

# JOURNEYS

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement



## No final goodbye

by Kenneth J. Doka

**M**y dad was in hospice care. He was conscious but weakening daily. As death approached, we kept a death watch. Yet, one night, my dad suggested that we all go to sleep. He seemed to be a bit stronger, so we agreed. Unfortunately, he died quietly in his sleep that night. My sister was deeply upset since we were not there for his last moments. There was no final goodbye.

Over my years working with the bereaved, I found many who shared my sister's regret. We hate seeing someone we love die alone. Perhaps we even fantasize a final goodbye where we mutually express our forgiveness and our love. We can feel cheated if we are not there for the moment of passing.

That feeling can haunt us, complicating our grief. We may have a deep sense of guilt. We may be angry, perhaps at the person who died. Even if we know that feeling is hardly rational, it does not mean it is not experienced. In other situations, we may be angered at whomever suggested we take a break or assured us that death is not imminent.

Death and dying remains a mystery. While we may know someone is dying, no one can correctly predict the moment of death. Much of the timing may simply be a medical issue. Yet perhaps psychological and social factors play some role. In my dad's case, I took comfort that while our dad needed us there to express our appreciation and love, he could not leave while we were present.

And there are still things we can do to offer that final goodbye. First, it is important to explore why that bothers us as well as the feelings it generates. We may need to acknowledge uncomfortable feelings such as anger, regret, or guilt.

Then we can decide what we need to do to express our reactions. Perhaps, we may wish to write a letter to the deceased.

When her husband died alone, Connie felt guilty that she was not there for his final moment. So, she wrote him a letter, reading it as his grave site.

Jack's wife died when he had left the house to get her soup. He felt terrible and even blamed his wife for sending him on this final errand, saddened that she fell into a final sleep as her aide was the only one there. Jack had his wife cremated and

kept the ashes in an urn. He would often speak to the urn, sometimes even kidding her, wondering if they serve that "damned tomato basil soup" in heaven. It helped.

Or we may design a ritual to say a final goodbye. Maybe, we can use the funeral or memorial service to say goodbye or we can design our own ritual. For my sister, it was a family dinner, a shared pizza where we each stated what we wished we had done or

said near the moment of death. And then we realized that we had, in fact, shared those acts or sentiments in the days prior as we cared for him.

The final moment, then, seemed less important.

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