

SUSAN CAIN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

Quiet

Bitter- sweet

HOW SORROW

and LONGING

MAKE US WHOLE



Bittersweet



HOW SORROW AND LONGING
MAKE US WHOLE

SUSAN CAIN

 CROWN
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2022 by Susan Cain

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Crown, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

CROWN and the Crown colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Cain, Susan, author.

Title: Bittersweet: how sorrow and longing make us whole / by Susan Cain.

Description: New York: Crown, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021053380 (print) | LCCN 2021053381 (ebook) | ISBN 9780451499783 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780451499806 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Grief. | Desire.

Classification: LCC BF575.G7 C274 2022 (print) | LCC BF575.G7 (ebook) | DDC 155.2—dc23/eng/20211227

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021053380>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021053381>

International edition ISBN 9780593443392

Ebook ISBN 9780451499806

crownpublishing.com

Frontispiece images (clockwise from top): Sarajevo Requiem by Tom Stoddart, © Getty Images; photographer unknown; January Day: Lower Manhattan, © Thomas Schaller (thomaswschaller.com)

Book design by Dana Leigh Blanchette, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Evan Gaffney

Art direction: Jackie Phillips

Cover art: Qweek/ Getty Images

ep_prh_6.0_139749446_c0_r1

Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) spoke about *compunctio*, the holy pain[,] the grief somebody feels when faced with that which is most beautiful....The bittersweet experience stems from human homelessness in an imperfect world, human consciousness of, and at the same time, a desire for, perfection. This inner spiritual void becomes painfully real when faced with beauty. There, between the lost and the desired, the holy tears are formed.

–OWE WIKSTRÖM, PROFESSOR IN PSYCHOLOGY OF
RELIGION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF UPPSALA

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I've been working on this book officially since 2016, and unofficially (as you'll soon read) for my whole life. I've spoken to, read, and corresponded with hundreds of people about all things Bittersweet. Some of these people I mention explicitly; others informed my thinking. I would have loved to name them all, but this would have produced an unreadable book. So, some names appear only in the Notes and Acknowledgments; others, no doubt, I've left out by mistake. I'm grateful for them all.

Also, for readability, I didn't use ellipses or brackets in certain quotations, but made sure that the extra or missing words didn't change the speaker's or writer's meaning. If you'd like to quote these written sources from the original, the citations directing you to most of the full quotations appear in the Notes at the back of the book.

Finally, I've changed the names and identifying details of some of the people whose stories I tell. I didn't fact-check the stories people told me about themselves, but included only those I believed to be true.



Sarajevo Requiem by Tom Stoddart, © Getty Images

PRELUDE

The Cellist of Sarajevo

One night, I dreamed that I was meeting my friend, a poet named Mariana, in Sarajevo, the city of love. I woke up confused. Sarajevo, a symbol of love? Wasn't Sarajevo the site of one of the bloodiest civil wars of the late twentieth century?

Then I remembered.

Vedran Smailović.

The cellist of Sarajevo.

...

It's May 28, 1992, and Sarajevo is under siege. For centuries, Muslims, Croats, and Serbs have lived together in this city of streetcars and pastry shops, gliding swans in parkland ponds, Ottoman mosques and Eastern Orthodox cathedrals. A city of three religions, three peoples, yet until recently no one paid too much attention to who was who. They knew but they didn't know; they preferred to see one another as neighbors who met for coffee or kebabs, took classes at the same university, sometimes got married, had children.

But now, civil war. Men on the hills flanking the city have cut the electricity and water supply. The 1984 Olympic stadium has burned down, its playing fields turned into makeshift graveyards. The apartment buildings

are pockmarked from mortar assaults, the traffic lights are broken, the streets are quiet. The only sound is the crackling of gunfire.

Until this moment, when the strains of Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor^[*] fill the pedestrian street outside a bombed-out bakery.

Do you know this music? If not, maybe you should pause and listen to it right now: [youtube.com/watch?v=kn1gcjuhlhg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn1gcjuhlhg). It's haunting, it's exquisite, it's infinitely sad. Vedran Smailović, lead cellist of the Sarajevo opera orchestra, is playing it in honor of twenty-two people killed yesterday by a mortar shell as they lined up for bread. Smailović was nearby when the shell exploded; he helped take care of the wounded. Now he's returned to the scene of the carnage, dressed as if for a night at the opera house, in a formal white shirt and black tails. He sits amidst the rubble, on a white plastic chair, his cello propped between his legs. The yearning notes of the adagio float up to the sky.

