



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Final Gifts

Stories of Loss and Remembrance
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Two Departures, Two Stories by Ann Grant

Death comes in many forms; sometimes it's anticipated, even welcomed, at the end of a long and productive life. Sometimes it's shocking, and comes unwanted, cutting short a promising beginning. Many in our group have experienced death in some form in the last year. We would like to share our stories with you, hoping that they may be helpful as you think about your own death, or that of loved one.

Afterward we'll be available to talk, and we have some brochures and information on a table outside, on hospice, planning memorials, and on completing advanced health care directives.

There are also two sign-up sheets – one if you would be interested in an advanced care directive workshop, and a second if you would be interested in a bereavement support group here at church.

These are not always easy stories, as dying is not necessarily an easy process. As you listen, we would ask you to think about your own end of life, or that of a loved one. Advance preparations can make a significant difference in how turbulent or calm your leave-taking is. You might ask yourself, "What would I want if I were to experience this? What would I like to know or do beforehand if this was my loved one?"

And dying does not just happen to people, of course. Treasured pets also die, and, as Linda's story shows, grieving and acknowledging this loss is important. Ask yourself, "If I knew that a friend had lost a much-loved pet, how might I provide support?"

As a nurse, I've seen death, both planned for and not. I've seen the challenge to friends and family as they try to ease a loved ones passing without knowing precisely what that loved one wants. I resolved early on that I would follow the example of my Grandfather Will, who began planning his funeral in his 60s and died 30 years later his 90s. Grandfather had to keep revising his funeral plans as designated pallbearers passed away, or his eulogizer moved out of state. Being identified as his organist seemed to be a particularly hazardous assignment – I think at least three of his organists predeceased him, some by decades. We teased Grandfather about his long-running planning, but he said that, as he revised each time, it was an opportunity to acknowledge those friends who had died, and to reaffirm his own desires to die quiet, natural death, and he did. It was very comforting for his family to know what he wanted in terms of his care at the last, and in his service of remembrance. It was Grandfather's final, loving gift to all of us.

At the opposite pole was my ex-husband's death. We were together for more than 30 years, and divorced for 18, but we remained friends for many of those years. I learned of his death on Facebook in December. Because at the last he was estranged from his family and friends, he chose not to tell anyone about his final illness and approaching death, except for one former student who helped him arrange his affairs. Don died alone, at home, and that was his choice.

But it was a very hard choice for family and friends, who would have supported him, still loved him despite the estrangement. We decided that – while we respected his own choice to die alone – this was not the last memory we would choose to have of him. We arranged for a memorial at Cal Poly, where he had taught form

many years, and we honored this gifted, challenging, creative, frustrating man, and wished that his ending had been kinder.

As I say, these are not easy stories to tell – we know they are not easy to hear, but we hope they will be instructive as we each think about our own end of life, and the decisions we can make.

Grieving is a Part of Life by Susette Horspool

Grieving a loss or pending loss can occur at many different times and be triggered in many different ways. Elizabeth Kubler Ross identified five states of grief, some of which you can see in the piece I just sang: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Typically, we don't go from one to the next, but switch around between them.

Grieving is a natural part of life. According to actor, Sam Shepard, "Grief is bizarre territory because there's no predicting how long it'll take to get over certain things. There's no telling how long it will resound in your life."

Between the years of 1999 and 2006 at least ten people in my family died, including one of my six brothers and both of my parents. I was living in Lancaster CA then. The hardest death for me was my father, who died in 2005 so, naturally, that's the one I'm going to share.

If the decline of a cherished dream ('cause it happens then too) or a loved one is gradual, like it was with him, and the loss predictable, we can grieve before, as well as after. It first hit me that he was going at my sister's house in Thousand Oaks, several months ahead. Dad was complaining about the combined medications he was taking, and I stepped in (again) to suggest ways around his confusion. I had spent years training myself in how to stay healthy without drugs, and had been angry already that he wasn't taking better care of himself. But he didn't want suggestions this time. He brushed me off, and it suddenly hit me hard that he was preparing himself to die, and there was nothing I could do about it. I quickly left the room to mourn alone.

Just a few months before he died, I was helping a veterans group construct wooden crosses, representing soldiers who'd been killed in Iraq. I got a cellphone call from my sister who had taken our father to watch her son play basketball. Dad had disappeared. After a search, Kathy's husband found him standing in the middle of the men's restroom, completely bewildered, not knowing where he was or what he should do next. This was a man who had acquired a PhD from UCLA in ethnomusicology and was proud of his intellectual abilities. I sat down on the curb, out of sight of the other cross builders, and wept at the decline.

As Dad's time came closer, more such incidents occurred. Eventually we moved him to a nursing home, and two weeks later, he contracted a mysterious infection in his leg. The home called an ambulance, which took him to the hospital, where doctors discovered the infection ravaging his entire body. They gave him antibiotics and then moved him to an outpatient care facility. Within the month he was back in the hospital being fed through a gastro-intestinal tube, pretty much lost in delirium.

