Goodbye is Just the Beginning

Sheila Garos

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Life with my mother was difficult. After losing my father at fourteen and having no siblings, the relationship with my mother became more intense, more complex and more confusing. I was too young at that age to understand what she was going through… how inadequately prepared she was to parent, to manage her grief, to move forward without the anger and resentments that pressed against her shoulders and stiffened her neck day after day since before my father’s death.

My mother lived at home until the deterioration of her body, the stench of her decay and the inevitable loss of what was once a sharp and incisive mind necessitated her admission to a nursing home. What my mother didn’t lose was her bitterness… her regrets… her judgmental and critical edge that pierced through me more times than I can count. My mother had good qualities too. She was a hard worker, had a marvelous sense of humor, made the best chicken soup a Jewish mother can make, and was in her own way… always there for me.

The last time I saw my mother, she was in hospice care in Florida. I lived in Texas at the time. I remember distinctly as I looked at her in her death bed how much I wanted to lay next to her… to have a final moment of unconditional love, acceptance and closure. Instead, my mother in her characteristic way said, “MOVE! … get off me.” At that moment I realized
that the primitive wish for closeness, for acceptance, would never come
and the reconciliation of that fact was mine to face alone.

Despite the contentious nature of our relationship, the call telling me
that my mother had died hit me hard. Recently, when going through some
memorabilia, I found three letters my mother had written to me. In one,
she told me she was proud of me. In another, she asked me to “forgive her
transgressions.” The third revealed a mind unsettled with entangled
thoughts, scrambled words and a loss of sensibility.

My mother was blessed with a close group of women who gathered to
honor her passing and thoughtfully remember the friendships they shared.
When I learned of this gathering, I wanted to reach out to them and tell
them how much they meant to my mother and to me. What follows is a
letter I sent to them to be read at that gathering. I will forever be indebted
to the women who were there for her in ways I was not capable of.

In Memory of My Mother, Vita Garos
(November 23, 1918 – August 19, 2001)

To my mother’s friends and loved ones:

It has been several weeks ago now since my mother died. I have shed
many tears and felt a great sense of loss – more than I would have
expected, given that the relationship we had was for many years, not a
close one. What I have come to understand however, is that as children get
older some of us are fortunate enough to see our parents for the people
they are. I myself gained a better understanding of my mother’s fear, failed
dreams, and what seemed her ever-present lack of peace. I also came to
appreciate her strength, intelligence and quick wit.

At times when she was in the nursing home feeling angry and frustrated
(always complaining about the food of course) I would say to her, “Mom,
tell me a joke.” Within seconds her demeanor would change, her spirit
would lighten, and she would tell at least two or three before the conversa-
tion ended. During the last 6 months or so, those moments would bring
tears to my eyes as I witnessed what seemed a miraculous transformation.

My mother was not one to share compliments often or easily. She fre-
quently buried her feelings with pragmatism or a good pastrami sandwich.
Though she was often bitter, angry and at times even mean or thoughtless
during the last few years of her life, the feelings she verbalized were some
of the most real and honest expressions of her inner turmoil that even a
good story couldn’t cover. I would sometimes get frustrated with her – but
in my better moments I wondered just how well she would adapt to going
from independence to total dependence in one year’s time. Granted, she
could have done more to help herself over the years, but then… couldn’t
we all?
I asked that Hospice send my mother’s address book to me. She kept that book by her side no matter how sick she became. She made sure the book went with her each time she would go to the hospital and back. It was as though it became my mother’s passport to the world beyond the nursing home. It became her connection to all of you.

As I said before, my mother was not one to share compliments or feelings easily or freely. However, she frequently told me a great deal about each of you – mainly that she so appreciated your friendship. She would say, “I’m so lucky to have the friends I have.” Indeed, she was.

I too feel a sense of gratitude to and for each of you. Though I know your good deeds, phone calls, visits, etc., were for my mother, indirectly they helped me as well. My mind always rested a bit easier knowing that each of you played a part in caring for, and about her. You brought my mother moments of joy, reassurance and comfort. I don’t know whether she ever expressed this to you directly, but in her own way, she would let me know how she felt. I feel tears welling up as I write this to you because whether I have met you only once or twice, or whether I have known you well, all of you have been an important part of my mother’s life, and thus my life too.

I was touched to learn that you chose to have this service in honor of my mother. I know that taking the time to remember her would cause her to choke back tears, as she often did. As you may know, my mother chose to be cremated and have her ashes scattered at sea. With her own unmistakable humor, she would tell me, “If I can’t travel in life, maybe I can travel in death.”

Though I am not there in person, this letter allows me to share in the moments of reflection, laughter and sadness that are brought to life in my mother’s memory on this day. In closing I would like to share portions of some writing I did the day before my mother’s death. I thank each of you for taking the time to listen as it is read.

... I watched as my mother fought to survive, to live. I’m not sure if she fought as hard as she did because she loved life, or because death terrified her...

My mother’s walk toward death lasted two years. I saw how a once fiercely independent woman became helpless – stripped of every dignity, diapered, demoralized, and talked to as though she were an ignorant child by people far more ignorant that she...

The most difficult and despairing aspect of my mother’s death (and life) was her lack of peace. I have always seen her as an anguished and restless soul. I sometimes wondered if God prolonged her pain and suffering in a last-ditch effort to gain her resignation that facilitated my mother’s approach to the threshold of death’s door...