All around him, the rifles fire, the shelling booms, the machine guns crackle. Smailović keeps on playing. He'll do this for twenty-two days, one day for each person killed at the bakery. Somehow, the bullets will never touch him.

This is a city built in a valley, ringed by mountains from which snipers aim at starving citizens in search of bread. Some people wait for hours to cross the street, then dart across like hunted deer. But here's a man sitting still in an open square, dressed in concert finery, as if he has all the time in the world.

You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello in a war zone, he says. Why don't you ask THEM if they're crazy for shelling Sarajevo?

His gesture reverberates throughout the city, over the airwaves. Soon, it'll find expression in a novel, a film. But before that, during the darkest days of the siege, Smailović will inspire other musicians to take to the streets with their own instruments. They don't play martial music, to rouse the troops against the snipers, or pop tunes, to lift the people's spirits. They play the Albinoni. The destroyers attack with guns and bombs, and the musicians respond with the most bittersweet music they know.

We're not combatants, call the violinists; we're not victims, either, add the violas. We're just humans, sing the cellos, just humans: flawed and beautiful and aching for love.

...

A few months later. The civil war rages on, and the foreign correspondent Allan Little watches as a procession of forty thousand civilians emerges from a forest. They've been trudging through the woods for forty-eight hours straight, fleeing an attack.

Among them is an eighty-year-old man. He looks desperate, exhausted. The man approaches Little, asks whether he's seen his wife. They were separated during the long march, the man says.

Little hasn't seen her but, ever the journalist, asks whether the man wouldn't mind identifying himself as Muslim or Croat. And the man's answer, Little says years later, in a gorgeous BBC segment, shames him even now, as he recalls it across the decades.

"I am," said the old man, "a musician."

[SKIP NOTES](#)

* This work is commonly attributed to Tomaso Albinoni, but was probably composed by Italian musicologist Remo Giazotto, possibly based on a fragment of an Albinoni composition.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Prelude](#)

[Introduction: The Power of Bittersweet](#)

[Part I: Sorrow and Longing: How can we transform pain into creativity, transcendence, and love?](#)

[Chapter 1: What is sadness good for?](#)

[Chapter 2: Why do we long for “perfect” and unconditional love? \(And what does this have to do with our love of sad songs, rainy days, and even the divine?\)](#)

[Chapter 3: Is creativity associated with sorrow, longing—and transcendence?](#)

[Chapter 4: How should we cope with lost love?](#)

[Part II: Winners and Losers: How can we live and work authentically in a “tyranny of positivity”?](#)

[Chapter 5: How did a nation founded on so much heartache turn into a culture of normative smiles?](#)

[Chapter 6: How can we transcend enforced positivity in the workplace, and beyond?](#)

[Part III: Mortality, Impermanence, and Grief: How should we live, knowing that we and everyone we love will die?](#)

[Chapter 7: Should we try to live forever?](#)

[Chapter 8: Should we try to “get over” grief and impermanence?](#)

[Chapter 9: Do we inherit the pain of our parents and ancestors? And, if so, can we transform it generations later?](#)

