



Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy

By Anne Lamott

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New York Times Bestseller

“Anne Lamott is my Oprah.” —*Chicago Tribune*

From the author of *Help, Thanks, Wow* and *Bird by Bird*, a powerful exploration of mercy and how we can embrace it.

"Mercy is radical kindness," Anne Lamott writes in her enthralling and heartening book, *Hallelujah Anyway*. It's the permission you give others—and yourself—to forgive a debt, to absolve the unabsolvable, to let go of the judgment and pain that make life so difficult.

In *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* Lamott ventures to explore where to find meaning in life. We should begin, she suggests, by "facing a great big mess, especially the great big mess of ourselves." It's up to each of us to recognize the presence and importance of mercy everywhere—"within us and outside us, all around us"—and to use it to forge a deeper understanding of ourselves and more honest connections with each other. While that can be difficult to do, Lamott argues that it's crucial, as "kindness towards others, beginning with myself, buys us a shot at a warm and generous heart, the greatest prize of all."

Full of Lamott's trademark honesty, humor and forthrightness, *Hallelujah Anyway* is profound and caring, funny and wise—a hopeful book of hands-on spirituality.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Lamott is a superb writer. Her voice is one-of-a-kind: deft, folksy, cheerfully hostile... She is witty and funny and smart... Telling stories so personal even a distant reader can relate.” —*The Washington Post*

“This is trademark Lamott—theological speculation, hippie slang and domestic comedy, C.S. Lewis by way of Janis Joplin by way of Erma Bombeck.” —*Christian Science Monitor*

“Every writer, truth-seeker, parent, and activist I know is in love with one or more books by Anne Lamott... she writes as naturally as she breathes, she explores the mysterious paths and detours of life itself, and she reports back to make the way ahead easier for all of us... I keep learning a lot from the clear and great Annie Lamott. I think you will, too.” —Gloria Steinem

“A clarion call to the better angels of our nature.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“A hopeful book for the care and feeding of your soul,” —Adriana Trigiani, author of *Kiss Carlo*

“Best bathtub read for me would be anything by Anne Lamott... She always makes me laugh and she embraces all the broken bits.” —Andie McDowell, actress, in *W Magazine*

“Mercy is complicated, but *Hallelujah Anyway* does a fabulous job of breaking it down so it’s easier to understand. And [Lamott] even paints visual pictures of mercy that help you *feel* what mercy is.” —*The Huffington Post*

“*Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* is a breath of fresh literary air. With a caring and understanding tone, Lamott takes on the overwhelming negativity in today’s political and international culture head-on, and gets hands-on in finding humor and hope in between the headlines.” —*Pacific Sun*

“Some books we read for their delicious plots, but others we savor another way. Anne Lamott’s *Hallelujah Anyway* is one you’ll slow down to read, so exactly right are her insights. The way to feel whole, she says, is through mercy—an idea as beloved as cheese, yet so tricky when you have to apply it to annoying people. But at this exact moment, we can all agree: It’s time for kindness.” —*Redbook*

“Reading Anne Lamott...is like sitting down with a girlfriend you haven’t seen for a while.” —*The Washington Post*

“Not a book to miss.” —*Library Journal*

“Spiritually enhancing, life-affirming lessons . . . delivers flashes of wisdom and inspiration that resonate.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for Anne Lamott

“Lamott is beloved by legions for her smart, irreverent take on the human condition, filtered through her unique brand of compassionate Christianity and delivered with delicious, self-deprecating wit. Lamott goes

even deeper in these essays.” —*People*

“Anne Lamott is a cause for celebration. [Her] real genius lies in capturing the ineffable, describing not perfect moments, but imperfect ones...perfectly. She is nothing short of miraculous.” —*The New Yorker*

“Lamott is funny, witty and irreverent...Her basic message is love and forgiveness...Not a bad message for any faith.” —*The Denver Post*

"Read this book, whatever your faith. Read it twice." —*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

About the Author

Anne Lamott is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Help, Thanks, Wow; Small Victories; Stitches; Some Assembly Required; Grace (Eventually); Plan B; Traveling Mercies; Bird by Bird; Operating Instructions*, and the forthcoming *Hallelujah Anyway*. She is also the author of several novels, including *Imperfect Birds* and *Rosie*. A past recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an inductee to the California Hall of Fame, she lives in Northern California.

