

GENERATIONS SEVERED: WHEN A PARENT DIES

Our perception of the natural order of life dictates that our grandparents and parents die before us. When a death occurs in that natural order, society tends to take a matter of fact approach because “that is the way it is supposed to be.” When a parent dies, we lose so much more than society gives us a chance to express. Adults who lose parents often are overlooked and expected to carry on. Their grief is minimized. When we lose a parent, we also experience loss of traditions/roots/history, our sense of roundedness, loss of a part of ourselves, loss of identity, loss of our advisor or mentor, loss of future sharing of life-events, and the loss of the psychological buffer from our own mortality.

In addition to the normal grief reactions to loss, there are some very unique issues in parental loss: our sense of abandonment, lost expectations, unresolved issues in the relationship, a feeling of loss of connections between generations, shift in responsibility in care for the surviving parent and a major shifting of balance in our lives.

Parents are not replaceable. Traditions are not easily rebuilt. Identity is fragile at its best. We need to claim the grief process from the loss of a parent. We need time and permission to grieve this very valid loss and to recognize our new sense of identity.

“Visiting the graves of parents reminds us vividly of the fleeting nature of life, of the passing of the generations, of the values which are eternal. We are humbled. We sense the distance between us. But at the same time we sense the community, the closeness... When we stand at the grave of parents, we may “hear” their voices within us. We may feel the years they were with us. We recognize that we are the next generation, and that, at the same time, we are bound eternally to them.”

Pam Reese; Quote from *The Orphaned Adult: Confronting the Death of a Parent*, 1987