[*Coda: How to Go Home*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

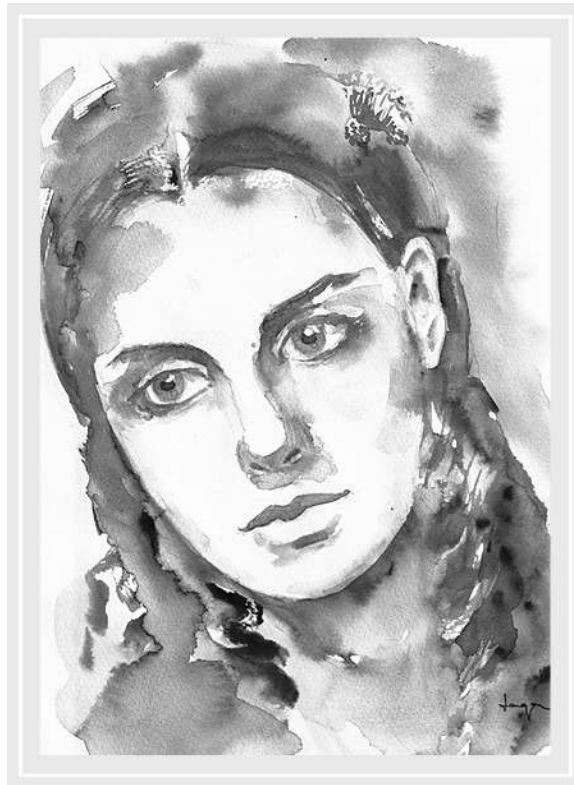
[*Notes*](#)

[*Index*](#)

[*By Susan Cain*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*A Reader’s Guide*](#)



Portrait of a Young Woman, 2021, Ukraine, © Tetiana Baranova (Instagram: [@artbytaqa](https://www.instagram.com/artbytaqa))

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Bittersweet

Homesick we are, and always, for another
And different world.

—VITA SACKVILLE-WEST, *THE GARDEN*

Once, when I was a twenty-two-year-old law student, some friends picked me up in my dorm on the way to class. I'd been happily listening to bittersweet music in a minor key. Not the Albinoni, which I hadn't heard back then; more likely a song by my all-time favorite musician, Leonard Cohen, aka the Poet Laureate of Pessimism.

It's hard to put into words what I experience when I hear this kind of music. It's technically sad, but what I feel, really, is love: a great tidal outpouring of it. A deep kinship with all the other souls in the world who know the sorrow the music strains to express. Awe at the musician's ability to transform pain into beauty. If I'm alone when I'm listening, I often make a spontaneous prayer gesture, hands to face, palm to palm, even though I'm deeply agnostic and don't formally pray. But the music makes my heart open: literally, the sensation of expanding chest muscles. It even makes it seem okay that everyone I love, including me, is going to die one day. This equanimity about death lasts maybe three minutes, but each time it happens, it changes me slightly. If you define transcendence as a moment in which your self fades away and you feel connected to the all, these musically

bittersweet moments are the closest I've come to experiencing it. But it's happened over and over again.

And I could never understand why.

Meanwhile, my friends were amused by the incongruity of mournful songs blasting from a dorm room stereo; one of them asked why I was listening to funeral tunes. I laughed, and we went to class. End of story.

Except that I thought about his comment for the next twenty-five *years*. Why *did* I find yearning music so strangely uplifting? And what in our culture made this a fitting subject for a joke? Why, even as I write this, do I feel the need to reassure you that I love dance music, too? (I really do.)

At first, these were just interesting questions. But as I searched for answers, I realized that they were *the* questions, the big ones—and that contemporary culture has trained us, to our great impoverishment, not to ask them.

...

Two thousand years ago, Aristotle wondered why the great poets, philosophers, artists, and politicians often have melancholic personalities. His question was based on the ancient belief that the human body contains four humors, or liquid substances, each corresponding to a different temperament: melancholic (sad), sanguine (happy), choleric (aggressive), and phlegmatic (calm). The relative amounts of these liquids were thought to shape our characters. Hippocrates, the famed Greek physician, believed that the ideal person enjoyed a harmonious balance of the four. But many of us tend in one direction or another.

This book is about the melancholic direction, which I call the “bittersweet”: a tendency to states of longing, poignancy, and sorrow; an acute awareness of passing time; and a curiously piercing joy at the beauty of the world. The bittersweet is also about the recognition that light and dark, birth and death—bitter and sweet—are forever paired. “Days of honey, days of onion,” as an Arabic proverb puts it. The tragedy of life is linked inescapably with its splendor; you could tear civilization down and

rebuild it from scratch, and the same dualities would rise again. Yet to fully inhabit these dualities—the dark as well as the light—is, paradoxically, the only way to transcend them. And transcending them is the ultimate point. The bittersweet is about the desire for communion, the wish to go home.

