

I'm Joining the Circus

Four months after Dave died, I had a six pack. Not the beverage kind, the abdominal kind.

My dad and my brother both died the year that I turned 40. It was a year of heavy things. In addition to the crash course in death, I was running my own business and caring for three intense children. Trying to show up for my husband, trying to be a friend, and trying to deal with the developmental baggage of transitioning “over the hill,” and grappling with my own mortality.

I did what every reasonable middle-aged, working professional and mother of three would do in this situation. I joined the circus.

I began practicing aerial arts: sling, split panel silks, and some flying trapeze. Aerial is equal parts yoga, dance, acrobatics, and brute strength. It was a casual hobby that I started about two years before my dad died. When I moved to Minneapolis, I needed to take up an indoor sport because it turns out that I didn't love the experience of running in two-degree weather.

I ended up at an aerial yoga class. I'm a yoga teacher and I've been doing yoga for many years, so I thought, "Hey, this is a new take on something I already love. Sounds fantastic." I started practicing regularly, and I realized that it's a good fit for my body type and for how my brain works.

I went a little deeper, I did a teacher training program. I went to Texas and did another teacher training program in how to use aerial to support kids on the autism spectrum or who have ADHD.

It wasn't until my dad died that I felt like I *needed* aerial. I felt an urgency—like I needed to move and spin and lift and train in order to survive. I needed it like I needed to breathe. Some days I trained for three hours a day: lifting weights in the morning, training with an aerial instructor, and then maybe practicing on my own for another hour. I sprinkled my weeks with traditional yoga and running to balance out my exercise routine.

I can't express how grateful I am that aerial was in my life during the season of death and grief. In the midst of emotional heaviness, I needed something light and playful. I needed something that would take my mind off of loss. I needed to literally fly around in the sky to keep myself from being fully immersed in the sad, heavy coldness of death. I could grieve and cope effectively because I had some thing in my life that provided a counterbalance to all of the emotional weight that I was carrying.

The time of grief may seem like a strange time to join the circus. But it is also the perfect time. It was so much more than a hobby—it was a healing practice and hands down the most important protector of my mental health during the years of intense grief.

When I am moving as an aerialist, I am using a different set of neurological skills, different cells, then I use when I'm working as a psychologist or when I'm writing or speaking. I'm thinking about spatial reasoning. I'm thinking about physics. I'm thinking about how not to fall. My body's innate proprioception is activated. It is so, so good for all of our brains to diversify and build new neuronal connections. Activities like dancing, that require us to memorize steps or to watch a motion and then practice that motion, build our kinesthetic intelligence which is a part of us somewhat stunted in most of our sedentary adult lives. Movement is one of the best protections against the cognitive decline that's commonly associated with aging.

And now I've come to know that movement is one of the most powerful healing tools.

We need a diversified brain if one set of circuitry within our brains gets fatigued or the connections between the neurons start to fray, or if we are flooded with the imbalanced neurological activation commonly associated with trauma and grief. Having a lifelong hobby or even a series of different kinds of hobbies is helpful in cultivating a robust brain that is able to stay healthy and strong while also digesting the tremendous weight of loss.

And play. I can't overstate the psychological necessity of play, especially when you're in the midst of grief. Aerial is the one place where I have a break from sadness. There's no emotional complexity. There are no triggers. It is a different experience, a different existence, a true break from the tasks and challenges in grief life.

Aerial is also a deep study in the reality that nothings stays the same. When I am learning a new trick on the sling, I feel myself growing. I feel myself changing. I watch it, try it, practice it five times. Get feedback from a teacher. If it's a simple trick, in the course of 10-15 minutes, I've accomplished it. Woohoo! Get to check that off my list. That's a great little dopamine rush for a brain that is in the midst of a years-long slog of active grief. The dopamine hits are few and far between in my land-based life and my brain is thirsty for simple accomplishments and a feedback loop of success.

