

## The Death of a Grand-Parent

I am not a social worker, I am not a psychologist, I am not a grief counsellor. I am, however, an expert on what it means to grieve the death of grandparent, and that is because my expertise stems from lived experience. That experience is valid, and my grief is valid. And if you have suffered a similar loss, you must believe the same about your experience and your grief. You must believe this despite the fact that you will not always get support from others reinforcing the validity of what you are feeling. I am writing this in the hopes that it may help those who read it to validate their grief, despite the obstacles, and to move further down the long road to healing.

Many people will not understand how much you hurt from the loss of a grandparent. Often people do not want to deal with your sorrow or tears, so they will avoid bringing up the subject of your loved one's death. They feel embarrassed and uncomfortable, and they wish you wouldn't dwell on the death, as it only makes them feel down and helpless. It is only natural to feel uncomfortable around a grieving person. No one can take away another's grief, and this is frustrating for those who care. And seeing another grieve may be too much of a reminder of others of their own past pain, or perhaps worse, of the grief they will inevitably face in their future when they themselves experience the loss of loved ones. But real friends will be there for you, and will listen, even if they have no words to say. Sometimes listening is enough. You need to let your closest friends know this. If you have never been able to be open about your feelings, now is the time to learn. Experiencing grief is a terrible way to learn this lesson, but it is a great catalyst for this. And it is a lesson which must be learned if we are to lead healthy and complete lives.

So you can learn from your grief, and so can those who support you through it. Perhaps they missed out on getting to know an older person, and your stories will help them to appreciate the wisdom and special love that older people can bring to their lives. Perhaps they still have the chance to spend more time with their own grandparents or other older people, and your grief will let them see the value in this investment of their time.

When you talk with people about your grief over this particular loss, you still may struggle to make that grief seem valid. Even among the compassionate groups founded to help people grieve, this struggle may continue. Even in the very helpful books you can read about the stages of grief, you may not find all the validation you need. This is because the loss of a grandparent is not often covered. You can read and hear about the loss of spouses, children and parents, and your heart will break for those who have suffered these losses.

If you are not careful, you may start to tell yourself that your own loss is not so bad after all, and that you ought to stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Do not give in to the temptation to

invalidate your feelings in this way. Certainly, there can be losses more shocking and painful than your own, more life-disrupting. But that does not take away an iota from your own pain. Your own pain is real, and it hurts, badly. You have every right to grieve. In fact, I once read that we have no choice – we will grieve. It's just a matter of how we will do so.

To help you to validate your grief over losing a grandparent and to heal, I want to write specifically on what a grandparent can mean to a grandchild. In my own case, my grandmother, "Nan", lived with my family since before I was born. She would have been glad to have repeated to you what she used to say to me, "When it comes right down to brass tacks, I helped raise you." And she was right. I was very fortunate to have two loving parents in the same household, who did not abdicate their responsibilities of raising me. I was that much more fortunate to have Nan there as well. The role she played in my life was absolutely central. She did more for me than words can express. She made me brown bag lunches for eleven years of schooling, she sewed buttons on my clothes, she helped me wrap my Christmas presents when I was little. She took me on weekend trips to visit friends and relatives; when she got too old, she gave me her car and I did the driving. She taught me just about everything I know about baseball. She listened to my spelling words, and her coaching helped me to win a trophy at a spelling bee. She explained to me our extensive family tree on her side of the family, and through her stories introduced me to relatives whom I never had the opportunity to meet. She made more cookies for me than I can count, and sent them to me at college, and after I graduated and was working. She sent me Birthday cards, Valentine's Day cards, St. Patrick's Day cards, Easter cards and Halloween cards when I was away from home, right up to the last, when I was 25 years old. I cannot think of a time they did not have money in them. And even when it wasn't a special holiday, she wrote me letter, usually a couple times a week. She would often write, "I don't have much to say, but I wanted you to have something in your mail box." She would start the letters "Dear Little Buddy", because that was what I was to her. I was her best friend.

In her final years, I recognized how hard it is to get old and to have loss not only some sprightliness and energy, but also immediate family and many, many friends. I am thankful she had me to talk to about her memories to go out to dinner with, to watch baseball games with. I am glad I made her proud through my academic success (so proud that at age 84, she chose to spend three days on her feet, traipsing around my college campus, on Graduation Weekend, to attend every ceremony.) It was a chance to give back to her something of what she had given me.

On the other hand, I think this mutual exchange of love and affection and attention happened throughout my life. She always meant the world to me and vice versa. In old age, the roles reversed just a little as to who was looking out a little more of whom. When she died, my life changed unalterably. A part of my childhood was gone. A channel for my

energy was gone. A connection to my past, and to my family's past, was gone. I lost my biggest fan.