If you see yourself as a bittersweet type, it's hard to discuss Aristotle's question about the melancholia of the greats without sounding self-congratulatory. But the fact is that his observation has resonated across the millennia. In the fifteenth century, the philosopher Marsilio Ficino proposed that Saturn, the Roman god associated with melancholy, "has relinquished the ordinary life to Jupiter, but he claims for himself a life sequestered & divine." The sixteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer famously depicted Melancholy as a downcast angel surrounded by symbols of creativity, knowledge, and yearning: a polyhedron, an hourglass, a ladder ascending to the sky. The nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire could "scarcely conceive of a type of beauty" in which there is no melancholy.

This romantic vision of melancholia has waxed and waned over time; most recently, it's waned. In an influential 1918 essay, Sigmund Freud dismissed melancholy as narcissism, and ever since, it's disappeared into the maw of psychopathology. Mainstream psychology sees it as synonymous with clinical depression.^[*1]

But Aristotle's question never went away; it can't. There's some mysterious property in melancholy, something essential. Plato had it, and so did Jalal al-Din Rumi, so did Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, Maya Angelou, Nina Simone... Leonard Cohen.

But what, exactly, did they have?

I've spent years researching this question, following a centuries-old trail laid by artists, writers, contemplatives, and wisdom traditions from all over the world. This path also led me to the work of contemporary psychologists, scientists, and even management researchers (who have discovered some of the unique strengths of melancholic business leaders and creatives, and the best ways to tap them). And I've concluded that bittersweetness is not, as we tend to think, just a momentary feeling or event. It's also a quiet force, a way of being, a storied tradition—as dramatically overlooked as it is

brimming with human potential. It's an authentic and elevating response to the problem of being alive in a deeply flawed yet stubbornly beautiful world.

Most of all, bittersweetness shows us how to respond to pain: by acknowledging it, and attempting to turn it into art, the way the musicians do, or healing, or innovation, or anything else that nourishes the soul. If we don't transform our sorrows and longings, we can end up inflicting them on others via abuse, domination, neglect. But if we realize that all humans know—or will know—loss and suffering, we can turn *toward* each other.^[*2]

This idea—of transforming pain into creativity, transcendence, and love—is the heart of this book.

...

The ideal community, like the ideal human, would embody all four Hippocratic temperaments. But just the way many people tend in one direction or another, so do our societies. And, as we'll see in chapter 5, we've organized American culture around the sanguine and the choleric, which we associate with buoyancy and strength.

This sanguine-choleric outlook is forward leaning and combat ready; it prizes cheerful goal orientation in our personal lives, and righteous outrage online. We should be tough, optimistic, and assertive; we should possess the confidence to speak our minds, the interpersonal skills to win friends and influence people. Americans prioritize happiness so much that we wrote the pursuit of it into our founding documents, then proceeded to write over thirty thousand books on the subject, as per a recent Amazon search. We're taught from a very young age to scorn our own tears ("Crybaby!"), then to censure our sorrow for the rest of our lives. In a study of more than seventy thousand people, Harvard psychologist Dr. Susan David found that one-third of us judge ourselves for having "negative" emotions such as sadness and grief. "We do this not only to ourselves," says David, "but also to people we love, like our children."

Sanguine-choleric attitudes have many advantages, of course. They help us throw a ball to second base, pass a bill through Congress, fight the good fight. But all this vigorous cheer and socially acceptable anger disguises the reality that all humans—even, say, online influencers with impressive dance moves or the fiercest “takes”—are fragile and impermanent beings. And so we lack empathy for those who disagree with us. And so we’re blindsided when our own troubles come.

The bittersweet-melancholic mode, in contrast, can seem backward leaning, unproductive, and mired in longing. It yearns for what could have been, or what might yet be.

But longing is momentum in disguise: It’s active, not passive; touched with the creative, the tender, and the divine. We long for something, or someone. We reach for it, move toward it. The word *longing* derives from the Old English *langian*, meaning “to grow long,” and the German *langen*—to reach, to extend. The word *yearning* is linguistically associated with hunger and thirst, but also desire. In Hebrew, it comes from the same root as the word for passion.

