

A little book of

Endings
and new beginnings



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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A LITTLE BOOK OF ENDINGS AND
NEW BEGINNINGS.

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INTRODUCTION: The Ending of the Year.

There was once a time when I used to set aside a couple of hours on New Year's Even with a hardback notebook, a mug of strong tea and whatever was left over from the Christmas gorging to reflect back on the year and set resolutions for the following one. Had I kept those notebooks I am fairly sure that every one of them held the promise of a fitter, more successful, kinder me until the end of January when I would stop tracking my progress and let the good intentions slide.

It was the ancient Babylonians who were the first people 4,000 years ago to make resolutions at New Year to change bad habits, inculcate new behaviours or set goals for improving their lives. Nothing much has changed. In recent times some of the most popular resolutions are a) to lose weight, b) to get fitter c) spend more time with family and friends d) spend less and save more. Goals differ from resolutions as they are more clearly defined and measurable. How much weight? How much fitter? How much more time? Save how much? Figures can be attached to goals making them more tangible and achievable whereas resolutions can end up being fluffy ideals.

Less than 10% of people keep their resolutions or fail to achieve their goals in full. The main reason is that the slightest derailment such as eating one of the forbidden foods leads to a "what the hell" mind set and the diet is "broken." Are we really this weak willed? Of course not. We simply set unrealistic targets in the first place and beat down on ourselves when we can't meet them.

At the ending of a year after a dark midwinter period of feasting hopefully in the company of family and friends, it's normal to withdraw and reflect on the months that have past. It's hard to accept that we're a year older and much of what we hoped would happen hasn't quite worked out that way.

There may have been unexpected deaths, accidents, redundancies, home repossessions, out of control debt, health scares and other losses. The unexpected can't be planned for on a spreadsheet of goals.

Surprises as well as disappointments, even shocks will have coloured how we see ourselves, others, the world we inhabit and a vision for the future. Too many disappointments can lead to disillusionment. Too many positives in a year can make us overconfident and believe we are invincible. Of course it all depends on how centred we are in the first place.

January, named after the Roman god Janus, is the door to the New Year and new beginnings. He is said to have had the ability to see into the past and the future. We put such significance on the first day of this month as being the turning point for a fresh start, a new you, a new me and somehow as part of our New Year's Eve celebrations there is this mystical idea that when the clock strikes midnight everything will somehow be better. Once the hangover goes away that is.

So begins our debate on endings and beginnings. I hope you find the content of this Little Book inspiring.

ONE: Loss of someone important in your life.

Very few people will get through life without facing a painful loss of some sort. If they do, then they are the fortunate ones. Whatever that someone or something may be, we know it brings emotional pain. This can be experienced physically such as the tightening of the chest as the shock hits or an acute pain in the abdomen as if from a physical blow. It's different for all of us.

As the grief kicks in, especially after a death, expected or not, we can feel as if we're peering over the edge of a well into an unfathomable darkness. It claws and tears at our guts like an indiscriminating, voracious animal and we in turn howl and bay in a voice that couldn't possibly belong to a human.

For others the pain is converted into anger or a wild, merciless rage which is acted out in every dimension of life. Screaming at a child, threatening to rip someone's head off when they cut in front of you on the road or tearing out one's own hair, a rare condition known as trichotillomania. Whilst it shocks those looking on, there is no moral value to be attached to our raw, broken feelings over which we've lost control. All of this, in my experience of loss, is perfectly normal.

In fact it's healthy. If grief isn't expressed openly it can burrow its way into our core like some toxic worm. We blame ourselves and others for the loss and become a martyr to self-punishment. We move on from the initial shock to denial- *This can't be happening to me*. In the well documented five stages of grief by Kubler-Ross, we can move into depression where many get stuck for a long time until reluctantly and with time we reach a bittersweet point of acceptance.

The loss of someone who was sewn into the tapestry of your life can be through death, divorce, separation or emotional distancing. The love has died. In any of these scenarios, we experience an ending and even if deep down we know it's for the best in the long run – we tell ourselves this many times to save face – it doesn't lessen the pain. Those who have experienced it report it as feeling of being caught up in a swirling dense fog, a feeling of disconnect like looking through a thick sheet of frosted glass or down the wrong end of a telescope.

