



On the First Anniversary of Your Loss

by *Linus Mundy*

My father died on Father's Day, and every Father's Day since has been bittersweet. No doubt your feelings are bittersweet, too, on the anniversary of your loved one's death. It's a hard time and it may have you experiencing as sharply as ever all the sadness of your loss.

To say the least, the first anniversary is not a day or a season that you feel

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like “celebrating.” You may even be feeling disappointed that you aren’t doing better—since, as others may remind you, it’s been “a whole year.” Or you may not be feeling much of anything beyond a general sense of loss. Our grief comes in many flavors, and it doesn’t follow a calendar.

Working your way through

Nonetheless, many people consider the time around the first anniversary of a death to be a significant marker. Are there ways to make this season of your grief an occasion for healing? Here are a few suggestions.

■ **Honor yourself.** You bet. You are, after all, a survivor. That doesn’t mean everything is just great. But it is a time for you to congratulate yourself for coming as far as you have.

Anniversaries serve as a chance to take stock, writes Peter V. Fossel in his “Country Journal” column. The anniversary of a death, says Fossel, is “a time to see where the river of time and circumstance has led, to review some lessons, and plan what lies ahead. And if nothing else, to celebrate the fact that...we’ve made it this far.”

How do you honor yourself for making it this far? By continuing to express yourself and your grief, but also by beginning to forgive yourself if you’re feeling unforgiven; to admit to yourself that you probably did the best you could for your loved one, or if you didn’t, to seek a final, closing forgiveness from God, your loved one, and yourself.

This may be the day to tell people what you want and need. Whether it’s a trip to the cemetery or your old hometown, baking cinnamon rolls the way Mom used to, eating popcorn while watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” for the eleventh time—do it in honor of the one you loved. But do it for yourself.

And don’t hold back the tears if the tears are there. Tears, whether public or private, help us grieve well and grow stronger.

■ **Honor your loved one.** The first Father’s Day without my dad I dedicated in my mind a series of little booklets to him. Today it is still my prayer that these little booklets pay honor to the memory of this gentle giant of a man.

But I tried to honor Dad in some smaller ways that day, too—by trying to be a simple, kind, honest father like he was to me. There are lots of simple ways to remember and commemorate the first anniversary and the days surrounding it. It may be the perfect time to do something like writing a one-page story about the life of your loved one, a story not for publication but one that recalls the true uniqueness of your loved one. Or you may want to get out the pictures and the clippings and

We talked about the year, and as she left, she turned to me and said, “Happy new year.” That’s right! I thought. It is a new year. It was incredible what that statement meant to me as I ruminated with friends about the year and a whole new perspective opened up.

—Joyce Phipps,
Death’s Single Privacy

create a memory album. Or make a list of your loved one's best traits. How would you yourself like to be more like him or her? That's really paying a tribute to your loved one and honoring the spirit of the person.

“The best anniversary gift you can give to yourself and your departed loved one is the gift of healing—even if it's just a beginning.”

■ **Honor your loved one's story.** Speaking of spirit, be sure to tell the story of your loved one. This is the most genuine way to capture and convey and keep the memory of your loved one alive. When I hear my Uncle Ted tell the funny and sad stories of himself, Uncle Wes, and my mother growing up, I see again a side of my mom that I saw growing up. She comes back to life for me.

You may also need to re-tell the story of your loved one's passing itself. Even if it was a peaceful and expected death, it is rarely a peaceful event as far as surviving family members and friends are concerned. And parts of the experience are so powerful they can take on a life of their own unless they're talked out.

While it's true one can get too immersed in reliving the entire ordeal of your loved one's dying, it is also true that unspoken, intense feelings can have an unhealthy effect

over the long haul. So go ahead and find a good listener. Even if it's awkward and you're the only one who remembers the date, give yourself and your loved one the gift of remembering. And then express your true feelings about then—and now.

■ **Honor your memories.** You might want to consider a more formal tribute-making, though it doesn't have to be very formal. In his book *Healing Our Losses: A Journal for Working Through Your Grief*, Jack Miller emphasizes the healing power of tribute-making, and gives two major pointers: 1) Try to capture the essence of your lost loved one with your tribute; and 2) Try to lose yourself in the making of the tribute.

What sort of memorial would you like to create in honor of your loved one? The first anniversary may be the perfect time for something as grand as dedicating a public garden or park in memory of your loved one—or as simple as planting a geranium in your window box.

This didn't happen all of a sudden, but about a month after the first anniversary...I started to take account of what I did have, the people in my life who I value tremendously, and I thought, maybe this is the way the first year of bereavement ends; maybe [by] re-entering the world...taking stock in what I have that is sacred to me, and truly reveling in that, I've passed the point of obsession and now can go on with memories intact, but no longer overloaded with the burden of loss.

—B. Taylor, quoted in
Remembrance of Father
by Jonathan Lazear

What, exactly, was the essence of the person? That's what you want to commemorate.

The first anniversary of your loss may also be the time to present a memorial keepsake to someone—a pin, dish, book, or memento that signifies something about your loved one. In our own family of four grown children, we circulate a simple pair of glass candlesticks that meant a lot to our mom.

Mom would always light candles in these holders when a big storm approached, signifying God's light and presence amid even the darkest storms. Now these candleholders signify Mom's abiding presence among us, too, along with God's.

■ *Honor your relationship with your loved one.*

Though this may sound corny, and you hear it all the time, there is hardly a better remembering and healing exercise than writing a letter to your loved one. This is the way to bare your soul, to say what has been unsaid, and to repeat what has been said but needs to be said again—that it is love that matters and lasts.

The intimacy and self-expression of a letter helps you keep nurturing the spiritual bond between you. And it acknowledges that your personal, one-to-one relationship with your loved one continues forever.

And don't hesitate to include the painful stuff, too. All relationships include disappointments and shortcomings. When you express them, you can begin to let them go.

Other commemorations might include creating a family tree or writing a short and informal entry in a diary, journal, or notepad—capturing the special memories of times spent together. Do something that confirms that your relationship with your loved one has changed, not ended. That's an anniversary gift to both of you.

■ *Honor life itself—and the Giver of life.* My wife and I have a little plaque on our bedroom wall that says: "Thank you, God, for allowing us to have this time together." Someday one of us may well be reading that plaque alone. But my wife and I trust that God is saying something downright astonishing about time and life and love: They go on and on—beyond the first anniversary, beyond the hundred and first. That's something to hang on to and celebrate on this first anniversary of your loss.

Take heart

The word *celebrate* isn't only about joy; it's also about observing, paying attention, and noticing. So go ahead and celebrate the life of a loved one who has meant—and continues to mean—so much to you.

Honor this period as a rite of passage, giving yourself the right to pass to a new stage in your grieving and healing. While you're celebrating this rite of passage, you will be getting a gift as well as giving one. It will be the gift of a loving, lasting communion that binds you to your loved one for eternity. ■