



THE JOURNEY Newsletter

CONGRATULATIONS!

**to our Founder and CEO
Susan Whitmore**

**KNX 1070 Radio
HERO OF THE WEEK!**

[Listen to two-minute segment here](#)



Nominated by Lori Lerner Gray: Having worked in radio most of her life as a News Director/Broadcaster at numerous stations in Los Angeles, including KIIS FM and K-Earth 101, Lori Lerner Gray knows a thing or two about the media. But when she lost her son Scott to cancer in 2012, she had no one to help her navigate the uncharted territory of grief until a friend told her about griefHaven and Susan Whitmore. "Although I had a supportive and loving family, it was Susan and griefHaven who really became a lifeline for me. Because of her support, compassion, and endless energy, Susan truly became one of my heroes, and it was my pleasure to nominate her as a KNX 1070 [Hero of the Week](#)."

But ask Susan, and she'll be the first to tell you that she sees herself as part of a very large team, and that it was that team that made griefHaven what it is today. Now with the pandemic and over 400,000 deaths, as well as the trauma medical staff are experiencing treating those who are sick with Covid, griefHaven has been busier than ever. "I never in my wildest imaginings could have known that griefHaven would one day be needed for what is happening now. I'm just grateful we are able to help," said Susan.

Have a listen to the two-minute KNX radio segment: [Hero of the Week](#)

Beyond Resilience
by Chris Vognar
for the *Los Angeles Times*



There are injuries from which one never heals, and losing a child has got to be near the top of that list.

Consider the Phoenix, that majestic, born-again bird of myth that defies death by rising from its own ashes. A mighty creature; a symbol of hope.

“Screw that,” says memoirist Emily Rapp Black, imagining the bird’s ascension. “That bird looks like crap. That bird has one wing, one eye left, half of its beak, and it’s barely getting out of there.” In other words, that bird has been through hell, and it shows. But it’s ready to fly again, because that’s what it does.

Black and I are talking on the phone about resilience, grief and writing, three things about which we both have many thoughts and feelings. Black’s 2013 memoir, “The Still Point of the Turning World,” introduced us to Ronan, her infant son, who had been diagnosed with a rare terminal illness, Tay-Sachs disease, that destroys nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. The diagnosis changed Black’s life forever. As she writes, “I had the sensation of skin falling away from bone. My life, the life as a new and hopeful mother, was over.”

Rapp also wants readers to know unspeakable pain and newfound joy don’t necessarily alternate; often they run concurrently. They can coexist, she says.

But life, if you survive it, takes unexpected turns. And that thrashed Phoenix can still fly.

In her new book, “Sanctuary,” a lot happens. Ronan dies at just under 3 years old; Black’s marriage implodes under the strain of his illness. She meets a kind older man, Kent, and they have a daughter, Charlie, now “6 going on 16,” she says. They uproot their life in New Mexico and now live in a small town in Southern California’s Inland Empire.

None of which means life is all butterflies and rainbows. There are injuries from which one never heals, and losing a child has got to be near the top of that list. “The truth is that grief never lessens,” she writes, “it just moves around, and for me, and I think for many others, it moves around in a room that itself changes shape: a square, a well, a hole in a cracking wall, the corner of a sweltering attic, the aching belly of a hungry animal.”

In other words, that bird has been through hell, and it shows. But it’s ready to fly again, because that’s what it does.



Yet Rapp also wants readers to know unspeakable pain and newfound joy don't necessarily alternate; often they run concurrently. "They can coexist," she says, "and in fact they always do in some respect. You will be able to do it, whatever comes to you. You will find a way. Or you will give up. But you will probably find a way, because that's what we're wired to do."

I can't pretend these are just words to me. I remember shouting similar words roughly two years ago as I punched the walls of my bedroom: "My life is over!" And I meant it. My girlfriend Kate, the only person I ever loved, had just been diagnosed with a rare and terminal brain disease. I had just been laid off from my job of 23 years. I was headed for a full-on nervous breakdown. As Black puts it, "It's kind of like a hole drops open in the world and in you go." I liken it to a constant state of falling, as if my body had grown too heavy for the ground beneath (quite literally, as my depression eliminated all interest in exercise). Yet, as Black says, we're wired to keep going.

This is why I'm still breathing.

