company for nontraditional people going through traditional life passages: committing to a partner, creating a home, starting a family. I first shared my story and then the stories of thousands of other people, weaving a web of personal narrative and relationships and online community and empowerment and support all focused around one core belief: being offbeat could save us all! I handled my logistics like a boss, did a li'l therapy when needed, cuddled with my family on the couch, gossiped with friends, balanced my company's books, traveled a bit. Life was good! I felt like I had things sorta figured out.

Then 2015 happened.

In January of that year, my left ovary exploded while I was on a cross-country business trip. I thought it was food poisoning, so I went ahead with cohosting a five-hundred-person wedding expo in a silver dress and a bouffant, gritting through the pain and sweating off my red lipstick. I made it back to Seattle and ended up in the ER for emergency surgery, sliced up the middle with an eight-inch incision and a drainage tube hanging out of the side of my abdomen. I spent a week in the hospital, another month refiguring how to walk, and then a few months after that I turned forty. The milestone birthday was a gentle slap in the face, your classic midlife mortality check.

Then in November of 2015, my partner of eighteen years sat me down on the living room floor and told me he didn't see a future for us. I felt blindsided.

## FROM SHITSHOW TO AFTERGLOW

The year that followed was the most excruciating experience of my life. Already disoriented from my mortality check, I was completely leveled. Nothing made sense. I walked into walls. I randomly threw up. I barely slept. I couldn't digest food. It was a complete shitshow. Then, because I couldn't figure out how to fix it, I wholeheartedly surrendered.

Here's what no one tells you about surrendering to a shitshow: when you're in the thick of it, naked onstage forgetting your lines (even worse, you're not even sure what show this is, or whether it's a comedy or a tragedy), spotlight burning your bare skin, you don't know that in the surrender, you're already starting to heal. In the middle of a clusterfuck, all you know is that it's awful and that it's probably getting worse.

And it *does* get worse . . . but then, somehow, if you stay with it and keep paying attention and staying awake even in the awfulness, things go around some "even worse" bend and the mind-bending disorientation shifts, and you start being able to eat again, and your sleep gets a bit more normalized, and at some point you start bitterly laughing and can't stop, and then you start crying again but it feels cathartic instead of bad and you realize that you're somehow still alive—and maybe it even feels GOOD?

Then, if you roll up your sleeves and really get into it, maybe it feels *more* than good. Maybe it even feels great sometimes. That's the emotional-catastrophe survivor's high, the post-traumatic transformation that no one tells you about, the afterglow you can bask in after life fucks you HARD.

That afterglow is when your new self looks at the gaping hole that used to be your life and realizes, I might be able to grow some amazing things down here if I really try.

And, oh, it felt like I tried *everything*. Once I got my sea legs back, I decided that every moment I wasn't working or parenting would be invested into learning and growing. I would roll up my sleeves and try my best: I would learn all the things, examine all the internal lies, read all the books, take all the classes, date all the people, push all the edges, do all the healing. I would try every therapy I could find, and a few that I made up. Therapy is everywhere!

## WELCOME TO YOUR SHITSHOW!

A shitshow can become the best worst time of your life. The shock and pain can become fuel for growth. I'm here in these pages because I want to help you find your afterglow. I can't change what happened to you, but just maybe I can support you in making the most of it.

### WHAT EVEN IS A SHITSHOW?

Let's get clear about what I mean by *shitshow*. It's a cheeky term, but refers to a very specific kind of life crisis with a few key ingredients:

- ◆ **Uncontrollable change in several foundational life structures** like your career, relationship, family, home situation, or health. Somehow it's never just one at a time. It's shit dominos, a chain reaction that feels out of your control.
- ◆ **Intense identity shift** so acute that you feel like you really don't know yourself—your self-definitions are stripped and you lose your core concepts about who you are and where you're going. It's just identity death, but in the thick of it, sometimes it feels like *actual* death.
- ◆ **Confusion like whoa.** You feel disoriented and baffled AF. How do I human? Where the hell? How did I get here? Who is this person I've become? Everything feels in-between and liminal.
- ◆ **Physical symptoms** like your sleep being jacked (too much, too little), messed-up appetite (again: too much, too little). You might be extra clumsy, or prone to injury. If grief is part of your experience (and it often is), you may even hallucinate or feel like you're losing your grasp on reality. If shock or trauma are part of your personal disaster (and they often are), you may randomly puke, sweat through your clothes for no reason, or have debilitating panic attacks.

