

THE HEALER'S BURDEN

STORIES AND POEMS OF PROFESSIONAL GRIEF



MELISSA FOURNIER & GINA PRIBAZ, EDITORS

PRESS KIT

WWW.HEALERSBURDEN.COM

CONTACT

www.healersburden.com

editors@healersburden.com

 @HealersBurden

MEET

THE EDITORS

MELISSA FOURNIER, LMSW

As a writer, social worker, and practitioner of narrative medicine, Melissa helps bereaved individuals shape their grief stories. She has worked in adult, pediatric, and perinatal hospice, mental health, and has been a featured speaker on end-of-life, bereavement, and ethics. This is her third book on the subject of grief.

Melissa works as the Program Director for Michael's Place, a nonprofit bereavement support center in Traverse City, MI, where she designs and facilitates grief support programs including Writing Through Loss, an ongoing writing workshop aimed at helping individuals shape their grief narrative. Melissa has worked in adult, pediatric, and perinatal hospice, mental health, and has been a featured speaker on end-of-life, bereavement, and ethics. She holds a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Michigan, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Wayne State University, and a Certificate of Professional Achievement in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University. Her writing has appeared in *Dunes Review*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Pulse: Voices from the Heart of Medicine*, and *Medical Literary Messenger*. She is co-editor of *AFTER: Stories about Loss* and *What Comes Next* (Barnwood Books, 2019) and author of *Abruptio* (The Poetry Box, 2019).

GINA PRIBAZ, MFA, MA

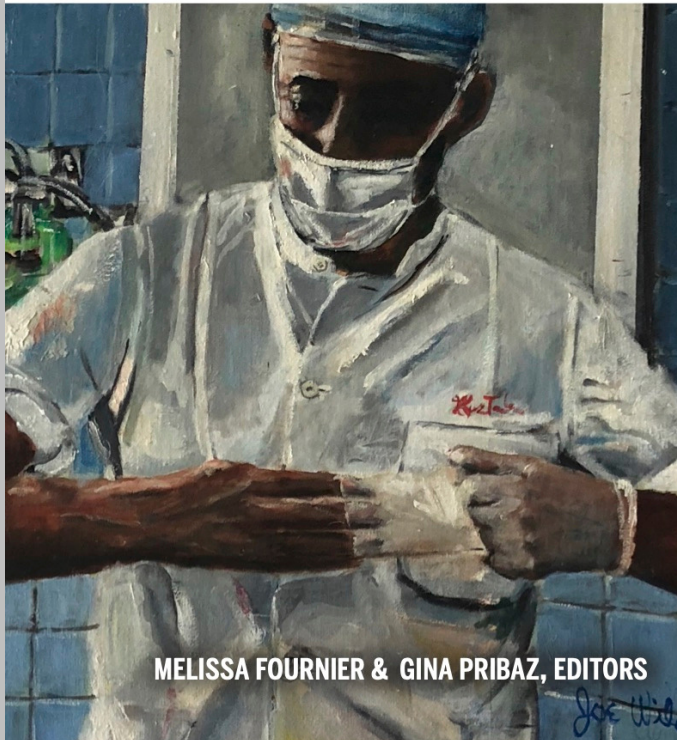
Gina is passionate about the power of story to humanize the healthcare experience. She teaches creative writing and health humanities to medical students at the University of Illinois College of Medicine.

Gina is a clinical associate in the Departments of Internal Medicine and Pediatrics at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria, where she teaches creative writing and health humanities. She has developed humanities, arts, and ethics programming at a nonprofit healthcare system in Peoria, IL. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Northwestern University, a Master of Arts in Literature from the University of Iowa, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Notre Dame. Her essays have appeared in *Body and Soul: Narratives of Healing from Ars Medica*, *Tampa Review*, *Brain, Child Magazine*, and elsewhere.



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ABOUT THE BOOK

WITH A FOREWORD BY
DR. RANA AWDISH,
AUTHOR OF L.A. TIMES
BESTSELLER, *IN SHOCK*

"...a mandated read for seasoned and
beginning health carers..."

