

[Background music]

>> Welcome I'm Steve Mencher for the Library of Congress. On today's podcast Kay Redfield Jamison. She's one of the country's foremost authorities on bi-polar illness and the author of a memoir on her own battles with mania and depression called "An Unquiet Mind. Jamison has served as the advisor to our Music and the Brain series. As part of today's podcast you'll hear excerpts from Felix Mendelssohn's Quartet number six in F minor Op. 80 performed by the [inaudible] String Quartet.

>> Thank you. It is lovely to be back at the Library of Congress. Sometime ago the Library of Congress was kind enough to approach me with the idea of an evening focused around a book I recently published "Nothing was the Same." A book about grief and a sequel to an earlier memoir I had written "An Unquiet Mind." In thinking about it, instead of doing just a reading and a signing, I thought it would be far more interesting to have an evening that centered on the general theme of grief and depression but an evening that brought it from different perspectives. From the perspectives of the life and music of the composer Felix Mendelssohn and the grief that he took into his music and the perspective in my case from someone who had experienced both grief and depression and who has struggled to distinguish between the two of them and to write about it and then the perspectives of a superb clinician and world renowned researcher into depression and bi-polar illness who as a doctor is caught up on a day to day basis with the medical distinctions between grief and depression. I'm going to read first from my book "Nothing was the Same" about some of the experiences that I had trying to make the differences in my own mind between depression and grief after my husband died and then next Ara Guzelimian will be talking who's the provost and the dean of the Julliard School is going to speak about the life, the grief and the music of Felix Mendelssohn. His talk will be followed by a performance of the first movement of Mendelssohn's Quartet in F Minor. Finally, Dr. Raymond DePaulo from Johns Hopkins will talk about grief and depression from a more clinical perspective. I'd like to talk about grief from a very personal point of view which I wrote about in my recent book "Nothing was the Same". The book is an elegy. It's an attempt to capture what love gives and what death takes away, what lasts of love and what grief teaches. My late husband, for whom the book and about whom the book was written, was a physician and a scientist, chief of nurse psychiatry at the National Institutes of Health and his entire world revolved around medicine and science. He was an interesting man, a warm and witty man. He wrote over eight hundred scientific papers and six books, all in the context of having extremely bad dyslexia. Every line that he wrote was an effort, every prescription that he wrote for patients had to be read back to him by his patients to make sure he hadn't made a mistake. In addition to being a very good doctor and scientist he was very easy on the eyes and he was catnip to women. He and I were as different as imaginable in temperament and in many many ways. He used to whenever anybody would listen he would tell about our first Christmas together. He and I had gone about and bought a very small Christmas tree yay high and I'd gone to the drug store and bought twelve strands of Christmas tree lights. He was deeply annoyed. For some reason this extravagance very much bothered him and he made it very clear he thought it was extravagant and he thought I should take the lights back

to the drug store. We got into a major row and I said it was inconceivable that you could have too many Christmas tree lights. It was like saying you had too much joy. We had, despite our differences, we had a very relationship and a great deal of love and love as everyone knows exists in strange ways and in strange places. He was very supportive of my severe bi-polar illness. He was understanding in a way that made my life possible in a way in which it would have not been possible. He encouraged me to write and go public about my illness and to write "An Unquiet Mind" and backed me entirely and more than anyone he supported me and he thought that it was the right thing to do. He had had suffered from Hodgkin's disease when he was in his early thirties and he had stage four Hodgkin's disease which basically meant he had cancer everywhere. He had cancer everywhere but his brain, actually he had it in his bone, he had it in his chest, he had it in his vertebrae, liver, spleen. He was saved by the grace of great medicine, very aggressive medicine and pioneering medicine at Stanford University and like much of medical research what we know now about those treatments was not what was known then. He was given very high doses of radiation and not protected in the same ways that would just be routine now. He lived thirty years longer than he otherwise would have lived but the radiation treatment came back to kill him. First it came back in the form of heart disease, then it came back in the form of Burkitt's lymphoma for which he had a bone marrow transplant, he survived that, did quite well and then a few months later his oncologist said Dr. White you have a lump in your lung basically. The book is written about our relationship, our life together because I think that grief is obviously always based on the loss of an individual life and I wanted to make that life come alive. I think it's hard to do actually as it turns out to write about somebody who's dead and you feel very strong compunction to get it right. So and I also wanted to write then the last half of the book is about the nature of grief. Because I had had a history of severe bi-polar illness including suicidal depression and including a nearly lethal suicide attempt I was of course concerned that I would get depressed after he died. In fact I didn't get depressed at all, I didn't get depressed for a day, which speaks to the fact that these illnesses actually are treatable and one does get well. But you then have to live with trying to figure out you know which is grief and which is depression. So I'm just going to read a bit from my book and then turn it over to music and the perspectives of grief that are so astonishing in music.

[Music]

It has been said that grief is a kind of madness. I disagree. There is a sanity to grief and it is just proportion of emotion to cause that madness does not have. Grief, given to all, is a generative and human thing. It provides a path, albeit a broken one by which those who grief can find their way. Still it is grief's fugitive nature that one does not know the start that such a path exists. I knew madness well but I understood little of grief and I was not always certain which was grief and which was madness. Grief as it transpires has its own territory.

