

**After Father's Death:
A Compelling and Thought-
Provoking Interview
KPCCR NPR Radio
"All Things Considered"
With Host Melissa Block and
Author Marie Mutsuki
Mockett**

**To order Marie's book, click
on photo of book**

As usual, I was in L.A. traffic. But this time I was glad because I was focused on a fascinating interview between KPCCR NPR radio host Melissa Block (All Things Considered) and author Marie Mutsuki Mockett (read interview below). In fact, when I got to the bottom of my hill where KPCCR cuts out, I pulled over and sat there so I could finish listening.

Marie's grief journey was filled with many insights and her wisdom so beautifully expressed that I immediately thought, "I've got to share this interview with our griefHaven family." So I contacted KPCCR and received permission to bring the interview to you. I then got in touch with Marie who, in-between TV, traveling, book signings, and radio, generously took time with me so we could expand upon the original Melissa Block interview by asking our

find Marie's discoveries about life, loss, and embracing life hopeful and meaningful.

Recommended Read: By the way, we recommend Marie's book, and you may purchase it on our website or by clicking on the photo of her book above.

**Susan Whitmore
Founder and Erika's Mom**

HERE IS THE KPCC/NPR INTERVIEW



MELISSA BLOCK, NPR HOST:

When writer Marie Mutsuki Mockett's father died unexpectedly several years ago, she became unmoored, lost in deep depression and grief. Her father was American, her mother is Japanese, and it was in Japan's rituals of mourning that Mockett found solace. Her mother's family owns and runs a temple just 25 miles from the Fukushima nuclear power plant which melted down after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Mockett begged her cousin--the temple's priest--to leave. He refused. He told her his community needed him.

Photo of Melissa Block: Steve Barret/NPR

MARIE MUTSUKI MOCKETT: To care for the souls of the ancestors so that the living who are left behind feel at ease that the souls of their beloved departed family members are being tended to every day.

BLOCK: It's at her family's temple that Marie Mutsuki Mockett begins her journey through grief, a journey that takes her into the radiation zone, into the homes of tsunami survivors, into Zen temples where she spends hours in meditation. She writes about those experiences in her new book, "Where The Dead Pause And The Japanese Say Goodbye."



take individual pain like that and cast it against the backdrop of human suffering, just in general. So for example, I write about something called Toro nagashi, which is lantern floating, where during Obon--which is this period in August when the spirits of the ancestors come home--one can go to any number of locations, purchase a paper lantern, and write down the names of the people who you have lost, then go to either a river--or in my case, it was the ocean---and put the lantern in the water just as the sun is setting. So when you put your lantern out, you know, it's still sort of light. And then very quickly, it becomes dark. And then very quickly you're aware of the fact that there are hundreds of lanterns on the water and that hundreds of people are mourning their loved ones, you know, and that your loss is one of many, many losses.

When I was really intensely depressed and disoriented, I would sit there and think, *I just want this pain to shrink; I want it to get smaller*. And what I learned was it wasn't really possible for me to miss my father any less, but, kind of the world, the backdrop against which I missed him could be larger, which had the effect of making that pain feel less. And the only way to do that was to sort of open my heart up more and have more compassion for other people who had suffered similar losses.



TORO NAGASHI

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BLOCK: By the end of your book, Marie, you have come to an otherworldly landscape in Japan. It's called Mount Doom. And why don't you describe what it looks like and what Mount Doom is, what it represents?

MOCKETT: Mount Doom is considered one of Japan's most sacred places and it's in the very, very far north of Japan, and it is an extinguished volcano. You're met with a really, really strong smell of sulfur, but it kind of signals that you're in another world. You know, you're smelling the inside of the earth. And there are these little pools of bubbling sulfuric hot water that come up in these strange rock formations. There aren't a lot of birds flying around. There's very little vegetation. So it's a very desolate, barren, dead landscape, but it's also eerily beautiful. And there's a river, Sanzu-no-Kawa, which runs from the lake down the mountain and out into the ocean, and this is considered sort of like the River Styx.

