

MAGAZINE

When My Father Died, I Discovered the Unmentionable Stage of Mourning: Relief

I was troubled by this feeling. But it's more common than you think.

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In my dreams, my dad is alive. He appears beside me in the grocery store clutching a list of items he wants me to purchase for him. They're always things that suit his esoteric taste but are difficult to find in Missouri, like teff flour or broccoli rabe. Or he calls me with complaints about the loud neighbors at his independent-living facility. But when I try to dial the manager to sort things out, the numbers on my phone start melting.

My dad died this past March, when my sister and I made the decision to withdraw life support after an unsuccessful cardiac procedure. I scattered his ashes beside the Pacific Ocean this spring.

In some Buddhist traditions, bardo, the liminal state between one incarnation and the next, is said to last up to 49 days. But it's been six months, and my dreams still involve explaining to my dad that he's dead. He's incredulous. Once my sister was in the dream too, and I called on her for backup: "Zoe, Dad's dead, right?" He always did accept truths from her that he wouldn't from me.

Waking up from these dreams I feel something familiar: relief. It's like swimming upward to a place where I can breathe again. I think Dad keeps returning to me in dreams because I feel guilty that my life is easier now that he's gone.

"The dreaded freedom." That's what my friend Catey Terry called it when I told her my dad had died. Most friends had guessed, even if I hadn't told them, that my dad had challenges. He had suffered from mental illness for most of his life and had moved to be closer to me five years prior as his overall health deteriorated. I was grateful for Catey's phrase because it was my first indication that it was okay to feel anything other than sadness about his death. Catey had cared for her mother through a brutal decline into dementia, so she knew that death can mean many things, not all of them bad.

"[Grief and Relief: Is it wrong to feel relieved when someone dies?](#)" is the title of an online video by psychotherapist Joe Walz that caught my attention during a late-night Googling session. While speaking to Walz for this piece, I learned research indicates that relief is an [extremely common reaction](#) caregivers have to the death of a loved one who had dementia. But he noted that similar feelings may appear in those whose parents experienced other struggles particular to aging. "It's very natural to think, 'Hey, I don't have to change my parent's diaper anymore; I don't have to do all these painful, time-consuming, tiring things,'" Walz told me.

Why hadn't I heard this before? All I knew about grief was what had filtered into the popular imagination based on the work of psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross — that it has five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Litsa Williams, a clinical social worker, told me that the first thing I need to know about the "stages of grief" is that "they're not real." Kübler-Ross observed the stages in people diagnosed with terminal illnesses in relation to their own deaths, not in those dealing with others' deaths. "I think people like the stages," Williams said, "because it takes something incredibly complex and overwhelming and difficult, and makes it neat and tidy, like, 'Oh, it's just going to be these little five stages, and it ends in acceptance.'" The popular understanding of these stages, she said, may lead people to feel that they are "grieving wrong."

Williams, who started the website [What's Your Grief](#) with a colleague, calls relief "the unspoken grief emotion." She explained that relief is a common part of grieving, especially for those who have been involved in caregiving for the person who died. If someone had mental health problems, like my father did, their death can allow survivors to "exhale from that hypervigilance, worrying the worst is always coming." She said people may think, "God, what does it say about me that I've wanted this person to die?" But in fact, "when we peel it back ... if they could have waved a wand and fixed the relationship, the mental illness, the addiction, that's what they would have wanted."

"I'm sorry" is the most common response when people hear that a parent has died, and some variation on "Thank you, it's really sad" is a frequent reply. But "sad" does not begin to cover the complexity of what many adult children feel when parents die. I was sorry my dad died, and I was not sorry. Yet I had few models for these feelings.

By the time I came along, my father had already had a difficult life. He grew up in a working-class family in Bridgeport, Conn. He was an intellectual and a poet in a neighborhood where men were judged on how well they could throw a punch. He struggled to be accepted by his alcoholic father. As a teenager, my dad fell into a depression that would chase him his whole life. The health-care system being what it was in the 1950s, he was misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and sent to a mental institution, where he received electroconvulsive therapy that erased much of his memory of his childhood.

Whether it was a result of this trauma or related to his late-in-life diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, my dad oscillated during my lifetime between what the [Institute for Challenging Disorganization](#) would classify as Level 1 and Level 3 hoarding. In my childhood home, I wended my way between piles of newspapers that narrowed the hallways. There was a room full of empty bottles that we called the Plain of Jars. Over 20 years, he carefully saved a garbage bag full of plastic forks and spoons — for a picnic with a thousand of his friends, we joked.

