For Adults who have Lost a Parent

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A United Way Agency

Surviving the Loss of a Parent

My father said, “Well, I´m not going to live forever,” but I didn´t believe him. He wasn´t going to die. He was never going to die.

WHOSE FATHER DIED AT AGE 56,
WHEN THE SON WAS 28

Some way I had been conditioned when I was young to think that I would be grown up when I was forty. You don´t need your mother. But after my mother died, I collapsed. I kept thinking, “I´m forty years old and yet I fell like a child.” My sister and I said, “Now we´re half orphans.”

WOMAN WHOSE MOTHER DIED AT THE AGE OF 69,
WHEN HER DAUGHTER WAS 40

Even if you are in your adult years when your parent dies, you respond to the death as the child of your parent. At age thirty, forty, or even seventy, your reactions will be similar to those of other adults who lose a parent. In addition to feeling angry or guilty, the most commonly expressed reactions are:

- I feel like an orphan
- Now I am closer to death
- I fell vulnerable
- I´m frustrated because there was something more I needed to say or do.
- I am released from a burden.

Special Factors Which Influence Your Grief Reactions

Several major factors help to produce each of the above reactions. Examining these factors will make it possible for you to gain a more thorough understanding of *the entire context* of your grief´s affects. You will be better able to recognize *what* is happening to you after the loss of a parent, and *why* it is happening. (See *Coping with Your Loss below*.)

Believing That Your Parent Is Immortal

The belief that a parent could live forever seems, on the surface, to be so ludicrous that it does not deserve any serious attention. No rational being could possibly have such a belief, you may think.

Yet, underneath your conscious awareness that immortality is impossible, you may have nurtured the subconscious belief that your parent´s death would not actually occur. For some offspring, the denial is deeply and firmly entrenched.

Equally as strong may be your conviction that if your parent´s death does occur, it will not be from disease; your parent will not be the victim of any demoralizing, debilitating illness. This person whom you love will – if he or she must absolutely die someday – have a death that is painless, uncomplicated, or possibly even “romantic.”

He had been hospitalized a couple of times in his life but in my mind he was still immortal. What he did pass on to me was the concept that my family was immortal. It was an attitude more than it was any kind of conversation. He wasn´t going to die. He was never going to die. (*Thirty-two-old man reflecting on his father´s death*)

Feeling Closer to Death

When your parent is gone, there is the realization that you are the next in line for death. You become acutely aware of the quantity and quality of your remaining life. I had the feeling, "I´m the next to die. There´s nothing between me and death now." My mother was going to protect me from death. Her life was going to protect me from death. (Forty-year-old daughter survivor)

Losing Your Protection

When you lose the buffer between yourself and death, you may feel extraordinarily vulnerable to the world in general. This feeling is reflected in the statement at the beginning of the chapter, "I feel like an orphan." The adult who loses a parent often feels like a forsaken child. At the same time, he or she steps into the generational position previously held by the parent:
I remember one of the worst things when my mother died… the first voice to come into my head was, "I´m the mommy now, forever." (*Woman who lost her mother during middle-age*)

When your parent dies, you view yourself as the "older generation." This oldness brings with it new responsibilities, that of presiding over the younger generation, and reconciling yourself to meeting death head-on with no intermediary.

At the same time you feel the protection of your own life dissolve, you may also feel that your other loved ones are more vulnerable. Any one of them might die. If one of your parents is still living, you more acutely recognize the imminence of his or her death. Your increased awareness of death my reflect itself in new resolutions regarding your own behavior.

I have a consciousness about saying good-bye now that I didn´t have before my mother´s death. Even when my husband and I have real arguments I still say good-bye now. I am going to see my father who is eighty-five this summer, and I really want to make sure I get a sense of completeness with him.(*Woman whose mother died after a short- term illness*)

Losing Your Home

Everything a parent represents to a surviving offspring can be fully understood only by that daughter or son. For that reason, survivors' descriptions generally vary regarding what they feel is especially lost following a parent's death.

Losing your parents takes away your home, your place to go. (*Middle-aged man whose mother died*)

The hardest thing for me to deal with was the loss of the hub. He was like the hub of the wheel out of which I was maybe the rim of the tire. I wasn't just the spoke, but he was the hub and without him there in a very real and physical way, I had to transfer all that information into a spiritual sense. Not to say that he cannot still be a hub, but it's *a spiritual hub instead of a physical hub*. It was a really difficult thing to do, to shift from the physical to the non-physical. (*Man whose father died when the son was in his late twenties*)

I lost my place of retreat, my defender, my home base where I could always know I was accepted. (*Young woman whose fifty-year-old mother died of cancer*)

Regardless of what the loss is called or how it is described it represents a *void* in the life of the surviving individual’s beliefs and predilections.

Longing

When the parent-child relationship ends, there is a sense of discontinuity. A daughter may long for her parent to see how the rest of her life turned out, or to participate in important life events. She may miss her parents most severely when experiences are extraordinarily good or bad. The survivor thinks “If only my father or mother could see me now and be proud of me,” or “help me now,” or “advise me now.”

Many public figures, when asked what their regrets are or what is missing form their lives, will express the desire for a parent to have known about their recognition or to have benefited from it. The survivors compare their own lives to their dead parent’s lives, wishing their mother or father could have been touched in some way by their success.

A woman survivor, the single parent of two high school students said, “When experiences are really good, you long to share them. When experiences are very bad, you ling for help.”

There is also the longing that occurs in the course of normal, everyday life. You may find yourself feeling empty and despairing because you cannot pick up the phone and call your parent, run by to see how he or she is, or join your parent in an ordinary activity the way you used to. You long more than anything to have your parent there to enjoy a favorite TV program, share a favorite food, play a game of cards, or take a walk in the neighborhood.

Needing To Blame

As a surviving son or daughter you may experience great surges of anger, guilt – or both. You may be angry at God for taking your parents, be angry at the doctors, or a brother or sister for not taking better care of your parent. You may feel hatred toward what you consider to be an unfair world. All of this gives you someone or something to blame.

Guilt serves the same purpose. As long as you think there is someone to blame, even if it has to be yourself, you can assume your parent’s death was controllable. (*Understanding and Dispelling Your Guilt* in Section I explains this in greater detail.)

Upon the death of your parent, you may even call forth a whole host of factors to support your belief that your parent could have lived much longer. One woman confided at length about how her own waning energy and inattention to her mother contributed to her mother’s premature death. The neighbors, however, reported the situation entirely differently. The woman had, in fact, carried her mother from room to room, stayed in the same room with her throughout the day, talked and visited with her (even though her mother was totally deaf), cooked her favorite foods, and devotedly administered her medication.

After this survivor told how her own defects had caused her mother’s death, and that her mother should have “lived another five years,” the interviewer inquired, “How old did you say your mother was when she died?” “Ninety-eight,” was the reply.

Death as a Catalytic Agent for Unfinished Business

Your parent’s death may bring on regrets or self-recriminations similar to these.

My father never told me he loved me.

My mother never said, “You’re all right.”

I was never able to discuss some specific important part of my parents live such as why mother divorced my father, how my father’s behavior was affected by his alcoholic parents, why my parents never wanted another child, or why my father never grieved after my brother’s death.

I was never able to discuss some important aspect of my *own* life. I always intended to talk about some action I took or belief I held that had caused my parent unhappiness. I needed to talk over the fact that I felt inadequate in my mother’s eyes, that I wished I could be more of the person she wanted me to be. There were goals I wanted to talk over, but never did. I never told my parent that I appreciated him or her. I never revealed to my parents that I was gay.

Unfinished aspects of the parent-offspring relationship can be tormenting and may take on added importance as each day passes. If you have found yourself reviewing similar unfinished business, you may also be wishing, “If only I had another chance, I would as the unasked question, make the admission that was too painful, or venture to initiate discussion into forbidden or ignored territory.”

The parent’s personal unfinished business. Sometimes an adult survivor’s emotional pain originates from a disturbing or shocking confession made by a parent during the final days. the parent may have expressed deep regrets about past behavior, or may even have perceived his or her life as having been worthless. Witnessing the emotional distress of a father or mother during the parent’s physical decline in the face of death may leave the survivor with disturbing and haunting images.

In a young man’s journal which chronicled his father’s final days, this entry stood out:

A new day, in theory. In fact, still the night he died. I’ve been manic, fazed. I haven’t cried yet.

Yesterday morning, saying good-bye after sitting the night beside the hospital bed, I said, “I’ll bring Mama back in a little while.”

I leaned down and kissed his stubbled, sunken cheek. He reached up and patted my cheek with his right hand. I stood up, holding his hand, looking him in the eye.

“You’re quite a guy,” he said. I leaned down and kissed him again, his forehead. I cradled his head in my arm and spoke into his ear.

“You too, Papa, you’re quite a guy yourself.” I stood up.

“No,” he said, looking away through the rail, raised now because I was leaving, “no, I’m not. I haven’t been much good.”

