Dealing With GRIEF

Because we love, we suffer. So bereavement, like death itself, is inevitable. But even the profoundest distress can lead us to gain some understanding and enrichment for our living.

GRIEF AND LOSS are universal. We all experience loss in our lives—the death of a parent or a grandparent, a spouse, a sibling or a pet; the end of a marriage or a job; or loss on a massive scale, as in the senseless killings at Virginia Tech and the tragedy of 9/11. We're born knowing how to cry. Most babies' first sound is a wail; laughter comes only after several weeks, during which parents learn all too well the many tones of an infant's woe.

When a loved one dies, we return to this primordial knowledge of grief. Often, though, we come as strangers to a strange land—bewildered by our loss, wondering how we'll ever get back to familiar terrain. Grief and mourning are a journey, say countless poets, prophets and proverbs. If that's so, how do we make our way down the path? Can we bear to begin the trip at all?

On this, the ancient sages and modern-day researchers agree: there is no way out of bereavement but through it. Though the way is long, winding and often brutal, if we turn from it, we also sidestep a crucial part of life. Yet all too often, we do shrink from the journey.

Edited by *Janet Carlson Freed*

"We live in a grief-avoidant society, where grief is supposed to be 'overcome,' 'let go of' or 'resolved,'" says psychologist Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., founder of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, a Fort Collins, Colorado–based organization that offers workshops and training to bereaved individuals and grief counselors. "We don't understand that grief is a lifelong process, one that's not linear. We learn so much through the grief experience, but our society has very short norms for mourning—three days off from work or school, and you're back. We ask things like 'Are you over it?' Our culture, with its 'buck up' messages, doesn't support people who are grieving."

We've also lost sight of a crucial distinction, says Wolfelt, namely, the difference between grieving and mourning: "Grief is your natural emotional response to losing someone you love; mourning is grief gone public, if you will. Historically, people would put on official mourning clothes and have a chance to tell others the story of their loss again and again, which is a powerful way of integrating the loss into both your head and your heart. In our culture people lack opportunities to mourn authentically." The result? Many wind up "carrying" their grief, a phenomenon Wolfelt writes about in his new book, *Living in the Shadow of the Ghosts of Your Grief.* "They end up with long-term symptoms of anxiety, depression and loss of intimacy; the old, unhealed wounds of grief linger, influencing all aspects of life, living and, particularly, loving."

Baby boomers and Gen Xers wrestle especially with bereavement because our contemporary, high-tech Western society puts death at a remove: our parents and grandparents live longer and then die in hospitals, not at home. "We are the world's first death-free generation," Wolfelt says. "A lot of people in their forties have never had a close relative die. A hundred years

GRIEF AS COMMUNION: "Grief is a high form of compassion. One grieving attaches you to the history of grieving both in your own consciousness and in the collective unconscious. I think that's why it's so crucial to grieve. It places you in the river." —*Eve Ensler, playwright and activist*

ago you'd have been to fifty funerals by the time you were that age." For many this has led to a gap in real-life experiences of grief and to a host of stubborn misconceptions about bereavement.

One of these is the concept of closure, a notion that many grief specialists now deplore. "You close a door; you don't close your mourning," says Virginia A. Simpson, Ph.D., founder of the Mourning Star Center, in Palm Desert, California. Mourning, she says, involves reshaping your relationship with the departed, not severing the connection. "You get to integrate that person into your life in a new way," she explains. "It's not a physical relationship anymore, but you get to keep him. When I say that to boys or girls who've lost a sibling, they're so happy. It's an ongoing relationship, and that's healthy grieving as we know it."

Another myth, erring in the opposite direction, holds that mourning should take place nonstop, with no downtime or respite. Simpson, who lost her father to a heart attack when she was twelve, says, "I started out thinking that I should be miserable for as long as possible to show him how much I cared." Only as an adult did she realize how sad she still felt over his death and fully mourn him. "Mourning does not mean 'Let me be totally miserable every single day,'" she says. "Often the feelings come in waves, the first couple of weeks almost continuously, but over the course of time you'll begin to get a bit more space. And even as you're grieving, you can still go out and have a good time and do the things that feed you internally, like reading, hiking or being with friends."