After a death we survive by focusing on the business of the funeral. It keeps us busy, makes life meaningful as we prepare for the final act of love for that person. Yet it is once the body is committed to the ground or the fire that reality throws a rock at our head and reminds us that this ending is for ever.

The picture of our life has a gaping hole in it. It can't be patched up to look the same. We can put something new in its place but that doesn't make it a bad picture... simply different.

“No-one ever told me grief was like fear,” said C.S.Lewis, in his physically thin but emotion-packed book, “A Grief Observed.”

Is it a help to know that grief and mourning is a universal expression of deep loss? Probably not. It's your pain, your loss, your broken world at the moment and nobody else's. The evil finger of Fate has poked you in **your** eye.

So what do we do? That one person who made our lives complete has gone. Some say death is easier to cope with than divorce as there is finality. At least that person is not happily strolling around hand in hand with another adding jealousy to the boiling cauldron of untamed emotions.

I've experienced both and have to say it's different. My reactions to three significant deaths (as in significant to altering the structure of my life) have varied. My mother was terminally ill for several months so the shock was dealt with early on where as my father died suddenly and dramatically one August Bank Holiday and the shock made a lot of my hair fall out. In both cases, the grief process took about two years before I could begin to feel my nerves coming alive again.

Time doesn't heal pain but it can be used for healing purposes depending on what we do with it. I think a period of sitting with the pain in your hands in silence can be one of the most powerful ways of coming to terms with the loss. No radio. No TV. No distractions. It allows you to get in touch with a deep part of yourself that must acknowledge that death is part of life and divorce is part of a dead relationship. We need to talk to that vulnerable and helpless part of ourselves that can't control what happens in life. If you're experiencing the emotional fall out from a loss of a significant other, try this for half an hour a day then get on with your routine.

No matter how sick you feel, you cannot heal without looking after yourself. Nutritious food, rest, companionship and tasks to occupy a different part of your brain and sleep. Lots of natural sleep, aided by walks in the fresh air rather than medication. A mouthful of soup, a potter in the garden, a pencil to paper. One step at a time. I had to be forced to do all of those things in the first few months. Oh and cry. Without apology. Without shame. Without restraint.

Oh how grief loves the bottom of a brandy glass as here lies all the answers. Avoid poor coping mechanisms of alcohol, binge eating, drugs or anaesthetising with endless television. Masking any emotional pain does not deal with it. Charles Darwin noted that humans are not the only creatures to shed emotional tears. Elephants do to so we're in good company.

My reaction to divorce was predominantly anger and fear. *How dare you leave me/your children/with debt/unable to work the lawnmower?* I wanted to punish and hurt but my husband's response to complete silence. He'd made his plans and nothing was going to stop him returning to his native country. When I look back I realise I should have been more dignified and calm. My behaviour reinforced his decision to leave. The women that impress me most as they go through the fires of divorce hell are those who hold their heads up high even when they are breaking down. They continue to function as employees, leaders, mothers, friends, social organisers as if nothing is happening. The proverbial swans. They are the brave ones with copious amounts of inner strength.

Two: The Loss of a Child.

To my mind, this must be the most devastating type of ending for not only the immediately family but the wider network of extended family and friends. It is not only death of a child through natural causes or accident that turn a world upside down but that of a growing phenomenon amongst adult children and their parents – estrangement.

An acquaintance of mine lost two of her three children in a car crash. Her husband has never recovered from the post traumatic shock he suffered, blaming himself whereas his wife lost all feeling for anything and carried on as if locked in a block of ice. The funerals were done and dusted in a matter of days and she returned to work, leaving the baby with her husband who was barely able to get out of bed in the mornings. She eats the same food every day, wears black and grey clothing and when not distracted by work, sits in a chair staring into space. Modified catatonia.

Other bereaved parents carry on being parents through their activism. Not only do they raise considerable funds to support research into the diseases that took their children but they find a new sense of purpose – a beginning created from an ending. Putting the name of the child to some worthy cause keeps that the memory of that child's life burning bright. Not dying in vain is a mission or vision of many bereaved parents.

For some the shock morphs into a numbness from which they don't emerge. The sun has shut down heralding the end of their world. Others, after a natural period of mourning want to harness their anger or distress into something positive and lasting. Out of the hottest fire comes the strongest metal as my father used to say.