He looked through the stainless steel bars at the wall.

He gave me his blessing. He couldn’t give himself forgiveness.

When I cry, a lot of the tears will be trying to wash out that particular chunk of grit.

In such cases, death mandates that the survivor needs to become the forgiver of the parent's guilt as well as their own, if he or she is to heal.
As one woman survivor expressed, "There is the hope that I can forgive my father's perceived misdeed, not only for my sake, but for *him* too."

Role Reversal

Toward the end of your parent's life you may have experienced a role reversal; that is, your father or mother became your child and you assumed the role of parent. This most typically occurs when a parent has a terminal illness or is the victim of senility. In such a situation, you may have had to attend to your parent's physical and emotional needs, and to have met many demands a child would have made. Though you did not want to take the parenting role, it was imperative for you to do so in order to maintain your parent's safety, and to administer or monitor his or her health care.

The memories of your own actions in such a situation may now cause some emotional distress.
He said, "Don't put me in the hospital. Don't do it." I was on his couch and I could hear him in his room, groaning and moaning and in pain. He said, "I want to die at home." Finally, about two or three in the morning I did call the hospital. He couldn't walk and the ulcer was very, very painful so I had to make that decision. You go against his wishes to call the ambulance but you have to make that choice. (*Thirty-two-year-old man reflecting on his father's final days*)

I criticized dad for drinking. I was pretty hard on him. I shouldn't have been so judgmental. He had lived his life, raised his children, conducted his business. What difference did it make if he wanted to drink once a week? He was eighty-three years old. (*Fifty-year-old man reflecting on the last year of his father's life*)

I scolded Mama for not eating, not cleaning her plate. I always tried to make her eat as if she was a baby. Now I realize she had no appetite and she had probably decided she wanted to die at home. I made too much fuss over her meals. I didn't have any respect for her wishes. (*Sixty-eight-year-old woman reflecting on the last months of her mother's life*)

The role you assumed before your parent's death not only affected you and your parent, it may now be determining the present role you play within your family. During your parent's terminal illness, for example, you may have assumed a role which thrust you into the position of overseer and caretaker in the family. You may have made the necessary decisions or administered the funds needed for proper care. When a position such as this becomes established within the family, the balance of power changes among remaining family members. After the death, you may find yourself remaining in the position of caretaker with one or more family members expecting to be cared for. While this expectation is rarely voiced by a surviving family member, it is made evident by his or her actions. These actions indicate that the survivor considers himself or herself to be *more severely affected by the death* than other members of the family. In fact, several family members may jostle for the position of "most bereaved."
A caregiving individual will often contribute to this dynamic because of his or her own emotional needs and patterns of coping. Because a surviving adult child needs to avoid overt grief, he or she may step into the more comfortable and familiar role of solicitor-caretaker.

I asked what would happen do dad. Worrying about my father would have postponed my grief. It's easier for me to take care of others than to show my own feelings. (*Woman reflecting on her actions when her mother died*)

Compounded Stress

If your parent was hospitalized for an extended period of time or was steadily declining at home, you may have been subjected to a variety of stresses arising from one or more of these situations.

You were emotionally torn between the demands of your job or your home and your devotion to your parent.

You were physically exhausted by the added responsibility of medical arrangements, hospital visits, and providing emotional support to other family members.

You were financially drained by your contribution to medical care services.

You were solely responsible for decisions and preparations related to the funeral, and perhaps for the cost of funeral services as well.

When any of these circumstances are present and then the death occurs, you may experience a great sense of relief. This relief may compound your stress. Even though you feel released from an overwhelming burden, you may also feel guilty for experiencing relief. Although you are freed to return to a more normal, less demanding existence, you will still need to regain your footing, clear up neglected work, get physically rested, or replenish your exhausted funds.

If you do not receive the support from others that you require, even deeper stresses are produced, To complicate matters, because you are an *adult survivor* experiencing the loss of an adult of an *older generation*, you may not feel it is legitimate or proper for you to seek external support.

Coping with Your Loss

There are several guidelines for dealing with your loss. First, consider what you are doing with your feelings. As an adult survivor of a parental death you may try to hide your grief responses. A grown son or daughter, you may think, is supposed to accept a parent's death within the normal cycle of life's events. Though the loss is extremely traumatic, you may feel that exhibiting emotional devastation is not "grown up":

I collapsed and felt so silly. I kept thinking, "I'm forty years old and I fell like a child."

Your grief, if suppressed, will last longer and be poorly resolved. In addition to finding comfort in expressing your feelings, you will find it helpful to (1) memorialize your parent in some way, (2) enjoy a healthy identification with your mother or father, which includes keeping a few personal possessions of your parent, and (3) develop an awareness of the final destination of your parent's presence.

Allowing and Expressing Your Feelings

I would urge a person who is grieving to allow yourself to feel whatever comes. Allow yourself a physical space if you can, go away to place where you can really experience what you need to feel. Allow yourself to feel. *It is a graceful state!* (*Forty-year-old woman survivor*)

Survivors who give themselves permission to feel are facilitating their own healing process. One woman stated, “In the first few days following my mother’s death, I might be in the grocery store and I’d suddenly lean against the wall and start crying. I didn’t care and that was wonderful. I just allowed myself to do that.”

Releasing surges of feeling is extremely beneficial, but it is not always possible, especially if you must maintain a specific image on the job – if you must be the person who is reliable, competent and in control.

A fifty-year-old engineer reported that for the first few months after his mother’s death he would find a legitimate reason to leave his desk and walk across the landscaped grounds of his plat to the opposite building.

Whenever my sorrow welled up, I wanted to be outside. I felt closer to her, almost as if I could commune with her as I walked along the path and under the trees. Also, in retrospect, I think the walk, even though it was short, released inner physical tension which eased my emotions. (*Forty-year-old engineer, reflecting on his grief following the death of his mother six months before*)

If you are expected to display a modulated demeanor, you may need to seek a place where you will have privacy, and where you can allow yourself a good cry when you feel like it.

Many survivors tell of being in social situations when they are suddenly overcome with their sense of loss. They go off to the bathroom, shed a few tears, and return to the group.

In addition to allowing feelings to flow, it helps to talk them through with an understanding friend or relative who has also lost a parent.

The two friends who lost their mothers were especially helpful to me because they were talkers. They would come and talk. They’d go over what happened when their mothers died and that was very helpful to me. (*Middle-aged woman who lost her mother*)

As you talk, it will be beneficial not only to express your sadness, but to talk about several areas within the broad scope of your loss:

Your relationship with your parent. What kind of relationship did you have? What were the most important aspects of the relationship?

***Your parent’s perception of you*.** How would your parent have described your personality, character, capability, success and appearance? How does this differ from the way you see yourself?

***Your strongest emotional responses to the death*.** Why do you feel angry, guilty, vulnerable, afraid, or relieved? Who or *what* is it that is provoking that response in you?

Your regrets. What more did you want to say or do? If your parents were still alive how would you take care of this unfinished business?

***What specifically do you miss*?** Do you miss knowing you can go home and talk over problems, making the telephone call on Sunday, having your parent be a grandparent to your children, sharing your parent’s sense of humor? (What you miss does not necessarily have to be positive.

You may, for example, miss having someone to take care of, having someone structure your life, or giving unsolicited help or advice.)

If you find that you want to *talk* more than anyone wants to *listen*, make arrangements to share your loss and your reactions to it with a minister, priest or rabbi, or set up an appointment with a counselor. You might also like to participate in a support group for survivors. If so, contact the pastoral care office of your local hospital, or call a local Hospice and ask them for information regarding groups that are active in your area.

Men in particular often feel their grief is inappropriate or disproportionate to what is expected. Or they are perceived by others as needing little, if any, emotional support. A young man described the reaction of his woman friend following the loss of his mother.

When my mother was dying, Lynn wouldn't go up there with me. I felt like when you're in a relationship with somebody and this is their time of need, you better damn well support them. She refused to do that. I went up there by myself and saw her.

When primary attachment figures do not provide support, the stress produced by the death is intensified. The survivor has even greater feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and abandonment. In cases such as this the survivor benefits from sharing with a professional. Doing so does not indicate weakness or inability to cope; quite the contrary, it proves that the survivor is taking control of the situation and being responsible for getting what he or she needs.

Men who lose a parent often seem more inclined to express themselves on paper, rather than orally. For some, writing about feelings is easier or more necessary than talking about them. Also, writing following a death has more than a single purpose. On one level, it is expression and, in the case of some survivors, an act which fits within a life that was already inclined toward literature or art. At another level, writing memorializes the person who has died and records the final stage – the week, hour, or moment of death – and tries to put the death in perspective, to make sense of it.

A thirty-two-year-old man tells sitting down in the hospital room where his father lay after his death, and beginning to write immediately. "It was not more than five minutes after my father died." The surviving son wrote a poem to his father which begins, "Peaceful, unhooked, your white hair wild at last…" And the poem continues, "You, my dream of America, joining your own father on the last stageline/ your body glows an instant on this earth…" And it ends, "I thought for a moment I lost you/ but no, I don't lose you. Your soul runs free."