He couldn't save his marriage to my mom, but he could save the Sonny Rollins record she bought him for his birthday in 1983, still wrapped, for 30 years. He couldn't prevent me and my sister from leaving home, but he could save the plastic barrettes that had fallen from our hair into the green shag carpet, in a jar with marbles, rusty paper clips and orphaned keys.

My dad was a brilliant, funny, gentle person. His heroes were Malcolm X and Charles Darwin, and he read everything from poet Sharon Olds to the Federalist Papers, which was the book he brought to the hospital with him the day he died. When I was a teenager, we'd take the train into New York together; we saw Edward Hopper at the Whitney Museum and Shakespeare in the Park. His expectations for me were high: For my 14th birthday, he gave me German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra." I would need to know, he said, how to confront what he called "the ultimate question" — how to relate to death.

If the stereotypical father is stern and withholding, my dad was vulnerable to a fault. When I was growing up, I didn't know it was unusual that he confided in me about his loneliness. In fact, I felt special. He told me we were different from other people, honest beyond social conventions. But I wondered later whether I had needed to know, as a teenager, that his antidepressants lowered his libido. Was it okay for him to ask me, as a college student, to open a credit card account that he could transfer his debts to? Was it normal that I spent summers in my 20s secretly taking loads of garbage from his house to the dumpster behind CVS?

As I entered adulthood, I kept in close touch with Dad. I wrote him postcards from Chiang Mai and Berlin, and I felt his pride that I'd done the things he'd always wanted to — travel, get a PhD, build a stable family. He sent me multiple one-line emails every day, each with a foreboding subject line: Capitalism. My Mortality. Licorice Panna Cotta.

But once my husband, Sean, and I had settled down in a Midwestern college town and had kids, my worries about Dad increased. He'd had a heart attack in his 50s and triple bypass surgery in his 60s, and his mother and brother had both had dementia. By then in his mid-70s, he complained of loneliness every time I spoke with him. He was still living in the house he and my mother had bought when I was a baby, surrounded by 40 years of accumulated detritus. I couldn't bear for him to die there, surrounded by dirty dishes and stacks of AOL.com free-trial discs, his body undiscovered for days. After years of resisting my pleas, Dad left Connecticut, his lifelong home, in the summer of 2017. We found him an apartment around the corner from us and helped him move in his boxfuls of newspapers dating back to the '80s and his collection of sample-size tubes of toothpaste in various stages of use.

Thus began the hardest years of my life. Until then, Dad had been unfailingly gentle with me, albeit persistently melancholy. The person who arrived in Missouri was desperately unhappy, fragile and belligerent. I couldn't tell if these changes reflected cognitive decline, resulted from underlying health problems, or stemmed from the unsettling move. Whatever the cause, I felt like I had gained a third child, in addition to the 3- and 5-year-old we already had. Dad told me I had ruined his life. He delayed buying a car due to financial worries, expecting that Sean and I would share our one vehicle with him. He'd sometimes knock on our door at 10 p.m., saying he felt anxious, and insist on sleeping over. He always wanted to move in with us, but I didn't think my solid-but-strained-by-circumstances marriage could withstand Dad's constant presence. My sister did the best she could to help from afar, but I was overwhelmed. I had just started a new job, and my life felt like an exhausting jigsaw of demands punctuated by repetitive arguments.

The only time Dad was happy and relaxed was when he was with his grandkids. He found library books to read to them that matched their interests, spelling out difficult words just as he'd done for me and my sister. He let my son beat him at soccer, 1 million to 6. He found educational videos about the science of farts and the fastest animals on Earth. I got to glimpse the parent he'd been to me further back than I could remember, and my heart broke with tenderness.

Then his health problems escalated, and in the summer of 2020 he had a stroke that affected his mobility and made driving dangerous. I followed his doctors' advice to secure him a place in an independent-living facility, which he despised. Although he was offended when I suggested there had been cognitive changes as well, he constantly lost track of his wallet, phone, keys and medications; he forgot how a gas burner worked. He got angry when I tried to help, and he got angry when I didn't help enough. I gritted my teeth and did my best. I picked him up for dinner, a concert or a kid's sporting event twice a week. With a few horrible exceptions, I spoke to him patiently. When I woke up in the night, my thoughts inevitably turned to him. When was the last time he had taken a shower? How could I persuade him to agree to a cognitive evaluation? How long was all this going to last? Was it wrong to even think about that?