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Being alive here on earth has always been a mixed grill at best, lovely, hard, and confusing. Good and bad things happen to good and bad people. That's not much of a system: a better one would be a silverware drawer for joy, sorrows, doldrums, madness, ease. But no, Eden explodes and we enter a dangerous, terrifying world, the same place where goodness, love, and kind intelligence lift us so often. The world has an awful beauty. This is a chaotic place, humanity is a chaotic place, and I am a chaotic place. Mother Nature is the main problem. Mother Nature runs on the principle that we all just get killed.

This is a little depressing, that nearly every species has to be afraid in order to live. Of course it makes sense for a colony of wild rabbits to be afraid when the harrier hawk appears overhead; no surprise that you hear the concerned back-ground music swell from the bushes. But I've seen toothy foxes up close on my hikes, and they bolt. They really don't seem interested in getting to know me. (Their loss.) They're afraid of an older woman with sore feet and hands, because life is scary.

How—if we are to believe that there is meaning in our brief time here on earth, that mercy is the ground of our being, and love is sovereign—do we explain childhood cancer, earthquakes, addiction? Where is mercy in a beloved's suicide? In the Christian tradition, we say that Christ continues to be crucified, in tsunamis, sick children, political prisoners, and that we must respond.

This is what I believe, so I show up and get water for people, real people, which is to say, annoying people. Mother Teresa cradling strangers at dawn is very romantic, but in life, there's also your thirsty bigoted father, your lying sister, the whole human race, living and dying and rising with Christ.

In the rabbinical tradition, there is great insight in the notion that when we see suffering, we remember that this is only the sixth day. We're not done here. The good news is that God isn't, either. God is searching with us for a cure for cancer. God rejoiced at the cure for smallpox.

And the Dalai Lama said, “Old friends pass away, new friends appear. It is just like the days.” I don't love hearing this, but yes: yes, one of these days I'm going to die. However, not on any of all the other days. Today, we put on the artist's smock and plug back in.

This co-creation goes slowly. Time takes time. It's about evolution, increased equal rights side by side with mothers still hauling in their daughters to the traditional surgeon for genital mutilation. The great French

Jesuit soul Teilhard de Chardin believed we're on the crest of a wave, evolving toward what I would dare to call, this one time, Christ consciousness; but chaos is real and hard and a lot of people would be relieved to live in the silverware drawer of North Korea, if there was more food.

One of the few consolations is that it is not just you and yours who get upset and scared and deeply defeated, not just your own rabbi or lama who loses faith occasionally and sinks into despair. It is everyone. Even Jesus' best friends lost hope, even with Him right there beside them, way before the crucifixion.

When Jesus comforts Mary and Martha after the death of their brother, Lazarus, we read the shortest and most amazing line of the Bible: Jesus wept. But in some translations it says Jesus is pissed. And the reason for this pisses me off: He's sad because Lazarus dies, but He's also frustrated because Mary and Martha aren't getting the message—they don't fully believe in the kingdom right then. Right then, after their brother has died. Martha is despondent that Jesus didn't rush to Bethany to save him, since He could have done so, and Mary worries that her brother's body will smell after four days dead in the tomb. Well, yeah. You can hardly blame her. They are the ultimate believers, and yet everything feels awful. And how does Jesus react? He gets pissy.

The women remind me of my pastor's sermon on dual citizenship. She described the information in one of our spiritual passports—that we're beautiful children, created by, and made of, holiness, spirit, love. In the other passport, regrettably, we have bodies, biographies, minds, and personalities. Mary and Martha have come so far in their faith, in trust and surrender, but it's not enough for Jesus. He admonishes them, and this bugs me. He wants them to come all the way into faith. He's saying, Okay, so the shit has hit the fan—do you still believe that I am the Resurrection and the Life? Even when you don't get what you want? Even when nothing makes sense?

I'm sorry, but I'm with the sisters here—and all inconsolable believers.

Jesus wants to know why they can't believe that their brother is still in His perfect care, safe and whole, and even smelling good, no matter what things look like. If Jesus were sitting here with me, in a good mood, I would say to Him, "Don't get me started." Jesus deliberately let their brother die, that the prophecies might be fulfilled. Putting aside that this is a morally ambiguous decision—whatever happened to the shepherd's desolation at one missing sheep?—they responded in authentic human ways, with weeping, anger, shock, and doubt.

There is so much for Jesus to be pissy about, but this? I believe God loves the real, is the real, who loves us at our most genuine, unburnished, unarmored. But Jesus groans. Oy vey.

The sisters, in their shock, say, We're suffering, scared, and hate everything, and we're not sure what is true anymore. And Jesus doesn't hear their humanity. He corrects them. Keep the faith, He says: I really am the god of the quick and the dead. Then, like a slightly depressive cheerleader, He tells them, Go big.

