

My puzzling year

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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For ten years, I expected my father to die. For all of that time, when I picked up a call from my mom, I anticipated devastating news. Dad had those mini-strokes that snuck up on him and addled his brain, and so I balanced for a decade on edge. His incredible endurance kept him fighting his death as tenaciously as a drowning man battles the ocean's waves.

As infuriating as it was that my father could not peacefully accept death, I also know that his forbearance forced him to summon all of his energy in order to push out a robust and horsey "love. you." during those last hours. And I often cling to those words that literally took every ounce of strength from him.

My dad exhaled his final breath over a year ago. I flew directly from a conference in Colorado to visit him during his last moments. Then I got back on a plane to fly from my father's funeral to another conference in New York. In the last year, I haven't had much time to pause and reflect. I promised myself August and kept my calendar blissfully empty in anticipation of the rest. But now it seems that we will be moving

next month, so my days will be filled with boxes, tape and newsprint instead of hot tea, thick books and lazy hours.

I think it'll be okay. I've always been able to work through my emotions on my feet, processing them along with the churn of words, prayers, and sermons that make up my days. The changing landscape that I face as I crisscross the nation nurtures me, leading me to wonder and fascination. The deserts, beaches, and forests remind me that I'm doing what God has called me to do.

But I can't help but realize that after these fourteen months, I'm still in the midst of grief. It is an odd sort of sorrow. I have not cried much. I have not visited the stages of grief that we were taught in high school psychology class. Instead, the grief makes me feel as if my essence is made up of thousands of puzzle pieces scattered in various parts of our home.

The most stunning effect of my sorrow is that I forget things. The information slips out of my hands under the bed, and I don't even know that the small piece is missing. People will often look at my CV or my bio and say, "How do you do it all?" and I think, *I don't*. I forget to do things, and I forget to tell other people things. I just *forget*.

I'm learning to use as many practical tools as I can to remedy the situation. I rely more on my manager, [Anna Woofenden](#), to remind me of what I need to do. And I'm always thankful of her kind work of nudging me. I've never had any sense that she's impatient; in fact, it's like she bathes her promptings in prayer.

I keep four calendars (for me and the family). My digital calendars buzz and blink at me, demanding attention. I write all sorts of lists. It's all in the hope that some day I'll have a bit more wholeness.

My emotions are still raw. I'm typically a pretty calm person and I used to be downright unflappable. But now I find myself getting angry at odd moments. It's as if I keep peeling off the scar of this yearlong wound and the gentlest touch makes me flare with pain.

Unfortunately, we're not in the sort of culture where "my dad died over a year ago" is an excuse. But when I speak to other people who have lost loved ones, they say it takes two to three years before the wounds heal. I wonder why there is such a disconnect between our personal experience and our expectation of others.

Along with all of it, I'm learning to be a bit gentler with myself. If my looming fears are realized, and that puzzle never fits back into place again, it will be okay. If I never feel quite whole again, I will learn to embrace those empty spaces within me. I will cherish them, just as I learned to tend to these memories where my father once stood.