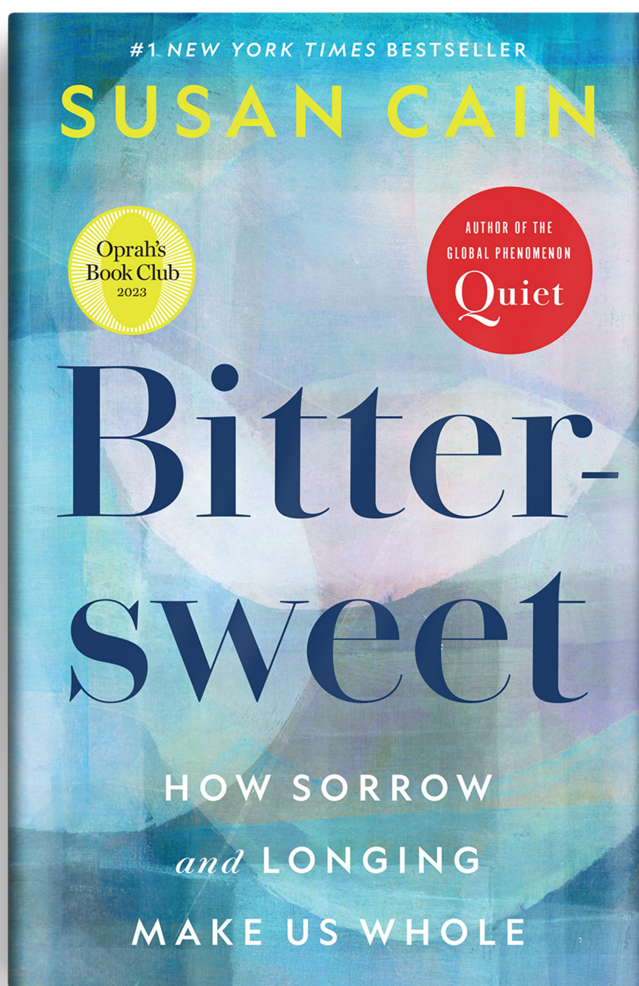
READ ONE OF OPRAH'S FAVORITE CHAPTERS FROM

Bittersweet

BY SUSAN CAIN



CROWN

January Day: Lower Manhattan, © Thomas Schaller
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CODA

How to Go Home

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.

—RAYMOND CARVER, "LATE FRAGMENT"

Ever since that day in the law school dorm, when my friend asked why I was listening to funeral music, I'd wondered about the strange magnetism of the bittersweet. But it took another ten years before I started learning how to tap its powers.

I was thirty-three years old, a seventh-year associate at a corporate law firm, with an office overlooking the Statue of Liberty on the forty-second floor of a Wall Street skyscraper; I'd been working sixteen-hour days for seven years straight. And even though, ever since I was four, I'd had the impossible

dream of becoming an author, I was also a highly ambitious lawyer and about to make partner. Or so I thought.

One morning, a senior partner named Steve Shalen knocked on my office door. Steve was tall and distinguished and decent. He sat down and reached for the squishy stress ball on my desk and said that I wasn't making partner after all. I remember wishing that I had a stress ball, too, but Steve Shalen was using mine. I remember feeling sorry that it had fallen to Steve, who meant well, to tell me this news. I remember the sensation of an edifice collapsing around me, of a dream never coming true.

I'd been working like a maniac all those years in devotion to this dream, which had replaced my childhood fantasy of becoming a writer. The dream was about a type of house—specifically, a redbrick townhouse in Greenwich Village that I'd coveted since my first week of work, when another senior partner had invited the new associates for dinner and I beheld the loveliness of the home he lived in with his family, the tree-lined streets he and his wife and children walked each morning on their way to work and school.

All along the dappled streets of that neighborhood of cafés and curiosity shops, ornate plaques adorned the houses, announcing the poets and novelists who'd been moved to flights of inspiration in those very homes. If it was ironic that they were owned now not by artists but by lawyers, if the price of entry was no longer publishing a chapbook of poems but making partner in an organization devoted to asset-backed securitizations and reverse triangular mergers, I didn't dwell on this. I understood that making partner and acquiring such a home would not cause me to publish heralded volumes of nineteenth-century poetry. But I dreamed of life in a Greenwich Village illuminated by yesterday's writers, and if, in the service of this

dream, I must learn about yield curves and debt service coverage ratios and carry dictionaries called *Wall Street Words* home for the weekend, studying them by candlelight in my one-bedroom apartment, this struck me as a price worth paying.

