

A Grief Explored

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In the months following my mother's death I searched for outlets for my grief. There were factual obituaries to be written, but I wanted to write something at a deeper level, as a way of trying to record and gauge the complexity of emotions I was going through, to make sense of the disorientation. I found comfort and insight in articles and broadcasts about grieving that appeared at the time, all of which stressed the importance of talking and sharing thoughts about this great taboo. Such discussion can obviously help to clarify one's own thoughts, but more fundamentally it gives that essential reassurance, that one is not alone. We are part of a community, all affected by the same experience.

My mother dying seemed so extreme for her. She was so down-to-earth, so uninterested in the dramatic gesture, so rooted in normality. Dying was what other people did. And I found the words from an actor friend who had recently lost his own mother to be spot on: 'Isn't it odd that something inevitable can be so deeply and lastingly shocking?' My mother's death in old age was not tragic and sad in the way that a young life prematurely cut short is. But the emotion of loss, the incomprehension can still be very powerful. She was in her 90s, in the final stages, but her very longevity and robust personality gave her an indestructible status; you thought she would always be around. Her innate optimism was present almost to the end. There was no fading away before she went into hospital. She kept her zest for life, driving her famous Land Rover until she was 92, and saying in her last decade that she still had so much to live for. I had known her for 53 years, the one constant when so many other changes had happened. She was the last great link to what had gone before too, the earlier generations in my family. I had learnt so much about my roots and the wider world through her eyes. Perhaps only after they have gone do you fully realise how much your parents taught you, how much has been passed on, and in this way they can endure too, living on in you in a way that may only become clearer as grief begins to soften.

Mum's death was traumatic enough, and the days leading up to it. It was a baptism of fire to experience a fortnight of palliative care, watching helplessly as the life drains out of the person you love. The doctors and nurses are used to the palliative process, but most families aren't, so your brain has to adjust to a situation that can be long and drawn out, and will have an inevitably bleak conclusion. All the reassuring medical paraphernalia

designed to preserve life is removed. You are no longer striving to keep them well, but doing all you can just to make them comfortable, and sometimes this is beyond your reach. This is what still haunts me. As her carer I had been there to protect her, and now I was powerless. In my mother's case a stroke (following a chest infection) had made swallowing extremely difficult, and although she could barely speak, it was obvious how continuously thirsty she was. Too much water made her choke, so my sisters and I had to painstakingly give it in small spoonfuls which she dutifully tried to swallow, but even tiny amounts could make her retch. An essential of life was suddenly at a premium, the drinking mechanism almost gone. Amazingly though there were still glimpses of humour, for example managing to murmur 'bless you' after I sneezed on one occasion. Such events had a precious familiarity in an otherwise surreal situation. There is no training manual, no easy guide for families to the winding down or the final exit scene. I had been through it with my father 30 years ago, but his coma, his semi-absence, somehow lessened the pain. Now there was all the anguish over the possible suffering of a woman who was dying while still awake.

And then it all stops. I found myself looking at a corpse, the remaining warmth in her body leaving her fast, the warmth of one's mother. She died while I was sleeping fitfully next to her bed, in a reclining chair the hospital gave me so I could be with her at night. It was one o'clock in the morning when the nurses came in to check her and found she had gone. I looked on her already shrunken face and barely recognised it, the face that had been marked by a kindness and familiarity that people never forgot, several staff in the vast Royal Worcestershire Hospital remembering it from her time there two years earlier. Not for me the sense that she was 'at peace' or 'looked beautiful', the mantras you so often hear when someone dies. One friend said that in death her mother's face 'turned to wood', another compared his parents to 'an empty nest'. Mum had turned into a strange effigy. My sisters who had sat with her too in her last hours rejoined me to say their own goodbyes, and needing to fill our numbed minds with something practical we began discussing funeral plans.

For many it is only after the distraction of the ceremonies that true grief sets in. But again there is no gameplan. Mum died early in 2017. The period taken to adjust can be months or years. How can one put a timeframe on it anyway? Grief does not necessarily obey



A coastal photograph by my mother. A keen sailor in her youth, her favourite landscapes were always wind-swept watery places.