It will take me years to learn how to live through Christmas without my dad and brother. But I can learn a new trapeze trick in a weekend.

I've never been a dancer. I have very limited background in gymnastics. I'm 42-years old and just now learning to point my toes and working on being able to do the splits. But little by little, day by day, I feel my body learning new ways to be in the world. Living in this sense of possibility is absolutely refreshing compared to the stuckness and finality of death.

As an aerialist, I'm well known for my strength. I'm able to master complicated tricks purely because I can hold my own body weight for an extended period of time. Thanks, for those shoulders, dad. In fact, I'm so strong that when I slipped off the side of a rope suspension bridge while hiking in the Dominican Republic, I caught myself on a dangling rope and held on with one

hand until I could lower to safety. It was next level grip power that kept me from getting badly hurt.

But aerial is a lesson in counterbalancing strength with flexibility. Muscles that are too tight are vulnerable to injury—they're susceptible to being pulled or torn or detached at the tendon. An over-strengthened body is a rigid one—imagine the super muscley football player who can't reach his toes. Aerial requires a stretching practice that elongates the sinews and creates a flexible softness that prevents tearing and other injuries. Of course, an overly flexible body is problematic too. Without strong muscles to stabilize the tendons, the joints can slip out of place, becoming dislocated or vulnerable to a different set of injuries caused by hyperextension and or structural weakness. Strength and flexibility are both necessary components of a high functioning body.

And family, aerial has filled my life with interesting people. Isolation and loneliness are a debilitating part of grief. And frankly I'm not the best conversationalist as a grieving person. At my aerial studio, I am part of a community. I am loved because I show up and am kind and I demonstrate a deep love for the practice. We have a built-in conversation topic. They're my troupe and the fact that my life is a shit show is completely unknown and irrelevant to them.

I get that you may not want to go out and join the circus. Perhaps you'd like to keep your feet on the ground or in the kitchen or the metal shop. It doesn't really matter. From my perspective, the best grief-helping hobbies fit these criteria:

1. Absorbing. An activity that requires you to be "all in." You cannot be distracted, you cannot dwell on a problem at work or think about a problem with your kid or think about your grief. The task requires full focus. Woodworking, glassblowing, rock-climbing... if you're not paying attention, you could get seriously hurt. The demand for your body and your mind and your emotional life to be completely engaged helps you heal. Maybe painting, maybe cooking, maybe hockey, creating board games, learning piano. The key is that your brain is on a break from grief.
2. Collaborative. One of my aerial teachers is a woman named Elizabeth. She is a ballerina turned rock climber, turned circus performer, and she is also on the autism spectrum. She thinks in movement. She can hardly explain things to me in words. She always has to show me, because her primary language is the language of movement. And that is so different than me—I am immersed in the world of words.

But I've been without words more often in the midst of grief. The sadness swells into my throat and blocks the sound. Elizabeth is teaching me how to think and feel in motion.

The healing hobby doesn't need to be a team sport where you're playing soccer or volleyball and you have a lot of comradery with other people. But it is very, very helpful if your hobby can help create a broad network of people. People who aren't living in the

middle of the grief story with you and can therefore afford you the space and time to live in another part of your story.

3. **Embodying.** Most of us spend a lot of our adult life detached from our bodies. We live in our minds. We live in our to do lists. If we're in grief, we live in the heaviness. Healing involves getting back into your body—moving the emotion around, letting it move through you. You can't heal sitting still. That means that we must relearn how to move, how to play with our hands and our toes and all the muscles in between.

I appreciate that it is not always easy, as a grown-up, to walk in totally green to a new activity. There is an awkward phase, and a learning curve that most of us are not comfortable with. Over and over I have found people to be so gracious, and when they have something that they love that they're often very happy to teach.