But deep down, I knew that Steve Shalen had just handed me a Get Out of Jail Free card.

A few hours later, I left the law firm for good. And a few weeks after that, I ended a seven-year relationship that had always felt wrong. My parents, children of immigrants and the Great Depression, had raised me to be practical. My father had suggested law school so I could always pay the rent; my mother had warned me to have kids before my biological clock stopped. Now I was thirty-three, with no career, no love, no place to live.

I fell into a relationship with a handsome musician named Raul. He was an expansive, lit-up kind of person who composed lyrics by day and stood around a piano singing with friends at night. He wasn't fully available, but we had an electric connection, and my feelings for him turned into an obsession the likes of which (thankfully) I've never experienced before or since. This was the era before smartphones, and I spent my days dodging into Internet cafés to see if there was an email from him. I can still call up the dopamine rush of excitement at the sight of his name, bolded in dark blue letters in my Yahoo in-box. Between dates, he sent me music recommendations.

I lived alone now, in a nondescript Manhattan neighborhood in a small rental without much furniture, just a fluffy white rug where I lay, looking up at the ceiling and listening to the music Raul had sent. Across the street was a nineteenth-century church and garden, tiny and miraculous, sandwiched

between the skyscrapers. I sat for hours in its pews, breathing in its air of hushed mystery. Sometimes, I would meet my friend Naomi for coffee and tell her all the fascinating things that Raul had said during our last visit. It must have been trying for her, listening to all those stories on constant repeat. One day she said, with loving exasperation: *If you're this obsessed, it's because he represents something you long for*.

Naomi has enormous, piercing blue eyes, and she fixed them on me.

What are you longing for? she asked me with sudden intensity.

And the answer came, just like that. Raul was the writing life I'd longed for since I was four. He was an emissary from the perfect and beautiful world. That's what the Greenwich Village townhouse had been, too: a signpost to that other place. All those years at the law firm, I'd misinterpreted the direction the sign was pointing. I thought it was about real estate. But it was really about home.

And just like that, the obsession fell away. I still loved Raul, but in the way you love a favorite cousin; there was no more eroticism in it, no more urgency. I still loved those Greenwich Village townhouses. But I didn't need to own one.

I started writing for real.

• • •

So. What if I asked you this same question:

What are you longing for?

You may not have asked yourself this question before. You may not have identified the important symbols in your life story, you may not have examined what they mean.

You've likely asked other questions: What are my career goals? Do I want marriage and children? Is so-and-so the right partner? How can I be a "good" and moral person? What work should I do? To what extent should my work define me? When should I retire?

But have you asked yourself these questions in the deepest terms? Have you asked what is the thing you long for most, your unique imprint, singular mission, wordless calling? Have you asked where on earth is your closest approximation of home? Literally, if you sat down and wrote "Home" at the top of a piece of paper and waited a while, what would you write next?

And if you have a bittersweet temperament, or you've come to it via life experience, have you asked how to hold the melancholy within you? Have you realized that you're part of a long and storied tradition that can help you transform your pain into beauty, your longing into belonging?

Have you asked: Who is the artist or musician or athlete or entrepreneur or scientist or spiritual leader you love, and why do you love them, what do they represent to you? And have you asked, What is the ache you can't get rid of—and could you make it *your* creative offering? Could you find a way to help heal others who suffer a similar trouble? Could your ache be, as Leonard Cohen said, the way you embrace the sun and the moon?

And do you know the lessons of your own particular sorrows and longings?

Maybe you experience a chasm between who you are and what you do for a living, and this tells you that you work too much, or too little, or that you want fulfilling work, or an organizational culture in which you fit; or that the work you need

has little to do with your official job or income source; or countless other messages your yearning might be sending you: Listen to them, follow them, pay attention.*

Or maybe you're thrilled when your children laugh, but suffer too vicariously when they cry, which tells you that you haven't truly accepted that tears are part of life—and that your kids can handle them.