While a shitshow is messy and feels devastating, it's not usually life-threatening. It might include a major illness or the death of a loved one, but it's not typically your own terminal diagnosis. This isn't a book about genocides or mass shootings or surviving an assault—to refer to a life-threatening situation as “a shitshow” would be insulting.

It's one of the things that's awkward about this kind of crisis: it *feels* like your life is ending, but when you're able to pull yourself back and get some perspective, you know your life isn't in danger. There's often a measure of shame; you know this isn't the end of the world—it just feels like it.

It's embarrassing to feel like you're overreacting, but here's the deal: your nervous system doesn't care if your life isn't actually being threatened. Once trauma reflexes kick in, you and your smarty-pants brain can try to rationalize all you want—you can't outthink your reaction.

Only you know whether your life is a shitshow. It's not cool for anyone to tell you whether or not you qualify. If you feel like you do, then you probably do. If you're still holding things together and you've got a sense of control, then it's probably not a shitshow. A shitshow makes it clear that control is an illusion.

If it's a shitshow, you can no longer hold your shit together. Access to shit-holding has been denied.

## WTF CAN THIS BOOK DO FOR YOU?

This book is for people who want to make the best of a messy disaster. It's for folks who want to actively invest in their own healing, who want to funnel their suffering into change, transmute their misery into growth. We all have different styles of learning, and this book will probably feel the most useful for those who learn like me: through experiences and effort, through seeing how others do things, from self-reflection and self-inquiry and a strong desire to be proactive. You need to *want* to get balls-deep in this—I'm not here to twist your arm.

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This book is not here to be super prescriptive, telling you exactly what to do. One of the humbling lessons I've learned is that I don't have any of the answers. Before my life fell down, I really thought I had things figured out and loved to tell people what to do. But—surprise!—I wrote wedding and relationship advice for a living, *and then my marriage abruptly ended!* HA HA, JOKE'S ON ME! Now I understand how little I know.

I don't even have the answers to all *my* questions, so I can't pretend to have all the answers to yours. That said, I do love questions, and so this book offers up many opportunities to support you in digging to find answers that are already inside of you right now. This book isn't here to tell you exactly what your recovery should look like—I just want to support you in finding your afterglow.

The material is broken into four parts that loosely translate to mind, body, spirit, and integration. In each chapter, first I'll tell you my story as a sacrificial offering (because I don't think you should ever follow the guidance of someone who isn't willing to be vulnerable about their own struggles), and then I'll weave in bigger-picture context—stuff like research about why the methods work and quotes from folks who are way smarter than I am.

Then, each chapter will wrap up with prompts to help you find what *your* self-development might look like. It likely won't look like mine, because even though experiences of loss are remarkably similar, each of us will find recovery in our own way.

I strongly suggest you grab a notebook and journal through the questions at the end of each chapter, or dance through them, or draw through them, or sing through them in the car! Take the process seriously, and treat your healing like your art, or a sport, or like you're starring in the pilot for an inspiring Netflix series. Find ways to express your progress through writing, movement, assembling little piles of rocks in the park, or whatever mediums help you get the process out of your body and mind and out into the world. Better yet, find a shitshow buddy and share your progress.

I'm going to do my best to share my experiences responsibly and offer the research-backed guidance to help you peel back the layers of your emotional onion . . . but it's important to me that

everyone reading this book be safe out there and get *real* advice from *real* people who *really* know your real-life situation.

This book wants to be your friend, but it is no substitute for folks who know you and can help you recognize if you need in-person support or treatment. I am not a doctor, a counselor, a coach, or a spiritual guide. I'm not an academic—I'm just an autodidactic writer in Seattle with a BA in sociology from a state school! I offer my story up for your entertainment and I'm stoked to offer resources so you can learn about where to go next . . . but I am unqualified to tell you what to do with your mental, physical, or spiritual health.

In these pages, I hope that you find comfort—but if my story at times becomes the butt of the joke, I'm okay with that. If you're in pain, you probably need a few laughs and I'm down with you having a few at my expense. Like all of us, I'm a deeply flawed human, and this book shares a profoundly messy time in my life. This story is about falling down, trying to recover, failing, trying again, failing again, and trying something else. ONWARD, I shouted over and over again, face-planting in a steaming pile of my own ignorance and failures and blind spots and self-sabotage and bad choices.