On Friday, June 2nd, 2005, Kathy called me at home to say that my brother, Doug, and I needed to come down to the hospital. Dad was worse and the doctor didn't think it would be much longer. All but one of us seven siblings made it down to see him. That one sibling didn't really believe it was that serious. It may have been denial, but who knew, then, for sure?

I spent the night and three of us spent the next day in the hospital, chatting quietly, playing guitar, singing harmonies, while the others wandered in and out. At one point Dad whispered, "Very nice" when we

finished singing. That was the last thing I heard him say. Two days later, after we'd all gone home, he died peacefully, early in the morning, in his hospital bed.

Kathy and I arranged for his cremation and put together a memorial service at the Antelope Valley College where he'd taught for thirty years—in the music auditorium that he had designed. It was a great service with students, teachers, family—warm and sentimental. We buried his ashes in a local graveyard, with only family and cousins in attendance, and then went out to dinner. There was the usual mourning and attendant camaraderie.

After that I felt relief that it was over, but there were still a few moments of grieving to go. One was a sudden deep sadness that erupted for no reason a few months later. I called my brother and went to his place to talk and cry. He put on music and made me breakfast, which was unusual for him and very soothing for me.

Dad's death affected our family chemistry. At our next gathering, I tried to get my brothers to play guitar, so we could sing, hoping that it would make up for the loss of Dad's piano playing. We tried to get our nephew to play keyboard too, but it didn't work. My brothers were angry at me for “pushing” them and our nephew couldn't play well enough yet. For over a year we stopped making music at family gatherings.

Sometimes grief is triggered in unexpected ways. A year or so after my father's passing, I was sitting in a little restaurant inside my favorite health food store. I noticed a man and his aging father sitting at a table not far from me. They got up to leave, and the man went to the cash register, while the father went to the door. But suddenly the father got confused and cried out his son's name. The son looked around, called to him, and then went over to gently take his arm and guide him back to the cash register. I turned my face to the wall. Compassion is a hard feeling to have when you're in public.

There have been other such occurrences, and they do lessen over time. Letting the grief out helps clear any low-level, chronic pain. And discovering that there's a certain sweetness that accompanies reminders of loss, which actually helps soften the pain, makes it easier to let go. That's why I like Roberta Flack's song so much. The poignant sweetness is there, and I can let it remind me of all my losses, along with the love inherent within them.

Learning to Relax by Ellen Rosenblatt

My mother died this past September and I didn't grieve much. I always assumed that when she died I would be devastated for at least awhile, but I wasn't. I felt some guilt about this and worried that I was a cold person until I realized that I had been mourning the lack of a close relationship with her my whole life. I had a difficult relationship with my mother. I was rarely relaxed around her and sensed waves of tension when she was around. I felt like I made her nervous especially when I tried to show her physical affection. When I was very young, I thought it was my fault. Later, I used to describe my mother as a 'difficult person'. I am realizing now that it was the interaction between us which was difficult, not me or her alone. I know that my brother and father have different descriptions of their experiences with her.

I found my mother especially hard to be with while she was dying. She was frustrated, in pain and lashing out at family and care-givers. She didn't die of any one disease; she was bed-ridden due to extreme neck pain and multiple falls and had various other non-life-threatening issues. She probably could have lived for quite a while with these issues if she wanted to. However, she didn't want to. A diagnosis of 'failure to thrive' with a life-expectancy of 6 months or less allowed her to go into hospice. When asked by a hospice nurse if she wanted to discontinue food and water, she very clearly and with extreme lucidity, said “yes”. The only other

lucid thing she said around that time about things happening in the present was her response one time when asked the question 'Who is president?' She said, "Trump, unfortunately."

I think my mom made a valid choice. She decided she didn't want to continue living with her current quality of life. She seemed more relaxed and less frustrated once this decision had been made. Of course, she could have stopped eating and drinking on her own without hospice. Being in hospice allowed the process to be supervised and for her to be at home, with morphine, medical equipment and around the clock aides. Hospice also removed any remaining expectation that she might recover. That was especially good for my dad who had been in denial. He did seem more relaxed, although sadder, once he stopped fighting the inevitable. It was good for the rest of us because we were able to gather the extended family to be with us.

After my mom died, I was shell-shocked and somewhat traumatized. I mistook this for grief for a while but when it wore off, realized that what I was feeling was not typical grief. I felt bad that she had suffered. I felt terrible that my father and aunt seemed to feel such intense grief but, when I was honest with myself, I was not grieving the fact that I couldn't be with her again.

