

My dad died from COVID-19. My grief is a lonely one.

I'm the only person he loved the way he loved me.

by [Charlotte Donlon](#) in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue



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In a voice message from my dad that I saved on my phone, he tells me what I need to do: “Just hang in there. Do what you’re supposed to do. Rest. All that other stuff. Drink fluids. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Love you. Bye.” The message is 15 seconds long. I received it a few years ago while I was sick with the flu.

When I listen to this message, I hear my dad’s accent, formed by his Detroit childhood and his Deep South adulthood. I hear the humor and lightheartedness that

could make me smile even while I was ill. I see him in the cozy recliner in a corner of his den, rocking gently, one or two dogs on his lap, his 65-inch TV on but muted.

My dad didn't leave this message because he thought I needed him to tell me what to do. He just wanted me to know he was thinking about me. That's what he did: he thought about me. He thought about me often.

I found the message on my phone the night my dad died from complications due to COVID-19. He was in a hospital room in Panama City, Florida, with my mother and my aunt by his side. I was on the sofa in my living room in Birmingham, Alabama, with my husband and two teenage children. We were separated by a few hundred miles and a pandemic that insisted I stay away when everything in me wanted to be with him.

I stayed on that sofa for a week. During those first days of heartbreak and grief, I did what my dad told me to do a few years before when I had the flu. I drank water. I slept. I remembered that he loved me.

That was in early August. But in truth I'd been grieving for 15 years, ever since my first therapy appointment. My therapist told me that I had experienced many things over the course of my life that were very messed up and that I needed to grieve the brokenness I knew as a child, an adolescent, and a young adult. I had lived my whole life convincing myself everything was OK. But everything was very much not OK, and many of those things that were not OK required grief and tears.

The thing is, once you begin to grieve the things that are worthy of tears, you can't stop. I started grieving that day, and I cried several times a week for two years because I kept remembering events, conversations, and trauma I had ignored or denied.

Some Christians believe we're supposed to smile and thank God for the "gifts" that result from whatever tragic things have happened. They try to console the grieving with pat aphorisms that end up wounding them instead. They reinforce a culture of denial.

Many people in our families, communities, churches, and nation have never learned to grieve in healthy ways. So a lot of us feel alone right now as we navigate multiple losses and process our personal and collective griefs. When we don't have support, grief becomes tinged with shame, guilt, and confusion. We think something is wrong

with us and wonder why we can't get it together and snap out of it.

"It is impossible to grieve in the first-person singular," writes Cristina Rivera Garza. If we try to grieve alone, she suggests, the expression and experience of our grief can't be fully realized; our grief cannot be what it needs to be. We need more family, friends, spiritual mentors, and therapists who will support us and validate our losses and sadness. We need to learn to grieve together.

In an article published in the journal *Culture and Psychology*, Svend Brinkmann explores grief as a learned emotion. Grief is not a simple inner reaction that's automatically triggered by an experience of loss, he claims. "Rather, grief is a way of understanding and acting in the world," he writes. "Grief is a way of 'thinking sadly' or 'responding sadly' to a loss," a way that we first learn from our parents and other close relationships.

If our parents, faith leaders, and others who model behavior for us are uncomfortable with grief or deny it or suppress it, we may never learn healthy ways to process loss or navigate the complexities of lament. But even if we know how to grieve and are surrounded by people who also know how to grieve, we may still experience loneliness in our grief. That's because feelings like loneliness and grief don't fit into boxes very well. There are too many pockets of mystery.

My first experience of parental loss came with a new and significant sense of isolation. It isn't just that my dad is no longer physically present. This new loneliness surfaced when I realized this is a grief that only I can carry. I'm his only daughter. He didn't watch any other daughters dance a different role in *The Nutcracker* every winter. He didn't explain the rules of football to any other little girl on game day. He didn't walk anyone else down the aisle on her wedding day.

I'm the only person he loved in the ways he loved me. He's the only person I loved in the ways I loved him. Plenty of other people have also been grieving my father's death; none of them knows my grief. None of them knows the particular ways we belonged to each other. The unique relationship I had with my dad has created a lonely grief.

But it has also created a secret belonging. My dad and I shared a lovely secret language about ordinary things that others might have deemed boring or inconsequential. I hold the unique memories of the curiosities I shared with him throughout my whole life before his death, just like I hold the unique sense of sorrow

I've known and will continue to know in the weeks since he died.

One afternoon in October, I whispered to my dad, asking if he's ever noticed how the yellow butterflies always fly in the same direction, how they are always coming from the same place and moving toward the same destination. If I'd been able to call him, he would have responded with curiosity. He would have Googled it. He would have asked me questions: What shade of yellow are the butterflies? What size are they? We would have realized that the butterflies I noticed are most likely cloudless sulphurs, and they are flying in the same direction because they are migrating before the cold weather arrives. We would have said how cool it would be if the butterflies that pass through Birmingham also pass through Panama City on the way to their destination in South Florida. And we would have said something along the lines of, "What else are we missing?"

I didn't get to talk about cloudless sulphurs with my dad. But I do get to talk about them with other people, and I get to write about them. The way my dad and I belonged to each other still lives when I know people are listening and seeing me and knowing me. I can depend on that as I depend on the rhythms of the natural world, like cloudless sulphurs migrating every October. When my mother, brother, husband, and all those who are grieving my dad in their own particular ways feel pulled toward despair, I can tell them what he would say: Just hang in there. Do what you're supposed to do. Rest. All that other stuff. Drink fluids. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Love you. Bye.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A lonely grief."