

Secret

Looking back at the death of a parent

"It has been 31 years since my father drowned in a boating accident when I was 8 years old," wrote **September Sands**. "but I am more and more impressed with the profound effect this loss has had and continues to have on the way I encounter life. . . . I would like to hear from others who have lost a parent in childhood and feel affected by it still."

Among the Chat readers who responded were **A Happy Heart**, who lost her mother, and **Razzberry**, whose father died when she was still a child. Here are their stories.

Dear September Sand - It has been 20 years since my mother died a slow, agonizing, ugly death caused by cancer. I was 17 at the time and had two younger brothers still at home.

When she died, my immediate feeling was a giddiness and relief that it was finally over. Other than that, I was numb and unable to experience any grief.

Gradually, I felt more and more grief, guilt, a sense of enormous loss, anguish and regret. It was more than two years before the dam burst and I started dealing with all I felt. By that time, there were a couple other stressful factors in my life, and everything combined lead to what is commonly referred to as a "nervous breakdown."

I spent three months in a psychiatric hospital and continued outpatient counseling for another couple of months. That, combined with the support and compassion of friends who really cared, started me on the road to coming to terms with my mother's death and my feelings about it.

Like you, I still feel a great sense of loss. I think the important thing here, though, is to keep it at its proper level in proportion to the whole. Don't let it dominate your thoughts or keep you from leaving the past and looking to the present and future. Facts are facts, and no matter how we might hope or wish or regret, those facts won't change.



ILLUSTRATION BY IRENA ROMAN

How many times I've wished my mother could know that I'm an adult, could know my husband and children, and share my joy in my beautiful family! I'd tell her how much I appreciate the warm and generous and strong person she was. I must admit I gave very little thought to my parents' feelings or desires, as is typical of childhood selfishness. Growing up and becoming a parent yourself alter one's perspective.

In summation, I feel I've emerged a better, more feeling and compassionate person. I've learned a great deal and grown a lot.

Life is not forever for any of us. What a loss to pass through it, and not be able to savor the good and beautiful and accept what cannot be changed and make the most of things!

Hope this helps. Peace.

A Happy Heart

Dear September Sand - I am 31, and I lost my father at age 7. As long as I can remember, he had been sick, in and out of hospitals with emphysema. Because of his illness, my mother worked until I was about 3 and too active to be looked after by an invalid. After she had to quit, we had very little income. My Dad required oxygen tanks, and we had to live in a rather crummy walk-up because no one wanted to rent to a

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Early death of a parent still is painful

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family with kids, a sick, unemployed father, and dangerous oxygen tanks.

Dad and I were very close. I was the last of his four kids, and the only daughter. Mom says he wanted all girls, but I was the only one. Most people think I can't have known him very well, but I feel that the relationship I had with him has colored nearly every aspect of my life. I took his death very hard, and though I feel I accepted it years ago, I often wonder how my life might have been different had he lived. So many aspects of the lack of a father - poverty, added intensity to my relationship with my mother, the lack of that loving relationship - just left a huge hole in a child's heart.

As a child, I tried to value what he had valued. As a result, I excel in school, and strove for personal honesty and integrity. I also formed close friendships in a serious manner, trying to make up for that other relationship I was lacking.

Later, I was always attracted to men like my father - tall, thin, quiet, intellectual, sensitive. In fact, many people see my father's picture on my mantel and ask if it's my husband's father. I was astounded when my mother remarked that my husband, referring to his moodiness, "is just like my father was." She was referring to his moodiness.

I find I never stop missing my dad. Whenever

things have gotten rough for me, I find myself wishing I could talk it over with him. I look at my two daughters and wish he could read them the stories I heard as a child. I know that my father, who wanted daughters so much, would have made a wonderful grandfather.

There are still times when I think of him and tears come, but I feel that the part of him he gave me in the seven years we had together cannot be taken away. The void is still there and will always be there, but I feel that knowing him, even for just seven years, made my life saner, richer and more worthwhile. I have also developed an outlook on life that does not take tomorrow for granted.

It must have been such a shock for you at age 8 to be faced with such a sudden loss. At least I was prepared, since I had always known my father was very ill. If you are still hurting from your loss, I guess you don't get much sympathy from most people. I find that, unless they have also lost a parent, most people don't realize that a child can feel such a loss in its entire emotional depth.

I don't know if this letter has been any help at all, but perhaps just knowing that other adults still feel their childhood losses as keenly as you, and in as many different ways, will give you a clearer perspective on it. Let me hear from you. I love your nom.

Razzberry

Writing to Chat

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