In the last years of my dad's life, I sometimes felt alone with the difficulties of caring for him. But my experience wasn't unique. As soon as I started mentioning "relief" and "parent's death" in the same sentence, friends' stories came pouring out. Catey Terry, 60, described her mother in her younger years as "a lovely person" who was "dedicated to being a mom." "She shopped at Talbots," Catey explained, conveying the put-togetherness of a generation of women born in the first half of the 20th century. But dementia rendered Catey's mom nearly unrecognizable. Nursing home staff would call Catey with the news that her mother was throwing planters over the fence or pulling pictures off the walls. "She was dangerous to herself and others," Catey recalled. "I could deal with it, but I just knew how much *she* would have hated it. ... You don't wish anybody dead, but I wished peace for her, and peace was not the way she was living."

When Catey's mother died in 2018, she, her sisters and her husband were "just relieved." But this didn't make the loss any less devastating. "I still say good night to her every night and tell her I love her," said Catey, tearing up.

The trauma Catey experienced was based partly on the sharp contrast between her happy, stable upbringing and her mother's distressing transformation. People who have been taking care of their parents for a lifetime have a different journey. I talked with a college friend, Oriana Walker, who had lost both of her parents by the time she was 35. She described her parents as "pretty hardcore hippie seekers" who disavowed traditional medicine. When she was a baby, her father was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and her mother insisted on caring for him at home even as he lost mobility. From a young age, Oriana was dressing her father and brushing his teeth, and eventually feeding him. By the time he died when Oriana was in her early 30s, he could only move his head. "The whole trajectory [of his illness] was incredibly exhausting," she said. "That's where the guilt starts. ... You don't want to feel how exhausting it is. You want [the situation] to be workable."

His death was the only way out of the excruciating dynamics that had warped our relationship.

But Oriana's caregiving duties did not end. Her mother, who had devoted decades to caring for Oriana's father, had left her own metastatic breast cancer untreated. Just as Oriana was trying to finish her PhD — not coincidentally, in medical anthropology — she had to move back home. She described the months before her mother's death as “a 24/7, crushing labor of caregiving.” Oriana questioned at the time how she would survive the experience. “It was like a life-and-death struggle we were in, and it was going to be me or her. She would either eat me alive, or I wouldn't allow it and she would die. ... We were like three dominoes in a line. First my dad feeds off my mom, and then my mom feeds off me.”

Oriana survived. After her mother's death in 2016, once the physical exhaustion wore off, “it was an amazing feeling ... one of the biggest gifts I've received ... like somebody pushed the reset button on my life.” It took years of therapy for her to accept these feelings and come to terms with her guilt about wanting a life independent of her parents' illnesses.

Besides leaning on friends in similar situations, the most helpful thing I did in the year before my dad's death was go to counseling with him. Our therapist, the skilled James Hunter of the Employee Assistance Program at the University of Missouri, listened to my dad's complaints — that I had imprisoned him in the independent-living facility, that I didn't buy him the right kind of butter (unsalted!) — and then said something that shocked both of us: I needed to be doing less for my dad, not more.

Enmeshment, Hunter explained, was a relationship lacking boundaries that can emerge when parent and child roles are blurred or reversed, often due to mental illness or trauma. This had begun when I was a teenager and intensified in the past several years. To heal, we had to differentiate. I had to step back. Dad had to get on Instacart and order his own butter.

Emboldened, I told my dad in a counseling session that I wasn't responsible for his happiness. “What are you responsible for, then?” he demanded. His question made me wonder why I had willingly taken on that responsibility for so long. When I asked my dad why he thought we spent so much time in counseling talking about his feelings and so little talking about mine, his jaw dropped as if the answer were obvious: “Because I'm the vulnerable one!” Although I was his child, he couldn't see that I was vulnerable, too.

When I asked Joe Walz about enmeshment and how it affects reactions to a parent's death, he told me how fortunate I was to have started unraveling this dynamic before my dad died: "When people have started recognizing the problematic nature of the relationship and started doing their own work with friends, family members or their own therapist ... they're probably in a better position. Even though it'd be very painful when that death happens, they will find that relief," because they "finally have that room, that opportunity and that necessity to become [their] own person more fully."

