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**When Adult Children  
Grieve the Death of a Parent:  
*Spiritual Perspectives***

*by Rev. Richard Gilbert*

*Foundations and definitions*

Losses of any kind reconfigure who we are, what we believe and how we live. This personal reframing may be for a time and, for many, for the rest of time.

The spiritual dimension is, for many, an area ripe for disappointment, unmet needs and hurt. Others may feel reasonably well connected spiritually, but find their religion missing the mark. Oftentimes we find ourselves blocked, ignored, even undermined, as we seek these resources in our sorrow. Even the healthiest expressions of spirituality and/or religion are tested by any experience of sorrow and suffering. Many griever come to a point of "make it or break it" for a credible spiritual and religious value or God.

The spiritual piece is often overlooked. Many care providers discourage this exploration. Some therapists (and others) skirt around spirituality because of their own discomfort or feelings of inadequacy. Others disrupt the search because of their biases or prejudices. Many support groups and organizations insist that there be no discussion of religion, arguing that vulnerable griever need to be "rescued" from religious zealots and heavy doctrinal discussions. There is the risk of crushing of the significant "Why?" questions that lead a person forward on their search for peace.

Everyone has a spiritual component, even those who find the very word repulsive. We bear within us this desire to believe, trust and hope. It also is the reminder that the gifts that bring us that strength may, at least for a time, appear so strangled by the pangs of loss that they become additional losses due to their ineffectiveness.

*When adults grieve for a parent*

There are aspects of grief common to all grief work and all grief work has its own variations and issues. Many adult children frequently hear ...

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## When Adult Children Grieve

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- They had a wonderful life
- How lucky you were to have such good parents
- Our parents are supposed to die before us
- Their last gift to us is to prepare the path to heaven and to be their when we come ...

These may bear significant truth for many. For others they are dismissive. They highlight the denial that is frequent with the death of a parent (for adults). Since it is "accepted" it therefore has diminished significance. Nothing is further from the truth.

Grieving adult children are often denied access to community and societal support, including religious groups and religious leaders, simply because the death is normative and expected. It may weaken some of sorrow's intensity, but it can easily become an isolating factor that diminishes our self affirmation and support when most needed. It also blocks the pathway to our deepest feelings and needs around a parent's death.

Spiritual dimensions of parental loss might best be understood by looking at some frequent dynamics that emerge from the experience of adult grief for a parent.

### *Abandoned/orphaned/alone.*

Isolation and loneliness intrude when adults grieve for a parent. Parents are supposed to be there! Parents keep us safe, guide and bind us together as family, respond to our bruises (whether it be a scraped knee or a missed mortgage payment) because that is what parents do. Even as adults, to perceive losing that when our parents die is to experience the isolation and loneliness, even with a sense of a loss of safety, that can accompany our sorrow. Some adult children, even in their 60's, were still treated as "the children" by their aging parents.

The death of a parent, and, in time, the surviving parent, can create a sense of emptiness and abandonment for the surviving children. Ritual, meaning and process are moving in new ways when a parent dies. We are wandering without our parent/shepherd. For others it is the extended burdens of caring for a surviving parent who not only grieves, but may be facing other serious and progressive issues.

Some shut down religiously and/or spiritually. "When Mom died, so did God. I was taken to church as a tiny baby by my Mom. She was my faith nurturer. Just last week, and I am 58 years old (the son), she called and said, 'And of course I will see you at church tomorrow.'" The son had lost his faith link. A Muslim man laments, "I always looked forward to going to the mosque with my father. Together we prayed. We are no longer together."

Healthy spirituality is affirming, meets us in our sorrow, and ought to be an expression of community even when family, friends, feelings or religion isolate us. Spirituality is our connection with and to ourselves. Healthy spirituality is the antidote to abandonment or at least the pathway through it. Spirituality is our connection with and to ourselves and to the "other," however experienced by each person, leading us through the "Why's" to the "What now's?"

