Episode Book

EPISODE #6570

Grieving a Living Parent Without a Diagnosis

PUBLISHED	13 November 2026 at 21:17 UTC
DURATION	21:29
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/grieving-living-parent-ambiguous-loss-38772/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	z-ai/glm-5.3
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.26
SOURCES	22 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	14 November 2026 at 06:47 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Grieving a living parent who will never get a diagnosis or offer an apology creates a second layer of ambiguity: doubting whether the loss is even real. Exploring Pauline Boss's ambiguous loss framework, Arie Kruglanski's need for cognitive closure, and Toni Caverly's writing on estrangement grief reveals why a clinical label wouldn't actually bring resolution. Instead of chasing the cultural myth of closure—a concept critiqued by sociologist Nancy Berns—resilience comes from building tolerance for what remains unfinished.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Grief is supposed to come with a script. Somebody dies, there's a funeral, casseroles appear, and for a few weeks the world agrees that you're allowed to fall apart. Today's episode is about a grief that gets none of that. Our prompt comes from Lena, a listener in Hamburg, and it's a serious one. Her mother will never be diagnosed with anything. Never sit in a therapist's office, never get a label, never offer an acknowledgement or an apology. And part of Lena still wants one of those things, as she puts it, as if a diagnosis would prove it wasn't me. She's asking how you grieve a parent who's still alive, how you grieve the mother you never got to have, whether Pauline Boss's ambiguous loss framework applies, and how to make peace with never getting outside confirmation of something you lived through.



Herman

Welcome, Lena. This one's worth doing properly.



Corn

It is. And the first thing worth doing is taking Boss's framework seriously, because it fits better than you'd expect, and it has one important gap.



Herman

Pauline Boss coined ambiguous loss in the nineteen seventies, studying families of soldiers missing in action. Her definition: a loss that remains unclear due to incongruence between absence and presence. Ongoing, and without a clear ending. The precursor idea came from a paper she wrote with Janine Greenberg in nineteen eighty-four, called family boundary ambiguity, which is exactly what it sounds like. The family doesn't know who's in the system and who's out. A physically absent member is treated as present, or a physically present member is treated as absent.



Corn

The missing soldier is present at the dinner table in every way except the one that counts.



Herman

That's Type 1. Physically absent, psychologically present. The kidnapped child, the incarcerated parent, the migrant who left and stopped writing. Type 2 is the inversion: physically present, psychologically absent. Boss's own examples are dementia, brain injury, coma, chronic mental illness, addiction, depression. The body is at the table and nobody is home behind the eyes.



Corn

And Lena's mother sits right next to that category without being inside it.



Herman

That's the gap I wanted to get to. Every one of Boss's Type 2 examples is clinically legible. There's a diagnosis, a name, a prognosis, a neurologist who signed something. Lena's situation inverts that. The parent is psychologically absent and there's no diagnosis, no label, no professional corroboration of any kind. So it's ambiguous loss plus a second layer of ambiguity, which is ambiguity about whether the loss is even real enough to grieve. Boss's canonical cases don't quite cover that second layer.



Corn

A grief that has to argue for its own existence before it can start.



Herman

That's the shape of it. Though the most useful thing Boss offers comes before any of the typology. Her line, from her presentation slides and her On Being interview: pathology lies in the external social context of ambiguity, not in the individual or family. Or as she put it to Krista Tippett, it's not a pathological psyche, it's a pathological situation. Hold onto that, because it's the answer to the sentence Lena wrote about wanting a diagnosis to prove it wasn't her.



Corn

Before we get there, I want to sit with the craving itself, because that's the part of the prompt that has teeth. She knows a label wouldn't fix the relationship. She says so. And the wanting doesn't go away.



Herman

No, and there's a reason it doesn't. There's a construct in psychology called need for cognitive closure, from Arie Kruglanski's work. He defines it as the motivation to find an answer to an ambiguous situation, and it has two components. An urgency tendency, the drive to get an answer fast, and a permanence tendency, the drive to keep that answer once you have it.



Corn

A diagnosis is a closure object. It converts unbearable ambiguity into a firm answer, and then it seals the answer.



