

AFTER THE FUNERAL

By Carol Abaya, M.A.

Carol's Special Note: The following thoughts, feelings and events are typical Sandwich Generationer reactions when one parent passes away and the other is on her own for the first time in decades. Madeline shared her thoughts and feelings -- and then came back two years later to share some more. . Emotional support to a surviving parent is very important, but so is "letting go." These are her thoughts in her own words.

She looked so small, walking away from the grave where she had just seen her husband, the love of her life, laid to rest. Fifty five years, the best of her world, her life, her heart, she was leaving behind. She was leaving so much of herself there, that as she turned to go I could picture her caught up on a breeze and dissolving into the air. I held on tightly to her that day. I wouldn't let her sail away on that stray breeze, I held on tightly because for her, there was no where on this earth that she would be happy. Her happiness was gone. As I watched her I knew that I wouldn't let her just quietly slip away. But how do you fight an enemy as inviting as the dark folding layers of grief and pain that offer to engulf your world?

He was my father, my cornerstone, my place of safety in the world. But the pain wasn't mine it was hers. The task at hand was to put aside anything that would stop me from becoming the anchor that she now so desperately needed. To feed her spirit and nurture what was left of her soul, to help her to see past the terror of the nights. Each day to be there for her to hold on to, when falling was easier than standing. This was the war I saw beginning.

My mother is a woman with an incredible strength of purpose. A small woman, normally quiet and friendly, she would become, when any of us was threatened, a giant, a force of nature. For her entire life she watched over us, worried about us, and used her strength to enable us. Now here she is, her children and grandchildren are grown, and her husband is gone. Suddenly after all of those years of protecting and nurturing there is no role for her to fill. It was at that point I saw the first of the changes that she was to pass through.

At first she showed no interest in the world as it now existed. The timeless cry of "You have to eat!" no longer applied to her. Sleep was the place to go where reality stepped aside. She became docile, and I had to bully her to eat. Walking, reading, TV, music, conversation, all of the things that had always mattered so much to her were now neatly placed on the shelves she arranged in her mind. Her reality now was only the absence of her husband.

The first weeks went by, and she became more accepting of my nagging. She was eating better, walking for exercise, talking (mostly about the past), but not even attempting to contemplate that there could be a future for herself. Responsibility for income taxes, rent, utility bills and bank statements overwhelmed her. Setting the digital clocks, learning how the remote controls worked the TV and the VCR. Unsure and afraid that she would mess something up. The mystery of all those things that my father had controlled. He had always

made everything sound so complicated. She felt that she was incapable of understanding all those facts and instructions. He had left her unprepared to handle all those weighty problems.

We organized all the paperwork, the bills and statements. We promised to have her taxes taken care of. We talked her through the checks and the remote controls. Anything that seemed complicated was put aside for us to look at. We told her all she had to do was take care of herself; that was her job now.

Because my parents had been so comfortable with each other there was rarely any time for outsiders. The circle of people who mattered to them had been shrinking for years. There was my sister and I, our children, their spouses and their children. No new friends had been made in 20 years. My father never wanted to explore the senior citizens centers in their neighborhood. When someone would mention them, he would complain that they were filled with old people. My father was 83 when he died, but he was never old. After his death, my mother talked about joining the senior center. She knew that she needed to have someplace to go and people to talk with. At first, she kept finding things to do that prevented her from actually going to the center. After she finally took the step and joined, she said that walking in alone on that first day was the hardest thing she had ever done. Everyone else seemed to know each other, and she felt lonelier than she ever had before. I think she felt that way because it was the first time she ever presented herself to the world as a widow.

Dependence Increased

During the first few months, when she stayed with me, she deferred to my handling of almost everything. Things for her were either black or white, good or bad, frightening or safe. Everything was two dimensional. She didn't want to deal with decision making, and it was easier to let me handle whatever came along. It was painful to watch the shifting of her role from a self assured adult to one of semi-helplessness. Add to that the child-like dependence for all but the most simplistic situations. These factors created a complex series of stressful situations for me. All this was happening in the first four to five months after my father's death.