Now, I believe in a kingdom of heaven within, and that the soul never dies, but you take away my brothers, my son, or my grandson, and we have a problem on our hands. Wouldn't you think God's embrace of me in despair is galactic? And these women, with a lifelong lack of stature, and messy female bodies, have been derided enough.

When the rock at the entrance to Lazarus's tomb is rolled back, and Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out, Lazarus does. He walks out wrapped in grave clothes, not looking, feeling, or probably smelling his very best; it is still a miracle, maybe in need of a shower. And when he dies again later, the sisters still got their

miracle. So it all works out.

Orson Welles said, “If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.” The crucifixion looked like a big win for the Romans. At the end of the Lazarus story, the four are together again, Jesus and the family, and I can see here that mercy means that no one bolted. Mercy means, I don’t run away from this, and go shopping, just because you and your smelly family disappoint me. I stay.

I am committed to this, to this supernatural love. But Jesus pissy? I ask you.

Of course He wins me back right away. My Sunday school loves the story of Jesus’ returning after the resurrection, to the beach where his desolate disciples are grieving his death. As Frederick Buechner wrote, “The darkness . . . is broken by the flicker of a charcoal fire on the sand. Jesus has made it. He cooks some fish on it for his old friends’ breakfast. On the horizon there are the first pale traces of the sun getting ready to rise.” He cooked them brunch! It’s so cool; my kids and I toast Him with juice boxes. I’ve lived through times when a connected group of humans in grief and shock stayed together as things unscrolled, when a person was dying too young, or after. What could we do? We showed up. When our best friends’ teenagers disappeared, when their fathers lost their minds, or their babies or mates were in the ICU. We lay beside them in bed and held them in our arms. We brought the bereaved a sandwich. We let them vent, maybe watched a little TV together. We offered our presence, our warm bodies, and the willingness to feel like shit with them. One even bigger gift: no snappy answers. We could nod, sigh, cry with them; maybe go to a park. Against all odds, these things work, however imperfectly, when a closed system breaks open and turmoil ensues: this collective, imperfect, hesitant help is another kind of miracle.

Naturally one wants to avoid these kinds of miracles. We’d prefer routine, predictability, to never be ashamed or afraid, let alone aghast. But comfort zones leak. A niece dies, or there’s an earthquake, a lesion appears, affairs happen. If anyone is so good that he or she should be spared, you can safely assume that person is in the line of fire. Fair is where the pony rides are. In lovely closed systems, timers are set: tick tick tick.

The belief in original sin made sense of the chaos and pain by saying that we had caused it through sin, but this does not have the ring of truth for some of us, especially with sick or starving children. What has the ring of truth is this: It sucks.

You can say that certain tragic events are unfair and humiliating, but really, they are just true. Randomness and brutality are just what is; but so is mercy.

The power of mercy came clear to me recently, when the son of one of my closest friends, Ann, took his own life. He shot himself at a beach near the house where he had been staying with his aged mother for nearly a year. Everyone had seen suicide looming for a long time, and yet it was still the end of the world. Ann, at ninety- two, had lost her younger son.

It’s stunning, how a great trauma can also be so ordinary. Some of the dearest and most brilliant people we’ve known were not able to bear life on this planet, and we were unable to save them. Where, in the aftermath of suicide, does one even begin to believe in mercy again?

There were four people whose presence brought Ann comfort in the first few days, and we were there at all times in the first week. What I saw was the extremely disorganized nature of life, the reality of suicide, charity, sacrifice. We mourned Jay’s death, felt joy in his deep goodness, relief at his escape, and we felt Ann’s shaky peace. She was thankful that she’d been able to spend so much time with her son in the last ten

months, not to mention fifty years. She said that she could still feel his presence off and on, and experience peace that he had left her and his big brother and his kids notes of assurance and love. She experienced relief and gratitude that he had not shot himself at their home. And she missed him as only a mother can.

People kept saying she would feel him again someday, and she said, “Oh, I feel him now.” Lifelong friends told her she really must take a nap, and she said, nicely, “I’m not tired.” We brought the few foods she could handle, peaches, avocados, cheese, cherries, and people suggested she probably needed more protein. People said that since Jay was in a closed casket, awaiting cremation, there was no reason for us to visit the funeral home, but we did. We sat with him for a long time, not knowing at which end of the casket his head was, or his feet, so Ann rubbed the cloth at one end while I rubbed the cloth at the other. Then, smiling, we switched places.

