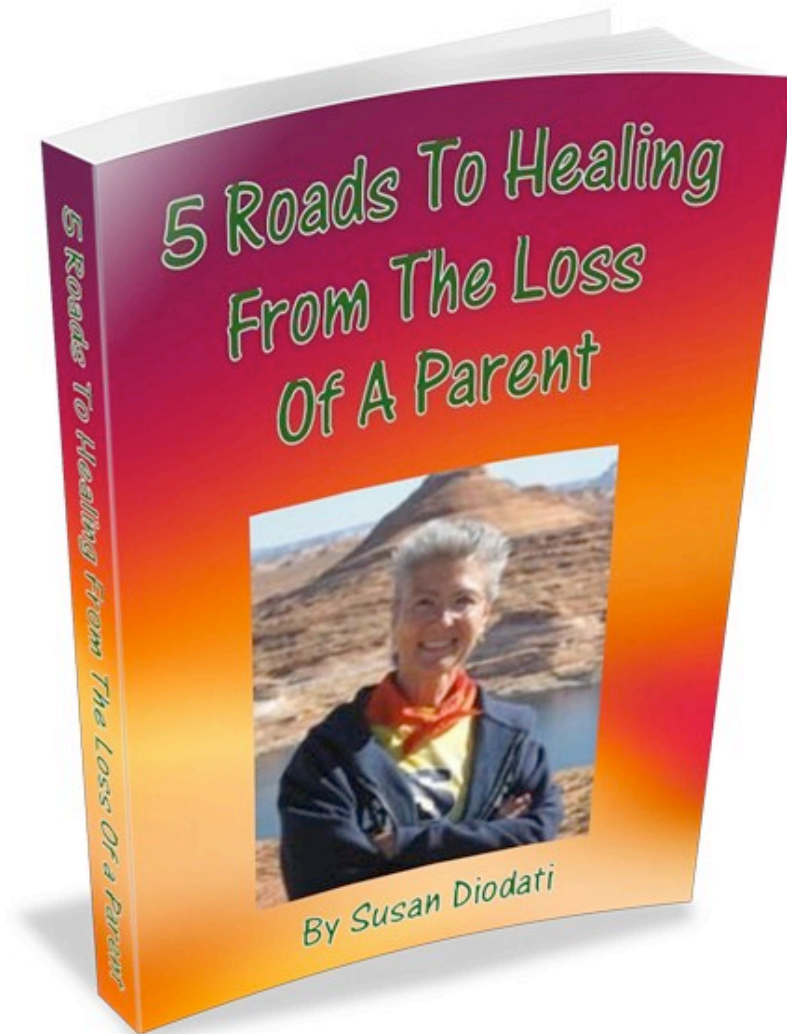


# **5 Roads to Healing From The Loss of A Parent**



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## **About The Author**



**Susan Diodati is a published Author, Teacher, and Speaker**

She has also been a Suicide Hotline Counselor, Grief Counselor, and the top Educator in Crisis Intervention during her time with Suicide Prevention and Community Counseling of Marin County in northern California. Within the first year of her volunteer work at that agency she was chosen to be Director of Community Education and went on to train thousands of Marin County residents.

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by

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From her memoir

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# Introduction

I have found healing to be a lifelong process. Why? Because my injuries have been continual and pervasive. From the fall off my bike that crunched my knee in childhood to the verbal abuse and abandonment that have accompanied me throughout my life, injuries just keep coming. How and when do I recognize the need to heal?

Physical damage demands that I take notice almost immediately. Emotional and psychological wounds have taken years, decades to make their voices heard. The source of my pain has become most clear when I have suffered a great loss.

In my pursuit of that source, there have been times when I thought I was searching for some external thing, for a result other than my own healing, but with enough time and openness to what presented itself, I have had epiphanies that in themselves were healing. And others that sent me on the road—literally—to healing.

I lost my father thirty years ago. I was thirty-two and lacked the maturity to do much of what will be offered to you in the following pages. I lost my mother eleven years ago. I was fifty-one and did possess the maturity to grieve and heal in this way, and, at the same time, experience a deeper healing from my father's death.

When in training to be a Grief Counselor at a non-profit agency in Marin County, California, two things I learned that, years later, helped me most in my own grieving were these:

There exists within each of us a blueprint for grieving. Similar to a fingerprint. And like a fingerprint, each is unique.

There are stages we pass through again and again on the way to Recovery:

Shock: refusal to believe, lack of feeling, hollowness, volatility

Refusing to Accept: anger, resentment, helplessness, yearning

Lack of Ability: despair, isolation, severe tiredness, fear, indifference

Restructuring: experimenting with new styles of behavior and a new sense of self, distancing from the loved one, engaging in new interests

As a result, I didn't feel I had to do what others told me to do. For example:

Snap out of it. Move on. It's been long enough. Throw yourself into work.