The place you suffer, in other words, is the same place you care profoundly—care enough to act. This is why, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, it was homesickness that drove Odysseus to take his epic journey, which starts with him weeping on a beach for his native Ithaca. This is why, in most every children’s story you’ve ever loved, from Harry Potter to Pippi Longstocking, the protagonist is an orphan. Only once the parents die, transforming into objects of yearning, do the children have their adventures and claim their hidden birthrights. These tales resonate because we’re all subject to illness and aging, breakups and bereavement, plagues and wars. And the message of all these stories, the secret that our poets and philosophers *have been trying to tell us for centuries*, is that our longing is the great gateway to belonging.

Many of the world’s religions teach the same lesson. “Your whole life must be one of longing,” writes the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth-century mystical work. “Those who constantly cherish only intense longing to encounter the essential face of their lord will

attain complete realization,” reads the Qu’ran, 92:20–21. “God is the sigh in the soul,” said the thirteenth-century Christian mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart. “Our heart is restless ’til it rests in thee” is the most quoted line of Saint Augustine.

You can feel this truth during those out-of-time moments when you witness something so sublime—a legendary guitar riff, a superhuman somersault—that it seems to come from a more perfect and beautiful world. This is why we revere rock stars and Olympic athletes the way we do—*because* they bring us a breath of magic from that other place. Yet such moments are fleeting, and we want to live in that other world for good; we’re convinced that *there* is where we belong.

At their worst, bittersweet types despair that the perfect and beautiful world is forever out of reach. But at their best, they try to summon it into being. Bittersweetness is the hidden source of our moon shots, masterpieces, and love stories. It’s because of longing that we play moonlight sonatas and build rockets to Mars. It’s because of longing that Romeo loved Juliet, that Shakespeare wrote their story, that we still perform it centuries later.

It doesn’t matter whether we arrive at these truths via Pippi Longstocking, Simone Biles, or Saint Augustine—whether we’re atheists or believers. The truths are the same. Whether you long for the partner who broke up with you, or the one you dream of meeting; whether you hunger for the happy childhood you’ll never have, or for the divine; whether you yearn for a creative life, or the country of your birth, or a more perfect union (personally or politically); whether you dream of scaling the world’s highest peaks, or merging with the beauty you saw on your last beach vacation; whether you long to ease the pain of your ancestors, or for a world in which life could survive without consuming other life; whether you yearn for a lost person, an unborn child, the fountain of youth, or unconditional love: These are all manifestations of the same great ache.

I call this place, this state that we’re longing for, “the perfect and beautiful world.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it’s the Garden of Eden and the Kingdom of Heaven; the Sufis call it the Beloved of the Soul. There

are countless other names for it: for instance, simply, home, or “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” or, as the novelist Mark Merlis puts it, “the shore from which we were deported before we were born.” C. S. Lewis called it “the place where all the beauty came from.” They’re all the same thing—they’re the deepest desire of every human heart, they’re what Vedran Smailović conjured into being when he played his cello in the streets of a war-ravaged city.

During the past decades, Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” a ballad of spiritual longing, became a staple—even a cliché—of TV talent shows such as *American Idol*. But this is why tears of joy streamed down audience faces as all those contestants performed it for the thousandth time. It doesn’t matter whether we consider ourselves “secular” or “religious”: in some fundamental way, we’re all reaching for the heavens.

...

Around the same time those friends picked me up in my law school dorm and I started wondering about sad music, I came across the Buddhist idea that, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell put it, we should strive “to participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.” I couldn’t stop thinking about this: What did it mean? How could such a thing be possible?

I understood that this injunction wasn’t to be taken literally. It wasn’t about dancing on graves, or a passive response to tragedy and evil. Quite the opposite; it had to do with a sensitivity to pain and transience, and embracing this world of suffering (or of dissatisfaction, depending on how you interpret the Sanskrit in the First Noble Truth of Buddhism).

Still, the question persisted. I suppose I could have gone to India or Nepal to try to answer it, or enrolled in an East Asian Studies program at a university. But I didn’t. I just went out and lived life, with this question, and related ones, never far from mind: Why would sadness, an emotion that makes us glum and Eeyore-like, have survived evolutionary pressures? What’s really driving our longing for “perfect” and unconditional love (and what does it have to do with our love of sad songs, rainy days, and even the