

## LOSS OF AN ADULT CHILD

"Age doesn't matter. Your child is your child no matter how old. But with an older child, the relationship you build over the years is different. My son was my best friend."

To bury one of our children is a tragedy few of us can envision, no matter how well schooled in the grief process we may be. What happens to parents who have raised and "launched" their children, only to lose one in his or her adult life?

Many of the responses of such bereaved parents are sadly familiar to all grief, debilitating fatigue, memory loss, overeating, insomnia, even thoughts of suicide. However, for bereaved parents, this event seems "unnatural" for it is parents who are supposed to die first. And guilt? It can be endless. Parents have an inborn sense of responsibility for their children, which continues into the child's adult life, and often continues regardless of the cause of the child's death.

Parents many show resistance to the idea of going on with life without the child. And Denial? Because the adult-child may not have lived at home, parent can be tempted to "pretend" the death never occurred; perhaps the son or daughter is still away at college, or on a trip. (It is a fine line to assess when such denial is a necessary coping mechanism and when it is delaying the grief process.)

What happens to the marriage of bereaved parent? Unbearable pain, blame, guilt and disbelief all wreck havoc on the marriage, often resulting in separation and divorce. This may be mitigated if there are still children living at home; dependent children sometimes provide an anchor to keep parents together. Either way, it is very tough going. Without a healthy outlet for the grief, counterproductive ways of coping may be sought, such as alcohol or drugs to numb the pain, a new sexual partner for diversion, maybe work-a-holism to escape.

What happens when the bereaved parents are seniors? An aged parent may have been financially or emotionally dependent on the adult-child. Or the older parent may be ignored as others rush to comfort the "primary" grievers: spouse and children.

*"As an aged parent, I have sometimes been made to feel that I am out of order to be grieving for a daughter who had already had a rich, full life before she died."*

When the lost child was an adult, bereaved parents may well have taken pride in their children's character and accomplishments, perhaps even the gift of grandchildren. *"When the child died, the parents lost the very essence of what gave meaning to their lives."* Areas that are particularly painful? Each and every "right of passage": graduation, weddings, birth announcements, the surviving spouse remarrying and/or having children. Again, the sense that their son or daughter was cheated out of life.

*"I have a sorrow that Holly did not live to use her considerable gifts"*