Writing can also take care of unfinished business, all those things which still remain to be said. The anxiety produced by this state is illustrated by the excerpt from a young woman's poem following the death of her mother.

I try to call you back so we can talk again
maybe in a dream so I can say
Something more, make something clearer,
let you know how much I still hop to wake up/
When will this be over?
I've chopped the bitter ending of your life
from the good part
and kept the wrong piece.
(Letter to my mother soon after her death, Jo Walz)

Thomas Mallon, author of *A Book of One's Own*, described his use of a diary after his parent's death.

I wrote a lot about my father when he died five years ago. I had a very happy relationship with my father, but there were gaps in it, and I used my diary to fill in some of these gaps. Losing my father was terrible, but it became almost a good thing that there were things to wonder about, to get confused and regretful about. It gave me work to do, things to think about with an eye toward solving them or being content to let them rest, instead of just wishing he were still here.
(People Magazine, May 21, 1985)

In addition to talking to others or writing about loss, some survivors have found it helpful to record their thoughts or feelings on tape, particularly during the period when they were dealing with the last stages of their parent's terminal illness.

A fifty-two-year-old man whose mother was dying of cancer tells of taping the facts, his feelings and reactions every day as he drove from the hospital to his job. It was his way of allowing himself to say what he needed to say in a safe and private place. And it provided the method for preserving his last conversations with his mother.

Your physical environment is directly related to your ability to adequately express yourself, but finding a quit space where you will be free from interruption can sometimes be very difficult, especially if you have young children at home. Among the "safe havens" sought out by survivors, where they could think and feel in relative solitude, were a nearby church or synagogue, a quiet corner in the library, their own basement or attic, a local or state park, a museum café, and the vacant apartment of a friend.

A woman survivor and mother of three children describes the importance of her selected quite space.

I went to a kind of church where they believe that you can make everything happen. My friend suggested that I might feel okay going there. I went and sat there. I'd never been to a church like that. I cried through the ceremony and they all looked at me so sympathetically. I would sit and listen and quietly cry through the service. At the end, everyone held hands and swayed. I didn't talk to them. I didn't want to talk to them. I didn't feel the need to. I was a bit embarrassed that I was crying, but I loved going and sitting there. The minute the music started, I cried. It was very helpful to me.

An older woman told of going to a nearby state park and discovering a hiker's trail which led to the top of a small mountain.

I would hike on that trail a mile or two and then turn around. And I made a pact with myself: While I was on the trail I could think or feel anything I wanted to about my mother. I missed her so. One day I became aware that each time I hiked, I went farther. Then I realized that by the time I was able to hike all the way up the mountain it would be a big event for me, a sort of celebration of feeling all the raw feeling I needed to feel, and crying all the tears I needed to cry at the time. It doesn't mean I don't still miss her. I do. But I think that we made it up that mountain together, my mother and I, and the grief peaked, just as the mountain did.

The Memorialization Process

The importance of a final ceremony, most particularly a personalized service, was emphasized in Section I. A service facilitates the healing process because it helps you fully recognize the end of your loved one's life on earth, say good-bye, express the feelings and review the memories that are most closely associated with your parent, and it makes it easier to integrate your loss into your present life.

In addition to the public service, there are other ways you can memorialize your parent. Two of them have already been discussed – writing and tape recording. Still other individualized approaches have proven helpful to mourners.

My aunt and I went away. At night, we'd lie down in our beds and talk about how wonderful my mother was. And I wouldn't cheat. My aunt thought my mother was perfection. I didn't tell her that mother could be very angry. We talked about how wonderful she was and how she was good at tennis. That was lovely. *It was like going to church every night when we talked about how wonderful mother was.*

My friend gave me tapes of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. That was important. I would listen to them and cry. Listening to them gave me a formality. I would sit down and listen to them and it took about an hour. *It was a kind of ceremonial.* I listened to them a lot.

Often a private ceremony or memorial is not something that is planned; it happens when it needs to happen. Other times, memorializing is more complex and requires conscious planning and skill on the part of the survivor. A young actor tells how he dealt with the memory of his father.

After my father's death, I wrote a play, a one-man show about his life, his thoughts, his dreams and my relationship to him. I performed it in local theater and then was invited to perform it at theater festivals abroad. It was my tribute to his life.

The process of finalizing a parent's death and commemorating his or her life helps the survivor begin the process of *letting go* of old roles and *relinquishing sources of gratification* that came from the very specific nature of the parent-offspring relationship.

Identifying With The Parent

I got to the hospital and he had died. As my poem about him says, "His white hair was wild at last." His mouth was open and he was unshaven. He was very untypical of anything he'd ever been in life. He was untypical of himself but at the same time, he was very typical of me. I had always been unshaven and my hair was wild. He became much more like me after he died and I became much more like him after he died. So we merged and we've been merging ever since.
(*Thirty-two-year-old man reflecting on the death of his father when son was twenty-eight*)

An identification with another person can be manifested mentally, emotionally, socially, physically, or materially. Often the survivor becomes acutely aware of identification with a mother or father during the mental review process that takes place after the parent's death. The silent questions are asked: *Are* we alike? In what *way* are we alike?

Some survivors make a conscious selection of the qualities, traits, skills, interests, mannerisms, eccentricities, or goals to be perpetuated. Other survivors have a subconscious identification process; with still others, it is completely absent.

For example, identification may mean that the survivor uses a manner of speech that was unique to the parent, emulates a gesture, has the same habit, or seeks out the same kinds of friends the parent had. He or she may dress similarly, carry out a parent's dream or wish, or participate in an organization or work for a cause in which the parent was interested. This type of identification, which is not harmful, may offer a great deal of satisfaction.

If, however, the grieving person feels the compulsion to follow in the parent's footsteps or emulate the parent's behavior when *the son or daughter does not genuinely want to do so, or does not have the required skills or abilities,* the identification process will not facilitate grieving, but distort it.

The importance of personal effects. Having an object to keep as a physical reminder of your parent is helpful. A possession, which may mean nothing at all to someone else, can serve two major functions. It is a treasure for you to cherish, and second, it is visible proof of your parent's earthly life. Survivors who find themselves without such effects may experience despair, regret, remorse and distress as a result. They feel bereft, left without something they *want to hold, look at,* and *own,* something they need as tangible evidence of their parent's individuality and former presence.

A woman survivor told of her extreme distress after finding out that one of her mother's rings, the one she had considered to be hers (because it was her birthstone) had been given to her niece.

A voice inside my head said, "That ring is mine." Then I told myself, "Let it go, let it got. " That was about six weeks after her death. I thought I was going insane. I wondered how I could write to my brother and say, "That ring is mine. I must have it." I would rationalize, "Let it go. I have something of mothers. I have the *memory* of her." Then I would want the ring again. My husband thought I was going crazy. I would wake him up in the middle of the night and discuss how I could ask for the ring. I became obsessed with having it. I consulted psychics about it. I mean, I was crazy. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I would even wake up thinking about it in the morning. Finally, I was talking to someone about the ring and the person said, "You'd better do something about that." I realized I couldn't go on like that any longer. I went home. I really thought my mother wanted me have that ring. I went out and bought a very beautiful ring and sent it to my niece who had been given my mother's ring. I wrote a long letter, a huge rationale about wanting the ring back. I felt guilty about writing the letter. The ring was sent back to me immediately. When I received it I felt as if something had dropped off me. The ring was the first material thing in my life that I had really fought for. I am not a material person, but I just couldn't let it got.

The importance of having something to hold onto is clearly illustrated by the case of a poet who lost his mother when he was eight years of age, and his father when he was twenty-eight. He had never been given any of his mother's possessions. In contrast, when the man's father died, he was able to retain articles, clothing and keepsakes.

Now I have the paintings of him, his shirts, different artifacts. I can smell him, feel his presence, I know who he was and what he was doing. As a kid, I had no artifacts from my mother, very few memories. I didn't have a whole lot of tangible information. My poetry about her says, "A scarecrow brought me into this world"… things like that because I *have no memory, nothing to* *tag it to.*

Survivors often feel distraught when they sense that a memory they once had is fading. This situation is relieved when they have a personal possession. It is as if the article can always be depended upon to stimulate the memory and to bring back the parent more clearly.

The Destination of Your Parent's Presence

It may sound quite strange but many survivors have a drive to achieve a personal understanding of their parent's presence after death. There is, of course, no way any survivor can verify his or her belief in this regard; it is based on a wholly private and usually comforting conviction.

A survivor who is religiously oriented will usually be inclined to state define beliefs. Without hesitation, the survivor will specify the destination of the parent's presence as being one which corresponds to accepted religious teachings. This type of statement is typical: "When my father died, there was a sense of a life accomplished, of going home to the Lord."