Take a cruise. How about antidepressants? It was my grief. I did it my way.

And though I was, at times, surprised to feel like a kaleidoscope of emotions, which came and went and returned and faded and snuck up on me again and again and again, I knew it was part of the cycle, and one truth always surfaced:

the depth and breadth of my grief reflected the depth and breadth of my love.  
And love was—and is—the jewel.

## Road One

*“I couldn’t seem to find the ground of who I was without my mother”.*

I dreaded my mother’s dying. We were very close. I spent nine years as an adult woman living with my mother in our family home, where I had grown up.

It wasn’t always a bowl of cherries, but there were many things my mother and I enjoyed doing together: shopping, riding in the car, eating a good Italian meal prepared by her or me, going to San Francisco to have dinner out with her brother and his wife, and singing a good song. During this time we became good friends.

My mother reached the age of 91, so I had had plenty of time to prepare myself, emotionally, for her passing and thought I had, but in reality, I was devastated when she died very quickly of a tumor that burst in her colon. Initially, I felt as though the rug had been ripped out from under me. I missed her terribly, went from room to room looking for her, saying, “Where is she now? I need to know where my mommie is!”

As the days and weeks and months wore on, I began to realize that I didn’t know who I was without her in the world. So much of my own identity had, apparently, been joined with hers: the feistiness, Italian-ness, musicality. The love of good



food, cooking of good food. Her beauty. Her life. And the people and experiences we shared. My father had been long dead—she was my last remaining parent, and without her my foundation began to crack.

How did I cope?

I engaged in activities that were part of her and part of me, staying close to my mother, and, at the same time, nourishing myself.

What?

Cooking.

After weeks of not caring whether I ate or not, I immersed myself in preparing food that we ate as a family. My mother's dishes: pasta with Napoletana Sauce. My father's dishes: rabbit in sauce flavored by bitter olives, served with fried polenta. I took delight in gathering herbs from our garden, plants that had been there since I was a child. I would invite a close friend of my mother's to dinners, and she would rave about the dishes I made and say how much my mother would have loved them. We would tell stories of the days with Mom when I was a little girl going to grammar school. We laughed, we cried, we ate!

Gardening.

While living in an apartment in Italy, I had no interest in planting, but back at home in northern California, where my father had been a master grower of vegetables and flora, roses and dahlias in particular, and my mother had carried on after his death with the flowers, I took to the trowel.

I would arise early on the weekends and drive up to the nursery to pick the most colorful specimens: petunias of purple, white, and red. Then, I would hurry home and get down on hands and knees and dig and plant, dig and plant. After a while I scooped with my bare hands because the rich damp earth soothed me, and, somehow, brought me back to life.

What kinds of things did your mother or father like to do?

What did you do together that you enjoyed, that made you feel alive?

## Road Two

*“I am writing my grandparents’ story. How? I don’t know, one word after the other. Why? Because I have to, because my mother is here, near to me in her aliveness, in the beauty of her youth.”*

While cleaning out the linen closet after my mother’s death, I discovered a box of letters. Old letters. From my mother’s parents to each other in 1925. This correspondence revealed a tale so mysterious I was compelled to read them all. They were written in Italian, so I translated, then wrote about the mystery.

For a year my mother’s parents and their daughter really wrote their story through me. And I loved every minute of it! I had not been a writer before this. The intense desire to be with my mother, to discover what her early life was like and where she had come from pulled my writing skills up and out of me almost without my knowing it! This, too, brought me back to life.

A surprising benefit of this project was my mother’s childhood friend Mildred, who still lived in Fall River, Massachusetts. We would talk on the phone regularly, Mildred regaling me with tales of my mother in her youth. What a gift! Eventually, Mildred and I forged a friendship of our own, and I traveled from my

home in California to visit her and to give the stories visual and geographic context.

Is there anything you wanted to know about your mother, or father, that you didn't take the time to explore?

What creative project could feed your need to remain in your parent's life and give you an outlet for your feelings?

## Road Three

*“In the rawness of my grief I awakened to nature.”*

In the midst of my intense sadness and loss, I was living closer to my feelings than ever before. And I felt more alive. What a surprise! One minute not caring if I lived or died, another minute feeling reborn completely. How could that be?

I had grieved deeply over losing my father. It was a totally different scenario: Because trying to care for him in his deteriorating health was weakening my mother substantially, I had to place him in a convalescent home. I alone was charged with the responsibility of consigning him to a facility that would care for him night and day. One month after that was all settled, he got pneumonia and died at the age of 77. I felt that I had killed him. It took a good decade to absolve myself of that burden.

