

AfterWORDS

VNA Hospice of Indian River County • Bereavement Newsletter

Clearing the Closets by Ronald Sunderland

It is reassuring for most of us to be reminded, in the midst of bereavement, that the thoughts that trouble us and leave us with the feeling that we are going crazy are “normal” responses to the stresses of mourning. I had a conversation with Janice who told me that her sister said she was crazy.

“Tell me why your sister thinks you’re crazy,” I prompted.

She told me that she was five years old when her daddy died. There was a cot in her parents’ bedroom, and after his death, she was afraid to sleep alone. Her mother said she could sleep in the cot. When visiting she’d slept in her mother’s room for the past thirty-five years.

“Six months ago, and shortly after Mom’s funeral, my sister, Beryl, arrived at the house and declared that we would empty the closets and drawers of mother’s clothes, and dispose of them. I wouldn’t let her touch a thing. I told her I wasn’t ready to move anything, I needed to leave things just like they were. Beryl was insistent, but I dug in my heels, and said: ‘Maybe another time.’”

Janice’s sister had visited five times and each time, Janice would say no. “Beryl doesn’t understand that mother’s clothes are all I have left of mother. I open the closet and smell her clothes, and I feel close to her. I just can’t let Beryl take that away. So last time she came, and I refused to let her move anything, she looked at me and said: ‘You are crazy. Do you realize that? You are crazy!’ Am I crazy?”

“No,” I offered, “I don’t think you are crazy.” I then explained that it is customary, when a loved one dies, to

‘empty the closets.’ Some objects – clothes, household items, jewelry – that have a special significance for family members can be retained, while other items can be distributed to family members, or may be donated to Goodwill or some other agency that can put them to good use. But the decision when to do that is a very personal one. I told Janice that “the day will come when, for your own sake, you need to move mother’s clothes from the closet, because you don’t need the clothes she wore to remember her by. Moving the clothes doesn’t mean you are beginning to forget her.”

She looked alarmed and I reassured her that I was not saying move her mother’s things today, or next week, or even next month. “No one but you knows when you will be ready to make that change. But there are other ways to remember and treasure your memories of your mother. Remember that the most precious memories are of places and experiences you shared, the photos that remind you of those moments, the stories that you and Beryl share of growing up with Mother, and she how cared for you after your daddy died.” Sometimes people even choose one or two clothing items that they particularly treasure, and put them aside.

Again, the feeling that we are going crazy is a normal response. Yet, for mourners who delay sorting out clothes and finding a suitable place for them, there comes a time when we also need to be reminded that taking that step is a movement toward healing grief and moving on with life. And for our own health’s sake, that is a step we need to take.

Searching by Susan Duggan

In memory of:

Ambrose “Dugg” Duggan
Nov. 29, 1921 • Jan. 10, 1993

Late night,
Wandering
From room to room
Searching for what?

Books on shelves,
Each in its proper place.
Lined up and orderly
With nothing to say.

Family photos,
Framed and standing.
Memories to hold in my heart
Or flee in pain.

A bed with jumbo pillows
And cotton quilt,
Once so inviting of love and
refreshing sleep.
I remember.

Drawers and little boxes
Holding far more junk
Than treasures.
Was it always so?

A table for eight with armchairs.
Deserted now,
But for ghosts
Of gatherings past.

Mirrors, small and large, lighted and
magnified,
Combinations to see all sides.
I squint into these,
Checking to see who’s there.

Unreliable mirrors all,
For I appear the same.
Late night wandering from room to
room
This is what I find.

All Those Details by Kenneth J. Doka, Ph.D.

Certain deaths, perhaps the death of a spouse or a parent, create not only grief work, but other work as well. When Marla's dad died, she had to cope with the loss of her only surviving parent and all of the detailed work that followed. Papers had to be filed, insurance had to be collected and distributed.

Dealing with all the details, such as readying a house for sale, disposing of contents, is more than physical labor. It is emotional work as well. We need to recognize the meaning of the actions as they take place. Marla felt like she was throwing away pieces of her dad's life with each box she threw away or gave to Goodwill. Selling the house where she had grown up was difficult. "We hired a painter. After he was done, I realized that he had 'repaired' the doorframe where dad made notches to measure my growth each birthday. I just sat down and cried."

In addition, Marla lived only an hour's drive from her Dad. Her two siblings lived a plane ride away. Marla resented that this work fell solely on her shoulders.

How do we cope with all these details? There are a few things to keep in mind.

1. *Recognize this is difficult, but full of meaning.*

When we deal with the possessions of someone we love – clothes, papers, photos – that evokes memories. Going through my own mother's papers, we found old report cards and letters, documents like their first mortgage application or ration cards from WWII. All of these reminded us of their stories and struggles. Selling a family home may represent a loss in and of itself, even as we

gain monetarily. Property may also unleash family conflicts since each piece of property has meaning for heirs. Even signing an insurance check can convey a sense of finality. Recognizing the difficulty validates feelings and reactions.

2. *Pace the work.*

We should avoid placing ourselves on a tight or unreasonable schedule. It is important to follow our own pace. If it becomes too draining to do something, do something else or take a day off. Each of us will have our own rhythm. Respect it.

3. *Get support.*

This may be difficult to do alone. The support of others can be critical. Support can give us an opportunity to discuss and process the experience, relieve some of the time pressure, relieve the burden of constant decision-making, and most importantly, it can build on individual strengths. The work that we find most difficult may be less problematic to another. Sometimes we must ask for support. As much as Marla resented her siblings' absence, she realized she had given permission for it. "Don't worry, I will take care of it. You live so far away." When she shared her needs, they flew out to help her for a week.

Details can be daunting. They can also provide opportunity to explore the meaning of this loss and all the other losses that accompany it. The trick is not to do it alone.

These articles were originally published in "Journeys," A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement, published by Hospice Foundation of America.

Support Group Schedule

- **Tuesdays, 6–7:30 p.m.**
Indian River County Main Library, 2nd Floor
History Meeting Room
1600 21st Street, Vero Beach
- **Wednesdays, 10:30 a.m. – noon**
Our Savior Lutheran Church,
Classroom #4, 1850 6th Ave,
Vero Beach
The focus of this group is "Turning the Corner," seven months or more since the loss.
- **Wednesdays, 1:30-3 p.m.**
Our Savior Lutheran Church,
Classroom #4, 1850 6th Ave,
Vero Beach
The focus of this group is newly bereaved, within six months of loss or for people who have never previously attended a bereavement group.
- **Thursdays, 2–3:30 p.m.**
Sebastian River Medical Center,
Conference Room
13695 U.S. Hwy 1, Sebastian

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