

WHEN PARENTS DIE: UNFINISHED BUSINESS

When adults lose a parent, there comes along a myriad of “*secondary losses*.” These further losses may include the loss of the parent as a friend or advisor, loss of the family home, a sense of abandonment, or the realization of one’s mortality. Another secondary loss that often complicates grief is the *unfinished business* left between the deceased parent and the surviving son or daughter. What are some examples of such unfinished business, and what can we do to help clients find peace with issues that may seem “unresolvable”?

One common thread we all had with our parents is that, to some degree or another, the relationship contained *ambivalence*. Our relationships may have been loving or conflicted, or both. While perfectly natural, this vacillation of feelings may cause anguish when a parent dies.

Oftentimes, there were words left unspoken: positive and negative words--statements of love, thanks, forgiveness, apology. If the death was sudden, there was no time for goodbyes. If the death was after a long-term illness, the adult children may have been overburdened with care-taking, or otherwise unable to find closure. Sometimes the dying parent was unable or unwilling to confront unfinished business.

Unfinished business often masquerades as guilt. This can be for offenses, real or imagined, from many years, or directly related to the death. In other cases, we carry our parent’s unfinished business for them by mourning the parent’s regrets about their own lives, or mourning what the parent didn’t live to see or do. Sometimes we carry regret for our children, mourning the loss of the grandparent.

What can we do to help people work through unfinished business?

- Normalize and validate the feelings. Most adult-loss-of-a-parent cases contain pieces of ambivalence, guilt, and regret.
- Guide the person toward *seeking the truth* about the love between parent and child.
- Where medical questions linger, encourage the person to *seek the facts* as best as possible, whether from EMTs, doctors or hospice. Knowledge about the actual course of death can help alleviate guilt and confusion.
- Suggest person *spend time with people who knew your parent*. Who was this person, besides your parent? Look at the scope of the parent’s life, not just the period around the death.
- Suggest the person make lists of their unfinished business: anger list, thank-you list, etc. This can help clarify “muddy” feelings, and sort out what pieces can be “let go of” and which still need work.
- When the person is ready, gently suggest they *write a letter to the deceased parent* whatever their unfinished business may have been. Allow him/her to read the letter aloud to one trusted person who will listen in silence, simply bearing witness to the words.
- In relationships where tremendous hostility and regret dominated the relationship, the notion of *simple forgiveness* may be appropriate. Forgiveness for the parent, as well as forgiveness for ourselves. If helpful, suggest he/she find ways to “make amends.” This could take the form of charity work, donations, ceremony, ritual, biography, or any project that feels appropriate to the person who is bereaved.