A MESSAGE FROM THE SONGWRITER

I lost my first mom when I was two, and I have no memory of her. So for as long as I can remember, I've pictured seeing her in heaven. And not in an abstract “I'll see her someday” kind of way. But in a very tangible “When I do finally meet her for the first time, what am I going to tell her about today?” kind of way.

While that question served me well, it couldn’t shield me from everything – especially not the impact of unresolved grief. Being so young, I didn’t even know grief existed, much less how to navigate it. Those around me knew what it was in general terms, but had never experienced it. And since no one could navigate it, we all avoided it. Completely.

That worked for a long time, with everyone managing to hold things together on the surface, including me. Then I lost a close friend from college a few years after graduation. I went to stuff my new grief in the trusty place I kept my old grief, only to realize that place was full, and my grief started spilling out everywhere. It didn’t take long before my favorite question – “When I do finally meet my mom for the first time, what am I going to tell her about today?” – became a question I didn’t want to ask.

To help change my day-to-day decisions, I began writing what became “I Wanna Bring You Joy.” Over the years, I cycled through healing for 18–24 months, writing the song, healing for 18–24 months, writing the song. Along the way, I’ve recorded more versions than I can count with Chris Burke, the vocalist on Track 16. Eventually, it became the rock version, which led me to Nolan Neal, the vocalist on Track 1. This is the third version Nolan has recorded.

Along the way, I’ve had two big realizations that helped me heal the most. The first is that it wasn’t the loss of my mom that actually caused the greatest amount of damage. The greatest damage came from trying to grieve inside the comfort zones of other people. Because I was two, I approached grief like everything else – I looked at those around me, and imitated them. But in order to grieve like other people, I had to disconnect from myself. And once I disconnected from myself, which I did, I couldn’t actually grieve. Which I didn’t.

I pieced that together shortly before my second mom, who adopted me when I was four, passed away. Thinking I’d figured it out, I was determined to only grieve inside my comfort zone – no one else’s. Unfortunately, I over corrected, which lead to my second realization.
It is horribly unhealthy to disconnect from yourself and grieve in ways that only work for those around you. But it is just as unhealthy to disconnect from everyone around you, and grieve in ways that only work for you.

Disconnecting from yourself to please others is easy. Disconnecting from others to please yourself is easy. What’s hard is staying connected to yourself and to others at the same time, while struggling to achieve the perfect balance between the two. And it isn’t just hard – it’s brutal, because achieving balance involves a lot of over-correcting, falling down, and getting back up, just so you can over-correct, fall down, and then stare at the ground as you try and decide if it’s even worth getting back up.

After each cycle of healing, I’d rewrite the lyric from a better perspective, hoping the improvements would make the song strong enough to be out in the world. When Nolan’s rock version started coming through the speakers, I thought the song was ready. I was wrong – it took another two years and another re-write, but it got my wheels turning.

I started thinking of different ways I could share the song, but as various options popped into my head, I became aware of something. As much as I loved the rock version, if that’s the only version I offered, I’d be accidentally handing down a mandate that was accidentally handed down to me: Grieve inside this one comfort zone, even if it isn’t right for you. Knowing first-hand what that did to me, I couldn’t do that to others. I didn’t have a solution for it yet, but it bothered me.

Then one night, I was clicking around a website called SoundBetter, a clearing house for musical talent. I clicked on Marcello’s demo reel, and when I realized he could sing in Portuguese, everything changed. I’d always wanted the song to help others heal, but if I cut the song in multiple genres and languages, I could create something bigger: a project that embodied the two realizations that helped me the most:

(1) Know your grief is unique. You should feel it and express it in whatever way you need, with no need for explanations or apologies.

(2) Never let the healthy embrace of (1) become unhealthy. Never feel alone, because you are not.

After discovering Marcello, I was driven to find everyone else on the album: Skyler, Anthony, Nacho, TonyB, Annie, Julia, Sandrine, Kody, Amber and Victor. When I initially reached out to each vocalist,
envisioned the “album” simply as a collection of individual songs people might buy based on the language they spoke or genre they preferred.

But as each version rolled in, I realized the “album” was becoming an album, with each song tugging at different shades of different emotions in different ways. The greatest surprise was how drawn I was to performances in languages I couldn’t understand. I think it’s precisely because I couldn’t follow the words that the only option I had was to follow the emotion. Which once again, reminded me I wasn’t alone.

As I tried to figure out which version should go where, I remembered a third realization I’d forgotten: grief is random and circular. I never grieved in a straight line, solidly building upon yesterday’s healing in a predictable way. I continually bounced around, feeling things that were almost like what I’d felt before, but not. I’d gain ground in one way, while losing ground in another.

Taken as a whole, I think the album moves in a similar way. I no longer envision people repeatedly listening to one version based on genre. As people bounce around inside their healing, I think they’ll bounce around inside the album, connecting to different versions with different nuances on different days. I hope this freedom to bounce around the album gives people the freedom to bounce around their grief, while reaffirming the bigger message: grieve how you need, and don’t feel alone.

Everyone on the project hopes and believes that music can heal, and we hope this project honors that belief. But being fully transparent, as much as writing this song helped me, it wasn’t the only thing that healed me. Fortunately, I knew some people who knew some people, and I got some great help. Which is where the fundraising aspect comes in.

For those whose healing only requires the song, we hope the album gives you all you need. But for those who need more than the song, we want to provide more than music. So for every album downloaded, we are donating $4 to charities that serve those who are grieving, for whatever reason the grief exists, and whatever form the healing takes. Our iTunes reports will itemize how many downloads come from which countries, so we’ll redirect the donations back to the countries where each album was purchased. We’ve pre-screened multiple charities in the US through CharityNavigator.com, and are working to do the same in countries outside the US. We expect charitable disbursements to begin in April 2019.
The last thing I’d like to share is our current decision not to release videos. That may change in the future, but at the moment, we are trying not to for a couple of reasons.

First, I once described having grief as like having the worst possible sunburn on your back. If you add even a single layer, you can easily hide it from everyone around you. But that still leaves you at risk of your closest friend giving you the lightest, most well-intentioned, most loving pat on the back, and accidentally causing you a great deal of pain.

In a similar way, I fear that no matter how carefully or thoughtfully we pick images for a video, we risk triggering painful memories for someone, somewhere.

Secondly, I’ve shared a lot in this message, but I’ve intentionally left out a lot as well. And it isn’t simply for my privacy, or for reasons of space. It’s because if you find a version that speaks to you, I don’t want any part of your mind filled with details of my story, details of some of the vocalists’ stories, or images that one of us selected to heal ourselves. I want your mind to be empty of all thoughts of us, so it can be filled only with thoughts of who you have lost. Those are the images that will help you heal – those are the images that should be in your head. Not us.

In today’s world, I don’t know how long a “no video” release will work. But for now, we want to try. If we simply give you the music, the words, and the performances – and then get out of the way – we think your heart will fill your mind with whatever it needs, and your mind will fill your heart with whatever it needs. All the talent on this record still isn’t wise enough to tell you what to remember, or what to imagine. So we will hold off doing so for as long as possible.

On behalf of the 30+ vocalist, musicians, producers and engineers who worked on this project, we wish you the best in your healing. We hope the album and the money it raises will help. But if not, we want you to keep searching until you find something or someone who does. I promise you that healing is a lot of work, but I also promise you it is worth doing.

Tom