Other survivors may tend to be more spiritual in a general way, or to be more cerebral in their judgments. Such a survivor feels the parent's presence as a spiritual presence, but one which retains the quality that was such an essential part of the physical; in other words, a force or essence transformed from the physical to the non-physical.

Closely related is the idea that the parent is part of the universe in some way:

I looked up at the sky and I saw all the clouds moving high up. It's very interesting but I did immediately feel a connection with the heavens, that my mother was up there. (*Woman whose mother died in her late sixties*)

The locations arrived at are varied and intriguing, but they all have one thing in common: they provide for closure and allow for a personal interpretation of the mysterious aspects of death. In the minority are those survivors who fix on inappropriate destinations for their parent's presence. They may believe the dead parent is living in another person, in an object, within the survivor, or in an animal. Though this is uncommon, a survivor who places a parent in this way would benefit from discussing with a professional the nature of the loss and the survivor's emotional relationship with the deceased parent. An exception to this would be the survivor whose beliefs are within the tenets of his or her religion.

Subconscious coping. Often a sense of the parent's invisible presence eases the survivor's emotional pain, temporarily relieves loneliness, provides comfort or help, or underscores the survivor's belief that he or she is being watched over.

There may also be a recurrence of the parent's presence in vivid dreams. Here important and realistic conversational exchanges take place, feelings are conveyed, or tasks undertaken, the purposes of which are usually to relieve anxieties or fulfill wishes. Many of these dreams are evocations of positive past experiences or pleasant fantasies.

In the dream I'll be on a cruise ship or an airplane and I'm taking control of the helm and I want to make sure that we're going to take off okay and that he's comfortable. He's a passenger. He doesn't take an active part in the control mechanism of the dream. I take a great control and he's there and we try to please him
(*Man whose father died in his eighties*)

As you heal, you reconcile yourself to several aspects of your parent's death, as well as to your present role in relation to the loss. This son's recurring dream summarizes some of the simplest and most helpful realizations any survivor can have. Specifically, you are in control now and you have taken over the helm, knowing your mother or father is in a comfortable place. As you continue the voyage, your parent's presence is with you.

A fifty-three-year-old woman survivor states, "I recognized that it is within my private realm of power to go forward, taking with me the gifts that come from my relationship with my mother – the good things I learned from her, her values, compassion, her quiet humor. I can leave the rest, the less valuable behind me and go forward with the certainty that she's there. She knows. I'm not as I thought I was."

Adult grief after parent's death underestimated

Corvallis – Anew study suggested that the grief suffered by adults after the death of a parent – especially if there was a close "caregiving" relationship – may be as intense as that suffered after the death of a spouse.

In most cases, however, the bereavement process appears to last longer for widows than it does for children of the deceased, researchers say.

The Oregon State University study focused on adult women who had caregiving relationships with their elderly mothers. Though the death of the mother often was anticipated, there was less "social recognition" for the grief of the daughter than for the widow, said Clara C. Pratt, director of OSU's Program on Gerontology and principal investigator in the study.

"There are similar feelings of emotional shock and similar approaches to 'grief resolution' – crying, visiting the grave site and wanting to talk about the bereaved," Pratt said. Most of the daughters, though, had not had much of an opportunity to talk about their mother's death and some cried throughout the interview. All of them, however, said that they greatly appreciated the opportunity to remember their mother and talk about their loss.

"Death is an uncomfortable topic," she added. "It's like, if no one mentions it, it didn't happen." Pratt said society may place less emphasis on the death of a parent because "it is expected." Nevertheless, the bereavement process remains, though the support mechanisms are not as firmly in place.

"I think what we found, and this gets into speculation, is that our whole social world doesn't support talking about grief," Pratt said. "There is a 'wall of silence' that builds around the bereaved and a lack of recognition about the process. In a social sense, the death of a parent in our culture is not recognized as being very important."

Among the findings of the OSU study:

- The daughters experienced more feelings of guilt, anger and confusion over their mother's death, or were more prone to expressing those emptions openly, than were widows.
- Three out of four daughters said their mother's death made them more aware of their own

aging and mortality.

- Two out of three daughters said their mother’s death made them appreciate life more and gave them greater realization, emotionally and functionally, that “life was finite.”
- More than half of the daughters said the experience made them feel closer to their own families.

Pratt said many of the women experienced conflicting emotions of grief, anger and relief after the death of their mother.

“When a parent suffers there often is relief after death, but that doesn’t make the bereavement process go away,” Pratt said. “Death is the final symbol; it doesn’t just end the problems, but all of the good things that happened in the relationship as well.”

Pratt said the “emotional shock” of death was nearly the same for daughters and widows for two months. Six months after the death, however, the intensity of the grief had lessened for the daughters, while it still remained high for the widows.

“The daughters tended to have whole other lives in addition to their caregiving responsibilities,” Pratt said. “They had children, or they were active in the work force or the community. They had a lot to turn to.

“The widows, many who were 65 to 80 years old, had already seen their roles shifts,” she added. “They were no longer in the labor force, they were unlikely to remarry, and they probably had already experienced the loss of family members and friends.”

In many cases, Pratt said, the intense energy the daughters invested in caring for their mothers appeared to be transferred to their jobs or themselves after the death.

Adult Orphans

Many of us will have at least one it not both parents live long enough to accompany us into adulthood where they will continue to be a major part of our loves. We have never known life without them. They were our first relationship and they serve as an example for all the relationships that follow. Our parents provided us with support and encouragement. A large part of our identity is based on being their child. Then one day a parent dies and life is never quite the same.

The death of a parent is a shattering experience, wounding us and flooding us with powerful forces. The boundaries of our world are torn away, and suddenly life seems bigger than we might ever have imagined (Kennedy, 1991).

Every year, 10 to 15 million of us will experience the death of a parent (Akner, 1993). Even when we know intellectually that their death is inevitable, we are never quite ready for it when it comes. In fact, losing a parent has been called the "new mid-life crisis" (Akner). As each of us approaches middle age, it is increasingly likely that we will experience the loss of both parents. When that happens, we may suddenly find ourselves feeling the strange sense of being an orphan. According to Edelman:

The very term orphan reflects the uniqueness of a solitary, insightful state. The alchemists originally used the word to name a unique gem once found in the emperor's crown… they compared the orphan to the… philosopher's stone, considered both worthless and priceless, despised by fools but loved by the wise (1994).

In a society that is seemingly made up of many more foolish than wise and which tends to define the concept of orphan in the narrowest of terms, it is often difficult and bewildering for one to suddenly find that the label of orphan seems so appropriate to his or her situation. However, Meyers does not regard these feelings as unusual but refers to them as a "…normal response to a major transition in your life (1986)". A number of factors have been identified which tend you contribute to, and lend credence to, this sense of orphanhood. These include the irreplaceability of our parents, the loss of unconditional love, the encounter with our own mortality, and the retriggering of previous losses (Akner).

Irreplaceability of Parents

Most of us have only a limited number of people in our lives whom we regard as our parent. Whether biological or not, these parents are like no one else in the world. It does not matter whether our relationship with them was good or bad, once it is gone it can never be replaced. When that happens, we have not only lost someone of great significance to us but we have also lost part of our own identity. We are no longer someone's child in the same way we were when our parents were still living. Who we are is now changed forever. As stated by Akner: "When a parent dies, an emotional umbilical cord is cut" and it can never be replaced.

Loss of Unconditional Love

In the realm of humanity, there is, in fact, no such thing as unconditional love. Being human, there are always "conditions", always some aspect of selfishness and ulterior motives included in the baggage of any relationship. When it comes to our parents, however, our perception of the love they give to us is one of unconditionally. We believe that home is forever a place to which we can turn when there is nowhere else. We believe our parents, though sometimes disapproving of our actions, will unceasingly love us wholly and completely. No other relationship ever seems to provide this same level of acceptance. When our parents die, we feel this loss greatly. Akner writes: "The expectation of unconditional love may be a comforting thought when your parents are still alive, but it leaves a huge hole when they die."

Encounter with Our Own Mortality

Within the general scheme of nature, offspring are likely to outlive their parents. We find this is also true of the human animal. We expect to live longer than our parents. Therefore, as long as they are alive, they act as a kind of buffer between us and death. We believe, mostly unconsciously, that we will not be compelled to endure our turn at dying until they have endured theirs. However, once both parents are dead, that protection is no longer available to us. We are suddenly the "next in line" and that can be a very frightening experience. We can no longer pretend or try to ignore the temporary nature of this life, our parent's or our own. As one woman said: "I never consciously knew my mother's age and I never asked her because I wanted to believe she'd never die."

Compound Mourning

Another important characteristic of the loss of a parent is what might be called compound mourning. This is often manifested at the death of the second parent. Edelman writes of the woman who experienced the death of one parent when she was a little girl. As an adult, she lost the other parent but the second loss triggered a renewal of the "mourning cycle of the first".

…when Daddy died, I really lost it. He died… fifteen years after my mommy. And then it was like there's nobody. I felt like I was losing two instead of one. So his death brought back all the memories of her, as well as the grief for him (1994).