Herman

And the mind treats firm answers as safety, even when the answer changes nothing practical. The relationship is the same on Tuesday whether the label exists or not. But with the label, the ambiguity stops being load-bearing. Here's where it turns, though. This is the part I keep turning over. Boss's framework says the absence of the label is itself the injury. The loss is unverifiable, unritualized, socially invisible. Those are the wounds. But imagine the diagnosis arrives tomorrow. Her mother gets a name for it, a chart, a clinician's signature. What does Boss say happens then?



Corn

She says it becomes the dementia case.



Herman

Which is Type 2 ambiguous loss. Which Boss says is equally unresolvable. The person is here and not here, the grief is frozen, and there is no closure. So the thing being wished for, if it arrived, would convert one form of ambiguous loss into the other form of ambiguous loss. Neither one resolves.



Corn

The diagnosis would prove it wasn't her, and then it would prove nothing else.



Herman

It would move the boundary, not remove it. I'd like to be careful here, because I'm not saying the craving is irrational. Wanting external verification that the problem was in the situation and not in you, that's not a flaw. That's the actual content of the wish. Lena's phrasing, as if a diagnosis would prove it wasn't me, is the tell. She's not asking for a clinical document to frame. She's asking a court to rule on something she's been carrying alone.



Corn

And there's no court.



Herman

Boss's 2009 paper describes why this grief freezes: because the lost person is here, but not here, grief is frozen, life is put on hold, and people are traumatized. With no official verification, no possibility of closure, and no rituals for support, there is no resolution. Three deficits. No verification, no closure, no ritual.



Corn

Lena has all three plus the second-order one. No verification, no closure, no ritual, and no agreement that there's anything to verify.



Herman

Which is why the pathology-in-the-situation reframe matters so much here. Boss is saying the stuckness is structural. It's built into a situation with no markers, no witnesses, no culturally recognized shape. Lena's sense that something is wrong with her, the need to prove it wasn't me, is in Boss's terms a misattribution. She's reading a situational problem as a personal defect, because the situation offers no other explanation.



Corn

The kid always assumes the fault is local. There's no other machine in the room to blame.



Herman

And the wanting-a-diagnosis impulse is the adult version of that same move. Still looking for the authoritative external source that will locate the fault somewhere else. Boss's answer is that the relocation is already justified. The pathology was in the situation the whole time. The diagnosis was never the evidence. The situation is the evidence.



Corn

There's a harder version of this too. Boss says with ambiguous loss there's really no possibility of closure. Not even, in fact, resolution. She says it flat. And a sociologist named Nancy Berns wrote a piece in twenty-eleven called Chasing Closure, arguing closure has become a buzzword for a commodity to be bought and sold, and that it survives as a narrative because it's politically useful. Closure is something we've been sold.



Herman

It's a twelve-step fantasy. You get the verdict, the verdict dissolves the pain, the pain goes somewhere and doesn't come back. Nobody's grief actually works like that, but the culture keeps promising it anyway.



Corn

So Lena is carrying a closure-shaped hope, and closure is the wrong target. Not because she's naive, but because the target was never real. Boss's word for what's available instead is tolerance. Not resolution. Tolerance.



Herman

Which sounds like a consolation prize, and I don't think it is. But let's hold that for a second, because there's a question underneath Lena's prompt that deserves its own air. She asked how you grieve a parent who is still alive. Alive. And there's something specific about that.



Corn

The dead parent closes the file.



Herman

This is the idea I found in Toni Caverly's writing, a psychotherapist who works with estrangement grief. She says death erases all the hypothetical endings. The one where they got sober, finally listened, or took accountability. When a parent dies, every maybe finally scenario dies with them. The counterfactual closes. It's brutal, and it's also a kind of mercy, structurally.



Corn

The living parent keeps the counterfactual on life support.



Herman

Every year the parent survives is another year the maybe she'll finally acknowledge it scenario stays technically open. So the grief can't settle, because grief settles around facts, and the fact hasn't happened yet. Caverly's inversion is the interesting part. The grief of a living parent may be harder to finish than the grief of a dead one. We assume death is the hard version. Death is at least the finished version.



Corn

It's the difference between a book that ends badly and a book that keeps not ending.



Herman

Her other point is about what's actually being mourned, because it isn't one thing. She lists distinct losses. The parent you wish they'd been, the version who noticed what you cared about, asked real questions, said I'm proud of you and meant it. The closure you won't get, no apology, no conversation, no acknowledgment. And the third one, which I think is the one nobody names. You might grieve the version of yourself that never got what they needed. Her words: you're still here, but there's a version of you that didn't get to be. And it's okay to mourn that, too.