Wolfelt, Simpson and their peers emphasize another point: the need for mourners and caregivers alike to tap into their humility in the face of loss. As universal as grief and loss are, there is no "right" way to mourn; we all do so in our own way. The most helpful thing others can do is to lend us their companionship—a key concept in Wolfelt's philosophy. "We don't need 'treaters,'" he says. "We don't need experts to tell us how to mourn; we need companions to be with us during the process. And we need sanctuaries where we can go to get attention in the midst of our mourning."

For this reason, *T&C* offers not so much a guide to grief's journey as a collection of stories from fellow travelers on the road. We hope that our readers will find in these pages a lasting and consoling sense of companionship and sanctuary in the depths of their loss. DIANE GUERNSEY

Losing My Dad

When the author's father died, she was well into midlife, but she was still his little girl. BY DIANE GUERNSEY

I DIDN'T WANT to write this story. It's harder to talk about grief than about sex, as I did for *T&C* not long ago, or childbirth (no one has asked for that one yet).

Grief hurts. It's messy; it has no rules or boundaries. If death is a dark, undiscovered country of endless night, then grief and loss are a black, bottomless pit. Who wants to go there?

But I don't want to forget Dad, so I have to go there.

What can I share about losing my father? What do I shrink from sharing? Oddly, the answer in both cases is the same: how much I loved him. I find myself embarrassed by the extravagance of my love for Dad. A quiet, sensitive, shy man, Dad was a gifted engineer, highly regarded in his field. In a warm but undemonstrative way, he loved music, sports, my mother, my two brothers and me. He died four years ago, at age eighty-five.

Catastrophe came quickly. Dad's right-field vision blacked out while he and my mother were dining in the North Carolina retirement community they'd lived in for years. Waiting for the ambulance, he called my husband, Paul, a family doctor, and offered a self-diagnosis: "I think I've had a stroke." He was right.

The next day I flew from New York to Asheville, where Dad lay in intensive care, surrounded by tubes and monitors. At some point that afternoon he recognized me, said "Hi" and pulled me to him for a kiss. I asked if his head hurt. "Yeah," he replied. As it turned out, that was his last word to anybody.

I stayed in Asheville with my mother for several days, overseeing Dad's care in consultation with Paul and with my two brothers, who live on the West Coast. My mother, hobbled by advanced Parkinson's disease, knew the score, but I was the point person, conferring with the doctors and my brothers to make decisions on Dad's behalf.

At first we hoped he'd recover, but the stroke had been massive and hemorrhagic. Over five days we watched Dad's vital

signs trail off until, finally, heeding his health-care proxy, we agreed to remove the tubes and monitors keeping his body alive when his spirit seemed to be gone.

That morning Mom and I sat on either side of Dad's bed, each holding one of his hands. The nurse had disconnected everything but the heart monitor. I watched its green lines ping up and down across the screen. I leaned over and whispered in Dad's ear, "We love you…we're here with you…you can go… it's all right." I don't know if he heard me, but it was the only thing I could think to do. A child's worst fear, I've read, is not death but facing death alone. Why would a grown-up be any different? So I tried to help my father know that he wasn't alone.

Meanwhile, the green light pulsed slower…slower…then stopped.

Dad's features smoothed out. He looked years younger—and suddenly, I felt like a three-year-old girl again, looking up at my dad, the handsomest man in the world.

Outside the sun shone, and the trees blew in a playful breeze. It seemed impossible that the world could be so carefree.

My brothers, supportive and appreciative, flew in a few days later for the memorial service, when we buried Dad's ashes in the garden of his beloved Unitarian Universalist church. I remember how the minister's face lit up as she knelt and wafted Dad's silvery ashes into the ground and up toward her face. I felt jealous; I would have liked to breathe in Dad's dust, to keep him with me in that bone-deep way. But by law we weren't allowed to touch the ashes. They went into the earth beneath the pine trees, and there I planted a tuft of green grass, which Walt Whitman calls "the beautiful uncut hair of graves."

I remember how calm I felt. Yes, I cried; yes, I was sad. But beneath it all, as in childbirth, I felt borne along by something larger than my personal feelings. In giving birth to my daughters, I'd become a part of life's cycle—a concrete, physical link in the endless chain of beginnings and endings. Now I felt the chain tug me closer to mortality's edge. *Your turn is next,* said a voiceless whisper.