[Music]

I did not get depressed after Richard died, nor did I go mad. I was distraught but it was not the desperation of clinical depression. I was restless but it was not the agitation of mania. My mind was not right but it was not deranged. I was able to reason and to imagine that the future held things better for me than the present. I did not think of suicide, yet Richards's death served up such a darkness in me that I was forced to examine those things depression and grief hold in common and those they do not. The differences were essential, the similarities confounding. I did not after Richard died lose my sense of who I was as a person, or how to navigate the basics of life as one does in depression. I lost a man who had been the most important person in my life and around whom my future spun. I lost many of my dreams but not the ability to dream. The loss of Richard was devastating but it was not deadly. I knew depression to be unrelenting, invariable, impervious to events. I knew its pain to be undeviating. Greif was different. It hit in waves, caught we unaware, it struck me when I felt most alive, when I thought I had moved beyond its hold. I am so much better dealing with his death I would say to myself assured by some new pleasure in life then I would be flung far and cold by wave of longing I could scarcely stand. I learned to live in expectation of assault. From nowhere a memory of Richard would compel me like some recollected scent into a region of my mind whose existence I'd forgotten. Then I would coil to protect myself huddled as prey against predator. He cannot be gone I would reel against the gods, caught again in the presence of his absence. He will not be back I would know after each confrontation. It became clear over time less wavering he will not be back, he's been away too long.

[Music]

Grief says C.S. Lewis is like a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. This is so. The lessons that come from grief come from its unexpected moves, for its shifting views of what has gone before and what is yet to come. Pain brought so often into one's consciousness cannot maintain the same capacity to wound. Grief conspires to ensure that it will in time wear itself out. Unlike depression it acts to preserve the self. Depression is malignant, indiscriminately destructive. Grief may bear resemblance to depression but it is a distant kinship. Grief cut me slack; memories came unsought and disturbed my equanimity. Still they carried with them an occasional sweetness, a periodic tincture of life. My thoughts did not dwell on the pointlessness of life; they dwelled instead on the pain of missing a life. Hope can find a place in a mind missing love; it cannot find a place in a mind taken over by depression. In grief one feels the absence of a life, not life itself. In depression it is otherwise one cannot access the beat of life. The parts of me that froze when Richard died had to thaw slowly, otherwise I would drowned. Life have to return inch meal, my heart could open up only small territories at a time.

[Music]

I turned my extinct to music to help with this but it was not the solace I thought it would be. Only hymns which quieted my nerves brought predictable comfort. Schuman and Beethoven ripped my heart apart. Their music ordinarily a source of immense pleasure pierced me in a manner I

found unbearable. The beauty was too human and yet unearthly. It was too intense, too direct an emotional hit. Schuman and Beethoven awakened in me things best left alone. In the one completely irrational and I must say highly regrettable act of my grief I gave away my entire classical music collection. I did not want to have access to such pain. And finally I'd just like to end with a little bit about the benefits of grief. One of the things I found at looking at literature is that in literature literature with a capital L great poetry you find that grief is addressed for what it can do and what it does do and the process by which it does it. In the medical literature and in much of the autobiographical accounts of grief much of what you find in an emphasis on the experience of grief but not so much on what grief actually does. Why does grief exist? It is an ancient ancient form of ritual and emotion. So I wrote actually quite a bit about that. Blessing may break from stone wrote the Scottish poet George Mackay Brown who knows how. Grief is such a stone. It gives much to the living, slows time that one might find a way to a different relationship with the dead. It fractures time to bring into awareness what is being mourned and why. I remember an afternoon at the Natural History Museum in Washington standing in front of a glass case filled with mummified owls. It seemed a violation of wild things to see such creatures stuffed and fakely perched, yet had they not been dead and fixed I could not have seen their wings and claws so clearly. I could not have appreciated the intricate beauty of their feathers and beaks. Had it not been for their deaths I could not have seen what made them live. I would have preferred to see them fly or hunt or take a mouse to beak but with them dead I took in with awe their parts and proportions, saw in their stillness what made a snowy owl a snowy owl and not an eastern screech. Death had something to give. Grief, lashed as it is to death instructs, it teaches that one must invent a way back to life. Grief forces intimacy with death, it preserves the salient past and puts into relief our mortal state. All die says Ecclesiastes, all must die it is written in the first statue of the Magna Carta. All die teaches grief. Grief is at the heart of the human condition.

[Background music]

Much is lost with death but not everything. Life is not let loose of lightly nor is love. There is a grace in death, there is life. Thank you.

[Music]

[Applause]

[Applause]

>> To hear and watch the rest of this event, including the remarks of Ara Guzelimian Provost and Dean of the Julliard School and Raymond DePaulo Director of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Johns Hopkins University visit our webcast by searching at the Library of Congress website for music and grief. Thanks for joining us. That concludes season two of our Music and the Brain podcasts. We're easy to find on iTunes University.