At the memorial a week later in her yard, Ann looked like an elegant, vulnerable young eagle. She has always been beautiful, white-haired for the thirty-five years I have known her, tiny but a huge presence in the larger theatrical world, still with a trace of a New Zealand accent. I got there early enough to help her older son set up the yard. Sandy is a few years younger than I am, and the handsomest man I have ever known, and he has buried two husbands. We sat with his mother while she put on her face, as she put it, but she still looked like a charcoal drawing that had been worked over, part of it erased, part of it in high relief.

We got things ready for the thirty or forty people we expected—chairs, silverware, wine. The three of us were to be the speakers. Salvation in these dire situations is to worry about the material world, futzing and putzing, folding napkins, unfolding chairs.

Sandy looked even more like Ann that after-noon, charcoal smudges under his eyes, and fine chiseled cheekbones, fierce intensity underneath his thrumming fear. People arrived and took a turn with the sacrament of ploppage, in a chair beside gentle, regal Ann.

Things began with all the guests shuffling in Ann’s long, skinny concrete yard. It was a sort of do-si-do with chairs and people, including Sandy’s and Jay’s stepmother, and exes, and exes of exes.

We placed the chairs in the shade of the trees under which Jay had found some peace here, fig, magnolia, plum. When Ann had asked him a few months earlier why he had left his home in the East and come back to live with her, he said that he wanted to help her, as she had grown so old, and that he knew he would find some peace and welcome in her backyard.

We made a wobbly long oval of irregular chairs, plastic patio chairs, and fancy dining room chairs, so perfectly imperfect on this tough day. It was not a tidy event: not one thing matched another, not people, not the sky, bright blue with clouds, a breeze, crows.

I was the officiant, I guess. I said, This is hard, and we all loved him so, and will miss him. We feel him here now, in wholeness once more, hovering, yet we will never get to talk to him on the phone again or at dinner, and this is too awful to bear. I said, Let’s keep the beauty and sorrow in front of us now, in memories, silences, poetry.

I shared some reminiscences of Jay as a happy boy, a handsome blond teenager beside his suave, dark brother, with their great huge goof ball of a dog. I remembered a few Christ-mases back, when he skipped the family dinner to instead make dozens of sandwiches to pass out to the homeless in our area. I gave a tip of the hat for the bravery of his friends who stayed close and involved even as he grew so defeated.

Sandy went next. He had notes, but didn’t read from them. You felt both constriction and generosity in his

sharing, of his brother's lethal empathy, of vacations, other gardens, holidays, camping, college, his children, and his crushing troubles.

Then Ann, at peace and in grief, stood up trembling and shared the note he had left for her. Like most suicide notes, it said, I have to do this. I'm sorry. Please forgive and release me. Don't be sad. And I love you; love you. Then she called forth Jay, in baby baths, at the beach, on a trike, at the prom, and here, smoking and resting among the flowers. She gave thanks for the gestational period of ten months they'd spent together at what turned out to be the end, for the communion and care he received and gave to Ann, for that time they had needed so badly, an intimacy most of us cannot imagine.

In the garden, where he had walked, paced, rested, we were holding him and releasing him, inside the ring of trees, ferns, rosebushes, a cherry plum. That is the purpose of memorial services, to cry and hold on and stick together, as well as to release ourselves from the grinding regret: How could this have happened? How can such pain exist? What else should we have done? How could doctors not help him, with all those meds and treatments, not help him get free of that bad brain any other way? He was at the mercy of it, of bad brain, yet he held out so long, for Ann, to help her. So mercy has claws, too, that don't easily let go.

God doesn't give us answers. God gives us grace and mercy. God gives us Her own self. Left to my own devices, I would prefer answers. This is why it is good that I am in charge of so little: the pets, the shopping, the garden. Ann plants flowerbeds of white impatiens every year, because they reflect moonlight in a dark sky. Jay's people in their funky chairs shared their love and memories. Every release inside us releases whatever energy inside us tethered Jay here, to this realm that was just too awful for him. We were saying, This is hard, but not as hard as it was for you here, weighed down by the anchors of so-called reality. So go now, go, unfettered.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Pearl Sanders:

Book is to be different for each and every grade. Book for children until eventually adult are different content. To be sure that book is very important normally. The book Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy ended up being making you to know about other expertise and of course you can take more information. It is rather advantages for you. The publication Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy is not only giving you much more new information but also being your friend when you really feel bored. You can spend your current spend time to read your book. Try to make relationship using the book Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy. You never truly feel lose out for everything in the event you read some books.

Susan Martinez:

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