

## Minding My Own Grief

I have spent years comforting people who are grieving the death of a loved one. Now it is my turn to look at grieving from the inside out.

Thursday, November 3, 2005, my mother died. On the surface, you might think that I would have been prepared for that day. After all, I help grieving people for a living, and my dad died just six years ago. My mother had Alzheimer's disease, and had been in decline for the past two years. I even got that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when my sister's email said that my mother had gone to the hospital again, thinking this might be the last time. Why shouldn't the event be easy?

Well, I wasn't prepared for what followed. You see, when your last parent dies, when the stress of trying to care for her has made her kids a little crazy for a few years, when she can no longer acknowledge her son, but can only slump in her chair, roll her eyes away, then close them as she buries her face in her hand, you know that she has already left you, even though she is still around. Deep down inside, Marie's little boy had known for a while that it would be hard losing his mama this way, and that he probably wouldn't like it one bit. Under the circumstances, hoping for a smooth transition was just plain old wishful thinking.

Living two states away, I loved and hated that I could not be the one nearby, to run to my frail mother's side to protect her from stuff that other old people have to endure. Worn down by years of cringing each time she made the trip from the nursing home to the hospital, I think I tried to numb myself, maybe insulate myself, from the foreboding of the coming end that so haunted me each time I made the long drive that ended with that dreaded, predictable reception. But even numbness couldn't save me.

The haunting finally became reality, as the end came too soon, even after ninety years of life. And, it didn't release me from the tension that had been building since the day my dad died, and the dementia that those two old folks had so masterfully hidden from their adult children for years was finally exposed. Never mind my denial – I steadfastly maintain that they were masters of deception.

But this story is not about dementia. This is just a story about some things I noticed as I went about the business of minding my own grief for a change.

First of all, grief brings stress. I didn't notice it at first, in fact never really noticed it at all before. Perhaps the events leading up to my mom's death taught me how to stress, instead of teaching me how to mourn. You see, I think the stress got in the way of my mourning. But this is not the stress of a schoolteacher's kid trying to get his homework right. This stress wells up from within, first diverting your focus away from anything you want it on, then surreptitiously sucking away bits of energy until one day you try to stand up, and you feel a bit faint for no apparent reason; your digestive system tightens from the esophagus to – well, you get the picture - and your head inflates with hot air or something, making it feel heavy when you think it should be floating.

I can't help but notice that if you take away the trauma-specific elements needed to diagnose Acute Stress or Post Traumatic Stress, we grieving people sometimes function in much the same way as people who have been exposed to trauma. Maybe we should not be so surprised that human beings, reacting to an abrupt change of their world, show symptoms of inability to eat or sleep, loss of concentration and memory, numbness, and the like, whether the event was traumatic or not. And, since so much of the results of stress can be felt in the body, it makes

sense that some cultures in the past have allowed, even mandated, that the mourner stop doing whatever he or she is doing, and mourn the loss for a season, unlike the “get-back-to-normal” mindset of modern western society. They must have known that, when someone dies, our ability to produce anything healthy from our bodies and minds is severely impaired for a while, so there’s no sense fighting it. Heck, I didn’t need any darned old trauma to make me feel and act that way. My mom’s death was quite enough, thank you.

Here is something else I noticed when my mom died: The very fact that my life changed forever was quite enough to cause me stress. Yes, my heart rate reflected the upheavals within my soul, my mind produced dribble, and my body quaked, but it was my changed situation that rushed to the forefront of my mind the moment I heard that my mom had died, and preoccupied my thoughts for weeks: My mom is gone; I have no parents. I have thought about it a lot, and can tell you a couple of reasons why I think this was so big of a deal:

- Sudden disconnect. There’s just no comfortable way to be separated permanently from your mother. Even at ninety years of age, I still grimace every time I am asked, “Was it expected?” The moment that two souls become disconnected is always sudden, and shocking. That’s stressful.
- Loss of ritual. My parents were the standard bearers of ritual in my family that the collective might of all five of their kids can’t possibly reconstruct, no matter how hard we try. Where the heck were we when they passed around the rulebook? Doesn’t anyone realize that no one will EVER get the rituals right without my parents? Sitting in the church, strains of that beautiful, old, all-but-forgotten music washing over me, much of it from the days of slavery, I knew that one of the last keepers of the rituals that shaped me lay still in the front of that little room, and within minutes would carry my part in those rituals to her grave, never to be retrieved. Stressful!
- Alzheimers. The change started when I began noticing symptoms of this disease. First the insult of having a mother who could no longer be my mother, then her death. Watching her waste away for years brought the stress of knowing that she was leaving; I just didn’t find a way to resolve that stress before she was gone.

I was once asked, “Who comforts you when you hurt?” I couldn’t answer on that day, but I was determined that I would have an answer if ever asked again. I feel like the Psalm writer, crying out not to be left alone in that lonely and desolate place that overtakes the soul when a loved one dies. In the past, I admit that I just longed for the God of the Psalmist somehow to magically take away my pain. Lately I am beginning to understand that His comfort comes to me through those around me. Now, I both see and feel the presence of my comforters.

Of course, my wife and my children are the first I see. I notice them more now than ever before, and place no demands on them except that they “are with me”, kind of like the Shepherd was with the Psalmist. But now I also see clearly what I instinctively knew as a young boy when my grandmother died, the first death that brought with it the deep pain that you feel when someone you love dies. Today, I can see that my horses, too, had been my comforters, a fact that I almost missed. You see, the fields and woodlands surrounding my grandmother’s house were also the home for my horses. There, in that sacred place, I romped and hung out with them, and generally basked in my grandmother’s memory, accompanied by my best friends, my silent companions. Little did I know that they were healing the pain of the loss every day that we retraced together all the paths that I had once explored with Granny, while her healing memory deepened its place in my soul. We didn’t need to talk about it; we just needed to be there together. Funny. The stuff that I help people do today – giving yourself the time and space you need to heal, letting the memories take root in your soul, and such – my horses were with me when I began to learn.

My healing companion today is Starlite, an eight-year-old sorrel Quarter Horse gelding. He only came into my life in August, but from the start I knew that we each had need of the other. He needed a job and a purpose, and I would soon need a refuge from my pain. When I am with him, my body and my brain don't feel the stress so much. And, maybe my heart doesn't feel the pain so much. When we are together, he gets to work hard, I get to show him how much I appreciate it, and he seems genuinely glad that we are together, work and all.

In a world that will no longer be the same because my mom is no longer in it, for a few hours at a time, he reminds me that I can be OK in this world again. It won't all happen at once, but it's good to be reminded that it will be OK again – someday. For now, Kathy, Kimberly, Amber – and Starlite – comfort me. That's good enough.