

Running on empty

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I stood at my father's hospital bed. They said he had a blockage in his carotid artery. If the blockage made it to his brain, he would die instantly. I went home as soon as I could manage. I watched over him, like a sentry guarding his morphine sleep. I wondered what "blockage" meant. Did the blood calcify and build up on the lining of his vein? Had it become like a hard stone that came loose? Or had his blood congealed, like Jell-o?

I watched my dad breathing through the tubes in his nose and I heard the machine beeping by his bedside. I found myself looking over at the pulsing line almost as much as I monitored his resting eyes. It reminded me of that children's book, *Harold and his Purple Crayon*. I thought about how my father's brilliant life, all of the accomplishments, hopes, dreams, anger, fear and anxiety had been condensed to that glowing line.

My father did not die that week, but he eventually died. When he did, I finally understood when people in church said, "It was good. He's no longer suffering. It was really for the best." All of those things had felt like trite phrases that we whispered when we tried to manage our grief, when we couldn't bear to give the sadness a life of its own. Suddenly, they felt *true*.

My dad was disabled. He had a neurological disorder, so he had no mobility in his legs and had lost a great deal of movement in his arms. He had persistent mini-strokes, and each time he suffered through one, it would limit his physical capacity and cause more confusion. More dementia.

My mother took care of him, while I was constantly worried about them both from my helpless distance. She bore the stress and exhaustion of 24-hour care for over ten years. All of the transfers from the wheelchair to the bed. All of the dressing, bathing and changing. All of it was over. When dad died, our whole family breathed deeper. Dad accomplished a great deal and there was a sense of completion to his life. His years were like a painting finished. It was not perfect, but it was done. The

brush could be set down. We could all step back and nod our heads at the work.

I let the relief wash over me. I thought that was the end of it. I could let him rest in peace. I could let him go. I could do all of those things we tell each other to do.

I took a class on grief at our church. I was just there to support Kristen Register Lakis, one of our seminary students who was working for hospice. She wrote down all of the physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological things that we had gone through after losing a loved one. We put them in quadrants so that we could organize the montage of emotions.

About thirty people crammed into a small room. We hadn't expected so many to show up, and people kept arriving, so we shifted and unfolded chairs as we filled up the chart with things. Many of them I never realized were grief. Lack of appetite. Lack of sleep. Forgetting things. Losing things. Hunger. Anger. Irritability. Loneliness. Emptiness. Drinking too much. Sleeping too much. Exhaustion.

The board filled up quickly, and I realized that I had experienced most of them. I had no space to talk about the death of my father and I hadn't even understood how it affected me. Church was the one place I could do it, because grieving is sacred there. Church was the one place where we call out with Jesus and that sermon on the mount, "Blessed are those who weep."

There is something so backwards in those pews. It is the place where we remind ourselves of this ancient wisdom, the parts of scripture that ring truer the more advanced we get: "Blessed are the poor... Blessed are the hungry... Blessed are the weeping... Blessed are the hated...." We are rarely told these things. Outside of the church walls, outside of our communities of faith, we're told that the more we hoard, the happier we'll be. We live in the land of all-you-can eat buffets. This is the place where we will entertain ourselves every moment of the day and night, so that we never have to feel loneliness or sadness. Our celebrity culture brands ordinary people, so that we can keep consuming one another, never allowing space for loathsome humanity. We keep ourselves working and productive so we don't have to mourn. If we fill our lives full with stuff, food, distraction and entertainment, then we will never even have to think about the emptiness.

Until we come to that moment when it's like we've devoured that massive feast, filled up on wine, and fallen asleep on the sofa. We wake up confused with nauseous stomachs that just can't take *more*. We regret what we consumed. We realize that

we have been running on empty all along. We long for that chasm.

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated. Somehow, in the midst of my grief, I become aware of that existential longing, that feeling of absolute dependence. And I understood how the emptiness can draw us, siphoning us to God.