And for those who didn't have the precious chance to get a neutral observer's view of their relationship with a parent, Walz noted that it's never too late. "Don't feel guilty," he said. "Be open to talking to a therapist." And in analyzing your own actions, "just be really gentle and forgiving."

Die at the right time," Nietzsche wrote in the book Dad had given me when I was a teenager. But Dad never wanted to die. He feared death more than anyone I knew; the loss of control reminded him of electroshock therapy. He was a hypochondriac who also happened to have a lot of health problems, and so his death had been a frequent topic of conversation. "You brought me to Missouri to die," he'd tell me accusingly, as if he'd have been immortal had he stayed in Connecticut. But in a way he was right. I hadn't wanted him to die alone, thousands of miles from me, food rotting in his fridge. And my plan worked: When the hospital called one Wednesday afternoon in March, I was only 10 minutes away.

"Low." That was how the cardiologist answered my question about Dad's chances of survival. He'd gone into the hospital that morning for a planned cardiac ablation, but his blood pressure had dropped during the procedure. At 81, his body turned out to be too fragile for such an intervention. His brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long to be able to return to its previous functionality.

"You can ask yourself what your father would have wanted," the doctor said. "Would he be ready to let go?" Despite the gravity of the moment, I almost laughed. I thought of the newspapers, the toothpaste tubes, the plastic forks. No, he was not "ready to let go." But was I? I called my sister, Zoe. As a nurse, she had seen these situations before, and she was clear: "Just make him comfortable and let him go."

The doctors were happy to, as they put it, "change the goals of care." I stood at Dad's bedside while they removed his ventilation tube and administered morphine. I noticed the soft fuzz of hair on his scalp; he'd asked me to take him for a haircut and I hadn't had the chance. I wanted to reach out and pet his head, but the doctors were busy with their work. Suddenly I remembered being carried by him as a child, laying my head on his shoulder and holding on to his earlobe for comfort as we walked up the steps to the library. Now his skin looked waxy and gray. His body was swelled with excess fluids, and his ears were mashed against his head with tubing and tape. He did not look like himself.

I started to cry. "Dad, we love you. It's okay to let go," I whispered. "I'm right here with you." It took longer than I thought it would. I worried that he was going to wake up and be mad at me for killing him. Then his heart beat one more time, and stopped.

“A good death,” as Atul Gawande calls it in *“Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End,”* is elusive. And the question is, good for whom? How to balance the needs of the elderly with those of their caretakers? There are no clear answers. Expectations around caring for aging parents vary according to culture and economic circumstances. Gawande’s book is one of the few that lays out the complex medical and social dynamics that surround aging and death, and one I’d recommend reading before your parents reach a medical crisis, when it’s easier to have a frank conversation.

But there are some things no book could have prepared me for. In the last years of my dad’s life, I felt like he was wearing a disturbing Halloween costume that he couldn’t take off. He was trapped, and I was trapped with him. His death was the only way out of the excruciating dynamics that had warped our relationship, the only way I could connect with the parent he was to me when he was still able.

I asked Litsa Williams about the dreams where my dad is still alive. When a relationship was more straightforward, she explained, such dreams can be accompanied by a pleasant sense of communion with the deceased. However, with more complicated relationships, the dreams often have an undertone of what Williams calls “Did I do enough?” “The brain hasn’t quite closed that loop,” she told me, and returns to difficult moments. We can “cut ourselves some slack,” she said, and realize that the wish for a parent’s death, or relief about it, “comes from a place of either compassion or self-compassion,” from “wanting the suffering to end,” both for you and your parent.

After my dad died, Zoe, Sean and I waded into the apartment full of his hoarded possessions. We recycled thousands of recipes he had carefully clipped from the New York Times. We donated a closetful of new apparel with tags still on, which he’d been saving for some unknown future in which he felt worthy of them, and we threw away the small collection of raggedy clothes he’d actually worn. I saved whatever I could, but it wasn’t much.

When I turned the key for the last time on that empty apartment, I thought I was finished. Now I know it will take much longer to sort through everything my dad left behind. But I’m moving forward, slowly. While I was writing this article, I had a new dream about my dad. He was his old self, sweet and gentle. When I woke up, I missed him.

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