

When We Lose a Parent

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When we lose a parent, we gradually become aware of all that we have lost with their passing. As we do, however, we can embrace once again what our parent has given us through the years on an ever-deepening level. May the following reflections assist you in accepting the loss and gift of your parents...in the past and present, and into the future.

It is always too soon...

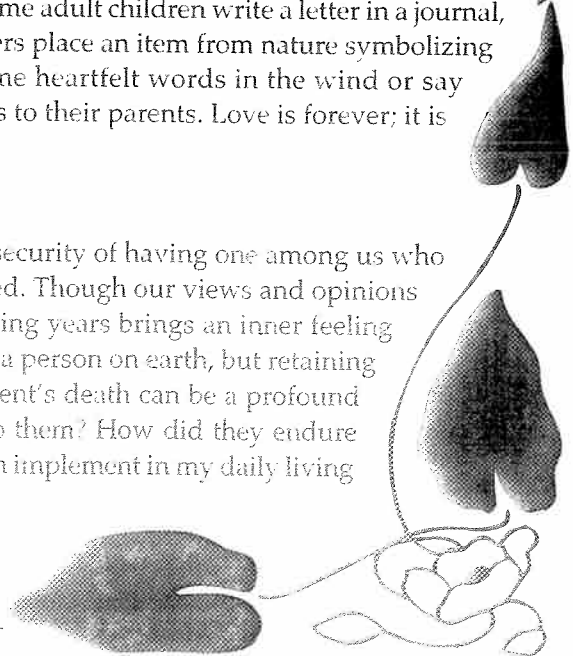
When death comes to a loved one, it is always too soon. There is always one more conversation to share, one more sunset to watch, or one more special day to celebrate. Whether we are six, sixteen, or sixty, the finality of losing a parent is something rarely wished for. It always is too soon, and it is only right that we grieve deeply what we wanted to keep forever.

It is never too late...

Some of the most important words to speak to our loved ones can also be the hardest: thank you, I love you, I'm sorry, and I forgive you. Few of us rarely take advantage of all the opportunities to speak them. We may not have said them to our parents at all or perhaps they were not spoken with the sincerity or emphasis we wish. If we remember the truth that love lives forever, it truly is never too late to speak what our dying loved ones need to hear. Some adult children write a letter in a journal, read a poem or sing a song with their sentiments in it. Others place an item from nature symbolizing their heartfelt thoughts in a stream or river, whisper some heartfelt words in the wind or say a particular prayer to convey the movements of their souls to their parents. Love is forever; it is never too late to express it.

The security of having parents...

As we grow through our adulthood, there still is an inner security of having one among us who has journeyed through life's trials that we have not yet faced. Though our views and opinions may not always match, having parents through our maturing years brings an inner feeling of security. The loss of a parent can jolt us into letting go of a person on earth, but retaining what their lives stood for, in good times and in bad. A parent's death can be a profound invitation to reflect on the gift of his life. What mattered to them? How did they endure heartache? What am I to receive from their life story that I can implement in my daily living and loving?



The quest to forgive...

As we reflect on our lives with our parents, we may come upon memories that seem to have been less than blessings. Upon the death of a parent, adult children often will revisit painful areas once again, desiring and striving to accept the humanity of their parents and honoring their own inner pain at the same time. As we maneuver through these waters, the finality of death often frees us to find the courage to forgive from a depth beyond where we were capable of forgiving before. The choice to forgive may come in small phases over time, but the gifts to our hearts will be endless.

The heart is where the home is...

With the loss of one or both parents, the family home and gathering place can often be lost as well. Family gatherings, family relationships and dynamics, and a sense of family unity can often take on new dimensions. While these can be disturbing, remembering the fact that changes accompany family life every year and in every stage can be a comfort. Rarely do things remain exactly the same in a family from beginning to end. Strive to embrace the new opportunities of this stage to "be" family with one another, whether we live across town or far away. Continue to celebrate the memories of the past and create new memories today as you embrace the love that is treasured forever.

The gift of our lives...

