

Grief by Erin Dunigan March 25th, 2020



My dad passed away fifteen years ago. He had been struggling with cancer for two years, so it was not a surprise when the day came, even though it was. Those of you who have been there know what I'm talking about. As much as you think you can do to prepare for that moment, you still are not prepared when it actually hits. My dad's passing was peaceful, at home, amidst family and friends. It was actually a lovely sacred time – you could even call it a gift.

For the three years prior I had been studying theology, including courses in what is considered pastoral care – courses such as how to be present with people in difficult times, how to help families make difficult end of life decisions and how to deal with grief. So, though I would not have said so in so many words, somewhere under the surface I thought I had a handle on the whole 'my dad is dying thing.'

It became clear very quickly that I thought wrong.

When my dad did actually pass it was as though the ground had been pulled out from under me. I was not a child – I was a grown adult in my mid 30's. But even still, it felt as though the very ground that I walked on became unsteady, unstable, shifting. I felt as though I was looking for a firm place to stand and tapping with my foot, but I couldn't seem to find anywhere to actually step down.

"Oh, this is just part of the grief process," I told myself. There are traditionally thought to be give stages of grief, that can happen in any particular order and that can cycle as one moves through grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Another thing I had learned is that there is no particular timeframe – grief can last far longer than one expects, or than others realize.

I had read. I had studied. I knew the five stages. I knew all 'about' grief – but it was not until I was in the midst of it that I realized, no amount of learning 'about' could save me from the 'going through.' I

realized that somehow I thought I might protect myself from the grief, that I might be able to take a short-cut around it – I've studied this, I don't need to actually feel it myself! What I learned when my dad died, more clearly than I had up to that point in my life, is that there is no short cut. Grief is something that one must travel through, not around. But I did also learn that it does not last forever. That in going through it, one actually does, eventually, get to the other side. That the grief does not have the last word. That the grief does eventually pass.

Of course I still miss my dad. But the missing is not as painful as it was in the beginning. The missing has lost some of its edge. I don't know when exactly it happened. But one day I realized that I had built a foundation again – that the ground did not seem to be as shifting. That my feet were finding places to land, and not only that, ways to move forward.

It seems that there will be no short cuts through this time that we find ourselves in. That it is something that we will have to go through, not around. My hope is that we will find our way through to the other side, stronger for having made the journey.