Where was I emotionally during this time? At the beginning, I kept busy trying to make her transition easier. I had not had enough experience to understand I could only help with the practical things, and it was not in my power to help her deal with being alone. I felt an awesome responsibility to keep her grounded. When she was home, I would be vaguely uncomfortable until we spoke each day. Asking the same questions, was she eating properly and sleeping alright, who she spoke to on the phone, and what she watched on TV became a mantra. The conversations were, by in large, a way of checking her emotional temperature. Sometimes I felt that it would be easier having her at my house; then I could watch out for her and be her companion. But having her here for more than a week at time was both physically and emotionally exhausting. I started to resent her neediness. It seemed that the more attention I gave her the more she demanded. I couldn't go into another room to read, for she would follow, and in a few minutes begin talking to me. She had lost so much; but the void I was being asked to fill was bottomless. I felt as though I was suffocating. I couldn't wait until she would go home, and then I would feel selfish and guilty about my feelings. There didn't seem to be a balance that worked.

Own Grief Surfaced

Enter into this picture a sudden realization that I too had just experienced an enormous loss. Until then, I had not taken any time or space to mourn my father. I buried my own feelings for fear of making her sadder. The expectations I had for myself were unreasonable. I could not balance my emotions and her needs. The two had simply become incompatible.

By the sixth month, my mother started to snipe at little things that I would say or do. One of her methods of getting at me was to agree with either my kids or my husband, usually to prove I had made a mistake or done something wrong. She began involving herself in discussions, but on the side of someone else. The friction became terrible. I was irritable and raised my voice to her. Talk about guilt -- now it was my fault. Even my husband, who normally stayed out of our conflicts, questioned how I could be unkind to her. How could I explain to him the dimensions of this tug-of-war. The dynamics of our relationship had been twisted and turned inside-out. I began to see that the neediness she had developed was too much for her as well, and she was trying to place some distance between us. It was time to have a talk with her.

I told her that I loved her very much, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fill my father's place. I told her that I could only give so much of myself, and it was unfair to place all her emptiness before me, like a bucket waiting to be filled. We talked about her trusting herself and her ability to make new friends. How she could open herself up to enjoy some new experiences. I talked, she listened, then she talked. We agreed that she couldn't go forward unless she was willing to face her future without my dad. Never to forget him, or have a day without missing him, but to go forward, keeping him in her heart. She didn't have my dad with her anymore, but she wasn't alone. I would be there for her, anytime and any place.

I saw her pause, and gather her own thoughts. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly she straightened her back. At that same moment, her eyes flashed with the determination and strength of purpose I knew had always carried her through the most difficult times of her life. To me, that was the defining moment, when she finally began to see some familiar places in her long travel through the wilderness. She is my mother; she is a fighter; she has a wonderful and generous spirit, and now I know she is going to be fine.💖

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Two Years Later

As the plaintive sounds of the Shofar bring another Yom Kippur to a close, she pauses. Has it been two years since he was taken from her? After 55 years together, the lingering echo of the ram's horn brings him back so clearly. She feels the loss; the pain is sharp, fresh, immediate; the pain she has carried since he died. The Jewish High Holy Days always makes the loneliness harder to hear; and the fading note of the born cuts through her soul. Slowly, wiping away the tears, she sheds the sorrow, peeling layers of it from her heart. "Oh, Dave," she thinks, "Why did you have to leave me?"

Two years ago, my mother lost the most precious person in her life -- her husband, my father. The first four months of transition were traumatic. Fears revolved around her head;

her loneliness became a dark smothering paralysis that challenged daylight, laughter and hope. Her home became a prison, solitary confinement without hope for parole. She could not imagine enduring the rest of her life alone.

