

Losing Helen

An Essay by Carol Becker

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AN ESSAY BY

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A daughter's thoughtful meditation on the inevitable loss of her elderly mother and her efforts to design an end-of-life experience that has meaning for them both.

Losing Helen is a first-person narrative essay of a daughter's profound journey through the many phases in the process of losing her ninety-eight-year-old mother. As an only child, she must assume complete responsibility for the often absurd but necessary planning that illness and death require. At the same time, she must struggle with her overwhelming grief and confusion, trying to make sense of her mother's life and her own. As she gradually comes to accept the inevitable loss, she focuses instead on finding ways to ensure a dignified and respectful passage, designing an end-of-life experience that is meaningful and sacred for them both.

In this compelling and thoughtful meditation, the author finds guidance in the spiritual insights of Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, the artwork of the Renaissance masters, Indian mythology, Buddhist philosophy, and the traditions of Catholicism and Judaism that are part of her interfaith heritage. Although unique in form, *Losing Helen* is reminiscent both in subject and depth of feeling of Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*, Phillip Roth's *Patrimony*, and Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diaries*.

Praise for *Losing Helen*

"In this quiet, lovely essay, Becker takes readers through the years and months leading up to her mother's death and the mourning period that followed, delving into the grief of losing a much-loved parent. Becker, a professor and dean at Columbia University, writes precisely and elegantly. . . . The subject of this slim memoir may be intensely private and narrow, but Becker's writing is so beautiful—and the process of grieving so universal—that it deserves a wide audience."

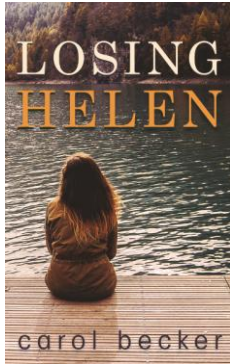
—*Publishers Weekly*

"A short and powerful evocation of a mother's death and of the events immediately preceding them. . . . A book written as much or more for the author as for any readership, but those going through similar trials will take much solace from the author's story."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Biographical Note

Carol Becker is Professor of the Arts and Dean of Faculty at Columbia University School of the Arts in New York City. She has written for many print and online publications on varied topics, including the intellectual lives and emotional well-being of women. Her recently reissued book *The Invisible Drama: Women and the Anxiety of Change* has been translated into six languages.



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More Praise for *Losing Helen*

“In this beautiful memoir, Carol Becker accompanies her mother’s living and dying with wisdom, humor, and deep, uncomplicated love such as we rarely allow ourselves to feel. It is a gift of courage amidst inconsolable loss for which her readers will be grateful.”

—Marianne Hirsch, author of *The Generation of Postmemory*

“Carol Becker’s work of undying devotion shows us that the death of a parent can be a time of unanticipated grace. Brave, honest, and moving, *Losing Helen* is also unexpectedly comforting. It makes it clear that kindness, clarity and insight can arise out of a willingness to face the traumas of our lives.”

—Mark Epstein, M.D., author of *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart* and *The Trauma of Everyday Life*

“Carol Becker’s extraordinary transcription of grief and love transcends various forms—memoir, autobiography—to become something else entirely: a work of literature that is entirely *sui generis*, constantly surprising, real, and, like the truth, beautiful and sustaining. A book to be treasured, embraced, and learned from.”

—Hilton Als, staff writer, *The New Yorker*

From *Losing Helen*

Jews don’t bring flowers to graves. They bring stones. But no one is certain exactly why. There are so many theories. People used to be buried under piles of stones. Stones were used to secure tombs to keep the dead, dead, and not walking the planet as ghosts. But I like best the thought that stones, like souls, endure. I always placed stones on the graves of my uncles, aunts, and grandparents. The stones I brought this time were small. I’d been collecting them on my travels for months. But soon I ran short and thought about whom I had loved most, whom I did really want to tell that I’d be here. All the big personalities of my childhood, all my great loves from the Jewish side were in this graveyard. There could never be enough stones. At other sites, I noticed that people had left large stones—boulders, even—for their loved ones. I just had small, little jewels—petrified wood from the island of Mytilene, Petoskey stones from the shores of Lake Michigan, and quartz from the jungles of Belize.