

What I've Learned Since Losing My Dad

We were arranged in Dad's nursing home room — my brother and sister-in-law, Dad's dearest friend and me. The nursing home staff had gathered enough recliners for us all to stay by Dad's side during what we expected to be his final hours.

The night-shift nurse came to Dad every 30 minutes like clockwork, ensuring he experienced no pain. One by one, eyes closed in the room — although none of us felt we could possibly sleep. I remember glancing at the clock when the nurse entered. 3 a.m.

Apparently, my eyes drifted shut. The next thing I know, I'm being awakened by the nurse gently entering the room again — Nov. 12, 2018, 3:30 a.m.

"He's gone," she said, quietly. "He was just waiting for you to fall asleep." I sat in shock.

The long battle was won. Dad was no longer suffering — he was finally in a body that would no longer fail him. In what was surely the greenest pastures filled with the greatest national champion cattle from Earth. Walking with his dad and uncles and friends who had gone before him. In a place more beautiful than we can possibly imagine.

And likely telling some big tales and sharing laughs about life on Earth, too.

I had no idea what awaited in the days and weeks and months to come. Grief would come in waves, literally taking my breath away. And my views of grief and loss have deepened in a way I never knew possible.

Of all I've learned, five lessons rise to the top.

You are not "prepared"

No matter how "prepared" you believe you are — you're not. Not at all. Dad battled multiple sclerosis for close to two decades, and during that time, we watched his body slowly rebel against him.

He spent his final three years in a nursing home, unable to even stand. This proud, strong man relied on others for everything. Every. Thing. He went onto hospice care 20 months before his passing. This is not how he wanted to live. But he fought — oh, how he fought.

We had years to prepare. But when the time came? I was not nearly as ready as I thought. You can do all you know to do in order to prepare your heart and mind for that loss.

But until it actually happens, you do not know how you will react.

Give yourself grace

Allow yourself to feel it all. And know there's no "right" way to grieve. It hurts to watch a loved one suffer. It hurts to lose a loved one. It's just a different hurt.

In the weeks leading up to Dad's passing, my brother and I had to make some incredibly difficult decisions regarding Dad's medications and care. It was heart wrenching. No real "winning" choices. My Bible study group were my lifeline, and they prayed me through each and every step through the years. And as we approached the end, I asked them to change from prayers of healing to prayers of a quick, smooth passing. For Dad to be at peace. For us all to be at peace.

As much as I knew we would miss my dad, I thought it would have to be easier than seeing him suffering as he was. I was so naïve. It is not easier to miss him. It is just a different hurt. No, I would never



PHOTO BY PATTON PHOTOGRAPHY, LYNDA GAMROTH

My brother, Willy, followed Dad to his final resting place. With him: Dad's horse, saddle and boots.

wish him back the way he was in that nursing home bed.
But, man, I sure do miss him.

Life goes on — whether you like it or not.

That is the thing about loss. You may feel that your world has stopped. But around you, the world keeps spinning. Your kids still need homework checked. Groceries still need to be bought. Laundry still piles up.

Work deadlines still loom

In some ways, that helps you keep moving forward, step by step. Day by day. But there are other days when it is crippling. In those moments, it is OK to take care of you. Cancel those nonessential appointments. Ask for help (something I have never been good with). And if you need a day on the couch in last night's pajamas, take that day on the couch.

For a Type-A, get-it-done person like me, I do not sit well. But in the past year, I have found myself slowing down much more often. Work and service organization issues that would normally upset me do not bother me as much — because, does it really matter? Like, in the view of eternity?

And you know what? The world has not stopped. My business is still thriving. My kids still seem to know their momma loves them and is here for them. And life. Goes. On.

No new memories to be made

You will learn that there are no new memories to be made — but you can certainly cherish the ones you have.

Many times in the past year, I have found myself angry. Angry that Dad would have given anything to be in the barns and at ringside at each and every cattle show our kids attended, giving advice and encouragement. And for some reason, God's Plan did not allow for that.

Angry when my dad could not see his grandkids doing the things that would make him proud. Showing cattle in Denver — one of his favorite places on Earth. Those boys spending time with Dad's lifelong friends and growing into some incredible young adults. Our young Caroline hugging that Minnie Mouse stuffed animal from "Papaw," knowing he picked that out just for her.

But what I've also learned? Dad is still here. Oh, how he's here. In the stories that get told by friends. In the laughs over the crazy things he somehow got away with. In his grandkids carrying on the traditions he held so close. In the pride I feel for being "Bill Couch's daughter."

Faith and grief can live side by side.

God's promises are good, and God's promises are real — in all of the good and all of the bad. It never wavers, no matter our circumstances. He's just as good on the days of ugly cries as in the days of laughter.

The grief will come like waves — out of the blue. On a seemingly normal Tuesday evening, while cooking tacos. On a Friday morning, when Dan Seals comes on your Prime Country station. And in all of it, it is good. I'm so thankful for our faith, for being able to know Dad is no longer hurting. And we will most definitely see each other again. **HW**

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