

## *The Grief of Older Parents*

It is difficult for society, in general, to understand the complexity of the loss of a child, no matter the age. Probably the two least understood losses are those at either end of the spectrum: the unsuccessful pregnancy, including stillbirth and death shortly after birth, and the loss of an adult child.

In the first case, they wonder why you grieve for someone they feel you didn't know, and in the second case, they think that because the son or daughter no longer lived at home and was no longer a part of your everyday life, with a family of his or her own, perhaps that the pain of the death shouldn't be so bad. They seem not to understand that your children are a part of your life, for all of your life, no matter how far away they may be.

Someone has reminded us that we do not love our children any more because they have lived long enough for the parents to watch them grow and develop. It is also important to realize that the older children also aren't loved any less. You continue to love them and to develop new relationships with them. It is so frustrating for older parents to have poured all that time, effort and love into the rearing and shaping of a child, to have done a good job and had the time to see the end result; to have been able to love and enjoy the decent, worthwhile adult who has emerged, who is now a part of two relationships, that of parent/child and friend/friend, and now to have lost both of those relationships.

Even if the older child has turned out to be not all that the parents had hoped for, and has caused unhappiness with, for example, his alcoholism, the parents are still very much involved in this child's problems and escapades. Worrying about him and being a part of his support system becomes a way of life, and if this child dies, suddenly they are at a loss for a center in their life. They love him, no matter what his shortcomings are and they grieve for his loss, as well.

As parents age, role reversals often develop between them and their children. After years of being responsible, in-charge people, as they age they go from, "What will happen to my children if something happens to me?" to, "What will happen to me if something happens to my children?" The child becomes a large part of the older parents' security blanket, and they rely on them for comfort. The parents are reassured, thinking that when either one of them dies, a child will be there to care for the one who is left.

Imagine a situation where the mother, who is widowed and in her 60's and 70's, and who now relies on her son, in his 40's or 50's to help with her financial decisions, the upkeep of her home, any problems she may have with her car, among other things. If she has health problems, he will see that she gets the proper medical care and whatever financial assistance he is able to offer. He may have already assured her of a place in his home should the need arise. Suddenly, this child dies. Fear and insecurity become a real part of the mother's life, as though she were a helpless, young child, whose parents have died.

Some adult children, on the other hand, never leave home. Older retired parents now find their daily life revolves around the routine comings and goings of this adult child. When he dies, the parents are cast adrift with no anchor, just as surely as parents of younger terminally ill children, after the death. What do you do with all of your time now that the bug of your universe is no longer there? All reason for functioning seems to disappear.

If there are grandchildren left from this adult child who died, the grandparents now have to try and maintain a good relationship with the surviving in-law, with hopes that efforts on the part of the son or daughter-in-law to begin a new life won't include cutting off all relationships with the old life. Keeping in touch, but not intruding, can be tricky, particularly if there was not an especially good relationship between the grandparents and the in-law before the death. If the grandparents are denied access to their grandchildren, that is another great loss for them.

Most parents, no matter the age, will tell you they would have gladly taken their child's place in death, but older parents have inordinate amounts of survival guilt to deal with. What right do they, who have loved a long, full life, have to be alive when their child is dead? "It should be me", they will tell you with great sadness.

A large part of survival after the death of a child is being able to motivate yourself to reinvest in life. If you aren't able to accomplish this after an appropriate length of time, you don't fare as well as those who can. If most of your life is behind you, as in the case of older parents, they, who have already known a thousand little deaths over the years, have other losses of family and friends staring them in the face, as well as having to deal with their own mortality. Some of these parents, with age, aren't as mobile as they once were, so it is difficult for them to take advantage of any new interests that are available to help them in their effort to survive. Motivation, then, though not impossible, certainly becomes more difficult. Older parents, like younger parents, are told that time will heal. The older parents answer, "But I don't have that much time." Therein lies the larger part of the problem with adjustment and reinvestment.

As you begin to understand the enormity of the loss of older parents, it is once again brought home that there is no good way or age to lose a child – just different ways and ages, and all of them hard.

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