

## **GRIEF**

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Grief is a strange thing, it comes and goes at its own pace. One minute everything seems normal, and the next minute I cry for no reason at all, or perhaps for many reasons.

My wife Betty had dementia which progressed slowly over about eighteen months after it was first diagnosed. She passed peacefully on the early morning of June 9, 2021. Her disease actually began at least the year before with subtle memory lapses but it was so slow that I didn't realize what was happening until she landed in the ER and spent three days in the hospital for observation. In retrospect, I can now see it all evolving: difficulty with walking and balance, longer lapses of memory, and finally disorientation.

After half a year at an assisted-living facility with memory care, she had a fall resulting in a broken hip and landed in the hospital for a half hip replacement and slow recovery. After that, I moved her to one, and then another, adult family home. The latter was a much better and lovely place for her.

In the memory-care facility, I started visiting her every day, and later every few days. Every time I left her, I cried on my way home. It was like a slow death, knowing that she wouldn't get better. It was the beginning of my grief. This grieving continued but became less over time.

Grief never completely goes away but slowly diminishes. It takes time to process, and it still reappears at odd times. At Betty's passing, a new kind of grief began. This was the final act. It was not the result of sudden death but one that happened over a long time.

My daughter, son, and I visited her in the adult family home the afternoon before she passed. She was under hospice care for some time, and I had a feeling that this would be her last day. Before I left, I went in alone to say my last goodbye. She couldn't speak or even see clearly but could hear, I think, even though she was lightly sedated. I told her how much I loved her and gave her permission to pass on. My son and daughter did the same. At 1 AM the next morning I got the call. I waited until my daughter, who was visiting from California at the time, awoke and I told her the sad news. We both embraced in tears. Right now, I am crying again as I write this. A new kind of grief appears, but one I hope I will manage – after all, I have grieved a long time.

The care she received in the adult family home was extraordinary. The owner and caregivers are all from Eritrea, very loving people, used to caring for their extended families. The owner, Betty's caregiver, a nurse and social worker from hospice, were all there the final day we visited. Their loving presence was a comfort for us.

Two days later, we came to the adult family home for dinner with the owner and two of Betty's caregivers. Dinner consisted of an Eritrean meal prepared by one of the caregivers. After dinner, we talked to them about how they came to Seattle. Eritrea is known as "the North Korea of Africa." It is a brutal, authoritarian regime, which sends its youth to fight the endless wars of the region. These two caregivers managed somehow to escape to Brazil. From there, they made their separate ways across the Darien Gap in Panama, through Guatemala, to Mexico – where they met each other – and then to the US border. After a stay in detention, they were allowed to enter the US where they both ended up in Seattle – a horrific journey over many months and indescribable hardships. They are incredibly happy to be here beginning their new lives. They are beautiful, loving people – why would we not want them in our country?

Betty's 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday would have been on June 22, twelve days after she passed. I celebrated that event by bringing a decorated cake to the home with the owner, one of the caregivers, and a new resident present. As we sang Happy Birthday, I could barely keep from crying. It was a bittersweet but necessary part of my grieving process.

Grieving reappears at odd times. I find myself disoriented. I just got back from my usual walk over the same route. A couple of blocks from home I had the feeling I was lost on the wrong street. When I reached the next corner I realized where I was – on the same route home. It seems my mind is easily distracted. My daughter mentions similar reactions. I think they are all manifestations of grief. I still tear up when I mention Betty's passing to others, and cry at other times.

I have had other occasions of grief in the past, and time has eased them, although they never completely go away. My father died suddenly at age 74 when I was 38 years old. That hit me hard at the time. I managed to sing at his memorial service but then broke down in sobs afterward. For a long time, I thought of things I wanted to tell him or ask him but it was too late

My other daughter – they were twins – died suddenly in a bicycle/car accident while in college in California and my wife and I were living in Minnesota. I took the call at midnight and was numb the rest of the night. The next day we flew to California where we met her other siblings to grieve over her passing. That grief increased over time. At the college where I taught, I would see a young student who reminded me of my daughter and that was hard to take. Students in my class took the news hard because they were of the same age and realized that it could happen to them too.

My mother died at the grand age of 93. She was in an assisted-living home for just a few years and her mind was sharp to the end. She was recovering from a mild heart attack and didn't want to go back to the home under their highest level of care – "I can't talk to other people there, they have all lost their marbles!" She had a good active life and told me earlier that she didn't want to live to be 100. I

think she just lost her will to live. There was some grief but that was tempered by the fact that she had lived well up until then. We all have to die at some time and it is good to pass on under our own terms.

Birth and death are the bookends of every life. We need to accept that fact as a part of life. Early death is harder to accept than passing at old age. If I could live to the age when my mother passed, without major health problems, I would be happy. Any more years in reasonable health would be a bonus.

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss. Different people experience grieving in different ways. Healthy grieving is an active process and should proceed in a series of steps. We should balance grieving with normal ordinary activities. Go gently and don't expect it to end at a specific time – it will eventually diminish but never completely disappear. Those we have lost should always remain in our memory. More advice on healthy grieving is given [here](#) by the University of Washington Counselling Center.

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