A less dramatic but equally distressing situation is when a young adult makes a decision to become estranged. This is often after a series of breakdowns and reconciliations. Both parties are left exhausted by trying to work things out. It may be more serious though. Emotional abuse by the parent(s) or neglect can mean there is no choice for the young person but to leave the family home. Whatever the reason, the impact on most parents is shock, especially if they don't understand what they've done.

This is not the same as a young person needing to leave home to find their own way in the world. It's a natural process and a form of emotional abuse if a parent guilt trips them into staying. Like the biblical story of the prodigal son, it is usually for a few years until the child feels ready to make contact as a mature man or woman. In some cases though, the estrangement is for good. This can be described as ambiguous loss as there is no definite ending. Every day the parent believes that there will be some contact to put them out of their misery. It's unreasonable to think that if you've raised a child and done your best for them that you can shut them out of your mind. I'm not talking here about seriously dysfunctional families.

Because there is no real ending, how can you turn this horror into a new beginning? I know of some mothers distraught with grief who turn to psychics, remote viewers, and private detectives to locate their child and bring them home. It becomes an obsession. Should we expect them to make new beginnings for their own lives? A new job, relocate, focus on hobbies. Because there is no closure, it's hard not to wake up and wonder if that young person is dead, lost, mentally ill, on the streets or in serious trouble.

One mother told me that it would be easier to deal with if she knew her son was in fact dead. I don't blame her for thinking that yet the counterargument is that she is selfish to focus on her own pain. Instead she should wish her son happiness and success even if she was no longer wanted in his life. There is no easy answer to this and I speak from experience.

In both cases, some healing can come from being proud of raising a child to whatever age and focusing on the good memories that experience yielded. Being part of a group or online community to share experiences and feelings is a positive step forward. The UK charity <https://www.papyrus-uk.org/> is a prime example of these. It brings parents and families together who have lost a young person to suicide. Another group <http://standalone.org.uk/about/> supports the estranged.

These groups do vital work in helping people make sense of their new and uninvited situation and to hack a path through the jungle. The danger is that the emotional tide is so overpowering, so suffocating that those suffering choose to end their own lives. This is the mother of all endings. None of us knows where our

turning point maybe and what our lives might become if we can hold on for another day, another week, another month and even till the anniversary of the event.

We change. Our perceptions alter and our resilience and inner strength is being tested. If we want to witness the dawn of hope, we must give ourselves enough time to find out what we are capable of.

A final word on the matter of estrangement. Dr. Joshua Coleman, author of “When Parents Hurt”, advocates not giving up. He talks about making small shifts towards the right communication and behaviour without badgering, threatening or demanding. Listening to grievances and being prepared to admit your part in the breakdown is essential. He makes the point that it is now the parents who have to earn respect from their children who know they have the power to hurt by refusing to make contact or not allowing contact with the grandchildren. It’s a sad reflection on the state of today’s society (my words).

Three: The Loss of Status

Jobs are no longer for life. Degree holders are not guaranteed a career with prospects, incremental salaries or pensions. We know this already. Redundancy, health problems, retirement, are just three of the factors that can lead to a loss of status in the world of employment and while we may attempt to view the initial shock as an opportunity to pursue other avenues with the hope of saying *It was the best thing that ever happened to me*, the reality is that we need to face the loss first.

Unemployment has detrimental effects on self-esteem, physical and mental health after a certain period. Although confident that we can take a month or so to think deeply about the next step, the more rejections and setbacks we face, the more that confidence erodes and with it our feelings of self-worth.

Apart from the loss of money and financial security, non-voluntary unemployment is one of the most damaging events that can happen to an individual. The loss of status (title), responsibility and belonging to a group can lead to an identity crisis since in the West we are defined by what we do and own rather than who we are. Work, defined roles and status aid our ability to recover from illness and to live longer. We only have to look around in our community at people who carry on working past retirement age to see they are, in the main, healthier, happier and more likely to survive for longer.

It doesn't mean that it is only paid work that matters. The voluntary sector attracts the semi or fully retired who are looking to keep connected with people and be useful. Plenty of websites can offer you statistical proof if you need it.