Or maybe you carry the griefs of your parents or grandparents or great-great-great-grandparents; maybe your body pays the price of their trouble; maybe your relationship with the world is compromised by hypervigilance or hair-trigger anger or a dogged dark cloud, and you must find a way to transform the pain of the ages, even as you find the freedom to write your own story.

Or maybe you mourn your breakups, or your dead, which tells you that separation is the most fundamental of heartaches, but also that attachment is our deepest desire, and that you might transcend your grief when you perceive how connected you are with all the other humans who struggle to transcend theirs, and who emerge in fits and starts, bit by rocky bit, just like you.

And maybe you crave perfect and unconditional love, the kind that's depicted in all those iconic advertisements of a glamorous couple driving their convertible 'round a bend to nowhere; but maybe you're also starting to realize that the heart of those ads is not the dazzling couple, but rather the invisible place to which their shiny car is driving: that just around that curve, the perfect and beautiful world awaits them; that in the meantime a flame of it is lit inside them. And that

* This is not to say that you should abandon your paycheck in favor of a dream (I still have my parents' pragmatism!), only that you make space for the dream, too.

glimpses of this elusive place are everywhere, not only in our love affairs but also when we kiss our children good night, when we shiver with delight at the strum of a guitar, when we read a golden truth expressed by an author who died a thousand years before we were born.

And maybe you see that the couple will never arrive, and if they do, they won't get to stay: a situation that has the power to drive us mad with desire (which the advertisers hope we'll attempt to satiate by purchasing their wristwatch or cologne). The world the couple is driving to is forever around the bend. And what should we do with this tantalizing truth?

. . .

A while after I left the law firm and ended my relationship with Raul, I met Ken, who became my husband. He was a writer, too, and he'd spent the past seven years doing U.N. peacekeeping negotiations in some of the bloodiest war zones of the 1990s: Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, Liberia.

He did that work because underneath his exuberant personality, Ken was filled with his own longing for a different world. He'd grown up wrestling with the legacy of the Holocaust. He'd lie awake when he was ten, wondering whether he would've had the courage to hide Anne Frank in his attic. And it turned out that he did; in the 1990s, he lived seven years in the eye of humanity's storm, a world of child soldiers, gang rapes, cannibalism, and genocide. He waited helplessly outside a mobile field hospital as a young friend died on an operating table in Somalia, following an ambush. In Rwanda, where eight hundred thousand were slaughtered by machete in ninety days, a rate of killing that surpassed the Nazi concentration camps, his job was to collect evidence for the U.N. war crimes tribunal.

He walked the fields of bones—jaws, clavicles, and skulls, baby skeletons cradled in the arms of mama skeletons—trying not to retch from the stench, and from the knowledge that, once again, no one had stopped the killing.

After all those years in the field, he started to feel that his work was futile: There were always more bad actors, more mutilated bodies, more indifferent onlookers. Despite good intentions, no heroic organizations, no noble countries, no individuals with pure motives; things could turn brutal anywhere, anytime. He came home. But "home" meant something different now. Home was friends and family, it was the pleasant shock of on-demand air-conditioning, water running from the kitchen faucet, hot or cold, whenever you pleased. But home was also the Garden of Eden after Eve ate the apple.

Never forget, we say. But forgetting wasn't Ken's issue: He *couldn't* forget what he'd seen; it rarely left his mind. The only choice was to write it all down, to record what he'd witnessed. As he wrote, he kept a framed photo on his desk, a vast field of Rwandan bones. That photo's still there, all these years later.

When we met, Ken and two of his dearest friends from the United Nations were about to publish a book on their experiences, which even if I weren't his wife I would say is brilliant and searing. (And I'm not alone! The rights were purchased by Russell Crowe for a miniseries.)

In contrast, I had my failed legal career and some poems I'd written. (At the time we met, I was writing a memoir, in sonnet form, because why not.) But I brought my sonnets to our second date and handed them to Ken. And later that night, he sent me this email:

HOLY SHIT.
HOLY. SHIT.

Keep writing.
Drop Everything.
Write.

WRITE
WOMAN
WRITE

Ken's faith in me helped make my longing to write a reality. As I watch him now—tying double knots at the crack of dawn on our sons' soccer cleats; planting a literal thousand wildflowers in the garden outside my office; playing fetch with our puppy for minutes that turn into hours—it dawns on me that we share something more. These small moments of quotidian devotion are a form of artistic expression for him: quiet, ritualistic, bittersweet celebrations of a small peace. Though our young adult lives were lived continents and emotional worlds apart, he must have seen in my inchoate writing, and me in his, a shared longing for the art of peaceful repair.