The reality of the death of our parents can serve as a mirror for our own lives. We, like they, will not live forever. Whatever our age, our lives on earth will also come to an end. We may find ourselves more pensive as we examine our existence. What are we living for? Where did our parents try to lead us? Where are we going? What, if any, changes need to be made? Just as our parents' lives served to guide and lead us while they lived, their deaths may serve similar purposes.

Orphaned or abandoned?...

Some adult children can experience feeling thrown to the wind after the loss of a parent. Seldom are we aware of the many ways we depended on our parents for approval, advice, assistance, support, for providing a refuge in trials and much more. Their deaths may challenge us to explore our own identity and inner strength and to even grow into new and deeper areas of wisdom and commitment. Feeling alone and even vulnerable can be transformed from viewing oneself as a mere seedling to one who must continue the family tradition of becoming a redwood for the generations that follow.

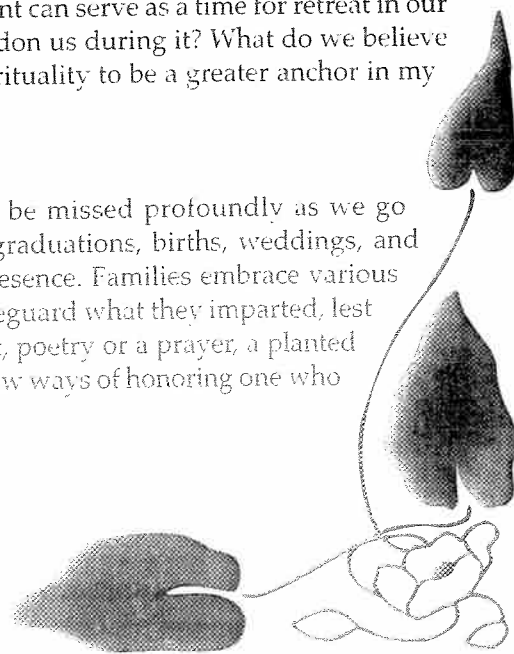
Has your faith suffered because of your suffering?

One of the deepest heartaches of humanity is to witness the suffering of another and to be unable to remove his or her pain. We may have felt abandoned by other family members, friends, the medical system or even God. Our faith in ourselves, our family and in the God we professed belief in, may have been shaken to the core. The suffering and subsequent loss of a parent can serve as a time for retreat in our busy lives. Does God indeed cause suffering and even worse abandon us during it? What do we believe and why? Does my daily life reflect a faith? Do I need or want spirituality to be a greater anchor in my life? What must I do to achieve that?

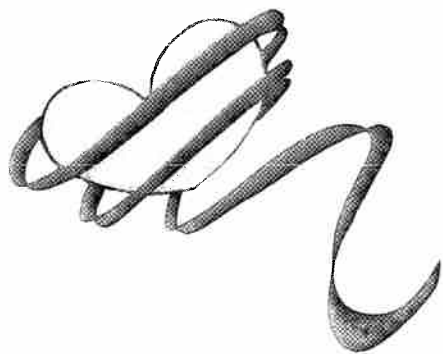
Going forward into the future...

Whether we are young or old, the presence of our parents will be missed profoundly as we go forward to make our own dreams come true. Religious rituals, graduations, births, weddings, and various achievements will be celebrated without their physical presence. Families embrace various ways of honoring what parents lived for and taught as a way to safeguard what they imparted, lest what is important be forgotten. A lit candle, a fresh flower or plant, poetry or a prayer, a planted tree, a moment of silence, a shared son, words of wisdom are just a few ways of honoring one who was and always will be in our hearts and lives.

*Memories link us with the past
and sacred moments today help us honor this truth:
Love lives forever.*



The Captive Heart



By Wendy E. Murray
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I was the third oldest of twelve children and it wasn't easy to find a way to be noticed by him. Although I am sure he didn't play favorites, our joint party carried me through the whole year.

At sixteen, like most teens, I eagerly entered the working world. My first job was sitting behind a reception desk in my father's company. My dad wasn't exactly tall, but he had a personality that could fill the room. When he came through the front door and he stood before me, it was akin to what I imagined it might be like at the pearly gates.

Everyone snapped to attention and I would hurriedly relate all of his phone messages taken for the day. I was more than a little intimidated by him, but mostly, I was in awe of his command of any situation and how people respected his authority and leadership.