I offer up my story not because I think it's especially unique (*Eat Pray Love*, *Portlandia*-style, anyone?) but as a sacrificial consolation, reassurance that as long as you're grieving forward, you're probably doing the best you can. Even if it feels awful, as long as there's movement, chances are good you're doing it right.

If you're in the thick of your shitshow right now, my heart (and one remaining ovary!) go out to you. This book is me in the middle of the night, sitting in a chair next to your bed, holding your hand while you wail, my bodily fluids leaking all over the upholstery in sympathy with your suffering.

This book is me in the dark with you, encouraging you to feel all the feels, because only then can you make the space for the new ones to come in. This book is me trying to help you carry the load.

Thank you for allowing me to share this awful wonderful time with you. It's an honor to get to be with you as you find your afterglow.

Let's do this.

part one

# MIND

WHY YOU CAN'T  
OUTTHINK A SHITSHOW

## chapter 1

# SHOCK

## AN UNWANTED INVITATION TO THE WAILING LODGE

**I KNEW I HAD ENTERED MY OWN PERSONAL SHITSHOW WHEN TIME AND SPACE BENT AND I started tripping balls.**

A shitshow has a way of doing that—one minute you're living through the pleasant tedium of the life you've known, the one that you've crafted, the one that might not be perfect but you've got it sorta figured out . . . and then the next thing you know, it's a Tuesday afternoon and you're sitting on the living room floor being informed that your marriage is over.

In that moment, I vortexed. Time slowed down. My vision got strangely sparkly. It was like I'd taken acid, except it was a heroic dose of abrupt life-changing news that challenged my core sense of identity. I didn't understand it at the time, but I was in a hallucinogenic state of shock, my mind bent by emotional disaster.

I mean, it had been a tough year, but that moment was the official shitshow on-ramp. When you experience that trippy, sparkly,

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time-warped feeling? That's your brain struggling to comprehend that life as you've known it is over. There's no going back.

On the third night after my shitshow officially began, I called my father in tears at 3:30 a.m. (I never called people in tears. I was not a crier. I took care of myself. On this side of the fissure in my life, though, I didn't know what else to do.)

My father picked up on the second ring because he'd had the phone next to his bed, waiting.

"I've never known this level of pain," I sobbed. "I had no idea how physically excruciating something like this could be."

"I know," my father said on the other end of the line, and he does know because he and my mother split up and went through their own shitshows when I left for college. "It's awful. But I'm also excited for you, in a way. If you can work this, I mean, *really* work through it—this'll be a breakthrough."

"*Excited* for me?" I whined. "Fuck, Dad! That's brutal."

"Daughter, this stuff's the meat of life," my father said. "You're right on schedule to break through a ceiling and step up to the next level. You can do this."

A few hours later, I got out of my bed having not slept, but at least having spent some time horizontal. My son, Tavi, was with his father. I'd now be spending 50 percent of my time without my five-year-old.

I was alone.

I opened my drawers to get dressed and everything smelled of heartbreak and disbelief and panic. I wobbled through the empty house to the bathroom to find a sunken-cheeked, red-eyed, snot-crusted wraith staring from the mirror.

"What should I do?" I whispered to the reflection in the mirror, a haunted woman living in some other metaverse where there was no joy. Here in this new universe, this new woman? Things were the darkest gray and would always be gray. There was no meaning. There was no momentum. I had no idea what to do. I was alone. Panicked. Crushed. Broken. And confused—so, so confused. The screaming inside my head was so loud that I couldn't

think or function. Functionality had always been my jam, but now I couldn't even figure out how to brush my hair.

How was it possible to have done so much in life and find myself completely demolished? All my various career defeats, interpersonal rejections, the five years of infertility, the various surgeries and medical emergencies—none of these felt as difficult as this moment. How was my oh-so-special life going off the rails in such a stereotypically pathetic way?

I shook my head and tried to focus my eyes on where I was. What's next? My manager brain desperately tried to step up. Surely there was a checklist or a schedule to lean on. Through the dense gray fog, I remembered that my friend Ellen was coming over to help me get myself together, to take me out to my mother's house.

I didn't trust myself to drive. I didn't trust myself to do anything, really.