After the service, my brothers and I went home to our busy lives—our children, careers, friends and other blessings.

It's been four years. I remember Dad every day—his memory wakes when I do. My first look in the mirror reminds me; his features underlie mine like a ghostly blueprint. When I put my hands on the wheel of the car (the Buick he used to drive), I see his hands. I inherited them—smaller, no less sensitive—and it's as if he's with me, his hands turning the wheel and taking me safely where I need to go. I wear his green jacket, whether it goes with my outfits or not, and feel his arms around me.

I carry on an inner dialogue with the universe, through the words of poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay: "I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.… More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world." Sometimes it seems the universe understands my grief; other times I'm alone with it.

What has it meant to me, losing Dad? Too many things to cram into this space, or any other. I walk this world with memories of him flowing in my veins—memories that will be part of me until I travel death's undiscovered country in my turn.

WHEN CHILDREN GRIEVE

"Children are misunderstood in their grief process," says Terese Vorsheck, director of the Highmark Caring Place, a center that serves bereaved children in central and western Pennsylvania. The organization, whose philosophy reflects that of its late honorary board chairman, Fred Rogers (of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*), offers children and families peer-support groups and communal activities.

A child robbed of a parent, grandparent, sibling or pet may not seem sad, but this is misleading, says Vorsheck. "Children grieve in short spurts. They don't have the cognitive resources to stay with their feelings. A kid whose dad has just died may have a tearful conversation with Mom and then, fifteen minutes later, be out playing ball with a friend."

A child's age also shapes grief. Preschoolers may play games in which a parent leaves; school-aged children and teens may lose focus, get lower grades or withdraw socially.

Teens can be especially elusive, partly from a desire not to seem "different" or dependent on outside help and partly to "protect" their parents from their sad feelings.

Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., author of *Healing the Bereaved Child,* and John W. James, coauthor of *When Children Grieve,* offer some guidelines for adults:

- **Be patient, available and responsive. A warm tone of voice and good eye contact are as meaningful as sympathetic words.**
- **Let children know that it's all right to feel sad and that these feelings won't last forever.**
- **Tailor your answers to young people's questions to their understanding. If children attend a funeral, explain to them that the deceased's body no longer breathes, moves or feels pain.**
- **If a pet dies, don't say, "Don't worry; we'll get another one." Validate their sad feelings instead.**
- **Let children participate in funerals and memorial services. This gives them comfort and an understanding that life goes on after someone has died. Teenagers can share a memory or a poem; shy children can light a candle or, if they want to, place a memento or photo on or in the casket.**

D.G.

When Skylar Died

A fourteen-year-old boy drowned in his grandparents' pool last summer. His parents put their loss into words individually here, as befits their separate sorrow.

BY HEIDI SONN AND LOUIS TANCREDI

GRIEF IS A WORD we had often heard used and had even said ourselves from time to time. We had simply never *felt* grief. It is a feeling we have now come to know very well and shall never forget. The loss of a child, they say, is just not the right order of things. But sometimes "just" is not the way things go.

When something so profound happens to a couple, it can happen to each person quite differently. They experience and react to it differently, as we have. It seems the one thing that really connects us now is the identical gaping holes in our hearts.

THE EVENT

The Father's Account: My son Skylar died last August while swimming in his grandparents' pool at a family gathering in Westchester County, New York. Skylar was the picture of health and an extraordinary athlete, so hearing my ten-year-old daughter, Siena, call out for him to surface and stop fooling around did not seem abnormal. Little did I know then that this would be the last moment of normalcy I would have. I calmly fished him out of the pool and began CPR, or at least the version I had picked up from watching too many TV shows. I assured everyone it would be all right. I kept waiting for that coughing thing to happen and for him to say he was fine. What I got was a mouthful of nacho vomit from the Yankees game he'd attended earlier that day. After the police and then the paramedics came and took over, I began to feel uneasy but still calmly got my shirt and wallet and kept waiting for that damned talking defibrillator to tell me what I wanted to hear. The message, however, never came. At the hospital, soon after it became clear he would not be revived, I asked for a moment with him. I climbed onto the examining table to give him a hug and say goodbye and knocked the IV out of his arm. Blood began to squirt out, and the nurse freaked. It was calming and strangely comforting for me, as I knew it would be the last time blood would flow through his veins. I really longed to see my wife but also feared that moment.