For some, the death of the remaining parent can retrigger not only this "mourning cycle" for the loss of the first parent but for other losses as well. Ironically, at the very time we are least able to face it, we may be confronted with all the pain that we have temporarily "tucked away" somewhere in our unconscious, all of the unfinished business of our lives. On the outside, we may look like mature adults, living an independent life of our own, but at the center of our being, we may be constructing a dark, Dickens like orphanage of fear and despair where we will be forced to live comfortless and alone.

Conclusion

Since the general populace is not likely to be aware of our sensitive to the needs of the adult orphan, one must look elsewhere for support and understanding. An aspect of this search involves a process of looking inward and becoming supportive of ourselves and our feelings. It is important to remember that these feelings of orphanhood are not "abnormal" but are an integral part of the grief process. Learning to accept these feelings in ourselves I an important step in healing. Acknowledging our intense feelings of loss and abandonment can enable us to develop healthy ways of meeting our newly evolving needs. By legitimizing our own sense of orphanhood we can begin to provide for ourselves the comfort and support we so desperately desire.

The Last Goodbye

When both parents die, middle-aged children must adjust to a new stage of life in which they become adult orphans

A few weeks ago, Janet Pincus' father died. She had looked after him for 15 years, ever since her mother past away. Pincus, now 54, had helped him through heart attacks, a pituitary tumor and gallbladder surgery. Two days before he died, he drifted into consciousness long enough to open his arms to his arms to his daughter, rock her in them and make one request " Just stay with me," he said. that was their last conversation. Since his death, Pincus has tried to keep occupied. In the quiet hours, after a day spent teaching kindergarten and before her husband gets home, she sinks into a deep sorrow and longing. "It's a hole, and it doesn't go away," she says. "I never thought about being orphaned until my rabbi said it."

What could be more natural – or inevitable – than death, especially when it comes at the end of a long, full life? How simple a trajectory that is, and yet the death of older parents often blindsides their children, no matter how much time they have had to prepare. "It takes a lot of adults by surprise," says Patty Donovan Duff, a registered nurse at the Bereavement Center of Westchester in Tuckahoe, N.Y. "Our society says, 'Your mother had a very good life; she was 70 years old.' Yes, but you've lost your mother."

As baby boomers travel through middle age, many will become parentless within this decade. Already, a quarter of 50-year-olds have lost their mothers, and half have lost their fathers. In a society that continues to shy away from speaking openly about death, it appears this group may not be any better prepared than previous generations for what experts say is a profound, life-changing experience.

When parents are gone, so are the prime archivists of your life. "My father watched my first steps." Says psychologist Alexander Levy, author of *The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change After the Death of Our Parents.*" He paced the floor the first time I took the car out at night." The role parents play is beyond measure – and even reason. "Even people who've murdered a parent go through this debilitating and confusing kind of loss," says Levy, who has observed interviews with young killers.

Philadelphia writer Jane Brooks felt terribly isolated when she lost her father in her mid-40s and, not long after, her mother. "In 16 months I went from being a daughter to being an orphan," says Brooks, now 54. "I was just shattered." Not only had she lost her last guardian of childhood memories, but she also suddenly felt childlike and needy, with no one to go to for help. "I was a single, working mom, and this was not a feeling I was proud of or wanted to share," she remembers. As she interviewed others who had lost parents for her book, *Midlife Orphan: Facing Life's Changes Now That Your Parents Are Gone*, Brooks realized that she was not alone in her complicated feelings.

Inheritance, for instance, is often steeped in deep ambivalence. "Overnight you inherit what took your parents a life-time to accumulate," Brooks says. "It's uncomfortable and bittersweet." Her inheritance helped her financially but also came with strings attached – albeit self-imposed. "My mother was extremely frugal," says Brooks, "so sometimes when I spend money, I thing she would be horrified."

Settling estates can also stir up family feuds. "The distribution of the parental estate becomes the last statement of who Mom and Dad loved best," says psychologist Levy. "And it can be manifested in the most ridiculous objects: some spatula, perhaps – but it's the one Mom cooked pancakes with every Sunday morning."

Heirlooms, though, can also realign the remaining family. "In some cases, siblings rearrange the hierarchy of the family around the object," says Levy. "Whoever got the dining room set becomes the host for family dinners," Whether dinners or other family rituals will carry on, though, is up to the surviving children." I think my parents were the mortar between the bricks as far as family goes," says Paul Kane, 39. Seven years ago, he and his three siblings lost both parents within six months of each other. "After they died, we, as individuals, had to make more effort to get together," he explains. "There wasn't that scaffolding anymore, that structure within the family that had given direction to things for 40, 50 years."

Generally, how siblings relate before the death of their parents is how they will afterward, according to Duane Bowers, interim executive director of the William Wendt Center for Loss and Healing in Washington. The death of parents simply reinforces existing patterns.

That has been the case for Thomas Lynch, who has buried many of his Milford, Mich., neighbors as well as his mother and father. Lynch's 30 years of working at the family-owned Lynch & Sons Funeral Directors is the underpinning of his recent book of essays, *Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality.* Lynch says his parents' efforts to instill a sense of family loyalty paid off, and the complicated task of settling the estate among nine siblings ("And the IRS was like 3 ½ brother more," jokes Lynch) proceeded with mutual trust and respect. His siblings also turned to one another for solace. "There is a sense that we are orphaned, but we are not alone," he says. "My brothers and sisters are the only people in the world who know how it feels to be bereft of these parents."

Amid the sorrow, Lynch says, were unexpected gifts. "We had to make room for the rituals, ceremonies and liturgies that my parents were always responsible for." In the process, he saw his siblings in a fresh, more adult light, and he even rediscovered his parents. "When I look, for instance, at my sister," he says, "I see my mother's wisdom, sensibility, faith and her great tolerance for the imperfections in others."

Such losses often bring new opportunities for reassessing one's life. "Even in mid-life people still defer to their living parents," says the Bereavement Center's Duff. "There's freedom to explore without parental approval how one votes, careers, the expression of sexual preference, marriage, religion," adds Levy. There is also, for many of the grieving children, a heightened sense of mortality and of being fully – and solely – responsible for one's life.

Profound re-evaluations are not unusual, says Ken Doka, a professor of gerontology at the College of New Rochelle in New York and an ordained Lutheran minister. For adults, their older parents' deaths dovetail with a life stage in which the children are already noticing the physical signs of aging. Mid-life introspection, Doka says, "is like a Janus mask, with two faces looking opposite ways: 'I've lived this much, and now I have this much more to live.'"

This swirl of emotions that stem from losing both parents is typically negotiated through a tremendous channel of grief, which friends and family – even the adult orphans themselves – sometimes greet with limited tolerance." This is a quick-fix society," says John DeBerry, bereavement coordinator for the Palliative Care and Home Hospice Program at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "Society says keep busy and you'll feel better."

When Anne Reid's mother died in August, her siblings joined her at the family apple farm in Virginia to help her with the funeral arrangements. Afterward, everyone headed straight back to work. "My brother's a college professor, my sister's a school-teacher, and I had to process the apples," says Reid, 62.

Ira Byock, a palliative-care physician in Missoula, Mont., and author of *Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life,* says intolerance is institutionalized. "What are most leave policies for loss of a parent?" he asks. "Three days? In the work-place, people expect you to grieve for a week and then get on with it." De Berry says too many people think grief is something to move past. "Grieving comes and goes just like the waves in the ocean," he explains. "Do we ever get over missing someone we loved? The goal is not to get over it or recover from it but to reconcile to it."

For the last 18 months of her life, Henry Roy's mother lived with Roy in Philadelphia. They were in and out of hospitals frequently, and he says he put his emotions on hold in order to care for her. When she died in February, he went on autopilot, arranging her funeral and cleaning out her St. Louis, Mo., apartment. “I still feel like I haven’t addressed it,” says Roy, 47, of her death. It took him six months to clear out the bedroom he’s made for her, and he has yet to go through the belongings that fill his third floor. “I keep saying that I will,” he says, “but those are her things: I don’t feel like I have the right.” Toward the end, when his mother needed to gain weight but had little appetite, fast food was Roy’s best chance at getting her to eat. Passing a Burger King now can reduce him to tears.

What would ameliorate grief, Byock suggests, is if, given the chance, we all faced impending deaths more directly. Byock has found that one stunningly simple conversation has helped people tremendously. “To complete relationships,” he says, “people have to say these five things: “Forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you. And goodbye.’”

Though much of loss is anchored in the past, some people who lose their parents lament a future they will never share. Stuart Chapin’s father died when he was 25, his mother five years later. Chapin, now 40, considers what their relationship might have grown into had they lived until he’d passed his 20s, which were so consumed by a desire for independence. “I, like my parents, have juggled mortgage payments. You receive when you are young. Now you are in a position to share the experience of being an adult, and there is no one to share it with.”