There are many stories about the souls of the dead seen walking along this river as they come to the top of Mount Doom and then pause; hence, the title of my book, "When The Dead Pause"-- before they slip into the underworld. And so Mount Doom has become this place of pilgrimage where people who are mourning--who needed desperately to just go to that final spot where they could perhaps catch the person who they miss, who has died, and say goodbye one more time.



BLOCK: There's something that you learn from the head priest at Mount Doom who talks to you, and he talks to you about you as a Westerner and how your need to know "why" things happen may not be really working--may not really be helping you.

MOCKETT: He was an extraordinary character, sort of severe and serious, who told me with great pride that his nickname when he had been in the monastery for 20 years was Darth Vader.

BLOCK: (Laughter).

MOCKETT: I mean, and what do you do if someone tells you that their nickname is Darth Vader? That's what he said his name was.

BLOCK: You listen.

MOCKETT: And yes. I did listen very intently. And I told him about my meditation training and I told him how irritated I was to have to sit there for three hours, how irritated I was because I had thought that if I wanted to understand anything about Buddhism and what Buddhism had to offer that I was supposed to read sutras and texts and, you know, think--like what I did in college. And he said, *Oh, you Westerners*. He said, *You always want to know why you have to do something before you do it*. And he said, *In Japan we make you do something, and then you learn why afterward*. He said, *But sometimes you just need to do something and learn the lesson later*, which is perhaps a healthier way to live because, of course, you can't always know why you're doing what you're doing. Sometimes you simply have to go through an experience.

BLOCK: When the priest told you about having to shake off this need to know why, did it change how you were grieving for your father?

MOCKETT: I think so. I think, you know, the Japanese believe that we are connected to our ancestors. And I heard a lot of, oh, your father knows this, your father knows that, your father is watching. And I used to dream about my father constantly, and it was always the same dream: He would always come to see me in my childhood room, and I would have to tell him that he was dead. And he would look very disappointed and sorry

Now I have these dreams about him and he will occasionally show up, and it's always with some sort of very specific and important message. I had a really powerful one last summer where he showed up and he said, *You need to be living your life a little bit differently than you are. This is not the way I want you to live your life.* I'm open to this idea that, you know, in whatever way we can explain this--whether it's just a facet of my mind and I'm projecting this onto him when I sleep--that he is still present in a significant way. And if I pay attention to that, the things that I miss about him--his guidance and his wisdom--that's still in me. And that is something that the Japanese believe. And I guess I found a way to believe that and integrate that in a way that works for me, if that makes any sense.