The Mother's Account: I was at our friends Michael and Sue's house. When I called my family that day to see what food I should bring, they said don't come to the pool, go to the hospital. I'm thinking Skylar broke his ankle or something. I called Louis and got his voice mail; he called right back. "It's not good," he told me. I made it as far as our house, but then I called Sue and said, "Come pick me up, drive me. I can't see."

I ran into the hospital, still not knowing what awaited me there. My father and Louis met me inside. When I heard the news, I hit the concrete floor, banging up my knees. I was wailing. People asked me if I wanted anything. No, I didn't want anything; there was nothing they could give me.

It took me some time before I could go into the room to see Sky. When I went up to him, he was still warm. I started kissing him, whispering to him, and then I asked the nurses to take the tubes out of his face, and I kissed him all over until he got cold. His lips were cold. Now, when I feel his presence, I get this feeling on my lips....

THE AFTERMATH

The Father's Account: I soon realized that I can easily be overhugged. Another's embrace mostly interrupted my moments of grief and caused me to take on the role of comforter, not comfortee. And why is it that most people feel the need to begin their words of sympathy with "No words can describe...," and then describe it for fifteen minutes?

It's also almost surreal that in the days immediately following a horrific death in your midst, you are as busy as if you were planning a wedding or a bat mitzvah. Suddenly, in your depths of despair, you need to be prepared to address a crowd of friends, loved ones and community leaders. I had never even had the benefit of experience in giving a slightly drunken bestman speech. I awoke at about 3 A.M. before Skylar's funeral and jotted down a poem. It was as if the words had been stored up there for just this occasion:

> I stand before you today as a father grieving for his lost son. It is a pain and a sorrow that no parent should have to endure. Yet here we are.
>
> I have asked myself how, and I have asked myself why, but I have no answers, and I can see no reasons. Yet here we are.
>
> I can still see his smile, his light and his love. I cherish the memories that Sky brought to us all. His wisdom, his compassion, his wit and his charm—they seemed hard to extinguish. Yet here we are.
>
> I was so looking forward to seeing Sky grow into a man; his

path seemed to be moving so fast and so sure. It is hard to imagine that his road will go only this far. Yet here we are.
But instead of the pain, the shock and the sorrow, we must somehow remember the laughter and wonder, no matter how painful, because,
Yet here we are.

The Mother's Account: I feel that Skylar has moved ahead. But what does that mean? I try to feel a sense of calm, but there is a raw burning inside me. There is no coping. There is no comfort where I am, though I have hugged how many thousands of people. My grief is like a black hole; I'm in the hole, and there's wind and waves. Or it's like an exhale without ever feeling the inhale. I can't find comfort in our house; I can't go into Sky's room. Louis and the kids go in; I make them close the door. When I feel as though I'm talking to Skylar, it's calming. I look at the sky a lot, and I feel an intensity and a lightness in the constant movement, which reminds me of thought patterns. It's mesmerizing. This is a kind of protection, an escape. I named Skylar for the sky in Arizona. At sunset it gets red and vibrant. Sunsets are vicious now.

I began to allow myself to feel more deeply about Skylar very recently. Louis and I haven't spoken about his death that much. It is hard enough dealing with my own grief but too overwhelming together. I often go to the river, to a place where there's a tree that was planted in his honor that I like to look at, and I cry and imagine hugging Sky. The first time, I went there with my family. Louis and I hugged and looked into each other's eyes in silence while our two other children watched from a distance.

(It was discovered postmortem that Skylar had a genetic heart condition, long QT syndrome, which can cause fainting, cardiac arrest and sudden death. The family also learned that Louis, Skylar's two siblings and other relatives also have long QT.)

A Widow's First Five Years

With the pain of missing her husband too great, she tries denial first and then discovers the deeper well of grief.

BY BARBARA LAZEAR ASCHER

"IT COULDN'T BE worse," our doctor said when Bob had left the room. He was speaking as my husband's colleague and friend of fifty years. It was he who delivered the words that held within them the fate of our last three months together: *pancreatic cancer.*

We were silent in the car going home. Not for lack of articulation but because we often communicated this way after thirty-five years of marriage. Sometimes there are no words for love. Often there are no words for parting.