Yet what Chapin regrets more than the end of his relationship to his parents is that his son will never know them as grandparents. “He’s now three years old and missing out on the experience of aging,” says Chapin. “I remember touching my grandmother’s face – the papery skin, the strangeness and yet beauty of that. My parents will only be a story to him,“ he says. “I will tell the story with as much love and art as I can, but he won’t be able to create his own story.”

All Grown Up and Home Alone

Every summer while I was growing up, my parents took me to the Jersey shore, where I'd plug quarter after quarter into pinball machines. As a teenager attempting to evade Mom and Dad's sometimes overbearing attention, I'd bike to the local arcade and slam the same games. Even into my 30s, whenever I'd visit my folks, I'd drive to a nearby juke joint and shoot a few pins for old times' sake. But when I became an orphan this year at age 42, I also became an adult. I stopped playing pinball for good.

My mom died more than a decade ago, and it was devastating. But my father remained my close confidant, trusted adviser and safety net. If I got a new job or girlfriend, he'd be first to know – and if either didn't last, he'd lend a sympathetic ear. As long as my dad was around, I was his kid. And, just like the Dylan song, I felt forever young – staying single, going skateboarding, enjoying trashy monster movies. Forty-two going on 14, and proud of it.

So after my father died this summer, I lost more than just my remaining parent. Four decades of childhood were also cut loose. Suddenly there were no family members to report to – or rebel against. And that's pretty scary. A new moral dilemma? A question about the stock market? A mature voice of reason? From this point on, the mirror would have to provide answers. Growing up is hard to do, especially when you're scheduled to enter middle age.

There are remnants of family left: a sister living in England, a stepmother who gave my dad waves of happiness in his final years. the bonds feel closer now, and we all laughed hysterically poring through his massive, pack-rat's collection of videotapes. (Tarzan's New York Adventure? Drums of Fu Manchu? Dad, please!) But walking through the house is no longer nostalgic. There's an aching feeling that my folks should be in the next room, or pulling up in the drive-way. Nothing seems quite right.

Not even the boardwalk. A few days after the funeral, I drove out to the Jersey Shore to watch the sunrise. Walking on the familiar wooden slats, I passed the arcade that my parents took me as a child. There were still a few pinball machines left amid the new video games. Somehow, I didn't have the urge to drop in a single coin. But I did imagine a time when I could take my own kids down to the beach and let them play to their heart's content.

Parent's death stirs grief in adult children, leaves many feeling orphaned

"It happens without you even consciously thinking about it," 44-year-old Ernest Higuera said. "Maybe you'll be driving to work months afterward, and suddenly you start crying on the car."

For Art Leatherman, 60, "Whenever I use his old power table saw, the memories come back, such as when I was young and he would take me to the beach."

"Almost a year later, I still have dreams about him," Gina Pack, 32, said. "In one dream, I was standing next to him at a party, and I was so glad that he had recovered."

"Don't let them tell you time makes it better," 39-year-old Jewel Novack said. "It doesn't."
All of these adults are talking about an almost universal human experience: death of a parent.

It would probably come as a shock to hear that the experience that has so imprinted their lives has been relatively ignored by social scientists who study the human condition.

But where much attention has been paid to how a parent’s death impacts a child – an there is study after study describing the grim fallout from the death of a child, and what it means to lose a spouse – there seems far less concern about the more common event of an adult finally “orphaned” by the loss of a parent.

“In our society,” said Andrew E. Scharlach, assistant professor in the University of Southern California School of Social Work, “it is more legitimate to talk about the problems of taking care of an elderly parent than to talk about one’s feelings for that parent after death.”

That’s something of an anomaly, Scharlach said, in that while a human can have many spouses and many children, everybody gets only one mother and one father.

As one woman said tearfully to a USC researcher after her surviving parent died: “I’m no one’s little girl anymore.” She was 59.

Higuera had the privilege of living parents of more than 40 years. Then three years ago, she said, both died within a little more than a month of each other.

Her 84-year-old father had suffered strokes, but, shocking to Higuera and her two sisters, it was their 80-year-old mother – with no signs of illness – who died first.

“When she said she didn’t feel well, we took her to the hospital. Three days later she was gone. Our father was in a convalescent home, and we never told him, but we could tell he knew,” she said. “And all three of us were present, releasing him when he left. We told him Mom was waiting for him. There was no response, but I feel he understood He finally let go.”

To this day, Higuera said, she is grieved by the circumstances of her mother’s death: what scholars call a residual grief. Since her mother was expected to recover, none of the family was present at the time of her death.

“Being with my father when he died was so important,” Higuera said. “I think one of the things we all fear is dying alone. I still hurt because I wasn’t there with my mother. It seems as I that regret will always be around.”

With Higuera, as with many children, there was an initial reaction:

“After the deaths, I moved from my apartment back into their house in Valinda (in Los Angeles),” Higuera said. “The bedrooms are in the rear of the house. At first, I couldn’t set foot in those rooms. I made the living room my bedroom. That lasted for about a month.”

Higuera, whose mother died Feb. 20, her father March 24, said that: “At first, I went out to Rose Hills Memorial Park on the 20th and 24th every month. I also went there on their birthdays, on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. With time, it becomes easier not to have to go through the ritual. I know this is part of letting go.”

Twenty months ago, Scharlach embarked on a study of this little-examined but much-experienced part of life.

Two hundred twenty people responded to a newspaper brief seeking adults who lost a parent on to five years previously, and all of the respondents filled out questionnaires. Scharlach and his assistants are conducting in-depth in interviews with 100 of these participants, and the study is still in progress.

But Scharlach said these preliminary findings have emerged:

Initial reactions to a parent’s death included difficulty sleeping, working, keeping up with normal activities and getting along with certain people.

One to five years after a parent’s death, at least 25 percent of the respondents indicated that they still cry of become upset when they think of the deceased parent. More than 20 percent continue to be preoccupied with thoughts of the parent.

Other oft-cited residual reactions included finding it painful to recall the parent’s memory, and feeling that it was unfair that she or he died.

In an interview, Scharlach, who plans to write a book based on his research, related other impressions for his study:

“That last contact with the parent remains for many people a metaphor for the entire relationship. People add meaning to it that may not, in fact, have had anything to do with the situation. The person may feel that Dad accepted him or her as he never had before – when that may not have actually been the case.”

Novack’s mother died in 1983, her father in 1984. Seven months later, she separated from her husband, and in 1986 the divorce became final.

“When I got married, my Mom gave us six weeks, but it lasted 10 years. I was in a dead-end marriage, though. If my parents had still been alive, I probably would have eventually gotten divorced, but it probably would have taken me longer to get around to it,” Novack said.

After both my parents were gone, I developed insomnia – only two or three hours sleep a night. I still have it.

“For a long time, I distanced myself from everybody. I didn’t want to see anybody or have anybody around me. I withdrew,” she said.

“I miss my mother in particular, because I thought Mom would be forever.”

Preliminary research results show that the death of the one remaining parent has a particularly profound impact on adult children, Scharlach said. Especially common responses to that final chapter were:

An overwhelming sense feeling orphaned.

The sense that one no longer fit the role of child, that they not only suffered the deaths of their parents, but had lost "the child within."

For just about all, the issue of their own mortality came into focus. Now they were next at the turnstile.

"As long as a parent is alive, there is somebody between us and what we fear," Scharlach said. "We are symbolically protected."

With the passing of both of them, he continued, there comes a realization that time is limited - "some feel the urgency to prioritize all aspects of their lives."

His study reveals, Scharlach said, that after both parents have died, interactions between adult family members often don't stay as they were.

"If a pattern of closeness (already) had been established, surviving siblings often draw closer; there is an increased sense of family unity, of connectedness, a need for mutual sharing," one of the educator's associates has written in a preliminary paper.

"If, on the other hand, there were conflicted relationships between siblings before the deaths, this gap seems to widen after the parents are gone."

As one woman told an interviewer: "My brother wasn't around, he wasn't there for my parents--or me--when they were alive, and we needed him. Now that they are dead, I don't particularly care if I ever have anything to do with him again."

It's Just Not Enough to be a Survivor

The New York City Skyline cannot look more beautiful than it does from the glass-walled Fifth Avenue penthouse, 20 stories above Central Park, that Marlo Thomas shares with her husband, the TV talk-show host Phil Donahue. I visited one Saturday morning to talk with Thomas about *Reunion*, a powerful new TV movie in which she stars with Peter Strauss. It airs next Sunday night on CBS.

But as we sipped coffee and ate some fresh fruit, the conversation took on a life of its own, moving beyond television to questions that are central to all of our lives – grief, loss, recovery, remembrance, joy.

“*Reunion* is about loss,” Thomas told me. “It’s about how we deal with loss that is unbearable and how the human spirit is such that we adapt. Not only do we cope, we celebrate life.”