Though I grieved deeply, too, after losing my mother, our relationship had been much more open and clear. There was little unsaid on my part regarding how much I loved her and how important she was to me. Maybe, that openness and clarity allowed the depth and breadth of my feelings to flow freely. I remember one instance hugging my beloved and laughing and a split second later the laughter turning to tears. It was then I realized that joy and pain inhabit the

same space in my heart. That knowledge has forever changed the way I look at myself, at others, at life. And certainly at the experience of grieving.

Eight months after my mother died, while tentatively walking my beloved dog Sadie down the street, the clear melodic trill of a bird arrested me. I searched for it. There it was! At the tiptop of a tree on the corner! I really saw that bird. Studied it. Heard its song. That moment awakened me to a nature I had never really seen, heard, or savored. And that was such a gift! A gift that has deepened and expanded and filled my life everyday since.

I learned to not be afraid of the rawness. Of the depth of my grief.

During your grieving, have there been moments when you felt more alive than before?

What gave birth to that aliveness?

What gives you enthusiasm for living that perhaps you overlooked, or even ignored before your loss?

## Road Four

*“I need you to come back to me...You’ve been gone for six months, and I miss you. I miss you terribly. I don’t want to live like this—without you.”*

Between sifting through my mother’s possessions, drawer-by-drawer, room-by-room and sorting out my emotions, I was occupied every minute of the day—for months. I found old photos in every room of the house, so I bought a new album and commenced placing the pictures in it, randomly, for trying to organize them in chronological order would have take the rest of my life! I would walk the halls in the middle of the night trying to make sense of the chaos, the cleaning, the relinquishing, the breaking of my heart.

My beloved partner helped me do all the work and never complained. She supported my every step of the way, respecting my process and my needs. She and my dog, Sadie, were my constant companions in all stages of the grieving.

My mother died the second week of July; the following January my partner said the words to me that are quoted above. My reaction was, “Huh? I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” So lost was I in my loss that I had left her out, maybe even shut her out. Her statement shocked me, like a blast of icy wind in the face.

Realizing what had taken place without my knowing, I got scared. Can't lose her, too! Not now! Not ever! I thought to myself. And, miraculously, I came back to her. Just like that. The grieving didn't stop, oh, God, no, but once again I was part of a couple: loving, sharing, even laughing. Giving as well as receiving. Re-engaged in living.

Is there someone you love that you have unknowingly shut out of your life?

Has there been a serious call that you have been too lost to hear?



## Road Five

*“I need to live in Sedona.”*

Five years after my mother died, which was one year after I found the box of letters and began writing my mother’s story, I left California and got on a plane to Arizona for a much-needed respite. The story I had unearthed depressed me so that I fled the house, the letters, and the state searching for light, enlightenment, anything that would bring me home to myself.

Why Arizona? The full story of that and my experience there is chronicled in my memoir, *I Knew It Then*, but here’s the short version: Having loved the desert of The Southwest in The Seventies, I wondered if I might still love it. I chose Sedona, Arizona because of the warm temperature at the end of November and its red rocks, which I viewed on the Internet.

From the first moment in Sedona, I came alive. The terrain, nature, spirit, energy, and warmth of the place literally birthed me anew. I had healing experiences at powerful red rock sites; people were kind and welcoming; the weather was wonderful, and the sky went on forever; unobstructed by manmade edifices. Quite simply, I fell in love with Sedona.

I did have a devoted life-companion, who, as far as I knew, had no fondness for the desert. I didn't know how any of that was going to play out, but I did know that I wanted to live in Sedona. All my creative energy went into making that happen whenever it could. I was considerate of my partner and did not push. And, six months after I visited Sedona by myself, my partner and I and our beloved doggie Shasta moved into our new home in Sedona, which we purchased with some of the money from the sale of my family home in California.

Oh, yes, most everyone, including my partner, thought I was nuts when I declared my intention to move to Sedona, but it was there, you see, that I had been brought back to life, re-energized, and re-acquainted with joy, and nothing was more powerful than that!

When have you noticed the life force, the joy bubbling up inside of you?

What places in the world have made you feel alive?

When was the last time you visited any of those places?

# Overview and Recap

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# Resources

## **Local Grief Counseling Services:**

County Agencies

Hospice

Parent Loss Support Groups

Individual Counseling

Religious Communities

## **Books By The Author:**

**I Knew It Then**

**Lifelines**

## **Available at:**

<http://www.susandiodati.com>

<http://www.ladybugpress.com>

<http://www.amazon.com>