That night at dinner I said, "This is a good time for us to think about anything we wish we had done or regret that we didn't do. This is a good time to consider regrets." I suggested that we ponder these things and discuss them at dinner the following week.

And we did.

"So?" I asked, smiling. He reached for my hand and shook his head.

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said, returning my smile. "And you?"

"Nothing."

That was a good place to start to say goodbye. No regrets. Through the years we had said all that there was to say.

And then came the silence in the wake of his death.

The silence of grief is not silent. The silence of grief is the absence of the beloved's presence. And into that silence comes the keening.

After a month I went to speak to a woman I could trust to tell me the truth. How long would I feel like this? I wanted to know. I wanted a straight answer, not one given to make me feel better. Kate had been the editor of my first books, and I knew her to be forthright, honest and smart. Her husband had died six years earlier.

"How long will it hurt this much?" I asked. I described a feeling of being without skin, a body of raw nerve endings. And inside those nerve endings was a wind tunnel. The wind howled day and night. Grief is as dramatically physical as it is emotional. I felt, I explained, as though I were walking naked in a cold, gray, empty world with nothing but fear as a companion.

"Expect five bad years," she said.

I was shocked. How could I survive five years?

And then, in the fashion of a child stamping her feet, I protested, "I haven't got five years to put into this." I was a relatively young widow. It seemed wrong not to get on with my life. Soon.

Patience, I was to learn, is the first requirement for safe travel out of grief's domain.

In that first year, grief was all-consuming. Grief makes even the otherwise kind and caring among us self-centered. Or grief-centered. And since the grief is ours, that is our world.

In the second year I began to reengage. My appetite returned. Sleep was hard to come by, but I was gaining strength. In the third year I began to absorb the fact that a sound in the hall did not herald Bob's return.

With each anniversary—his birthday, our wedding, my birthday, the day of his death—I felt like a prisoner scratching a mark into the cell wall on each remaining day of confinement. I would think, "Soon. Soon I'll be released."

Occasionally, I was let out on parole. I'd be happy. I even fell in love and out of love. One morning I followed a man for three blocks because he looked like Bob. He was tall and thin and wore a bow tie. I wanted to ask him if he would marry me.

Back in the slammer. I was not fit to be at large.

In the middle of the fourth year I made a visit to Bob's and my internist. In the preceding years I'd learned what Eastern philosophers have been telling us ever since Aristotle got it wrong: "Mind and body are one." I'd been exhausted by grief. I wanted a tonic.

"You look woebegone."

This is why I love my internist. "Woebegone." How 19th century. "I am," I said.

He looked at me sternly. "Barbara," he said in a voice generally reserved for one's wayward adolescent children, "Bob is not coming back."

With that, I was overcome by a depth of grief I had not known was there. Grief is a well. One can always go deeper, it seems. I cried for twenty-four hours, scolding myself as I did: "Of course he's not coming back. Of course. You know that."

Yes, knew it, but on some other level still didn't believe it. How could there have been such powerful love between two people and then nothing? No long arms wrapped around me. No pedestrian plans for the day. No sweet whisperings in the night. How could that be?

I hadn't realized the power of denial, grief's strongman. Nobody knows she's in denial. That's what denial is. It isn't something you consciously wish upon yourself.

I hadn't known I thought Bob was coming back after all this time. That would have been insane. But that's what grief is also: a form of insanity. I hadn't known that I was keeping everything, including my heart, ready for his return. Just in case.

With that awareness, and six months shy of my friend's predicted five years, a weight was lifted, so subtly I might have missed it. My shoulders felt lighter. Space opened within me like a window with the first spring cleaning. There was just enough room for the vestiges of grief to escape.

How can this be? I've wondered. This slow easing of grief is as mundane and astounding as a miracle. And like all miracles, it happens every day. The world is full of sorrow and the end of sorrow. Who would believe such a thing?