Even if the actual work itself is not satisfying, being able to say that you are employed in a particular role adds to the feeling of being somebody and having a slot in society. When this goes and especially if it can't be replaced easily, there is a mourning period for the loss of who we felt we once were and the life we once had.

Control over our lives is being dictated by others when we can't find a new position or a place in the world. This leads to frustration, resentment and a decline in mental health. Isolation is a killer so unless we can find a new outlet or group to belong to, our physical health will deteriorate too. After all, if we feel there's nothing left to live for, we will stop looking after ourselves. Pause for a moment and think about a) someone you might know that has lost their work status and how it affected them and b) how you would deal with this ending in your life.

Retirement is something we plan for financially, look forward to in our heads – the travel, time with family, getting healthy, but for some it is a nightmare period. Even if there are no financial concerns, loneliness can be the biggest obstacle to a contented end of paid work period. In Spanish “los jubilados,” (those who celebrate) means the retired yet for many without families or social activities it is a period of mourning or at least adjustment. The home worker can relate to the loneliness attached to being retired. Writers like me can go for days without seeing or even talking to anyone until the family arrive at the weekend. I have to admit to a touch of envy when I hear about their full and busy lives.

Lacking the need to leave the house to hop on public transport to go to a buzzing place of social activity – yes work is a place where we make friends, meet partners and join the in-house badminton club – we end up getting little or no exercise, maybe eat badly and go to bed early desperate to find a way out.

So how do we get our lives back on track again? This is what I did when faced with empty-nesting, the end of my successful training consultancy which took me all over the world and being an active member of a choir. Remember I was semi-retired not unemployed.

- I took time out to mourn the endings and understand the transition period that most of us go through. Accepting that it's a natural phase of life helps a little bit.
- I sold my family home and moved out of the city. On reflection this isn't something I recommend unless you have good reason to do so.
- Spending time trying out different hobbies – I taught myself to paint – or taking a course – I did several short courses over three years – taps into a different part of your brain.
- Making an effort to visit family and friends, to create a routine of keeping in touch (you have time, they may not).
- I wrote two novels and found a traditional publisher who believed that I had something to offer.
- I allowed time to pass but not by moping in a chair (I had my moments) and let the transition phase work its magic.
- Now I am ready to go “back to work” but in a way that suits me.

Does this approach work for the unemployed? Only for a short time while the pieces settle. Hanging onto that grand title of Managing Director isn't going to be much good in moving forward. It's better to think about your qualities and offer them up in some voluntary work – patient with the elderly, caring for animals, passionate about teaching – whilst on the job hunt. It's surprising how many people found their new line of work through these contacts.

Grieve by all means. It's an ending but know when to stop and look forward to the new cycle of life that is waiting for you. As with the loss of a loved one, we need that dark in-between period to recover, regroup and re-emerge.

Four: The ending of good health

We take our health for granted, especially when young, unless of course we have had some health issues from childhood. In that case we've adapted to them as time has gone on.

Whilst poor health is not an automatic consequence of aging, realising that your body can't do at 50 what it used to do at 20 can be a sobering thought. I've come across a number of people who've hired personal trainers in later life as they realise that to have a healthy old age they need to invest it in now. Better late than never.

If we look at physical health first, there's no telling when we might be diagnosed with a major condition that requires surgery and a long recovery period. Worse still, the news might not be so favourable thus bringing a devastating ending to what might have been. It's natural to rant and rage about the unfairness of what seems to be so arbitrary and unfair and a period of coming to terms with the forced change can feel like a mourning period.

It's easy to blame others for our misfortune but the real pain comes when we realise maybe there was something we could have done to prevent things- better diet, stopping smoking/drinking/drugs, more exercise and so on. If we turn the anger inwards and blame ourselves the chance of a seeking out a new beginning is delayed.

We all have private fears over which sense or faculty we would fear losing most. For me it's my mind. For others, their sight. Ask yourself the same question. Think about how you would feel and what you would do to adapt. As always, it's not so much what happens to us in life, it's how we handle it.

Imagine you love the visual arts and you become visually impaired which puts an end to your hobby or even career. A mother with severe spinal pain might be prevented from fully caring for her children. There are a hundred more examples of how a sudden change in bodily functioning can bring an ending to something you consider essential to your wellbeing. This brings me to a related matter.