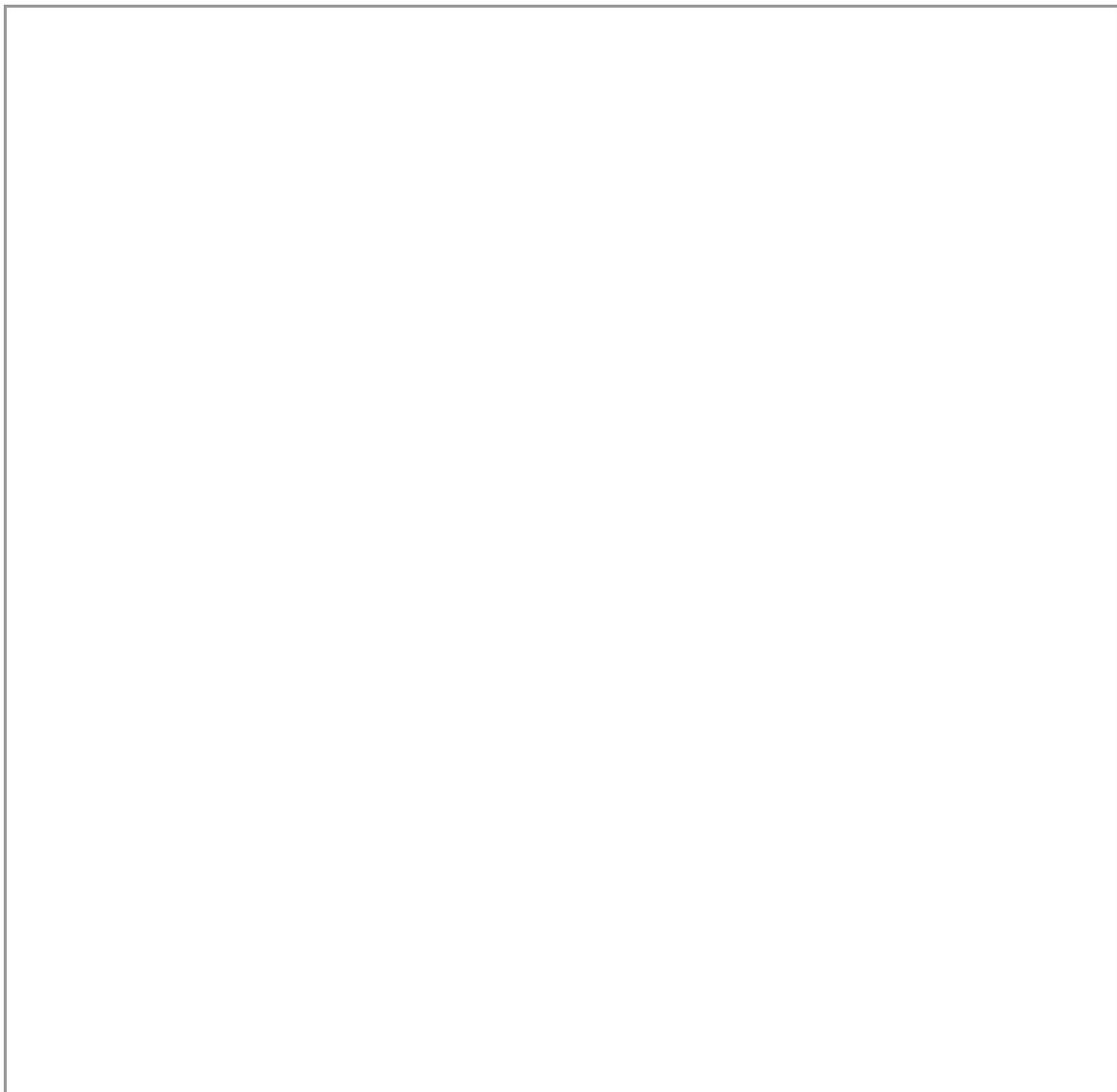
BLOCK: Yeah, it does.

MOCKETT: I'm not one of these people who believes in a spirit plane or believes that I can actually conjure his spirit or anything truly metaphysical. Metaphorically, I can accept. And that is something I definitely learned from Japan and feel comfortable with.

BLOCK: Marie Mutsuki Mockett. Her book is "Where The Dead Pause And The Japanese Say Goodbye." Thanks very much.

MOCKETT: Thank you so much.

And Now to the griefHaven Interview With Marie...





Dad, Mom and Marie

GRIEFHAVEN: What is the Japanese way of showing one's grief?

MOCKETT: One of the beautiful things about Japanese culture is that there are clear contexts in which one can behave a certain way. This has its frustrations, of course. But, to focus on the positive aspect of this cultural practice, it means one can cry loudly and as much as one wants within the right context. This is why the vice president of Mt. Doom says, for example, that grown men feel comfortable going to Mt. Doom and crying out to their mothers.