When I tell Black about Kate, and her death in July, she unleashes a supportive torrent of swearing. "No," she says. "That makes me mad." This is how it often is among grieverers. As the outside world looks on, not sure what to do or say; as friends you were sure would be around forever scatter to the winds, unwilling to come along for the ride — grieverers share a bond. There is a sense that we're all thrashing and gasping in the aftermath of the same shipwreck.

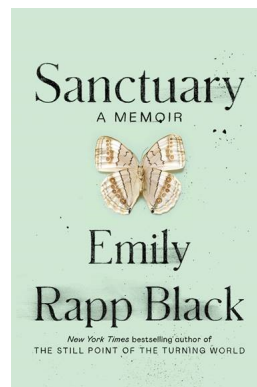
And if you happen to be a writer, you write. Black had already written one memoir, "Poster Child," about what her childhood was like after she lost most of her left leg to a congenital defect. When Ronan was diagnosed, she began writing immediately. As in, the same day. "I was in this hyper-manic state," she says, describing her overwhelming urge to write. There's actually a name for the condition: hypergraphia.

"I was trying to carve some kind of frame or circle or weird, funky geometric shape around total chaos," she says. "It was the thing that probably saved me from various ways of trying to take my own life."

From the book ...

I wasn't brave for telling my story; I was simply doing the only thing I knew how to do, the only work I've ever loved. And I wasn't doing it because I possessed some extraordinary courage, as if I were holding a glass ball inside my heart, protecting it, caring for it; I was doing it because it was necessary.

[Book Link](#)



I'm a little envious. I could barely drool on myself after Kate's diagnosis. Since her death I've chipped away at our story here and there, mostly in pieces like this one and op-ed columns about grief. I'd like to think there's an epic of love, loss, grief and salvation locked inside me somewhere, but I might need tongs to pull it out. In the meantime, I'm pithy in my Facebook grief group.

“There’s no right or wrong way to do it,” Black says, reassuringly. “When you know it’s time, you will do it because you will not be able to stop yourself.”

In “Sanctuary,” Black describes an unpleasant encounter from her “Still Point” book tour, shortly after Ronan’s death. “You must have a cold heart,” a woman admonished her, “since you are able to talk about your son to all of these strangers without crying.”

To grieve is to be judged. “Lots of criticism,” she says, “and I think, partly, that’s gendered. A grieving woman, or a grieving mother, is supposed to be a particular way. The expectation is that I’m going to wail and pull my hair out. But if I did that, they’d call me crazy. There’s just no way to win.”

Yet grievors judge as well. Black’s ex-husband, dealing with his own grief, accused Black of making Ronan her “meal ticket.” The bereaved often scorn those former friends who wouldn’t, couldn’t or just didn’t stay with us. “Most people came forward and got in there with me,” Black says. “Some did not because it was too hard for them. And to those people I say, ‘Don’t email me again. Never call me. You don’t need to know me now.’”

I know the feeling. Grief means severing longtime ties from those who don’t know what to say and those who look upon our madness and find it prudent to scurry the other way. It’s a horrible feeling, to be abandoned at your lowest point. There’s a great, little-seen film about this phenomenon, “Everything Put Together” (2000), in which a suburban mother loses her newborn and finds herself abandoned by her friends. They seem to fear death and grief are contagious.

This article was written by Chris Vognar for the *Los Angeles Times*.
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Emily Rapp Black **Author - *Sanctuary A Memoir***

Emily Rapp Black is the best-selling author of *Poster Child: A Memoir* (BloomsburyUSA) and *The Still Point of the Turning World* (Penguin Press), *Sanctuary* (Random House), and *Frida Kahlo and My Left Leg* (Nottinghill Editions/New York Review of Books). A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a former Fulbright scholar, she is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California-Riverside and the UCR School of Medicine.



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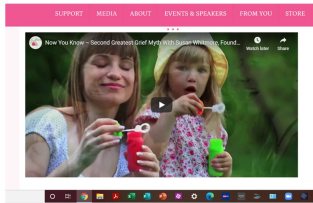
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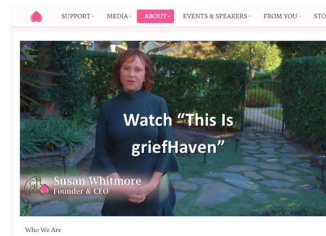
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