The alarming rise in mental health problems as reported in the press brings its own problems. Depression and anxiety, the most common of the mental illnesses cost sufferers their relationships, jobs, families and a meaningful until treatment is sought and even then not everyone responds to treatment. In the UK, around 300,000 jobs are lost each year with an illness that affects 1:4 people many of whom believe they've been badly let down by the system.

An end to "normal" functioning is lost and if the individual is to get back to work, requires rehabilitation, support and accept a lower skilled role, a mind shift is required to move forward. When the mind is tired and stressed anyway, this must be like climbing a mountain.

We've talked about the loss of health, short term or permanently but what about courses of action? Again, the passage of time to reconsider choices is important for the transition from one state to another. There is little point panicking to get back to the previous lifestyle, knowing that it's not going to happen immediately. Prolonged stress can result from a reduction in income, a forced house move and a new way of living incurring endings of everything familiar.

Finding a trained counsellor or even a good listener amongst our friends is a positive step forward. Talking out the fears of the future, the uncertainty of how to cope and move forward bring some relief from the worry if not an immediate solution. They might be able to think outside the box and offer ideas and solutions you hadn't thought of and help you work through the pros and cons in a methodical and logical way.

I'm a fan of writing things down. Journals allow you track your thoughts and feelings over a period and link them to progress or what is making you feel stuck. Family members and partners might struggle to relate to you without a leg or a heart condition as it has a knock on effect onto their lives. They may take their frustration out on you and you take your feelings of guilt out on them. If family dynamics are severely affected, therapy might be necessary to explore everyone's feelings and to explore new ways of being together.

Five: Goodbye to friends, neighbours and social networks.

I don't agree with Robert Frost when he said "*Good fences make good neighbours*" as neighbours can become good friends. (as per the Australian soap). I know we hear of nightmare stories of the people next door who seem hell bent on disturbing our equilibrium through their loud music or overgrown foliage blocking our view but I'd like to think that's in the minority.

What is more disturbing is the total lack of acknowledgement or refusal to engage in common courtesies and small talk, a phenomenon that seems more prevalent in cities than more rural areas. In these two examples saying goodbye to neighbours can come as a huge relief.

My very quiet neighbour, an elderly lady on her own, moved away recently and although she was not the sort for regularly knocking on the door, it was good to hear her pottering around and in the summer she was good for a chat over the garden wall. I'm feeling the loss already. The worry now is over who comes next? Will I have to raise the level of my fence?

Losing friends or a social network can be destabilising as one way of identifying ourselves is through the tribes or groups we are part of. Back in the days before the internet, we relied on letters, phone calls and meetups so it should be easier to keep in touch by means of the plethora of gadgets and mediums at our fingertips. I've found that unless we put in the effort those ties unravel quickly and end up in a card or email exchange at Christmas. Lives move on, new friendships are forged and while there is a sense of loss and ending, new beginnings are established. If these losses are linked to a death then please look over **section one** again.

As we get older it can become more difficult, depending on our confidence levels and personality, to find other outlets to meet new people. If you've sung in a choir or have been a regular church goer then these networks are readily available to tap into. In some smaller places, cliques are not as welcoming to newcomers as we would like. I've experienced this when I moved to my small town. Art groups, writing groups, choirs are all available but I get the feeling that whilst being polite, they've formed their friendship groups, a bit like at school and are not keen for those dynamics to be upended.

If moving into a new area, one thing that worked for me was to knock on the doors of neighbouring houses and introduce myself. You can craft an invitation for an open house to invite people for drinks and snacks. What hasn't worked is trying to blend old friendships with new but that maybe because I didn't handle it right. I guess what I'm saying here is that we have to be proactive and make an effort if we are to avoid isolation.

A very good friend of mine said as I packed up to leave my previous home, *"We're all like bubbles floating in the air. We bump into each other for a period then drift off to say hello to other bubbles."* I rather like that image.

Children can feel the loss of a friendship very keenly. They can have a best friend for years only for that person, so central to their happiness, to be stolen away from a newcomer. A fall out can be the most painful thing in a child's life and as parents we stand on the side-lines hurting for them. Interfering and rescuing is the worst thing we can do as it's a life event which they need to learn to deal with early on in preparation for the hard realities of life.