... I watched as my mother stayed suspended in a transitional place. Consciousness becoming cloudier, life becoming more distant. I watched as her breathing slowly
changed. Inhalations that were life sustaining yielded to exhalations of stale breath – breath tainted by the encroaching smell of death.

When I last saw my mother, I crawled beside her in bed. I laid my body against hers. I felt a struggle for connection – some demonstration of the closeness I had come to feel toward her over these past two years …

I spent time plucking the long gray hairs that had sprouted under her neck, across her chin and upper lip. I knew she hated looking as she did. When she was able and stronger, she would have seen to it that her face looked as good as possible with all its wrinkles, years of fatigue and lost dreams. I took care of the blackheads that clustered on the crest of her cheekbones …

… I have heard the subtle tempo of death’s heartbeat. I have watched as life and the ending of life embrace one another. I have witnessed my mother’s slow surrender to the inevitable …

The last time I called, she was unable to speak. I’m not even sure if she knew that it was me on the phone. The nurse held the phone to her ear and when she did try to speak, all I could hear was panic behind the congestion that filled her lungs. She gurgled and moaned, and tears streamed down my face at that moment as they are now. I hated the sound that had stolen my mother’s voice …

Earlier today I thought how foolish we are to think we are unlike our parents – that their life or death is of little meaning or consequence to us. I began in my mother. I formed in her womb. Her body provided me with life, with possibility. She bore scars where I was cut from her stomach. How I used to fight the idea that I could be like her. How can I not be? …

… I will miss my mother. I did come to love her deeply and empathically. I hope when I call tomorrow, she will be able to hear me tell her one more time that I love her. I hope that my voice will be known to her. I hope that peace comes for her whether it comes through God, her resignation, or the medication …

I feel anguish in her suffering. My heart is heavy. My eyes are filled with tears as I sense the piercing sting of this goodbye.

On behalf of my mother and myself, I wish each of you, health, joy and peace.

With gratitude and fondness … Sheila

While the loss of a parent brings opportunities for growth, healing and integration (Murray, 2001) losing a parent can also resurrect feelings of longing, finality and the pain associated with what will never be. In my practice as a counseling psychologist I have listened to numerous accounts of unfulfilled dreams, unrequited loves, failed relationships, unresolved issues, missed chances, premature foreclosures and daily disappointments. I have come to recognize the importance of one’s narrative, the reliving,
recounting and reclaiming of one’s life and one’s experiences (Bowman, 1999, Wright, 2002). Narratives temporarily suspend time by remembering who or what was lost and facilitate the process of grieving as we simultaneously try to make meaning of the past while facing a less certain more tenuous future. With the loss of a parent, one’s narrative can be remorseful, relieving, resentful, joyful or bittersweet. Regardless, the anecdotal memories that are shared help preserve what is now lost, and as Harvey and Chavis (2006) write, “…reflect with subtlety the deep feeling associated with the loss” (p. 185).

I found myself experiencing an existential crisis of sorts after my mother died. Having no biological children of my own, I realized that there would be no continuation of my DNA - that the Garos name would end with me. I was 44, single and childless at the time. I recognized that my own life was on borrowed time, something I knew intellectually but now knew in an organic and visceral way. Losing my mother, sensing my aloneness, my finality, forced the question of “what mattered?” Finding meaning in life had greater import. By this time, I had also lost my father, my dearest uncle and my psychologist and mentor of many years. I had come to know death personally and intimately.

Finding meaning after the loss of a loved one has been considered essential to reclaim a feeling of order and coherence (Marcu, 2007; Neimeyer, 2010) as well as harmony and peace of mind (Tyson, 2013). I found that meaning in my work as a psychologist. I found meaning in the knowledge that the pain, anguish and sorrows we suffer are as unifying as shared laughter.

While the literature on grief and loss is replete with articles about “therapeutic strategies” for helping those facing loss (Humphrey, 2009; Kosminsky, 2017; Lamb, 1988; Lendrum & Syme, 1992), models of grief and bereavement (Darian, 2014; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Rubin, 1999; Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010) and models of mourning (Hagman, 2016; Neimeyer, 1999), I have found that every experience is wholly unique. The literature has its utility. However, it is holding a client in that “therapeutic space” where he or she feels safe, accepted and heard that is often all one needs. It is through our conversation, connection, presence and compassion that clients invite us into their experience of loss – no matter how small or profound. A therapist who has suffered losses has a deeper understanding of the angst, the ache of the soul and the heaviness of heart that clients experience in their grief. In my own experience I have come to recognize that every second that passes, every rhythmic inhalation and exhalation that one takes and every life that one touches though ephemeral, is meaningful as moments of time collectively establish who we are and who we will become. Hence, the “goodbye” is just the beginning …
Notes on contributor

Dr. Sheila Garos is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of Training at Texas Tech University. Her research interests include human sexual behavior, behavioral addictions, sexual temptation bias, women’s OB/GYN health and women’s objectification of other women. Dr. Garos has maintained a private practice for eighteen years. The focus of her psychodynamic clinical work is with adults and couples who present with relationship issues, sexual dysfunctions and disorders, addictions and general psychotherapy. She also works extensively with LGBTQ individuals.

References