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The Five Stages of Grief

Denial

In the beginning, I wouldn't accept it. I kept going about my life as if it weren't true. In fact, I knew it wasn't true—he would fight to live. I would call him in the morning to see if he needed anything.

“Hi, grandpa. How are you feeling today?”

“Oh, honey, I'm doing just fine. I have less pain than I had yesterday. I think I am feeling a little better.” His voice was still chipper with no signs of pain or defeat.

“Well, maybe you'll pull through. Stranger things have happened!”

I was wrong. Stranger things didn't happen. Within three weeks of ceasing treatment, he was no longer able to care for himself. His pain was becoming intolerable, and he rarely left his bed. There had to be at least one person at his house at all times to take care of him. Even though I was a full-time student and working forty hours a week, I still volunteered my time. If I wasn't in class or at work, I was sitting in a rocking chair next to his bed attempting to catch up on homework, listening to him talk, or watching a low budget made-for-TV movie about a woman who was trying to escape a murderous ex-husband. This is about the time that the reality set in. He was going to die, and there was nothing either he or I could do about it. Shortly after this realization is when he asked the whole family to start removing things from his house. He wanted us to take the things that we wanted; he wanted to be sure that his things would go to a good home. I searched all over his house for what I might want.

“Grandpa, there's only one thing in this house that I want.”

“Mad Bluebird?”

“Can I have it?”

“Sure. No one else will want that ugly thing.”

Mad Bluebird is the best picture. It was bought by my grandmother twenty years prior at a garage sale. It is a photograph of a bluebird, and there

is really no other way to describe this bluebird except that he looks, well, mad. Both my grandfather and I always thought this photograph was funny. It was a moment captured where a harmless bluebird is pissed. No one else thought it was too funny, so he decided to label it: “Mad Bluebird,” in the handwriting of a seventy year old man on the frame. It was no longer just funny. It was downright hilarious. That night I brought Mad Bluebird into my house, but I refused to hang it up.

Anger

The house—full of fifty-four years of family history—slowly emptied. Some family left with a picture frame, some family left with boxes full of picture frames, or anything else they could stuff in there. Two weeks later, the house was sparsely littered with trinkets and broken furniture that no one wanted. My aunt’s husband (her second, but no less rude than the first) said, “Why don’t you just throw it all in a dumpster? It’s just junk.” After he left, I sat back down in the rocking chair next to my grandfather’s bed.

“I’d like to put him in the dumpster.”

“Now, don’t get angry. That’s just Kevin..... But if you get a chance, please don’t pass it up.”

Bargaining

While we shared a sense of humor that no one else really understood, we differed greatly on terms of religion—Christianity to be exact. In the many moments we shared as his death came nearer, a lot of them were spent talking about religion and God. My grandfather, a faithful Christian, was always interested in converting me. I spent most Sundays at church with him, not because I wanted to be a Christian, but because I wanted to make him happy. He enjoyed seeing me at church while I tried to find some kind of comfort in sermons about things like forgiveness. One evening, I had the most heartbreaking experience of my life thus far. In between cries of pain, my grandfather told me what he really thought of me, someone who has been riddled with doubt her whole life.

“Grandpa, are you scared to die?”

“No, not really. I’m kind of excited. I’ll get to see your grandmother again, and I’ll see your uncle Carl.” My grandmother had passed away seven

years prior to his cancer diagnosis, and my Uncle Carl was killed in an automobile accident at the age of eighteen.

“Who do you want to see first? Grandma or Carl?”

“Now, don’t get me wrong. I loved your grandmother very much. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t think about her. And I’ve said many times that I would give anything to see my son that was taken away from me too soon. But, honestly, I want to see my Savior, Jesus Christ first. Do you think you’ll see your Savior when you die?”

“I’m still not really sure what will happen when I die, Grandpa.”

“I know. I just thought I would ask. Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

“I’d be a lot more comfortable dying if I knew that you believed you would see me again someday. I would like to know that you would raise a good, Christian family. I don’t know if I can really be ready to die until I know that. It’s just something to think about.”

It really was something to think about. I was presented with an opportunity. My grandfather’s comfort in dying rested in the hands of my conversion to Christianity. Could it really happen that way? I knew that I couldn’t save him. I knew that I couldn’t keep him from dying. But I could make him more comfortable, and at that point I would have done anything to take away his pain, to make him feel comfortable. However, at the same time, I felt as though I had been somewhat wrong about my relationship with my grandfather. Was it possible that he really believed I couldn’t raise a good family without being Christian? What did he really think about my morals? Did he think I wasn’t a good person?

Shortly after this conversation I told my grandfather that I was sorry—I couldn’t make the decision to believe right then. I could have taken the easier way and lied. But, that wasn’t fair to him or to me. I promised him, though, that I would allow myself to remain open to the possibility of belief. This, at the very least, made him admit that I had a good head on my shoulders.

Depression

So, there we were. We had to accept our differences at the moment and trust that what is supposed to happen will happen. Our time spent together became grim. Our conversations were dark, rarely talking about anything

other than his suffering and his desire to die. His voice became more and more quiet, and I usually had to lean in close to hear his barely whispering words. Our depression grew with each day that passed without him getting out of bed. The medications were increased as his pain amplified, and I began to question his quality of life. I began to question the quality of my own life. My conversations with my fiancé at home became more and more somber. He would say to me, "I'm worried about you. If you're this depressed now, what will happen when he is actually gone? This isn't healthy. You go to class, you go to school, and then you sit next to his bed. You need a break."

"No. I need to be there. He needs me to be there. One day, he'll be gone, and I'll be thankful for my time with him."

Acceptance

After two weeks of spiraling further and further down, I felt the weight of a question that I didn't want to ask anyone but myself. I couldn't stand it anymore. I couldn't watch his body deteriorate. At that point he hadn't eaten in eight days; he hadn't gotten out of bed in two weeks. I actually wanted him to go. I wanted his suffering to end. Does that make me a bad person? Should a human want that for another human?

My answer was ultimately yes. I had finally accepted his death, and I let him know it. I went into his bedroom, and I sat down in the rocking chair and grabbed his hand one last time. His body was so skinny and frail that I could see his heart through his shirt, pounding just enough to keep his body alive. He hadn't woken up in almost two days, but I hoped he could still hear me anyway.

"Grandpa, I want you know that I'll be okay if you want to die. I will miss you terribly, but I don't want you to stay here for me or for anyone else. If you want to go, then go."

Within three hours he was gone. When I got home that night, I didn't say anything to my fiancé other than, "Can you help me hang up Mad Bluebird?"

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Something I had never realized about caring for someone who is terminally ill is the fact that you actually grieve their death before they are gone.

It is a strange experience—grieving the death of a person who is still living and breathing (even if it's just barely). It is even stranger when the person who is dying is also going through the same five stages of grief at the same time. It becomes a support system that you would never expect. I learned all of this while taking care of my grandfather after he decided to stop his chemotherapy treatments for bone cancer. In the seven weeks between the moment he decided he was too tired to keep going to the moment when he took his last breath, a bond was formed between us that I would have never imagined.