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Grief: Good Grief

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It is Friday, November 4, 2005. It is my 62nd birthday. It should be a day of joy and happiness, of celebration, but it is not. For 61 years and 11 months, I celebrated my life partially by remembering and enjoying those who made that life possible, principally my mother and father. Four weeks ago today, at 9:30 AM, I received a call from my brother: "Daddy has taken a turn for the worse," he announced. As I prepared to leave and go to him, hoping against hope that I would get there before the dreaded event of his death occurred, I received the second call, "Daddy has passed away."

Today, as my wife and I drive to Houston, to have lunch at our favorite restaurant and to visit our favorite stores, my mind is fixed upon the sequence of events which had taken place one month before. A sadness fell over me which I could not shake. Repeatedly, through the day, I found myself weeping – quietly and sometimes silently – tears came again and again. My wife was extremely kind and supportive. No recrimination for a grown man weeping in a public place from her. She understood. With reservations for the weekend, we both realized that the best place for us was home. A two-day trip was completed in six hours from departure to return, including lunch and shopping.

Saturday and Sunday were better days. Everything, absolutely, everything reminds me of my father, and why not, more than anyone I am a product of him, not just genetically, but by habits, attitudes, principles, values and every other element of my being. My grief came not only from the loss of my father, but because in reality, I had lost a part of myself.

In *Loss and Change*, Peter Marris wrote "The fundamental crisis of bereavement arises not from the loss of other but from the loss of self." As my father's illness progressed which resulted in his death – an illness about which I could do absolutely nothing – I honestly wondered if I would die with him. I had never known life without him and in quiet, lonely moments, I wondered if I could live without him. Of course, I did survive my father's death, but one of the pillars of my existence is no longer there. In many ways, I feel diminished in my person because I can no longer pick up the telephone and say, "How are you?"

I know that I shall never forget him, at least as long as I have memory, but I also know that October 7, 2005 has taken on such significance that the date itself will never be far from my conscious thoughts. Of all the dates which have defined my life, this date has taken its place at the head of the line of those dates which have such overwhelming significance that where I was, what I was doing and what I felt will never be forgotten.

Each of us grieves differently and none of us should feel the requirement to explain our

grief, excuse it, or imitate the grief of another. But, we also must grieve. The Apostle Paul said, “Do not sorrow – grieve – as those who have no hope.” Our grief must never be accepted as reality, for there is a reality beyond the grief which death of a loved one brings. Where and when my grief shall end, I am not sure. I do know where it has been. It started as I drove home on October 7th to memorialize the life of my father. The tears which clouded my eyes as I drove did not cloud the memories of this wonderful man.

Each of us will do different things which aid our grief. When my brother told me that my father had died, without thinking, I said, “Ask them not to embalm him before I get there.” I still don’t know why I said that, but it is not necessary to explain it. When I arrived in Natchitoches and went to the Funeral Home, the Funeral Director took my wife and me to their preparatory room where my father’s body laid. I took his hand from under the sheet which covered him and held it as I had my last conversation with him. I was so glad that his hand was soft and even slightly warm. His hands had always been dear to my and I had held his hand for hours over the past several years.

As I talked to him, my grief accelerated but my healing also started. I believe that if I started at 100% grief and 0% healing, by the end of that visit with him, my grief was 95% and my healing was 5%. Later, my wife said, “Did you say what I think you said at your father’s side?” “Yes, I did,” I replied. “Today, I am not going to be a theologian, I am a grieving son.” What my wife had overheard me say, quietly and almost under my breath, was a prayer. In part of that prayer, I said, “God, if you cannot find a place for this man in heaven, do not find a place for me. I want to be with him.”

Perhaps the most important part of grief is honesty with yourself, with others, and with God. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want to go to heaven – even those who don’t believe there is such a place. And, I know that you don’t get to heaven because a son prays for you after you have died, but I also know that it began my healing when I expressed the depth of my love for my earthly father to my Heavenly Father.

It is possible to share these intimate moments with others, even with strangers, because they are neither right nor wrong. They are! And, though the grief experiences of others are certainly different, each of us validates the grief of everyone as we actively engage in the process of grief and healing ourselves.

My healing accelerated and overtook my grief on the second day following my father’s death. The memorial service was approaching and I was to participate, yet there had been no time to be alone and to prepare. Early on Sunday morning, a great deal before dawn, I slipped out of the bed at my father’s home and quietly dressed. I would only discover later than my wife had awakened at this time. Rather than sleep, she also slipped out of bed and on her knees prayed for me. She prayed for the work which I was about to begin, knowing how important it was. Praying for those who are grieving, even when you are grieving also, is a critical part of everyone’s healing.

I drove down Cane River Lake to where we lived when we first moved to Natchitoches 56 years ago. The house is not there any longer but the power company substation which

my father operated is. I parked in the drive way and with the dome light of my car giving me light, I read and thought and wrote.

My mind was directed toward the Ten Commandments which are sacred to three of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I thought of the unity of the Law of God which means that if you break one, you are guilty of all. No picking and choosing here. James wrote in the New Testament that if you are a "respector of persons," if you think you are better than someone else, or if you think someone else is better than you, you are guilty of the whole law. I realized that my father's life was devoid of the pride and arrogance of thinking he was better than others, but also he never thought that he was not as good as anyone.

My next thought was of the structure of the Law of God. The first four commandments address our relationship with God and the last five our relationship with other men and women. The fifth commands that we honor our father and our mother. No one can claim to love God, or his fellow man that does not honor his father and mother, whether they are living or dead. I realized in that movement that I had never seen nor heard my father be impatient, irritated, harsh, mean or angry with his mother or father, nor with my Mother's mother and father.

Finally, I thought of the power of the Law of God. No man can keep the law of God and no man has except for the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. I realized that my father, I and everyone needs mercy. I prayed for mercy for him and for all of us. In those moments, my healing continued as I realized the excellence of my father's life but also how much we both need mercy. This act of grieving was almost over, as I was soon to discover.

It was at that moment that a miracle occurred and I knew that I could go on even without my father. Some would see this miracle as only a natural occurrence, but on this day, for me, it was a miracle. The sun rose! I had been alone for several hours in the dark and suddenly the first rays of light broke over the horizon. The reflection of those first rays upon Cane River Lake was magnificent. I realized in that moment that the dark night brought by the death of my father would always be followed by the dawn. My tears dried in that instance and I knew that my work of that moment was over. I knew that the memorial service would be a wonderful time of celebration of resurrection and of renewal.

As I drove to my father's house, I saw something else. Above the waters of Cane River Lake, little puffs of condensation, which looked like smoke, rose. It was as if there were thousands of witnesses to this moment of resurrection. As the warmth of the sun flooded the morning, those apparition-like images disappeared. It was almost as if in the sun's rays these witnesses completed their ascension. I am completely aware that this is totally a physical phenomenon which is repeated naturally every time conditions are right, but on this day, they were a gift to me which continued my healing.

As my tears of November 4, 2005, revealed, my grief is not over and my healing is not complete, but it is better. I think, I will never totally stop grieving and will therefore

never totally stop healing, but each day will distill the memories until their essence is filled with joy, peace and hope. And, that will be the most fitting memorial to William Richmond (Bill) Holly, Sr., my father.

It is my hope that my story will encourage you to grieve and to heal, whether it is over an event which is as recent as my father's death, an event which is long passed and yet unresolved, or an event which is yet to come. Mental, emotional and physician health requires us to grieve and to heal. It is your life and it is your health, only you can make it the best it can be.