Corn

That third one isn't about the mother at all.



Herman

Not even slightly. And that's why it matters. If the grief is only about her, then the grief is a claim in an ongoing case, and the case can be won or lost. If part of the grief is about a self that didn't get to exist, then it's not a case, it's a mourning. You can finish a mourning. You can't win one.



Corn

The other thing about this loss is that it happens in silence.



Herman

Joshua Coleman, who studies estrangement, calls it a silent epidemic. Both parents and adult children don't want to talk about it because they feel like they're going to be blamed or misunderstood. For the adult child, that silence compounds everything. There's no funeral, no casserole, no socially sanctioned sympathy. Boss's third deficit, no rituals for support, isn't a personal failing of Lena's or anyone's. It's structural to this type of loss. Nobody sends flowers for the mother who's still picking up the phone.



Corn

You get a grief with no public facing side. Grief that has to be explained from scratch at every mention.



Herman

And explaining it from scratch invites the But she's still your parent conversation, which Caverly addresses too. You don't owe anyone your story. Which is easy to say and hard to live, when the culture keeps asking for the receipt.



Corn

So what does help? Boss has six guidelines. Walk me through them.



Herman

Finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment, discovering hope. And the crucial framing is that they're circular rather than linear. They're not steps to complete in order. You dip into whichever one fits the day. The one I'd single out is tempering mastery, because it's the least intuitive. Letting go of control over what you can't control, and using it where you can. The urge to obtain the diagnosis, to force the acknowledgement, is a mastery project. It's an attempt to control an outcome that lives in someone else's head.



Corn

And the goal of all six is what, exactly?



Herman

Not resolution. Boss is explicit, and the University of Rochester clinical summaries put it plainly. Resilience in ambiguous loss comes not from resolving the ambiguity but from increasing your capacity to tolerate it. The goal is not to achieve clarity. Which is an odd ambition for a medical culture, because everything in that culture is oriented toward clarity.



Corn

It's a strange pitch. Come to terms with never knowing. Here's how.



Herman

Boss pairs it with something she calls both-and thinking, and I want to translate that into Lena's actual bind, because her framing is either/or. Either my mother is diagnosably ill and I'm vindicated, or it was me. That's the binary the whole question is trapped in. Boss's goal is to get out of the binary. You can grieve the small moments that felt good and still stand by your boundaries. You can feel sadness and relief in the same breath. The resolution isn't a verdict. It's a capacity.



Corn

Which is less satisfying than a diagnosis by roughly a factor of everything.



Herman

I know. But the verdict version has a structural problem we've already walked through. It doesn't exist.



Corn

Okay. The practical side. What do people actually do.



Herman

A few things recur across the clinical writing, and I'd offer them as options, not prescriptions. The first is talk to them anyway. Write the letter you won't send. Say it out loud in the kitchen. Caverly's phrasing is that what matters is giving the part of you that still has something to say somewhere to say it. The letter isn't for her. It's for the part of you holding the unsent version.



Corn

The unsent version has a way of staying at the front of the mind.



Herman

It does, because it's load-bearing. The second is confiding, and the specific guidance there is one person, not twelve. You don't need a dozen people who get it. One person who won't question your feelings or try to fix them. The temptation is to build a jury, and a jury reintroduces the verdict problem. A witness is enough.



Corn

Witness versus jury. That distinction does real work.



Herman

The third is the ritual, and this is where Boss's structural deficit becomes the argument for action. No rituals for support is a fact about the situation. So the ritual has to be invented. Light a candle, plant something, cook a meal. Caverly makes the point that it doesn't have to be a tribute to them. It has to mark the loss in a way that's yours.



Corn

Which is quietly radical. A funeral where the deceased is alive and the mourner chooses the date.



Herman

That's the whole idea, actually. The social script doesn't exist. Nobody will schedule this grief for you. So it gets built by hand, or it doesn't get built.



Corn

What about forgiveness. She didn't ask directly, but it's circling the prompt.