the rules of the calendar. It pops up and bites you when least expected. What I found strange was that many people were unwittingly prescriptive, even coercive in their remarks. Some hoped I was 'OK', when obviously one isn't in this situation. Some asked if I was 'coming to terms', and I thought 'what the hell does that mean?' Even people saying 'I hope things are improving for you?' creates a pressure, passively imposing a sort of limit on mourning. In many ways you want and need to live with the pain, to acknowledge properly what has happened. It was the least I owed my mother. Surely I didn't have to feel guilty or self-indulgent about being very sad, to add to all my other emotions? One said I 'should take comfort' in Mum's long life, another that I would have 'closure' (that dreaded Americanism) once I had buried her ashes. As if it is as easy as that! Death is certainly a trigger for well-meaning platitudes and statements of the obvious. I actually found the stark honesty from some quarters far more comforting; those who said that I must be feeling bloody awful and that this might go on some time, perhaps a long time. One friend was incredibly understanding, but warned against the temptations of 'self-pity ... that can be a killer'. I wondered

where mourning stopped and self-pity began, especially when I think that all-enveloping grief is selfish by its very nature. You need so much physical and mental energy to cope with it, and can shut yourself off from other people in the process. And this can be corrosive if it becomes entrenched.

Someone told me that death is the most normal thing in the world, and perhaps it is, but it is also so alien and dreaded. After all our extraordinary NHS staff do their utmost to stop it happening, no matter how old you are. And didn't Dylan Thomas tell us to 'rage, rage against the dying of the light'? Although my mother's death in old age was not a young life prematurely cut short, the emotion of loss, the incomprehension can still be very powerful. Mum was more than a parent. She was a best friend in the way that my father had been too. Now they were both gone. I felt 'cast adrift', to borrow a phrase of my doctor's who had recently lost both her parents in close succession. Right to the end of her days Mum had kept the optimism of youth. She was the most selfless of people who, like most mothers, always put her family before herself. She was our bedrock, who steered us through difficult times when my father succumbed to awful depressions and periods of heavy drinking. And when in recent years her once great physical strength began to fail we increasingly looked after her. As a freelance writer working from home it was no hardship to care for her, and I actually found it a pleasure. What I only fully realised after Mum's death is how you, the carer, can become just as dependent as the person being looked after. The relationship develops into something deeply symbiotic and reciprocal, and it's intimate too. When the loved one dies there is a sort of double bereavement because your whole routine, part of your way of life has gone, and as someone said 'you have to rebuild yourself'. The world seems to go into black and white, almost literally, not just metaphorically, or perhaps it is just that colour becomes meaningless.

The shock and incredulity manifested itself in many ways. I would go into the sitting room and look at Mum's empty chair, just staring at it, as if this might help me process the fact that she was gone. I would pass her window and still look in to wave as I had done my whole life. Only she wasn't there. And then there were her belongings. Yes, there were the obvious things like her glasses, her clothes and jewellery, her bottles of scent. These were poignant enough, but in fact I was more affected by favourite tools in her kitchen, like a cheese knife she had all her married life, and of which she took great care. How was it that this knife was still *here*? I felt it should have vanished too, like so many of her possessions. This enforced the sense of disjuncture, of dislocation. Objects can mean something because of the people who own them, a home is a home because they inhabit it. When they die you are left with four walls, and rooms full of stuff. Suddenly the Ancient Egyptian practice

of burying the dead with what they might need in their afterlife made great sense. And as my doctor pointed out, losing someone when you are an older person can be more difficult. I was very sad when my father died, but then I was a more robust 24-year-old, and Mum was there as the buffer. Without the diversions of youth and its survival techniques, one can grow more vulnerable by middle age.

A few weeks after Mum died I went away, staying with friends who one day took me to Tintern Abbey in Monmouthshire. It was a welcome distraction, but the beauty of that place was wreathed in the loss I was still feeling, I was just viewing it through a different lens, from the angle of a wider landscape. I looked through the windows of the ruined Gothic church to the clear azure March sky beyond, and the emotion was intense and unrelenting, like a great weight in my head and stomach. But small journeys such as this can be mental as well as literal, taking you to a fresh place which can eventually start to thaw the rawness. Then there are for me the

regenerative optimistic qualities of the natural world, most particularly the energy of the birds in the garden which my mother loved so much, which she could see from her window and would always remark on. She lives on in these things, painful reminders can in time become sources of comfort, and your relationship with the one you have lost does not end. The conversation continues, and indeed may grow and deepen as your mind is inevitably concentrated by their physical absence. And then there is the consolation of attentive caring friends, and the mutual support you can find in people who are going through the same experience. One thing I will say. You don't know, cannot know, what real grief is actually like unless you have been through it yourself. But it is so much a part of life that you have in a sense to embrace it, talk about it if you can. Don't keep it buried inside you where it can eat away. In sharing it with others you may be helping them as well as yourself. You can begin to accommodate it, and in time the world may come back into colour. ■