I have come to accept that my lack of grief is OK. I cannot manufacture a feeling if it isn't there. I am not a cold person to not miss a relationship which was so uncomfortable for me. Although I am not grieving, I am trying to let go of any residual anger towards my mom. I did feel angry at her for a lot of my life – I wanted her to be more confident, less anxious, yell at my father less and show him and me more physical affection. I am trying to practice what I think of as, 'radical forgiveness', towards her and towards myself. I googled this term and saw that it is 'a thing' with a book and a workshop. I am not using it in that sense but only because I needed a strong adjective to go with 'forgiveness'. It's very hard to forgive myself and my mother so I need to work at it proactively and aggressively.

One positive outcome of my mother's death is that I am much closer with my dad now. It was hard to be close to him as an individual when my mom was alive since they were so intertwined. My mother would probably have been jealous if she knew this would happen. I like to think that her true, better self would be happy. I also like to think that my mom's spirit is happy somewhere and the doubt, anxiety and frustration she seemed to feel most of her life are gone.

My friend Ona Gritz had a relationship with her mom which seems very similar to mine. She is a poet and wrote a book of poems called 'Left Standing' after both of her parents died. To close, I will read a poem called 'God Gives Back Rubs' from this book.

My mother, I believe,
is learning to relax.
Clutter and unmade beds
have lost their hold on her
as has silverware
placed the wrong way
in the dishwasher.
Now, reclining
beside my father,
who turns the pages
of a blank newspaper,
she writes, "God
gives back rubs,"
on a postcard of Elvis.
"And the view is to die for."

Missing Sweet Pea by Linda Doran

For some of us, pets are like family members. Raise your hand if you feel that way. I, too, am one of those people. In my case, maybe it has a lot to do with growing up in a dysfunctional family. For others, it may just be that they are super sensitive and supportive of creatures that are not human. Maybe you have a service animal that helps take care of you or a family member. There are lots of ways that pets become near and dear to us.

I was really devastated in early 2017 when I lost my pet ferret, Sweet Pea. It's always hard to lose a pet, and it's been my experience that it never gets easier. Even so, some pets just seem to bond more closely with me than others. Sweet Pea was one of those. She was cuddly and liked to sleep with me – not common behaviors for these wiggly little critters that spend most of their time sleeping, interrupted by brief periods of active awake time. She trusted me completely.

There's always been this layer of guilt surrounding such a loss. Why didn't I take her to the vet sooner? I had noticed symptoms that something might be amiss but I was so busy just trying to make ends meet that I didn't act sooner. In the end, kidney failure killed her, likely caused by a tumor. It's still hard to forgive myself – maybe that's something I need to work on.

I discovered another interesting thing. When I stopped worrying about everything else and focused first and foremost on providing the care Sweet Pea needed, I felt more alive than usual. Perhaps the most important part of life is the deep caring that even though the feelings of eventual loss are so overwhelming that I often avoid them. Sweet Pea's demise happened during the one month out of the year when I actually made decent money. I spent all of it and then some trying to save her. I spent every waking moment that I could with her. I took her to vets in Pasadena, San Diego, and even Portland. I was so hopeful that with enough effort and the best veterinary care, we could save her.

In the end, it wasn't possible to save her. I drove all day and through the night from Portland back to L.A. – downslope from the Oroville Dam as it was in danger of failing in February 2017 – and even had an accident in the dead of night when a big piece of retread that blended in with the blacktop seriously damaged the undercarriage of my car. (It turns out I wasn't alone – several cars pulled off at the next exit to assess the damage.) I needed to get her to my vet so she could euthanize her in such a way that I could be with her. The veterinarian in Portland, for all his expertise, wasn't willing to do that. I was terrified Sweet Pea would suffer and die on the way home. I gave her pain medication and prayed she would make it. During the drive, Sweet Pea still loved her treats and resting in my lap. But she had slowed down during the past couple of days. She wanted to live and walk around but had little energy to get very far on her own. It would have been wrong to make her suffer any longer. Understanding that gives me a greater appreciation for people who don't want heroic measures taken at the end of their lives. It's hard to let go, but sometimes there's nothing more to be done.

The grief that I felt from losing Sweet Pea and the fatigue I experienced from the emotional toll lasted for weeks. After she was gone, there was a big gaping space in my life where she used to be. I still missed seeing her walk up to me, look up at me with those sweet eyes, wait for me to pick her up and give her a treat, or climb into bed at night and snuggle at my feet.

Though it took time to start feeling better, sharing about the loss of Sweet Pea with friends helped. One friend painted her likeness on a rock and gave it to me as a gift. In some ways, time was the greatest healer. Just putting one foot in front of the other took a little of the edge off with each passing day. As difficult as it was, I

don't regret it. I loved her very much and I know she loved me, and I am grateful for our time together. In the end, maybe that's what we have – gratitude for our time together – as family members or friends. The grief does pass eventually, and the joy of being together far outweighs the loss that comes when it ends.