### *Reconciliation/restoration/forgiveness*

During funeral planning discussions, family tension can easily boil over. When preparing a funeral for a person I had never met, one adult daughter shouted out, "If you knew my father you wouldn't be asking these questions. There is redeemable in my father."

Over months of counseling and story listening with people like her, the anger and sadness continues to fester at or near the surface. The relationship died long ago.

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## EDITOR'S JOURNAL

### *A Rainbow Surprise*

Fall...the season of sunshine and showers, brisk breeze and brilliant color. My favorite time of year. Like children trying to grasp the last days of summer and take in a few more rays of sunshine, our group of six took to the golf course despite the temperamental weather that day. Amid vivid, warm sunshine, patches of threatening dark clouds, and sprinkles (even downpours) of rain, we were determined to finish the game. There was enough rain to dampen the spirit, but not enough to quit the game. After all, it could be the last 9-holes of the season.

We stood on a ridge looking down at the 5th hole, contemplating the challenge of whopping the golf ball across the ravine from one ridge to the other. We nervously teed up hoping to avoid the defeating "plishhhh", a familiar sound, as the golf ball falls short and neatly sinks below the cool, rippling surface in defeat.

Each of us personally felt empowered to make it happen. We could feel it. Today was the day to sail over the stream and land safely near the green—let it be!

On the other side, we were relieved to ( in a few extra strokes) be only yards away from the green. It was then the rain came down again..and then the sun...and then ---wow!—a brilliant double rainbow! The rainbow arched beautifully across a blue sky and ended perfectly in the stream at the foot of the bridge we just crossed. What a spectacular picture of natural beauty! It seemed like you could walk down and put your hand directly into the imaginary pot of gold below the rippling surface. All six of us stopped and paid homage to this miracle minute.

In grief, we trudge on month after month through the seasons, often failing to take advantage of the quiet moments, brilliant sunshine, and tiny miracles that bring us joy. We see the joy that others experience, but fail to see how it could work in our lives. We dwell on the clouds, and dismiss the rainbows. Life seems too uncertain to bring promises and hope. Isn't this the

misery of grief? We feel it. We accept it. And we feel we deserve the right to be sad.

The holidays are approaching, and we have a new set of social events to worry about. That means we have to begin preparing already to embrace the unexpected, high anxiety, and frightening social moments with people who just don't understand. We can do it if we breathe deeply and capture any moment of beauty and happiness that will sustain us when things seem challenging.

Charge your "battery" now. Take in the rainbow, the sunshine, the brilliant palette of fall colors. Take a walk. Sing a song, Rake the leaves. Visit a shut-in. Go to a Remembrance program during the holidays. Do something you never did before. Play one last game of golf and look for hope in whopping the ball from ridge to ridge and landing only strokes away from the green. Then don't be afraid to look back and honor the memories and blessings behind you. The double rainbow...the promise that someday things will be better again. The tiny miracles that once brought you joy.

## *The Daughter of a Soldier*

Recently, I was in Atlanta, Georgia attending a conference. While I was in the airport, returning home, I heard several people behind me begin to clap and cheer. I immediately turned around and witnessed one of the greatest acts of patriotism I have ever seen.

Moving thru the terminal was a group of soldiers in their camo's. As they began heading to their gate everyone (well almost everyone) was abruptly to their feet with their hands waving and cheering. When I saw the soldiers, probably 30—40 of them, being applauding and cheering. Then, it hit me. I'm not alone. I'm not the only red blooded American who still loves this country and supports our troops and their families.

Of course I immediately stopped and began clapping for these young unsung heroes who are putting their lives on the line everyday for us so we can go to school, work and home without fear or reprisal. Just when I thought I could not be more proud of my country or of our service men and women a young girl, not more than 6 or 7 years old, ran up to one of the male soldiers. He kneeled down and said "Hi!" The little girl then asked him if he would give something to her daddy for her. The young soldier (he didn't look any older than 22 himself) said he would try and what did she want to give to her daddy. Then suddenly the little girl grabbed the neck of this soldier, gave him the biggest hug she could muster and then kissed him on the cheek.