KENNETH DOKA, PHD author, *Disfranchised Grief,
Grief is a Journey*

"Modern medicine has never yearned more
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LISA MACLEAN, MD, Director of Physician Wellness,
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"...provides an unparalleled resource to
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PATRICIA GONCE MORTON, PHD, RN, ANCP-BC, FAAN,
editor, *Journal of Professional Nursing*

"...afford[s] readers opportunities to reclaim
their rights as healers to heal themselves."

LYNNE MIJANGOS, RN, LMSW, MFA, MS, co-editor,
Narrative in Social Work Practice

"...a powerful tool to help us listen, learn and
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IRA BEDZOW, PHD, UNESCO Chair in Bioethics, New
York Medical College

"*The Healer's Burden* shines much-needed light
into the space of professional grief."

ANA S. ILTIS, PHD, co-editor, *Narrative Inquiry in
Bioethics*

CONTRIBUTORS

JAFAR AL-MONDIRY
SHANNON ARNTFIELD
DANIEL BECKER
CHRISTOPHER BLAKE
JOSEPH BOCCICCHIO
WILLIAM A. FRENCH
LILA FLAVIN
RACHEL FLEISHMAN
SERENA J. FOX
JENNIFER HU
SIMONE KANTOLA
PAM LENKOV
MARY C. LINDBERG
TEEGAN MANNION
VENETA MASSON
PAMELA A. MITCHELL
RICHARD MORAND
KACPER NIBURSKI
PAIVI E. PITTMAN
ANEESH RAJMAIRA
SHERI REDA
LARA RONAN
HUI-WEN ALINA SATO
THOM SCHWARZ
ELENA SCHWOLSKY
KATHERINE DIBELLA SELUJA
HOWARD F. STEIN
DANIEL J. WATERS
KELLEY WHITE
RONDALYN VARNEY WHITNEY
ANNA-LEILA WILLIAMS
MARIA WOLFE



SHORT SYNOPSIS

We can ignore it no longer. But in a culture that discourages vulnerability, how can a healthcare professional effectively deal with death, especially now in this critical time of pandemic? Thankfully, ***The Healer's Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional Grief*** makes a space to tend this occult grief, and not a moment too soon.

Title: The Healer's Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional Grief

Publisher: University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine

ISBN: 9798697465691

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Tags: Grief, Medical Humanities, Narrative Medicine, Healthcare

AVAILABLE AT WWW.HEALERSBURDEN.COM

Why now?

While the idea and call for submissions for ***The Healer's Burden*** occurred well before the COVID-19 pandemic, focused attention on the emotional needs of healthcare professionals on the front lines, the daily despair they encounter, and the grief reactions they experience has never been more necessary. This book offers timely first-hand accounts of healthcare professionals' grief as well as strategies for tending it based in narrative medicine, a growing field that has already brought significant attention to the need for more humane practices in medicine.

What inspired *The Healer's Burden*?

Several factors inspired this book, including the fact that as a hospice social worker and bereavement counselor, as well as having been raised by a mother who was an ICU nurse, Melissa Fournier had first-hand knowledge of the impact of professional grief. She is acutely aware of grief's toll on those working in high-loss environments, their family members, and patient care in general. As a writer and practitioner of narrative medicine, Melissa envisioned an anthology of creative nonfiction that would engage the healing power of story and offer a forum for the long-ignored topic. Gina Pribaz, whose background in literature, medical humanities, and creative writing made her an ideal co-editor for this book, recalls a physician-colleague's pained struggle to answer a first-year medical student's poignant question: *How do you handle losing patients?* With that moment in mind, she responded with a resounding yes to the invitation to champion this project.

What is professional grief?

Professional grief is the grief response experienced by healthcare providers and others who work in environments in which death is part of the job. It is a term coined by Elizabeth J. Clark, who was a social worker and leader in the palliative care field. Professional grief is often ignored and suppressed, yet it contributes to conditions such as bereavement overload, post-traumatic stress, and burnout among those working in high-loss situations.

How is it different from personal grief?

Professional grief is typically invalidated and unacknowledged. It is often experienced as fatigue, irritability, anger, and guilt. Left untended it can create undercurrents of conflict, tension, and blame among co-workers and teams. Those carrying professional grief often feel they do not have the right to grieve because they are not a close friend or relative of the deceased. Professional grief is frequently a response to cumulative losses rather than the grief associated with the loss of a particular loved one.