In the movie – based on the novel *Points of Light*, by Linda Gray Sexton – Thomas plays a mother of three loses her only son in a freak accident, then struggles to decide her own future, in life or death. Onscreen, the dead boy appears to Thomas over and over, begging her to follow him. The audience never quite knows if the apparitions are real or figments of the character’s deluded mind. “We don’t want it to be clear, one way or the other,” the actress told me. “We want viewers to have that argument with each other because, really, who knows?”

Thomas read *Point of Light* while on vacation several years ago and became riveted by its theme. “Phil said, ‘Let’s go to dinner,’ and I said ‘I can’t – I’ve got to finish this book,’” she recalled. “The characters are a nice, normal family, just going along, when suddenly fate flies out at them and bites them. To me, it was a book about how one copes with the uncopable. When I finished it, I couldn’t get the characters out of my mind.”

For Thomas, the book struck a strongly resonant chord. “There’s such a compelling wish in all of us to be reunited with the people we love,” she said. “It’s so unfathomable when people you love aren’t here anymore.” I knew, even without asking, what she was talking about. A few years ago, when we met for dinner one night in Cleveland, the actress confided that her most cherished dream was to develop a film she could make with her father, Danny Thomas. “He always wanted to be a character actor,” she told me. “In his autobiography, he wrote that he was happy because his daughter Marlo was finally going to make that happen.”

Marlo never did make it happen, although she had planned to. On Feb. 6, 1991, at the age of 79, Danny Thomas died unexpectedly – leaving his daughter to confront the greatest personal loss she had ever experienced. “I didn’t realize that it was such a physical thing,” Marlo told me. “A death – especially the sudden death of a loved one – is a violent act on your body. I felt very much as if I’d been hit by a plank around the shoulders and chest. My head felt heavy. It was a stunning experience.”

Like the woman she plays in *Reunion*, Marlo Thomas had very reason to assume, before her father’s death, that her life had reached an even keel. The actress recounted how, at Christmas in 1990, she and her husband had held a huge family reunion at their Connecticut home. The guest included Marlo’s parents, Danny and Rose Marie; her brother, Toni, and sister, Terre, and their families; and Phil’s children from a previous marriage. “We had a smashing Christmas,” Marlo recalled. “Everybody was there. It was a wonderful family experience.”

“I’ve always wondered if people have little premonitions about their deaths,” she added. “My father was saying little things to each of us that week. He wasn’t sick, but he was telling my brother, ‘Your sisters won’t talk to me about this, but there are certain things you have to know.’ Then, one night, I went into my parents’ bedroom. My father had tears in his eyes. I thought something had happened. I said, ‘What’s the matter, Dad?’ “He said. “Mom and I are just so happy to see how happy you and Phil are in this lovely home. Mom and I aren’t going to be here forever, and it makes us happy to see how happy you are.’ He was kind of taking stock of where all of us were, but I cried, and he cried.”

About six weeks after that conversation, with no warning, Danny Thomas died. He had just completed a book tour for his autobiography, *Make Room for Danny*, which later made the bestseller list. “I felt like someone stole him from me in the middle of the night,” Marlo confided.

Something strange began to happen as we talked about her father’s death. I’d never had the pleasure of meeting the man, though I grew up watching him on *Make Room for Daddy*, his hit TV series. As Thomas spoke of the father she lovingly and laughingly described as “a big-nosed, cigar-smoking angel,” I found myself missing him as well. And that, I learned, was not an uncommon reaction.

“When I got on the plane to go to my father’s funeral, “Thomas recalled, “I was alone. Phil stayed behind to do a memorial program on my father on the Donahue show. It was a mistake for me to be alone. I cried the whole way.”

But, as Marlo soon discovered, she was not really alone. “The flight attendants all had stories about the times they had flown with him,” she said. “Then all these little napkins stated moving up to the front of the airplane. They were condolence notes. They would say, ‘I always loved your father’ One said, ‘He was like a daddy to me too.’ I had never received a condolence note in my life, but what a gentle world it felt like all of a sudden. That whole airplane was comforting me. It was very, very sweet and moving.”

Still, Thomas admitted, notes of condolence were not enough to ease the greatest fear she dad – of being cut off forever from the father she loved, a man who’d sat up with her late at night, listening critically to tapes of his own appearances and teaching her the fine points of performance, a mentor who at 78 still flew across the country to see every new stage role she essayed.

“Phil and I were both raised Catholic, but we’re not so much involved with the church anymore,” she told me. “He‘s kind of a devil’s advocate. But I called him from the plane that day. I was as fragile as an egg. I said, ´Answer me truthfully: Is there a heaven?` And my darling husband - I´m not sure what he believes anymore – said, ´Yes, yes there is a heaven.´ The need to hear that there is a heaven and that the person you love is there is very strong.”

One thing that Marlo, her mother, brother and sister quickly did was to pitch in to keep up Danny Thomas´ work for the St. Jude Children´s Research Hospital in Memphis, which he founded in 1962. Now one of the nation´s leading centers for research on catastrophic diseases in children. St. Jude was the first American institution allowed to experiment with genetic therapies for children.

“When I was going down [to Memphis] to make the first commercials after he died – I made them with John Goodmann – I thought, ´I´m not going to be able to do this,´” Thomas told me.
“Then I went there and saw the statue of St. Jude, and the kids and the nurses and the parents, and I thought: ´This is exactly where I belong. No daughter could have a better place to go. Itäs surrounded by my father´s spirit.´”

Nearly four years have passed since Danny Thomas died, and his family has dealt with its grief healthily. “We´ve moved on,” Marlo told me. But, while her grief for him has abated, her need for her father and guide has not.

“I have friends who dream about my father,” she said. “When I opened in Los Angeles in *Six Degrees of Separation*, a friend of mine wrote me a letter. In a dream, she said, she had walked into a theater, and my father was sitting on the stage at a little table off to the side. He looked great. When he saw her, he said, ´Shhhh,´ and pointed at the stage and said, ´Don´t tell Marlo I´m here.´ My friend said, í just know he was telling me that he would be there with you very night.´”

The plot of *Reunion* appealed to Marlo Thomas because it echoed and verified a lesson she had learned in her own life. “The real reunion is to reunite with the rest of your family, to take your loss and fold it into your life and make it part of who you are,” she told me. “It´s just not enough to be a survivor – you have to thrive. And my character, I know, will go on to thrive.”

In finding her own strength to thrive, Marlo Thomas discovered that her loss, though great, had not been what she thought it was. “There´s something that my father left behind,” she said. “It´s human. There´s a spiritual conversation that still goes on with him. He´s still there. If that weren´t true, it would be unbearable.

Grieving the Loss of a Parent

“The lifeless body of my mother lay on the bed. This body had given me life carried me inside, nourished me. But now it was an empty shell. It felt inconceivable that my mother was dead” Her voice shaking with emotion, a woman shares these words with a small group of adults, who listened compassionately and intently. They have all experienced the death of a parent, some recently and some in the past. In this workshop they are sharing their stories while exploring the complex territory of their grief.

The death of a parent is an important passage in the life cycle; it can be one of the most significant events of a person´s life. A person who loses a parent will never be the same as he or she was before this event. Old illusions are shattered, old beliefs challenged as one comes face to face with a deep sense of aloneness, with a sobering sense of the fragility of life and of the certainty of death. Something fundamental shifts inside. Recent studies (Scharlach, Umberson) reveal that this event is much more stressful, lingering and difficult than had been assumed by both the general public and mental health professionals. The majority of the adults in Scharlach´s study were still experiencing emotional and somatic reactions one to two years after the death of a parent.

Clients often come to therapy feeling overwhelmed by the intensity and at a loss in dealing with their grief. There can be considerable pressure from friends and family to “pull yourself together and encouragement, many people try to put this event behind them too quickly. Unresolved grief continues to work silently and insidiously, affecting life decisions and attitudes. A large number of my clients have current problems that are rooted in the death of a parent that was never fully grieved.

The role of the therapist is to educate, support, and encourage clients in their grieving. As a guide through the underworld, the therapist must encourage clients again and again to reach deep inside themselves to find the resources to go on through the loneliness and depression, to face not only the chaos and uncertainty, but also their own mortality and painful questions about the directions and quality of their lives.

In working with clients I have observed three stages in grieving the loss of a parent: shock, descent and emergence. Although some people move directly into the second stage, shock is usually the first response. Feelings are dulled, life feels dream-like. One feels buffered from the full impact of the loss. Clients often say at this point: “I feel numb… It hasn´t sunk yet that my father has died… Everything feels unreal right now.”

Shock serves as a protective transition into the second stage when the reality of the loss begins to hit. Then one descends into a long dark passage of grief. One feels alone, out of control, flooded with waves of intense and often overpowering feelings that range from anguish and anger to relief and joy. This is the stage in with clients are most likely to consult therapists. “I don’t know what is wrong with me. I cry all the time… It’s been six months. Why am I still feeling depressed? …I feel like an orphan. I’ve never felt so alone… I don’t seem to care about anything anymore… Will this grief ever end?”