The mother of the little girl said her daughter's name was Courtney She told the young soldier that her husband was a

Marine and had been in Iraq for 11 months now. As the mom was explaining how much her daughter, Courtney, missed her father, the young soldier began to tear up. When this temporarily single mom was done explaining her situation, all of the soldiers huddled together for a brief second. Then one of the soldiers pulled out a military looking walkie-talkie. They started playing with the device and talking back and forth on it.

After about 10-15 seconds of this, the young soldier walked back over to Courtney, bent down and said, "I spoke to your daddy and he told me to give this to you." He then hugged this little girl that he had just met and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He finished by saying "Your daddy told me to tell you that he loves you more than anything; and he is coming home very soon."

The mom, at this point, was crying almost uncontrollably. The young soldier stood up and saluted Courtney and her mom. I was standing no more than 6 feet away when this entire event unfolded. As the soldiers began to leave, heading towards their gate, people resumed their applause. As I stood there applauding and looking around, there were very few dry eyes, including my own. That young soldier, in one last act of selflessness, turned around and blew a kiss to Courtney with a tear rolling down his cheek.

We need to remember everyday all of our soldiers and their families and thank God for them and their sacrifices. At the end of the day, it's good to be an American. (Received from a friend through email.)

## When Adult Children Grieve

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- Alcoholism or other addictions
- Co-dependency/enabling
- Always working / never there for the kids
- Financial disasters
- Kids were the last priority
- Abuse
- Incest
- Domestic violence
- The judgmental character of family
- The negative impact of cultural or religious norms
- Rigid control with dictatorial parenting and discipline
- Children prohibited from being children

For many adult children, the parental relationship, maybe even the family itself, died long ago. The contemporary death is generally not about the "now," but the death "back when..." There is premature closure. "The person is finally out of my life." That may comfort for a time, but oftentimes the floodgates around those deep and significant old wounds will burst.

Abusive religion would push for the status quo, for a set of criteria that says this is what marriage, family, parenting must be about because I believe these are what the teachings say or because a religious leader or group says, we believe. Abusive religion loves shame and that shame further isolates and abuses the adult parents in ways that additionally compromise their effectiveness as parents.

Healthy spirituality acknowledges that things happen for many reasons and for no apparent reason. Life is not always fair or just. It isn't really about rules, but relationships and relationships fractured or abused. Healthy spirituality is inviting, meeting as where we are, as we are, not where others, including religion, determine we should be.

Even in the best of situations we have some unresolved "stuff" with our parents. For some the scars are so deep there will be no

reconciliation. There may be healing that helps us release the burden for us. Spiritual pathways, in any religion and in no particularly defined religious expression, should move us from this abyss to a measure of health that redeems us around how we feel about ourselves and then to grieve effectively.

### *Rituals*

Rituals are used by individuals, families, communities, even nations (as witnessed profoundly after 9/11) to give meaning, clarity and voice to what has occurred, to help in the search for meaning, some experience of closure, and the desire and strength to take a few small steps toward tomorrow.

The death of the parent of adult children slashes through all of the family and individual rituals.

- How do we have Thanksgiving without Dad there to carve the turkey?
- What will be the seating arrangement at the dinner table?
- What is the bathroom schedule?
- Who controls the remote control?
- Who will be my best friend?
- Who will get to the kids event when I can't?
- Who will be my listener/counselor/guide?

In addition to these feelings we may also have inherited an enormous mess with the deceased parent (bills, property, possessions) and also caring for a surviving parent. The surviving parents don't always play fair.

Meaning is found in the stories, chores done together, shared spiritual exercises. What concerns the parents now become the concerns of the adult children. There may be shifting of roles, even the reversal of them, but rituals nevertheless can step in to clarify or become new or renegotiated with comparable results.