Who should read this book?

The Healer's Burden is a must for healthcare professionals, medical education and nursing program directors and instructors, hospital administrators, hospice leadership and staff, facility caregivers, chaplains, first-responders, patients, family members and friends of healthcare professionals and anyone willing to be moved by powerful stories and poems about the weight those working in high-loss careers carry.

Who are the contributors?

We aimed to feature voices from the many different disciplines of healthcare—social workers, hospice chaplains, surgeons, nurses, even a therapeutic clown. Professional grief doesn't discriminate—anyone working in a high-loss environment is subject to its effects. It also doesn't discern the newer professional from the more experienced, and for that reason, readers will learn from perspectives across the career spectrum, from students to retirees.

What is narrative medicine?

Narrative medicine is healthcare practiced with “narrative competence” or the ability to absorb and be moved by stories. Such competence improves provider-patient relationships, and ultimately the experience of healthcare, through greater empathy and connection between provider and patient. **The Healer's Burden** encourages close-reading and self-reflection, seeking to improve affiliation between colleagues, between practitioner and self, and between practitioner and the greater culture around professional grief.

How is this book designed to be helpful?

The Healer's Burden is equipped with discussion questions based on the individual stories and poems, reflective writing prompts, and a facilitator's guide for those who wish to use the material in small groups, classes, and workshops. The mission of this book is to encourage conversation and community. Together we can begin to change how healthcare professionals are expected to witness suffering and death: from ignoring and repressing the strong emotions these experiences elicit to finding space and support in grieving them.

What is your hope for this book?

In addition to offering strategies for addressing professional grief, we hope **The Healer's Burden** opens the floodgates on a much-needed conversation about the personal impact on our healthcare professionals of continuous encounters with death. It is not enough for organizations to simply encourage “self-care”; a culture change in healthcare which recognizes the very real experience of professional grief and makes space for its tending is long overdue, and the predominant notion of emotion-denial as a necessary component of professional competence is counterproductive.

EXCERPTS

"...But it shouldn't take a pandemic to highlight the need for healthcare systems to tend the bereavement needs of professionals exposed to continuous loss. Nor should that tending end if and when the COVID-19 crisis resolves. The needs of aides, clergy, nurses, first responders, doctors, social workers, medical students, and trainees will continue as long as patients die, of whatever causes, and the conversation around how best to address those needs is only just beginning." (Melissa Fournier, from the Preface)

"It was about the extraordinarily terrible summer our unit had had. About the family in town on vacation who would find themselves bewildered, flying home lost without their child after a sudden illness erased her name from the returning passenger list. Our summer with multiple deaths from car accidents and suicide attempts and child abuse that ended up on the evening news. Our summer with patients who felt relatively safe on their cancer floors but less safe in our ICU because they had heard this is where the cancer kids go at the end. It was about the startling reality that these patients perceive me as the nurse who comes to them when they are about to die. It was about my fear, always sitting just below the surface, that I could one day be the mother at the bedside and not the nurse." (Hui-wen Alina Sato, from "Silent Intercession")

"I don't want to play again. Even if I win the next five hands, the one I lose will more than cancel it out. The gurney passes, and I slowly walk the quiet halls of the darkened hospital. I head to the nursery, often the place I gravitate to on nights like this. I look through the glass at the tiny faces swaddled in blankets, all pink and squished. White, Hispanic, Black, they all look pretty similar, and I like that. I just want to observe life; I want to see hope and promise and safety. Tonight it is hard to see." (Richard Morand, from "Tough Hand")

"I went to the back room. 'Did Esma leave?' I asked the resident. He was in between bites of a sesame bagel. There was a glob of cream cheese on his thumb and I waited to see where it would end up.

'You didn't know?' he said. 'She died. When was it?' He scratched his head. 'I think it was on Saturday or Sunday. I remember because I was on.'

'Wait, what? She died? Esma died?'