If the death of a parent is grieved fully, even years after the death, it can initiate a period of significant growth and change. I would like to share some of the important areas that I address with grieving clients in both individual therapy and workshops that enable them to maximize the healing and transformative potential in this major life passage.

Explore clients' concepts, concerns and fears about grieving.
Many clients resist grieving because they think that what they are experiencing is abnormal. I assure clients that it is natural. I assure clients that it is natural, although uncomfortable, to feel raw, vulnerable, alone, overwhelmed. We discuss the profound psychological psychological impact of losing a parent, the stages of grieving, common emotional and somatic reactions, and the damaging effects of unresolved grief. Since we live in a culture that expects quick fixes and avoids pain, there is a tendency to pull oneself out of grief prematurely. I encourage clients to be patient and compassionate with themselves; it takes time to heal. We identify how they can find support as they move through the stages of grieving, whether from people, activities, groups, pets, nature, or creative expression.

The next step is to create strategies for moving through the grief, stage by stage and day by day.
While these strategies are tailored to each client's need, I encourage most of my clients to setup a sanctuary in their home, a protected place where they can open fully to their grief for ten minutes to an hour each day. We discuss possibilities for using the sanctuary – writing, drawing, crying, praying, meditating, or just sitting and being open to whatever comes up. I ask them to find a rhythm of entering the grief for a period of time each day and then letting it go and attending to daily tasks. In this way clients can move beneath the surface of grief and even dive deep without feeling overwhelmed. They discover that they can attend to their daily commitments and also grieve.

Encourage clients to address any unfinished business with their parent.
It is very common for unresolved feelings toward the parent to surface after his or her death. Sometimes memories and insights emerge that were too frightening to disturbing to face when that parent was alive. The grieving period is an important time to heal old wounds and to begin to say good-bye.

Death ends a life, but not a relationship. I have observed that, even after a parent's death, the relationship continues to unfold and change. This is a new concept for many. I offer active imagination exercises for accessing and communicating with the living parent within (See below). One of my clients expressed: "I miss my father but most of all I miss the relationship I never had with him." Her father had not spent much time with her and had been very undemonstrative.

When she did an active imagination exercise in a workshop, she was convinced that nothing would happen. She was shocked when a vivid image of her father appeared in the center if the rose. "I could reach out and touch him. I could hear his voice so clearly." She was moved to tears by their loving interaction and was convinced that she was still connected to him.

Urge clients who are struggling to cope with increased family demands to take time for themselves each day and commit weekly talks with partners and children.
A parent's illness, dying and death can cause tremendous strain on family life, demanding an exhausting expenditure of time. Attention and money. With the death of one parent, one may need to take care of the other parent while both are grieving. Many marriages and partnerships have a difficult time adapting to these stresses. Disagreements and misunderstandings are common. One partner may feel that the other doesn't give enough emotional support while the other may feel intimidated by the intensely and unpredictability of emotions that well up in grief. Umberson, a sociologist at the University of Texas, has been tracking the changes that occur after the loss of a parent. She told *Longevity* magazine August 1992: "We had no idea that as common an event as losing a parent could place so much strain on a marriage." In weekly talks at home or in therapy sessions, partners can share their feelings and reactions to this stress, assess what is and isn't working and brainstorm possible solutions.

Children are often upset and confused by their parent's grief. Parents need to take the time to answer their children's questions and explore their fears. As our parents die, we have the opportunity to share this process with our children and thus bring death back into the family again. Then children have the opportunity to come to terms with death as a natural part of the life cycle.

The family of origin is often thrown into chaos and upheaval with the death of a parent. Old patterns of relating suddenly don't work with the same predictable results. This can be a stressful time with the other parent and with siblings, but it can also be an unparalleled opportunity for making healthy changes.

One of my clients felt perplexed and disturbed by the fighting that was taking place among his siblings. Old competitions and jealousies had surface. There were heated arguments over the estate. He was relieved to find that this happened to many families after the death of a parent. Realizing that there was opportunity for positive change in the situation, he focused on clarifying to himself and his siblings the changes he wanted in his relationships with them.

Preparing clients for the anniversary of a parent's death.

Even years after a parent's death, many go through a period of heightened emotion and depression in the weeks leading up to the anniversary. I have been struck that this takes place even when the person has forgotten the date; it's as though the body remembers. I ask clients to take time to reflect and grieve in the weeks before the anniversary to commemorate it.

There is often a significant shift around the first anniversary of the death; at this time there can be a sense of renewal, inspiration and emergence into the world after many months of retreat, depression, and exhaustion. There can be marked changes in self-concept, priorities, relationships and career goals. This is an exciting and rewarding time in therapy, as clients seek to expand, initiate, and express. I have seen babies, poems, paintings, books, and projects all being birthed in this third stage of grief. While encouraging clients to celebrate these changes, I also remind them that grief will continue to surface from time to time through the years. This is not a regression but an opportunity for more healing.

Everyone of us will experience the death of a parent, if we do not die first. This is a universal experience full of power and mystery and at the same times a deeply personal one. It is a time of loss and pain but also of freedom and growth. As psychotherapists, we have the opportunity to support and guide others through this major life passage and go to work with the powerful forces of grief to initiate not only change but transformation.

Imagination Exercise

Close your eyes and imagine a rose that represents your relationship with your parents.
Notice its stage of growth – is it tightly closed, beginning to open, blossoming? Enjoy this rose with all your senses – smell it, touch it, look at it.
The rose is now beginning to open slowly, pedal by petal. At its center, at the heart of your relationship, stands your parent, waiting for you.
Go to meet your parent there, and allow your interaction to unfold on its own. You may be surprised at what happens between you, perhaps some interaction or communication that you never in life imagined possible.
This may also be a time to update your relationship. Share with your parent the changes, feelings, insights, and new perspectives you have recently uncovered that you want to explore with your parent.
When you are ready, conclude your visit. If you still feel unfinished, let him or her know when you will be visiting again. Then step out the petals slowly flow up again, enclosing and protecting the place of your meeting.

Nobody's daughter

It doesn't matter how old you are. When you lose your parents, you become an orphan
by Wendy Lichtman

Three days after my father's funeral, I backed out of a parking space too close to a pole and broke off my side-view mirror. The following week, I ignored a scraping sound until the tailpipe was on the ground. And for months, even when the car was working, I spent a lot of time driving it in the wrong direction. My father was in the auto-repair business, so maybe it means something that after he died I had trouble with cars.

The afternoon I pulled over to the side of the highway to look for a map and instead found myself slugging the locked glove compartment with my fist, I started to worry.

My mother had died a decade before, and at 27, I had been overwhelmed by my grief. For more than a year after her death, I had tucked secret notes into a folder that I labeled *Letters to Mom since her death.*

This time, I decided, I was going to get on with my life as quickly and gracefully as possible. But there I was three months later, sitting at the side of the road beating up my car. It's not only that Dad is gone, I thought as I started at the highway. For the first time in my life, I'm nobody's daughter. I'm an orphan. I don't have anyone to tell my stories about my childhood. As I watch my children grow up, I don't have anyone to ask, "Was I like that? Did I, too, love to climb to the highest perch of the tree?"

It's also, I thought, that I'm next. In the relay race of generations, I'd been passed the baton. I would have to remember Uncle Joey's seventieth birthday and host Thanksgiving on Mom's plates with the hand painted wild turkeys. "How," I had asked my brother at our father's funeral, "did we get to the front of this line so soon?"

As I sat in my car and watched eight lanes of traffic speed by, I remembered my first car accident, when I was 16 – how afraid I'd been to tell my father that I'd rear-ended a van and how shocked I was at his reaction. "A car's a piece of metal," Dad had said. "If you're OK, you can't expect me to get too upset."

I remembered, too, other moments in cars of long ago. I could picture my mom's bright red 1959 Buick convertible; the tail fins ware enormous.

"You can drop me off right here," I told her when we were a block away from my junior block away from my junior high school.

"Would it be better with the top up?" she asked, pulling over.

"No better," I answered opening the door, "but thanks."

And I recalled a long drive to Florida when I was eight, my brother and I bored out of our mind in the backseat of the DeSoto for three days. "Sing 'My Country 'Tis of Thee,'" he urged, and for miles and miles I refused, knowing he'd laugh at me for being off-key. But finally I sang, and he laughed and Mom, reaching over the front seat to hand us orange sections, reassured. "My Country 'Tis of Thgee," she said, "happens to be a very difficult tune."

I've been an orphan for a while now. I've stopped getting lost driving around town, but I still spend time remembering. I put old photos in lovely new frames, I wear my father's maroon woolen bathrobe, and I tell stories about my parents.

"I can't believe you were embarrassed by a car like this," my son declared as he sat at the kitchen table snapping together parts for his latest model: a 1959 Buick Electra, whose tail fins, even in miniature, looked huge.

"But now you think it's a cool car," he asked, "don't you?"

I opened and closed the tiny doors, looked at the double set of brake lights under those fins, and nodded. “Yes,” I said. “Now I think it’s a very cool.car.”