In the first few months, her time alone was kept minimal. My sister and I would bring her to my house for a week; then to my sister's for an additional week. Between visits to us, she would be home for a week or two at the most. Then, we would drive to Brooklyn again to pick her up. In those days, she said that the only time she slept well was when visiting us.

We heard the cry for protection against all the terrors of the world, and not giving in to it was hard. But that would not have been in her best interest. She needed to restart her life, to be independent in her own world.

My father died in August. During the first few months, there were so many firsts. The first wedding anniversary without him; the first High Holy Days; the first Thanksgiving, Chanukah, and New Year's Eve. Looking back, I can see that those times were easy to deal with, because she simply stayed with us! We made enough noise to drown out her silent screams.

The practical matters were another story. How to keep a checkbook; what to do about income taxes' do the stock proxies have to be signed? These matters were handled one by one, patiently, slowly, encouraging her to handle the things she could, and giving us the things she could not. Everything took time and patience. The frustrating phone calls: how to set the digital clock; what to do about the VCR; how to change the battery in the smoke alarm. Daddy always did those things; all the tasks he so jealously guarded. He took such good care of her for all those years, she was totally unprepared to be alone.

The support and encouragement she had from the family was uncompromising. If she needed us, we were there. She trusted us, and that I believe gave her the courage to attempt to take on all those new responsibilities. Slowly she became comfortable with the check book and how the bank statements are written.

The assorted pieces of mail that she received; deciding which were important, which were not. For the first year, going to the mailbox was ceremoniously undertaken. At a given time each day, the postman delivered to the apartment house. She timed her arrival just as he finished sorting the letters. It was as if the letters should not stay in the box without her immediate attention. Everything had to be taken care of immediately. Checks for rent and utilities had to be written immediately. She took her responsibilities very seriously. An unfamiliar notice or statement would bring a telephone call, beginning with "I just opened the mail, and ..." A sense of order and control was very important to her. Her slow transition into self determination in practical matters took nearly a year, and by the second year she was handling all of her daily affairs. Oh, occasionally I still get a phone call that starts, "I just opened the mail, and..."

It was far harder to help her with the social aspects. My father and mother were inseparable. Their daily routine was absolute; varying only by change of inclement weather or an appointment with a doctor or dentist. Their routine was comforting and safe. Neighbors were smiled at and hellos were exchanged; but entry into their world was not encouraged. Dad's time with Mom was cherished, and except for family, he had little use for friendships.

Mom was more social, but adapted to his impatience with prolonged telephone calls or neighborly gossip. So, when she found herself without him, she also found herself without a network of friends. She finally joined the local senior center. Walking in the first day, seeing only faces of strangers took a tremendous amount of courage. Little by little, one by one, she turned those strangers into friends. Eating lunch every day with her new friends, playing cards twice a week and attending lectures and classes, gave her a life structure that was comforting.

Weekdays had a new routine, somewhere to go, friends to eat with, exercise classes, discussion groups, entertainment, card games, her daily walks. But this was Monday through Friday. She dreaded the weekend; that was when the loneliness set in. I had suggested that she make arrangements with one of her friends for a Saturday walk or card game. But she adamantly proclaimed that her friends spent weekends with their families.

That was the first year. The second year she changed. Her confidence was growing daily. She would tell me how her friends looked to her for advice, and admired her strength and independence. She began to believe them, and in doing so, she began to believe in herself. Today she has standing dates with her friends for weekend walks, followed by shopping and lunch at a local restaurant.

She comes out to visit every 6 to 8 weeks, depending on everyone's schedule. Her visits are filled with stories about the senior center and her friends there. She laughs when she speaks of how impressed the discussion group's leader is with her observations and common sense.

I think that they are impressed with a person who is grounded in reality and has the wisdom and compassion of one who entered a doorway of darkness, traveled through, and at the end of the darkness, realizes how far she has come. The world without my father will never be the place where she wishes to be; but the world holds joy for her again. Thanks to her friends, her community, her children and grandchildren. 🍷

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