We can be there for them, to listen, help them express their feelings and try to put things into perspective with (not for) them. What follows is another form of grief which has to be worked through to the final point of acceptance. It's hard for a child to understand why things happen as their world is small and egocentric. Realising that endings bring new beginnings early in life helps us grow, mature and develop healthy coping skills.

Six – Loss of stuff

Over the past few years we've had some serious floods in the UK and elsewhere in the world according to the newsfeeds. The home of one of my friends was devastated with not only her kitchen ripped out by the full force of the water but boxes of irreplaceable memorabilia floated down river. I know the pain this cause her and her husband who became very ill after the event.

It's easy to placate those who've experienced such a shocking event by saying, *"Oh it's just stuff. You'll get the insurance money so you can replace it."* Yes but it's not your stuff and unless it's happened to you it's difficult to lock into the profound feelings of attachment, meaning and loss.

In my last home, I was burgled four times in a year. Passports, a laptop with important documents I'd failed to back up and jewellery were taken while I was asleep in the house. My very first novel, completed and edited, was written on that laptop and although I had a paper copy it didn't have the latest edits and scribbles which are so important to a writer.

For a long time I was unable to sleep or even settle in the house worried about a repeat visit, possibly with violence. I was on edge during the days I was out working, unable to concentrate and obsessively checked doors and windows when at home. To save my sanity, I sold up and moved away. Others have shared similar stories so it may not be the loss of stuff per se that affects us so badly, but the sentimental value we attach to it and the knowledge that a replacement will only be a replicate.

The press is full of stories about the rise in homelessness and it's easy to equate it with feckless behaviour and addictions. This is so false. So many people are on the edge losing their homes despite working hard to make ends meet. Debt continues to be a big issue in the UK and I believe in the USA. When payments can't be made, loans on homes are called in and families find themselves trapped in the most horrendous of circumstances as they try to rehouse themselves.

Losing your shelter, your place of refuge means losing security and for many begins a spiral down into poverty. I cannot imagine what that must be like even though I've talked to people recently who's New Year is coloured by such fears.

Having to rebuild from the bottom needs energy, resources and hope and the older we get the less able we are to start again. The easiest option is to give up.

In this example of endings, I'm not sure there is hope for a new beginning other than to accept what's happened, be proactive in consulting agencies, local authorities, checking security, taking out the best insurance and detaching yourself from the need to have too much stuff. One good thing that came out of my house break in experience was to become more minimalist, know where everything is kept and for valuables, lock them in a bank security box. It changed my relationship with stuff and that's not a bad thing.

CONCLUSION

Life is beginnings and endings. We don't know when they will come and we can't be prepared other than to learn detachment or according to Buddhist teachings, non-attachment. Letting go of craving and attachment sets us free. Embracing uncertainty and the randomness of life is a tough discipline and one which calls for some deep soul searching. Meditation can help with this or being active out in the world focusing on the needs of others.

According to the well-known coach, Martha Beck, we can learn to detach from those we love by not being emotionally invested in them and the impact they have on us. That doesn't mean stop loving them but accepting them for who they are and for how long they are with us. This is a mind-set alien to many of us I think.

A positive way forward is to train our brain to be content (happy) whatever happens in life. This requires developing a philosophy of total acceptance but that doesn't mean submission. As Kubler Ross stated in her five stages of grief, acceptance is the final stage when we can let go and learn to live again. It's not about giving up or giving in.

Knowing there is a new beginning of some sort can reframe our thinking if we're prepared to not get stuck in the grieving process as many do. If this is you right now, you may find solace in talking things through with a professional. If you would like to talk to me, you can email me via my website www.angelenaboden.com

It doesn't have to be New Year's Day to take the first step into a new beginning. It can happen any day of the year.

So for my five top tips, born out of 60 plus years of experience.

- Grieve in your own time and your own way for what has gone. Feel the depth of the pain but try to limit it to a time of day suitable to you.
- Look after yourself as best you can. Healing comes from good health.
- Don't cut yourself from people even it's a visit to a coffee shop or library. It keeps you connected to the world.
- Embrace a philosophy of life. Mine is "There's a time for everything and everything has its time."
- From endings come new beginnings if we are prepared to look for them.