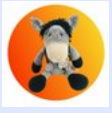
Herman

And it's contested, so I don't want to settle it falsely. The counseling literature defines forgiveness narrowly, as ceasing anger or resentment. By that definition it's something you can do unilaterally, for your own sake, whether or not the other person participates. But the estrangement-support material shows another view, from people living it. One mother quoted in that material: why should I forgive my son, he hasn't apologized. Another: forgiveness comes when the person wants to make things right.



Corn

Two definitions of the same word doing opposite jobs.



Herman

One treats forgiveness as a release you perform. The other treats it as a transaction with terms. Whether Lena owes forgiveness to someone who will never ask, I don't think that's ours to answer. I'd only note that ceasing anger is not the same as ceasing to remember.



Corn

No, and anger that stops being urgent doesn't have to be retroactive proof of anything either.



Herman

Right. The forgiveness question can stay open.



Hilbert

Nineteen seventy, not the seventies. The MIA families work was nineteen seventy onward.



Herman

Fair enough. Nineteen seventy.



Hilbert

I've got a recipe box. Wooden, my mother's. She kept it in the kitchen and I keep it on the shelf next to the tax returns, which is the other pile of paper I can't make sense of. There's a card in it, filed under M, in her handwriting, for a dish she never once made for me. Mushroom thing. I've compared the handwriting against the birthday cards, because my claws are useless for turning thin paper and I have to be careful anyway, so I handle each card once and I made it count. It's hers. The box is hers, the filing is hers, the hand is hers. The card tells me nothing. I don't know whether she meant to make it, or whether it was for somebody else.



Corn

You've had it how long?



Hilbert

Longer than the shelf. The part I'd say to Herman is, you two keep calling the missing diagnosis the ambiguous part. For me the ambiguous part is the card. It's her handwriting and it's completely silent. Physically present, psychologically absent, if you like that vocabulary. I've kept it years and I can't decide whether it's evidence of something or just a card.



Herman

Have you made the dish?



Hilbert

No. Never once. You don't make a thing from a card that isn't for you. I did file one of my own cards in there a few years back, under M, next to hers. I can't explain that either. Ronan at the darts club says I should just make it. Ronan makes everything sound simple.



Corn

Ronan sounds like a man with a recipe box he understands.



Hilbert

Ronan has no recipe box at all. Makes you think.



Herman

The card under M. I keep thinking about the handwriting being the only verification you've got. That's the whole situation in one object, verification of authorship and no verification of meaning.



Hilbert

That's more words than the box deserves, Herman. It's a card. It sits there.



Corn

I'm going to go back to what Hilbert just said, because you don't make a thing from a card that isn't for you is doing something strange. He's treating the not-making as the faithful option. As if making the dish would be forging her intent.



Herman

Which is its own kind of both-and, isn't it. Keeping the card and refusing the recipe. Holding the loss without consuming it. I wouldn't recommend it as a strategy, but as a description of what tolerance for ambiguity actually looks like from the inside, it's better than most of the clinical writing. The capacity Boss is describing isn't serene. It's holding a thing you can't classify and not putting it in the bin.



Corn

And the card he filed next to hers, under M, without being able to say why. That's the ritual nobody scheduled. He built one small and didn't notice.



Herman

If you take one thing from this episode, take Boss's reframe. It's not a pathological psyche, it's a pathological situation. The sense that something must be wrong with you, the need for a diagnosis to prove otherwise, is the situation talking, not the self. The proof Lena is waiting for already exists in the structure of what she lived through.



Corn

The diagnosis was never the evidence. The situation is.



Herman

And our open question, the one I can't answer for Lena or for anyone: if the resolution is a capacity rather than a verdict, what would it actually look like to notice your own tolerance for ambiguity growing? Would you even recognize it as progress, or would it just feel like giving up on the diagnosis? Because here's the catch. Boss's framework relocates the problem to the situation, and that's a relief, but it also means no external authority will ever certify that relief. The confirmation she wants is structurally unavailable. The work is learning to live without it, not finding the right person to provide it.



Corn

Which is why I'd forgive the woman her mother is, eventually, and let the woman her mother isn't stay exactly as unclear as she is. Thanks to Lena in Hamburg for trusting us with this one. And thanks as always to Hilbert Flumingtop, holding everything together at the desk.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If the show earns a review from you, leave one. You'll find us at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon. See you tomorrow.

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