

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Caregiver Grief: Sorting Out, Moving On, Remembering

It's a strange feeling, to no longer have the role of caregiver. The death of a loved one brings with it a lot of grief, but it also brings a sense of relief. Maybe strangest of all, it gives you so much time. So much time now to do . . . what?

This hasn't been easy. You're to be congratulated. Taking care of a loved one till he or she dies is a tremendous accomplishment. Take pride in the areas where you did well but don't get down on yourself about things you wished you had done differently.

Don't get caught in the traps of "What if . . ." and "I should have . . ." and "Why didn't I . . ."

Now there's a feeling of sorting out. Not just your care-receiver's belongings and necessary paperwork, but your own feelings.

In a sense, you've said good-bye to two people. One was the spouse or family member who was ill. It's not as hard to let that person move on to a place where there's no suffering as it is to say good-bye to the other one: the healthy person he or she used to be. Somewhere along the line, as you were taking care of your ill loved one, both slipped away.

It's good not to make any major changes at this time. And there's no reason to rush through cleaning out his or her belongings either.

Try to respect your parent or spouse's wishes, getting mementos to the friends and relatives he or she wanted them to go to. Seeing to it that this or that item is donated to the charity your loved one requested.

As you're sorting these things out, you may just want to sit there for a while, surrounded by, holding close, the items that belonged to your husband, wife, mother or father. In this setting, it may be easier for you to pray for your loved one. To pray to your loved one.

It's going to take time for you to sort out all the feelings, the emotions, you've experienced as a caregiver and are experiencing as a survivor. And, as time goes by, those emotions will shift. They'll change.

There will come a time—and there's no need to rush this—when you'll want to move on. You may want to find a way, a personal ritual, to say good-bye. There's no right way of doing this. And not doing it isn't wrong.

Again, moving on takes time. Just as you probably didn't become a full-blown caregiver overnight, you won't instantly move on to your "new" life or return to your pre-caregiver life.

You had to learn how to be a caregiver. Now you have to learn how to rebuild your personal life without it having that role. That role that dominated your world.

Now you may go back to jogging. Can return to gardening. Can attend your child's soccer games.

You can return to the little, ordinary joys that were a part of your life before you became a caregiver. You may find new ways to experience that kind of simple joy. The joy of being alive.

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In a sense, your life now has two holes. One is in your heart. You miss your loved one and no one can replace that person. The other is in your calendar. You have so much time, so much *free* time. That commodity that was so precious and so rare just a little while ago now fills your schedule.

A part of sorting out, a part of moving on, is remembering. Some of those memories might be related to your role as caregiver. A good time, a happy time even, during that difficult period.

Maybe it was when your wife talked about her death and she wasn't afraid. Maybe when your husband made some small joke and you were both so tired it seemed like the funniest line ever said and the two of you laughed until tears streamed down your faces.

Certainly, remembering includes the time before your mother or father was ill. Memories from your childhood. Memories of birthday and anniversaries. Memories of telling and retelling family stories.

It can help to remember your parent's "words of wisdom," his or her personal creed or philosophy. Maybe Mom or Dad never even put it into words. Just lived it. Maybe it's something you want to think about for a time to help you get through the difficult period following your parent's death. Something, if it's a good fit for you, you want to imitate in some way.

It can also help to remember the times your loved one comforted you. Those times when he or she helped you when you were hurting or unsure or restless, when you were discouraged or sad or frightened.

It can help if you sit down, take a deep breath, and smile, remembering—acknowledging—that as a caregiver you did the same for him or her.

And now your loved one is at peace. □

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