. . .

But as for the larger promise he'd believed in—a world forever free of mass graves—he's still waiting, we're all still waiting. And what should we do with the eternal elusiveness of our most precious dreams?

I come back, always, to the metaphoric response of the Kabbalah—the mystical branch of Judaism that inspired

Leonard Cohen's broken "Hallelujah." That, in the beginning, all of creation was a vessel filled with divine light. That it broke apart, and now the shards of holiness are strewn all around us. Sometimes it's too dark to see them, sometimes we're too distracted by pain or conflict. But our task is simple—to bend down, dig them out, pick them up. And in so doing, to perceive that light can emerge from darkness, death gives way to rebirth, the soul descends to this riven world for the sake of learning how to ascend. And to realize that we all notice different shards; I might see a lump of coal, but you spot the gold glimmering beneath.

Note the modesty of this vision. Note that it doesn't promise Utopia. On the contrary, it teaches the impossibility of utopias, and by implication that we should cherish what we have, we shouldn't cast it aside in favor of an unobtainable perfection. But we *can* bring the bittersweet tradition to our respective domains, to the corners of the world over which we have some small influence.

Maybe you're a teenager, trying to make sense of your alternately soaring and plummeting emotions, and you're realizing that your life tasks include not only finding love and work, but also transforming your sorrows and longings into a constructive force of your choosing.

Maybe you're a teacher who wants to make space for your students to express the bitter and sweet of their personal lives, as Susan David's English teacher did when she handed her a notebook and invited her to write the truth.

Maybe you're a manager who realizes that sadness is the last great taboo in the workplace, and you want to create a healthy culture, one that's positive and loving yet acknowledges the dark along with the light, and understands the creative energy contained in this bittersweet fusion.

Maybe you're an architect of social media who sees that your industry's algorithms cause its users to transform pain into vitriol and abuse, but you wonder if it's not too late to channel it instead into beauty and healing.

Maybe you're an artist, would-be or working, and you've started to absorb this dictum: Whatever pain you can't get rid of, whatever joy you can't contain, make it your creative offering.

Maybe you're a psychologist who wants to make room in your field for what the mythologist Jean Houston calls a "sacred psychology," which recognizes that, as she puts it, "the deepest yearning in every human soul is to return to its spiritual source, there to experience communion and even union with the Beloved."

Maybe you're a theologian, grappling with our culture's diminishing interest in religion, while knowing that spiritual longing is a human constant that shows up in different guises at different times; in our time, for many it takes the form of a fervently divisive politics, but it also has the power to move us toward unity.

Maybe you're in mourning, and it's dawning on you that you can (as Nora McInerny said) move forward without moving on (if not today, then one day).

Maybe you've reached midlife, or your twilight years, and you're realizing that the lengthening shadows needn't be depressing, but rather a chance to stop and notice the everyday glories you've been too distracted to see.

And for all of us, no matter our domain, there's the simple exhortation to turn in the direction of beauty. You don't have to follow any particular faith or wisdom tradition to realize that the sacred and miraculous are everywhere—literally they are all over the place—even though we moderns tend to walk

around not noticing them. I used to puzzle over the nineteenth-century dictum that "beauty is truth, truth beauty." I wondered how you could associate something as superficial as a pretty face or a pleasing picture with the moral grandeur of *veritas*. It took me decades to understand that the dictum was referring to beauty as a state we can access, for brief and transformative visits, through various portals: a midnight Mass, a *Mona Lisa,* a small gesture of kindness, a grand act of heroism.

Which brings us back to where we began—the cellist of Sarajevo, and the old man in the forest who refused to identify himself as Muslim or Croat—but only as a musician.

• • •

When my father died of COVID, we held a tiny graveside service. The twenty-five-year-old junior rabbi delivering the eulogy, who hadn't known him personally but agreed to preside over a stranger's pandemic funeral, praised my father's love of God. I smiled, thinking: "He didn't know Dad." My father was proudly Jewish, but he was impatient with formal religion. But even as I rolled my eyes, I realized that this was an outworn reflex; the way I saw it now, the rabbi's remark no longer seemed incongruous. My father did love God, but by another name—by many other names.