In order to become an aerialist, I've had to carve out time early in the mornings before my kids get up. A few nights a week I take classes at the end of the day, after they go to sleep. Going deep in on a hobby costs time, energy, resources, emotional reserve, relationship capital... it is very costly. But the benefits are much greater than people realize. A hobby is an investment in your long-term well-being, neurological flexibility, physical health, relationship connections, and your capacity for joy and fun. In the midst of grief, or in the midst of a demanding grown-up life, I think we're too busy NOT to create the space in our lives for these kinds of activities. We're too busy NOT to play. We're too busy NOT to be learners who are willing to explore different spheres of life and different ways of being in our bodies.

Flying around and spinning upside down might not be your jam, but it's got to be something other than sitting in front of a computer all day.

Play is the is antidote to grief. Given the universal looming of grief, whether big losses like deaths or losses like failure of important plans or being laid off at work, it would be helpful for all of us to find our best way to play. Play now. You never know how seriously you'll need it.

Take a moment...

It can be hard to get started. Here are some tips for returning to play, especially as a grieving grownup:

Step 1: Write down some playful activities that you're curious about.

- What have you always wanted to try?
- What kinds of activities are your friends and family members enjoying?
- What did you love doing as a kid?

Step 2: Prioritize for what's most playful.

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| 1. Is it novel, different from your day to day work life? | YES | NO |
| 2. Does it use your body, either your gross or fine motor skills? | YES | NO |
| 3. Is it something you think will bring you joy? | YES | NO |
| 4. Does it involve a community of others? | YES | NO |
| 5. Is it sufficiently engaging and focusing that you'll be "all in"? | YES | NO |

If you answered yes to all 5 questions, it made it to your short list

Step 3: Plan and go!

- Pick your top 2-3 activities to try
- Research communities, groups, events, places near you where you can try it
- Based on schedule and logistics, choose one activity to try three times.
- Put it in your calendar and lock in the plans

Step 4: Reflect and assess for joy

Now that you've tried it 3x, assess the activity based on the following criteria:

- How did your body feel during your activity?
- What kinds of thoughts came up for you during your activity?
 - Positive thoughts
 - Negative thoughts
- What was your mood or emotion state while you were playing?
 - Did you laugh?
 - Did you enjoy the other people involved?
 - Were you engaged and focused?

If you've gone three times and feel like it might not be right for you, return to your brainstorming list and repeat the exploration process.

Step 5: Dive into play

- Based on your reflections above, perhaps you've found your play activity.
 - Block it off in the calendar for the next three months.
 - Protect the time. Move meetings, arrange sitters, etc.
 - Talk with your friends and family about your play. Ask for their support. Make sure people around you know that it's a priority to you.

Big List of PLAY Ideas

Practice yoga	Train for a marathon or a 5K	Take a cartooning class
Pilates	Take up swimming	Start horseback riding
Love beer or kombucha? Start home-brewing	Ballroom, salsa or adult ballet	Build a model rocket
Take a studio art class	Sign up for a plot in a community garden	Make your own candles or soap
Join the Sierra Club or another and REI hiking group	Woodworking	Rebuild a classic car
Learn a musical instrument	Fencing lessons	Learn jiu-jitsu
Join a gardening club or take a class at a local nursery	Bodybuilding or competitive weight lifting	Join a soccer league
Join a chess club	Learn flower arranging	Join a softball league
Join Toastmasters to improve your public speaking skills	Become a puzzles master	Join a hockey (ice or field) league
Take photography class a local adult education program	Join a book club	Bee keeping
Take an improv class	Practice origami	Work with rescue animals
Take a magic class	Write fan fiction	Learn to sew
Learn needlepoint or knitting	Surfing or scuba diving	Pottery
Study a new language	Get into tie-dying fabrics	Table-top gaming
Rock climbing	Archery	Comic book writing or illustration
Join an ultimate frisbee team	Join a cover band or start a band with friends	Joining a community choir, orchestra or band
Acro yoga	Start paddle boarding	Learn to tile or make mosaics
Join a community theater	Find a writer's workshop to collaborate and get feedback on your work	Work your way through a cook book
	Learn to keep bonsai trees	