GRIEFHAVEN: Grieving is often considered to be something that is private, almost as if there is an unspoken rule that it should be cloaked in silence or that the griever should "put on an 'I am okay' face." Yet the experience of grief is such a universal one, will impact

What can you say about the isolation that people who are grieving often feel because they either believe they "should" keep their grief private or they are abandoned by those they thought would always stand by them? As a world, how can you encourage those who are grieving to understand the universality of their experience? How do you think rituals help with this issue?

MOCKETT: Well, the Medievalists called death "the Great Equalizer." Which is to say no one escapes. And if no one escapes death, then no one escapes grief. It's also true that you can't really prepare for the experience of grief until you undergo it. So just being aware that it is "out there" is only helpful to a certain degree.

The wonderful thing about rituals, however, is that if we see them when we are young, we are able to understand and turn to them with a sense of belonging and connection that we might not have otherwise. We can also understand that the rituals were put into place by people who went before us—people who also suffered—and left behind their wisdom to help us in our time of need.

But it's tricky. The modern world wants to embrace what is new. And I don't blame the modern world for this attitude. Having now spent time in "old" cultures (older Europe and Japan) and "new cultures" (new Japan and the East and West Coasts of America), I see what is valuable about both attitudes. New cultures and new worlds are exciting—they make us think, rightly, that anything is possible and anything can be invented, cured, enjoyed, and fixed. Older cultures ask us to act with caution and to value the past. And at no time do we need this reminder more than when we are grieving.

As for isolation—I think that is a function of our modern world, where we strike out and make our way and work hard to express ourselves. Grief runs counter to this attitude. Grief, and how to work with grief, is a very old question, and the modern world, which emphasizes "problem solving," doesn't really work well with the deep process of grieving.

GRIEFHAVEN: When you said, "I thought that of all the cruel and futile things that can happen to us in life, the very worst is when we are separated," I was struck by the universality of the truth in this statement, regardless of how one actually grieves. Would you talk about this comment and the differences between American and Japanese rituals? Also, what rituals have you found most helpful?

MOCKETT: The powerful thing about Japanese rituals is that they remind the individual over and over again that she is not alone. Americans prize individuality. An individual can accomplish so much when untethered to social norms or bureaucracy. But grief is an instance in which we need each other and need to be humbled and reminded of our human origins.

In my book I examine Japanese grief rituals from as many angles as possible. And over and over again I started to get the same message: You are not alone. And not to be alone means many things. It means you do not need to suffer with your pain alone. It means others also have a similar pain. It means the dead are also not alone.

Probably the biggest realization for me was that, while I could not shrink the pain—I couldn't treat it like an illness that just needed to be defeated—I could open my heart and feel my grief against a greater canvas of human experience. This is scary. When your heart hurts, you don't want to open up more. Yet it is the very act of opening up more to other people and feeling your connection to them that allows your grief to shrink in size.

It's interesting because, in the related field of psychotherapy, there is some evidence that simply talking about one's pain does not completely eradicate it. But when combined with something like meditation—something that takes us out of the mind and into the body, and indeed into a community of people meditating—then we have a chance to keep our pain in context. The old Buddhists seem to have known this, and this is why they stressed group meditation. To suffer as a human being is simply a facet of being human.

GRIEFHAVEN: It seems a unique Japanese aspect that these rituals allow the bereaved to express the desire for a loved one to move on. I was especially moved by the story of the

How do you feel about this notion that the bereaved who are left behind must live and "be" a certain way in life in order for their loved one to move? Do they seem relieved by it or overly burdened? For instance, in certain sects of Catholicism, they believe that if a person takes his or her own life, that person will go to hell. In my work, I see the positive and negative side of beliefs and rituals.

MOCKETT: One of the painful things about death is that feeling of complete severance from someone who was so emotionally and psychically important to us. We all have those people—the first people we turn to when we need help. And when they are gone, it is such a shock to our system.

The Japanese are, at heart, a culture that venerates the ancestors. In the very best sense, this means that they believe the deceased are watching over us and helping us. That's why my mother's cousin, the Buddhist priest, wouldn't leave his temple after the disaster.