I see now that my father spent a good portion of his life gathering the shards of the Kabbalah's broken vessel. Like all of us, he was far from perfect. But he was constantly doing beautiful things, just for the sake of them. He loved orchids, so he built a greenhouse full of them in the basement. He loved the sound of French, so he learned to speak it fluently, though he rarely had time to visit France. He loved organic chemistry, so he spent his Sundays reading "orgo" textbooks. He showed

me, by example, that if you want to live a quiet life, you should just live a quiet life; that if you're a humble person who has no use for the spotlight, to just be a humble person who has no use for the spotlight. No big deal. (These latter lessons later became the basis of my book *Quiet*.)

I watched, too, how he fulfilled his roles as a doctor, a father. How he studied medical journals after dinner, spent the extra hour to sit at the bedside of every last one of his patients in the hospital, kept training the next generation of gastroenterologists until he was well into his eighties. How he shared with his kids the things he loved, like music and bird-watching and poetry, so that one day we would love them too. One of my earliest memories is asking him, over and over again, to play the "Chair Record" (Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto, whose name I was too young to pronounce).

We're drawn to the sublime domains, like music, art, and medicine, not only because they're beautiful and healing, but also because they're a manifestation of love, or divinity, or whatever you want to call it. The night my father died, I listened to music, not because I would find him there—I didn't find him there—but because loving a parent and loving song or sport, nature or literature, math or science, are just different manifestations of the perfect and beautiful world, of the people we long to be with, the place we want to be. Your loved one may not be here anymore, but the manifestations live forever.

My father and I talked on the phone, just before he died. He was in the hospital, trying to breathe.

"Be well, kid," he said, as he hung up the phone.

And I intend to. And so, I hope, will you.

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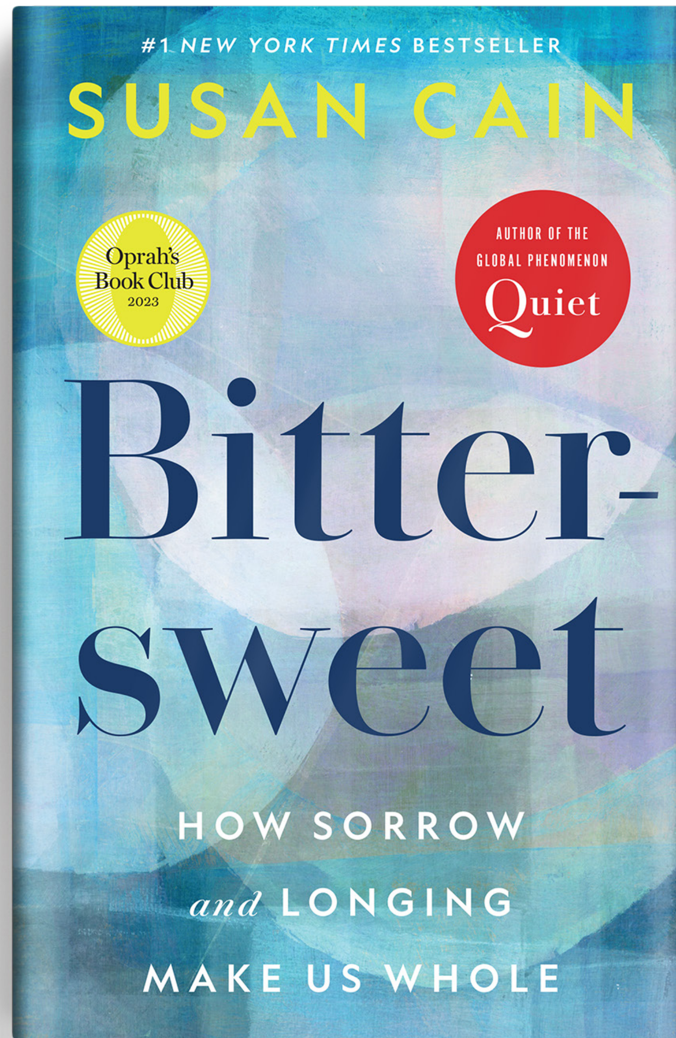

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