So the grieving process has been difficult for me, far more than I would have imagined. I did not know what I was "in for". It may be the same for you in the loss of your grandparent. Perhaps in your case, you too grew up with this loved person close to your geographically. If this is so, you are fortunate. It seems many young people these days do not get the chance to know their grandparents very well, because of distance and other separations. We may be the last generation to have this kind of connection with our grandparents, with such an explosion of nursing homes and retirement centres. This is a great pity, as so much wisdom is passed down from grandparents, wisdom about life, about how to be a family, about ourselves. Having gotten to know elderly people, we see the limitations imposed by old age, and perhaps are made gentler and more compassionate in the presence of any physical or mental imparity. We realize our own mortality. We see how important it is to live out the dreams while we are physically able to do it, and how much they can mean later on. The last summer of her life, Nan talked all the time about her trip to Europe some three decades before. How wonderful it was that a woman from a working class family and a small town would take on the adventure of see Europe, and enjoy the memories of it for the rest of her life!

Not only do we learn from grandparents, we are given a very special kind of love from them. Grandparents can be the people who shower us with the most attention and who do not have to concern themselves as much with the disciplining side of parenting. The loss of a grandparent can force on us a kind of growing up that is difficult. We have fewer people protecting us and taking care of us. Not that we do not want to stand on our own as adults. However, grandparents can be a shelter from some of the stress and ugliness of our world, which makes losing them make us feel more vulnerable. Losing our grandparents can also mean undergoing the pain of seeing our parents' grief. Along with all the sorrow I felt during the first days after Nan's death, I suffered by seeing how torn up my own mother was at being orphaned. I use that word intentionally – for no matter how old a person is, if there has been a good relationship with one's parents, it is heart-wrenching to be left on one's own. Seeing my parents' grief reminded me again that they could not take away my pain, or protect me from it. They had their own grief to bear.

Fortunately, my mother and I have been able to help each other somewhat in this grieving process. Ultimately, however, one grieves alone, for no one else experiences the deceased, or the loss of the deceased, in the same way. It is hard to know that my mother is hurting. It is hard for her to know that her daughter is hurting. It is hard for me to let her know about my grief sometimes, precisely because I do not want her to hurt any more in the knowledge that, despite her maternal love, she cannot take away my pain. Obviously, there can be vicious cycles of concern and pain for one self and others in grieving.

On top of this concern, of course, is the knowledge that, in some macabre sense, your parents are “next in line”. It is terrible to work it in that way, I know. Yet the death of one grandparent does make the death of one’s parents seem more imminent, even if it is decades away. The point is you are reminded more forcibly what you knew logically but did not want to face emotionally – that your parents will one day die. You too will probably be an orphan one day. You cannot dwell on this, but you can learn the lesson of taking the time to express what you need to express now to your parents – your love, your thanks, perhaps even your anger. Death can startle us into making the most of the time we are given. Say and do what you must while you have the chance.

I have also found that the death of a loved one makes all death seem sadder and more disturbing. It just doesn’t seem like something that is supposed to happen. Everything in our bodies – immune systems and breathing and adrenaline reactions and the way we convert food into energy – everything cries out “Life! Life! Keep living!” Why should this end? It does not feel natural that it ends. As a Christian, I believe in the Resurrection and in eternal life, but sometimes it is a struggle to hold on to those beliefs. I still cannot understand death its permanence or its meaning. Although Nan had slowed down in her later years, although she had cancer surgery 20 days before her death and was worn out by it, she still was full of life. She had been saying for awhile that she was ready to go. She still, however, planned for the future, looked forward to the next Mets game on TV, wanted to go visit friends. Now she will not be there to see me receive my Masters degree. Even more painful, if I ever marry, she will not attend my wedding or meet my husband. I feel like she was cheated, despite her old age. I feel I have been cheated too. I have a notion that if a person does not make it well into her or his 90s, something is amiss. There is a commercial on TV for arthritis medicine which shows a little boy with his grandmother, and at the end he says, “I love my grandma. I hope she lives forever.” Twenty years older than that little boy, I still nod in agreement with him through my tears.

All the common sense and grown-up understanding in the world does not take away the reaction. I wanted my Nan to live forever, too. I cling to the hope that we will be together again in eternal life.

The support of friends and of Bereaved Families, the wisdom of counsellors and the passage of time have all helped to diminish the acute pain of my grief. But I will probably always miss my grandmother. Whatever your own special, precious relationship with your own grandparent was, you may feel the same way. However, in the midst of your grief, try to believe that one day the terrible hurt you feel will diminish. Be gentle with yourself, seek the support you need, give yourself permission to grieve, and give yourself time to heal, in order to reach that day. Do not allow anything or anyone, especially yourself, to deny the

importance of your feelings. And remember that nothing, not even death, can destroy the love that you shared with your grandparent. That love will last forever.

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