He nodded. He passed me the sign out with the names of the new patients. I looked at the list, searching for her name. Could he be mistaken? 'I'm sorry,' he said as I ran my finger down the page. 'Esma wasn't a great learning case. I'll help you find a better one.' I looked up. I could tell he wanted to say more but I was glad when he didn't. That back room was a place where we shared our frustration, sometimes our anger, but never our sadness." (Lila Flavin, from "Hair Clips for Esma")

ENDORSEMENTS

The Healer's Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional Grief brings to the fore the feelings of end-of-life professionals as they daily face dying and death. Such workers will find their grief—heretofore disenfranchised—now validated. While this alone is so valuable, they can also find strategies to cope with the inevitable experience, yet often hidden, of the impact of loss and grief. Given the current pandemic, this book could not have arrived at a more needed time. It is a mandated read for seasoned and beginning health carers now working in that thin space between life and death.

Kenneth J. Doka, PhD
Senior Consultant, The Hospice Foundation of America
Author, *Disenfranchised Grief*, *Grief Is a Journey*

Modern medicine has never yearned more than for a book like this. ***The Healer's Burden*** allows us to get in touch with our passion for healing and recognizes the pain that often walks beside it. Finding the true meaning and purpose in our daily work is critical to our overall well-being, mitigates burnout and promotes our sustainability in medicine. These personal stories and poems create a relatable narrative. As we work to be in the here and now, taking a moment to read an excerpt, reflect upon it and create our own narrative can not only heal us but also connect us with both our patients and our colleagues and remind us why we entered medicine in the first place.

Lisa MacLean, MD
Associate Professor
Director of Physician Wellness
Henry Ford Health System

Professional grief often expresses itself as “I am tired...” But grief should not be confused with exhaustion, and these stories and poems should not be confused with simple tales. ***The Healer's Burden*** is a collection of self-reflections that completes the professional grief mantra of “I am tired,” with “yet I have a community with whom I can share the weight.” Every clinician who reads this book will feel their burden lighten, since these stories and poems give their readers the sense that others are helping to carry the load.

Ira Bedzow, PhD
Director of the Biomedical Ethics and Humanities Program
UNESCO Chair in Bioethics
New York Medical College

ENDORSEMENTS

I completed my specialty training with a tremendous sense of pride, prepared to have a great impact on patients and families in their time of greatest need and hopelessness. I entered and ended each day with the knowledge that I had given my all, but, like many of my colleagues, I ignored fatigue and underestimated the accumulated trauma of those occasions when, despite my best efforts, the neurological disease won. ***The Healer's Burden*** is a book of intimate stories and poems from healthcare providers experiencing professional grief. It serves as a powerful tool to help us listen, learn, and heal so that we have the courage to continue helping others in need. We must remember we are never alone. And we must find hope even in the darkest moments, for the lessons learned can give us insights into how to bring light to others.

Tony Avellino, MD, MBA
Pediatric Neurosurgeon
MSU Health Care Chief Clinical and Medical Officer
Michigan State University

My very first nursing job was in the intensive care unit at a large academic health science hospital. Since I was new, it was my job to work the Christmas and New Year holidays. On Christmas day, we had eleven patients. By New Year's Day, all eleven had died. I was distraught and did not know how to deal with my emotions. I asked myself if this was the right position for me. Could I really handle all this death? I could not remember any lecture in nursing school that prepared me for death and my emotions.

Although I came to learn that being with people at the time of their death is a unique privilege given only to a few, the hidden burden that health care professionals feel takes its toll on body, mind, and spirit. Much has been written about the moral distress and the compassion fatigue experienced by those who care for the dying. ***The Healer's Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional Grief*** offers much needed compelling insights through personal reflections of professionals from various disciplines who work with the dying. Through stories and poems, the book provides an unparalleled resource to professionals to deal with their own personal grief journey. The book is a must read for all in the field of caring for the dying.

Patricia Gonce Morton, PhD, RN, ACNP-BC, FAAN
Dean Emeritus, University of Utah College of Nursing
Editor, *Journal of Professional Nursing*

ENDORSEMENTS

This rich collection of voices demonstrates the tremendous power of personal accounts of human experiences. Each author creates a window. For some readers, this window will be into their own souls. This book will help them to name and understand their own experiences with professional grief. For others, this collection will enable them to better appreciate the burden of loss professionals face. ***The Healer's Burden*** shines much-needed light into the hidden space of professional grief.