Clearly, my brain wasn't functioning normally. During a breakdown, shock and loss aren't just mental and emotional experiences—they can come with physical symptoms that add extra confusion to the disorientation. Here are a few physical expressions you may encounter during a shitshow:

- ✓ Fatigue and feeling physically wobbly and weak
- ✓ Physical aches and pains, especially headaches
- ✓ Chest tightness and shortness of breath
- ✓ Forgetfulness and spaciness, difficulty focusing
- ✓ Digestive problems and lack of appetite
- ✓ Immune system suppression
- ✓ Rapid heartbeat
- ✓ Insomnia (or sleeping for days)
- ✓ Sexual function weirdness (zero sex drive or amped-up horniness)
- ✓ Hypervigilance, always looking out for warnings of potential danger

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Of course, knowing these symptoms are normal won't make them go away (sorry 'bout that), but hopefully it's reassuring to know that, nope, *you're not losing your mind or actually dying*—both things I wondered for myself during various dark moments.

The physical symptoms associated with shock and profound loss can last for days or weeks or even longer and totally exacerbate any emotional and mental symptoms. In the early phase of a shitshow, you must truly take things one day at a time.

Just know that in your darkest, most painful moments, you're never *ever* alone—I've been there with you. So many of us have. Please hear this and feel it in your belly: *you are not alone right now*. That isolated feeling is your mind playing tricks on you, trying to tell you you're separate when the gallows-humor joke of life is that what unites us most as humans is our experience of suffering. Basically, when you feel your most alone and miserable? That's when you're the most like everyone else, because we've all wrestled those beasts. We're together in this isolated misery.

That truth feels so backassward, and it's damn near impossible to wrap your brain around it when you're feeling isolated and broken and panic-stricken. The truth that things *will* feel different at some point is damn near impossible to understand when you're mid-shitshow.

I certainly didn't feel like things would ever get better. Staring into the mirror, all I knew was that I was the most broken I'd ever been, and that life as I'd known it was over. Both these things were in fact true, but what I didn't know was that both those painful truths could lead to a new existence that felt expansive and filled with so much more meaning than my previous life had.

I brushed my teeth, got dressed in my heartbreak-smelling clothes, and sat on the purple couch to fidget and stare at the wall. Everything hurt and my body felt like it was burning inside my flesh, like if I listened hard enough I could hear the crisps of skin falling off as the monkeys in my brain shrieked in chorus.

I tried to remember what was going on. Right . . . I was going to my mother's because I couldn't take care of myself. Ellen was taking me. That was the plan.

“What should I do?” I’d asked my mother on the phone the day before. “I can’t face this weekend alone and without Tavi. I don’t know how to be in the world.”

“Well, you could come out here?” my mother had said. “We’re hosting a grief retreat . . .”

Of course she was. For the past decade, my mother and her wife have opened their property for use as a communal retreat space they call Sacred Groves, a land of work-trade transients and Millennial artists. My childhood home has been turned into a hippie retreat destination, and I’ve mostly adapted to the fact that on any given weekend, there might be a bunch of girls singing around a campfire at a coming-of-age ceremony or a group of Boomers discussing conscious aging as part of an elders circle. Sometimes when I’ve visited, I’ve heard people through the woods participating in something called a “wailing lodge,” part of the weekend-long grief retreats.

“But I’m not grieving, Mom,” I’d said into the phone, trying to find the energy to argue with my mother like I always did. “No one died. My husband just walked out, and now I can’t keep my shit together. That’s not grief.”

“That’s loss,” my mom had said. “Grief is just an acute experience of loss, and it seems like you’re feeling this loss pretty deeply. Why don’t you just come?”

I wasn’t sure what else to do, so I’d agreed.

I heard Ellen let herself in my front door, and she led me like a child around my own home. She handed me my bag and a coat. She pointed me toward the door and walked me through it. She helped me get in the car and drove me down the west face of Seattle’s Capitol Hill to the waterfront, where we waited to drive onto one of those picturesque Puget Sound ferries that’s really just a floating bus.

I sat perfectly still for the half-hour ferry ride, silent stony panic in the passenger seat. Catatonic, dissociated, and disoriented, the only movement I could muster was a slow drip of snot down my face while Ellen patted my hand. She’d wrestled through a bipolar

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diagnosis and her own divorce, surviving her own high-grade shit-shows, so she got it.

“Thank you for being my crisis doula,” I managed to say.

Once docked on Bainbridge Island, Ellen drove me the ten minutes through the forest, over the glacier-carved north-south hills and down the one-lane road that leads to the ten acres of second-growth forest where I grew up. The driveway was filled with Priuses and old Subarus, and I could hear people crying before I even walked through the door.

That’s what happens when your mom runs a retreat facility: when your life abruptly falls apart and you try to go home for some consoling, you end up attending a grief retreat.