In my early thirties, we ended up working together in a gourmet kitchen store; he as owner and I as manager. Here I learned the value of hard work. The payoff was both financial and intrinsic. Dad showed me the "bottom line," not only in bookkeeping but how to persevere when times get tough. Those years, working side by side, taught me the meaning of honesty and the importance of

work ethics. He was a hard act to follow but tagging along was half the fun.

The years passed and my father entered retirement kicking and screaming. He kept one hand in the business but had a difficult time letting go. My parents tried the "house in Florida," but after leading active lives for so many years, they couldn't adapt to the slower pace and a life of leisure, although it was well deserved. Hard work was all they knew.

One day, my father couldn't find his car parked in a downtown garage. This was the first signal that his short-term memory was declining and our family was headed toward a long battle with Alzheimer's disease.

Once a vibrant and powerful icon in our family restaurant supply business, Dad struggled to remember people's names, directions, and simple daily routines. He was frustrated that he had to ask questions over and over, but the answers were quickly lost within his web of confusion. Right before my eyes, he disappeared. Although most victims fade away slowly, this disease ravaged my father. Eighteen months after his diagnosis, he had deteriorated so badly that hospitalization was required.

One Sunday, I slipped away from my weekend chores, hoping to spend some quiet time with him. Just the two of us – like old times. Searching the hospital, I came upon a frail, white-haired man sitting in the middle of the corridor. My heart lurched as I approached and realized it was my father. "Dad, it's me," I whispered. "How are you?"

My father had the cleanest ears in our family. He would spend several minutes picking deep within the recesses of either ear, checking to make sure no wax could be found.

I think this habit drove my mother crazy. Digging away with a bobbi pin just about gave her apoplexy, especially since she told all of us not to put anything smaller than our elbows inside the ear. I thought it was just a nervous gesture but this habit was often a signal that he would be expounding on an important political or business topic. He would pick away until either the wax was gone or he had exhausted the topic at length.

Grateful that I never shared that particular habit, I itched to find something that we both had in common. I was born on his mother's birthday, April 12th, binding me to Grandma Catherine for a lifetime. My father's birthday was three days before mine, so every year I could always count on us celebrating our birthdays together, two for the price of one. This yearly event became our special ritual.

He was neatly dressed in hospital robe and gown. All appeared normal until I realized he was strapped into his wheelchair. Nothing could ever hold my father down, yet here he was looking so insignificant, staring vacantly out into nothingness as life bustled around him

Most passed him by, discounting his presence, as if he had already vanished. My eyes welled up as I sat down beside him. How could the Lion-King of my heart be tied to a chair? With a bib fastened securely around his neck, someone had given him a sludge-filled cup of liquid with instructions to drink. Didn't they know that he had forgotten the simple task of lifting hand to mouth?

"Here, let me help you with this drink. It smells yummy." I smoothed his hair and rubbed his arm, gently lifting the cup to his lips, hoping to offer comfort

and a familiar voice. I wasn't sure if my soothing touch was for me or for him. Unable to speak or walk away, he was a prisoner now, his thoughts scrambled and his voice a whisper.

"I love you, Daddy."

That's how I found him that Sunday morning; listless, abandoned and alone. It was as if he was waiting for death to reach him. This disease had robbed him of his manhood, his dignity, and now, his spirit. I cried all the way back to my car. The man who had given me life and formed a fortress around me during stormy times had quietly faded away.

Time has a way of passing, yet when I think of those days, one beautiful moment shines through. It stands out amidst the sorrow as I watched someone I loved die.

I remembered that the hospital chaplain was bringing

Communion to able patients for Sunday worship. My dad, a fervent and devout Catholic, was asked if he wanted to accept the Sacrament.

A light was turned back on and somewhere a flicker of familiarity returned to offer solace and grace.

He nodded yes and just before sticking out his tongue to receive the Holy Eucharist, he made the Sign of the Cross. And then I heard "Amen" coming from his lips. I will never forget that gesture. He was still teaching me that even in our darkest days, God is there to journey along with us.

My mentor and my birthday pal are gone now. I still long for a hug and words of advice, but I know that I have been blessed with his kingly strength. I knew him well. He is tightly fastened within my heart.