Ana S. Iltis, PhD
Carlson Professor of University Studies and Professor of
Philosophy
Director, Center for Bioethics, Health and Society
Co-editor, Narrative
Inquiry in Bioethics

Professional caregivers experience grief at the loss of those in their care. These stories and poems by chaplains, doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, social workers, and a therapeutic clown attest to the weightiness of watching patients suffer and die and wishing they could have “done more.” In crafting these deeply felt experiences into well told stories, and placing them on the page, they honor the singular lives of people they cared for. Readers come to know both the givers and receivers of care and, often, to recognize themselves in these encounters with life and death.

Editors have wisely and generously included guidelines for using narrative methods to engage with these stories, affording readers opportunities to reclaim their right as healers to heal themselves.

Lynne Mijangos, RN, LMSW, MFA, MS
Lecturer in Narrative Medicine
Columbia University
Co-editor, *Narrative Social Work: The Power and Possibility of Story*

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Melissa Fournier

(231) 499-3703

editors@healersburden.com

www.healersburden.com

NEW BOOK ADDRESSES HEALTHCARE WORKERS' GRIEF AT CRITICAL TIME

The Healer's Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional Grief

TRAVERSE CITY, Michigan, November 13, 2020— Ignore. Suppress. Hide. Work in high-loss healthcare environments demands turning away from one's internal experiences and rapidly turning toward the next patient. In a culture that discourages vulnerability, how can a professional effectively deal with the challenging emotions that arise when faced with death, especially now in this critical time of pandemic? Editors Melissa Fournier and Gina Pribaz address this crucial topic in their anthology, *The Healer's Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional Grief*, recently published by the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine.

"Raised by a mother who was an ICU nurse and working myself as a hospice social worker and bereavement counselor, I became acutely aware of grief's toll on those working in high loss environments," explained Fournier, "and as a writer and practitioner of narrative medicine, I envisioned a work of creative non-fiction that would confront this long-ignored topic." A background in medical humanities education and creative writing made Gina Pribaz an ideal co-editor. "I recall a physician colleague's pained struggle to answer a first-year medical student's poignant question: *How do you handle losing patients?* With that moment in mind, I responded with a resounding *yes* when approached by Melissa about this project," Pribaz said.

The Healer's Burden offers a window into the lives of thirty-two healthcare professionals of various disciplines and experience levels from the U.S. and Canada who share their stories of grief. It includes a facilitator's guide and writing prompts to encourage reflection and discussion. Tony Avellino, MD, MBA, Pediatric Neurosurgeon and Health Care Chief Clinical and Medical Officer at Michigan State University explained his experience with professional grief, "Like many of my colleagues, I ignored fatigue and underestimated the accumulated trauma [of loss]" and describes the book as "a powerful tool to help us listen, learn, and heal so that we have the courage to continue helping others."

While the idea and call for submissions for *The Healer's Burden* occurred well before the COVID-19 pandemic, "focused attention on the emotional needs of healthcare professionals on the front

lines, the daily despair they encounter, and the grief reactions they experience has never been more necessary," Fournier emphasized. Kenneth Doka, PhD, Senior Consultant for The Hospice Foundation of America and author of *Disenfranchised Grief* and *Grief is a Journey*, adds, "This book could not have arrived at a more needed time. It is a mandated read for seasoned and beginning health carers now working in that thin space between life and death."

The Healer's Burden is a must read for anyone willing to be moved by powerful stories of those working in high-loss fields.

For more information, press kit, or to order *The Healer's Burden*, visit www.healersburden.com.

About the Editors

Melissa Fournier, LMSW, works as the Program Director for Michael's Place, a nonprofit bereavement support center in Traverse City, MI. She is a social worker with a background in adult, pediatric, and perinatal hospice, mental health, and has been a featured speaker on end-of-life, bereavement, and ethics. Her writing has appeared in *Dunes Review*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Pulse: Voices from the Heart of Medicine*, and *Medical Literary Messenger*. She is co-editor of *AFTER: Stories about Loss and What Comes Next* (Barnwood Books, 2019) and author of *Abruptio* (The Poetry Box, 2019).

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