Shitshows take you all sorts of places you never imagined.

## WHEN AVOIDING THE PAIN STOPS WORKING

Generally speaking, Western culture likes to deny pain. We try to avoid and ignore illness, death, poverty, and grief to bypass the difficult associated emotions. Author of *The Other Side of Grief: Hope in the Midst of Despair* Rhonda O’Neill says that this cultural predisposed alienation from our own misery makes our suffering balloon tenfold.

Instead of retreating into isolation or distraction (which is what our culture expects—The Man wants you to hide your pain!), it’s mission critical that you find people who can be with you in your suffering.

I’m not gonna lie: this can be HARD. Your friends and family might want to help, but sometimes they can be too close to you and the situation to effectively provide the support you need. Sometimes your pain triggers their pain and then you’re in a shit-show echo chamber, which, needless to say, isn’t an especially comforting environment.

If your shitshow involves acute loss (either because someone died or because your loss is so intense that you’re having physical

symptoms), you may want to investigate grief support groups in your area. Groups dedicated specifically to assisting people through your own brand of hell will have the tools and strategies you need and help you combat the isolation that so many of us experience when we're in pain.

It may feel awkward to seek out these groups, or they might seem like they're not meant for you, or the folks at support groups might not seem like "your people." Part of this process is understanding that loss is the great equalizer. It can be hard to let that information in (especially for those of us who have prided ourselves on our offbeat-ness), but it's true: when you're grieving, other grieverers are your people.

I never *ever* thought I'd go to a grief retreat (again, no one had died—what was I even doing there?), but when you're ripped open and torn down, comfort shows up in different shapes than your previous self might have expected. The dominant cultural aesthetics of loss may not match your vibe (religious quotes and fuzzy pictures of candles, anyone?), but for your own survival, you *must* find and allow comfort.

Speaking of cultural aesthetics, I may love my moms and Sacred Groves, but it's not really my scene.

The hub of Sacred Groves is a yurt-like roundhouse that's almost forty feet across with a huge circular skylight in the center. Filled with a mix of discarded Goodwill furniture, the structure's decor includes a four-foot drum made from a tree stump, a bison skull, and multiple swaths of prayer flags painted with goddess vagina art. The main room is anchored by a woodstove to the east and a huge bank of windows to the west that look out on the permaculture garden and the two smaller yurts rented out on Airbnb.

It's lovely, but I lean more toward the tidy modern lewk, y'know? I thought of myself as an urbanite, a media maven, an internet obsessive . . . or at least that's who I had been. I had no idea who this sobbing, wobbling woman was now.

I said my goodbyes and thank-yous to Ellen and walked into the roundhouse. The thirty retreat attendees were milling around

## SHOCK

the large room, with folks ranging from shaven-headed twenty-somethings to suburban dudes in sandals with socks, and more than a few wild-haired middle-aged women. Several of us were already crying, myself included. There were cedar boughs and twinkly lights and an altar with candles.

Even in my catatonic state, my inner bitch was rolling her eyes. I know how these kinds of workshops go, with lots of talking circles and mending times for broken people. Growing up with hippie parents, this kind of new-age stuff was what I spent my youth rebelling against. It's lovely and valuable for some people—it's just never been my thing.

Then again, being in a state of emotional pain so intense that I could feel it eating away at my body's tissues and warping my sense of time had never really been my thing either, and yet there I was.

The workshop attendees gathered into a circle to talk over the weekend. I learned that, traditionally, the social aspects of loss have always revolved around ritual. In *Grief and Loss Across the Lifespan*, Carolyn Ambler Walter and Judith L. M. McCoyd discuss studies showing that griever get a sense of control over their mourning when they engage in specific behavior and performance involving other people, symbols of the loss, and activities that are “out of the ordinary.”

Out of the ordinary. Like a grief retreat in a yurt, I guess. I learned that we were going to do something called “keening,” which is basically wailing for what's been lost. Keening also felt solidly out of character for me, but it would be the first of dozens of out-of-character things I would eventually try in my attempts to heal from the catastrophe of my life.

Sitting in a circle, we were asked to introduce ourselves. There were people who'd had parents die recently, and a young woman who was mourning the death of a friend who'd been tortured and killed while doing international aid work. There were sexual assault survivors, parents of stillborn babies, and folks dealing with losing a job while also caring for adult children with disabilities. A couple people were there to mourn climate change. My loss