I think, too, for community-based cultures—more old world cultures—it is comforting to feel connected to those who have passed and to feel that one who is living is still acting in the best possible fashion in front of those unseen eyes. However, you point out where this arrangement can go very wrong. And then, I think, it's more helpful if our rituals focus on (1) helping the deceased move on through the cycle of death to rebirth (reincarnation); and (2) carrying on that sense of rebirth in the heart and mind of those who remain behind. One of the gifts of the modern world is self-focus. And with that comes our ability as a culture to focus on helping the individual heal, without a sense of over-obligation to others. Sometimes we need that kind of freedom; sometimes the way to healing is through connection. The beauty of our modern world is that we are truly free to choose.

GRIEFHAVEN: You rather poignantly stated, "Hearing these stories, I was reminded that on any given day someone is dying and someone is grieving." Is this a realization you embraced prior to your father's death, or was it something you realized as you took the grief journey? Minami (p. 292) states, "The Point of Buddhism...is that it is natural to live with wounds. Everyone has wounds and will be wounded. This can be shocking at first, but in fact it is completely normal." Can you contrast how Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, address suffering as contrasted with Christianity, Judaism, or other religions?

MOCKETT: For a great many reasons, I have always tended to be empathetic. Some of this is cultural—the Japanese culture prides itself on being able to "read the air" and "feel how others feel." Still, I was not at all prepared to think or feel deeply on the subject of death until my father died. And then I had to literally rebuild my world view.

Minami was very firm that Buddhism's attitude differs from the west. In Christianity, man has a "wound on his soul" because of the belief that there is something "wrong" with him. Further, our language, from advertising to psychotherapy, is laced with the notion that we struggle with "sin." Such a concept does not exist in Buddhism, which I think is one reason why it has started to resonate with so many westerners. Buddhism literally does not accuse people of struggling inherently with sin, but rather that life simply presents suffering. This is a slight but important difference.

GRIEFHAVEN: Why do you feel it is important for other cultures to read about and understand grief in Japan?

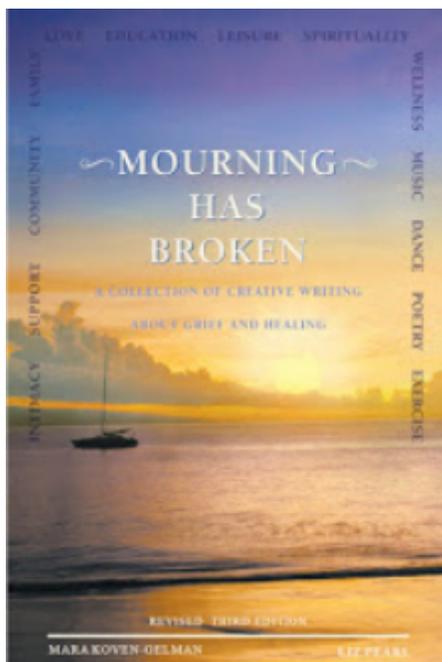
MOCKETT: Sometimes it is really helpful to look at something from a different point of view and through the lens of a different culture. It helps take you "outside" of yourself and able to see yourself more clearly. It can be really transporting to see things out of your normal context.

GRIEFHAVEN: Thank you for spending all of this time with us. I look forward to seeing you next time you are in Los Angeles.

MOCKETT: You are very welcome. It has been a pleasure spending this time with you. I will contact you when I am in Los Angeles, which will be soon.

Paterson Prize. She has written for The New York Times, Salon, National Geographic, Glamour, and other publications and has been a guest on Talk of the Nation and All Things Considered on NPR.

In 2013, Marie was awarded a Fellowship by the NEA and Japan US Friendship Commission, which enabled her to live in Japan. While there, she was featured in the NHK (Japanese National Broadcasting) Documentary, "Venerating the Departed," which was broadcast internationally several times.



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