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## When Adult Children Grieve

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When my father faced brain surgery for a tumor, his dementia was very apparent. We were already glimpsing the Alzheimer's that one day would strangle him. Now he was frequently delightfully confused, sometimes sadly, and at other times that sent roars of laughter down the hospital corridor. The night before his surgery his pastor commuted from Staten Island to Manhattan (two hours each way) to bring him communion.

All of the pores of our emotions were wide open. I also was struggling with the priest vs. son role. It isn't easy, what with pressures from others and sometimes myself. I knew what the Eucharist could and should be for my Dad, and yet also witnessed my father taking the conversations and actions way into the deepest corners of his memory. Still, this was my father, the proper English gentleman, saying the most outlandish things. For all of us it was Communion.

Rituals would continue to plague us and bless us. My father faced four more years of living and dying. The deterioration was so slow and yet much too fast. My mother continued to deny everything, unable to accept this stranger in her midst. Her health also was deteriorating. We prayed that Dad would get better while also praying that death would come quickly and quietly. Our spiritual yearning enabled us to demand answers to questions that had no answers, to release our sadness and our rage, and, with the old, old rituals and many new ones, to be family, to be parents and adult children.

*Printed with permission. The author is The Rev'd. Richard B. Gilbert, PhD, BCC, CT, executive director, The World Pastoral Care Center, and Director of Chaplaincy Series, Sherman Health, Elgin, IL. Article written for: The Forum, the newsletter of The Association for Death Education and Counseling.*

### **Resources**

#### Adult children

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## *Be Good to Yourself -A self Care Tip*

Sometimes after a traumatic loss or event in our lives, we find it difficult to imagine that any good can come from the sorrow we know we must face.

Relying on faith in something "greater than yourself" is the factor that helps grievers rebound. Faith does not diminish grief, but it does give us hope that things can be better again one day.

When faith is steadfast and hope is triumphant, we find lives transformed in ways we cannot imagine. We are compassionate, loving, and more in control of our destinies, our dreams, and our lives.

It's like the story of the pumpkin. A woman was asked by a coworker, "What is it like to be a Christian?"

The coworker replied, "It is like being a pumpkin." God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off of you. Then He cuts off the top and scoops out all the yucky stuff.

He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, and greed. Then He carves you a new smiling face and puts His light inside of you to shine for all the world to see."

## On the Lighter Side

The husband dies. He had \$30,000 to his name.

After everything is done at the funeral home and cemetery, the widow tells her closest friend that there is none of the \$30,000 left.

The friend says, "How can that be?"

The widow says, "Well, the funeral cost me \$6,500. And of course I made a donation to the church... that was \$500, and I spent another \$500 for the wake, food and drinks, you know. . The rest went for the memorial stone."

The friend says, "\$22,500 for the memorial stone? My God, how big is it?"

The widow says, "Three carats"



An old man was telling his grandson the secret to a long, happy, fruitful life. "The secret," he said, "is to sprinkle a little gunpowder on your oatmeal each morning."

The grandson thought this was odd, but still he did it every morning. And the old timer was right. When the young boy died, he left behind 13 children, 23 grandchildren, 34 great-grandchildren and a fifteen-foot hole in the wall of the crematorium!

## When Adult Children Grieve

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# *The Ship of Life*

*by John T. Baker*

Along the shore I spy a ship  
As she sets out to sea;  
She spreads her sails and sniffs the breeze  
And slips away from me.

I watch her fading image shrink,  
As she moves on and on,  
Until at last she's but a speck,  
Then someone says, "She's gone."

Gone where?  
Gone only from our sight  
And from our farewell cries;  
That ship will somewhere reappear  
To other eager eyes.

Beyond the dim horizon's rim  
Resound the welcome drums,  
And while we're crying, "There she goes!"  
They're shouting,  
"Here she comes!"

We're built to cruise for but a while  
Upon this trackless sea  
Until one day we sail away  
Into infinity.