HOW TO COMFORT

I come from a reticent tribe, except perhaps for my mother, but in the case of grieving she was dead set against being a screaming maniac like her mom. After my father was killed as a correspondent in World War II, my mother returned to work in a matter of days. She didn't say anything to me or my little brother. So concerning grief I had a thing or two to learn. You can imagine my shock when a friend of mine took to her bed while mourning her breakup with a beau. Frankly, I was impressed. Pain didn't have to be stuffed somewhere. I wish my mother had comforted me. Here are some experienced responses to grief and loss:

"We live in a culture that is afraid of illness and death. There's judgment from every direction, and it slows down the healing process. Trust your own experience, and be with people who aren't telling you to pull yourself together." CYNTHIA O'NEAL, ***cofounder of Friends in Deed, a crisis center in New York City***

"Be with a grieving person quietly, and offer the stability of your presence, which is not the same as trying to 'make it better.' Much more important for the bereaved is to feel the actual loss in the moment. Human beings are amazingly resilient; we think we won't be able to survive, but we will. Grief, the hurt, is a good sign." ACHARYA ERIC SPIEGEL, ***a Buddhist teacher in New York City***

"Think twice before telling anyone that they ever get over the loss of somebody close; on a feeling level you never truly get over it." SANFORD PEPPER, M.D., ***San Francisco psychiatrist***

"Give people all the latitude necessary to express their emotions fully. Ask how you can help. When the time is right, encourage a conversation about loving memories and good times shared." SALLY FISHER, ***founder of Intersect Worldwide, a New York City–based organization dedicated to ending HIV and preventing violence against women***

"I was terrified of my sons' impending deaths from AIDS. What helped the most when they were dying was to do whatever I could to open up my heart, instead of shutting off from the fear of the anticipated loss. I talked to mothers in hospitals who were visiting sons with AIDS." BRENDA FREIBERG, ***chair emeritus, AIDS Project Los Angeles***

KATE LARDNER

Sisters in Sorrow

When Jenifer Estess was diagnosed with ALS, her sisters Valerie and Meredith channeled their grief by looking for a cure.

BY KATE LARDNER

GRIEF BEGAN FOR Valerie and Meredith Estess when their sister Jenifer received a diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in 1997, at the age of thirty-four. She was told by one of her doctors to max out her credit cards and visit the places of her dreams because she didn't have long to live. Jenifer had a malady (popularly known since 1939 as Lou Gehrig's disease) that destroys cells in the brain and spine called motor neurons. Without motor neurons, the brain can't tell the muscles what to do. Without directions from the brain, muscles can't function. Without muscles, a person can't walk, speak, swallow or breathe. "We were outraged," says Valerie. "In this day and age of so many miracle medicines and technological advances, there's no medicine for neurodegenerative illnesses. Grief just seems to be a leitmotif once you get this diagnosis, but there are other feelings that can run alongside it. Besides, Jenifer was not big into grieving. Or it's as if grief fueled her."

The sisters, Valerie, Jenifer and Meredith, had a close bond fortified by a pact they had made at ages fifteen, thirteen and twelve, respectively, just minutes after hearing the shocking news that their parents' marriage was collapsing. No divorce or hurricane, no national emergency, neither person nor God, could break them apart, they ceremoniously declared on a grassy knoll in Larchmont, New York. "It's like we were one person," explains Meredith. After Jenifer sobbed in Valerie's arms upon hearing the grim prognosis, the sacred girlhood vow of eternal oneness was silently renewed.

There were many moments of shared sadness as Jenifer's illness progressed, taking one part of her body after another, but together the three sisters worked to change the reality of ALS. They had hoped to operate a movie company, but instead they went into the business of finding medicine for an incurable disease. Jenifer's Greenwich Village apartment became the headquarters for Project A.L.S. The organization was small at first, but then it snowballed, turning into a way of life, with the stricken-but-fueled Jenifer at the helm. "The wise woman sitting in bed," Meredith says. "She was always so beautiful in that bed." The focus was on the organization. "It was a full-time job," Valerie recalls. "It still is. We've raised more than $32 million. In 1999 we pioneered the use of stem cells in ALS research." Meredith adds, "If you can unlock the mystery of ALS, researchers believe, you'll also be able to make progress with other neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's." Valerie says it comforts her to go after her sister's dream.

Jenifer died in 2003. "I lost a huge part of my heart," Valerie laments. "I felt lonely. Blank. Helpless. The memory of the three of us together gives me great strength, but I can't call Jenifer. I can't have lunch with her. I miss her face. It was so comforting for the few months following her death to stay in her room. Just being with her things, listening to the music that she listened to. Smelling her sheets. The smell of my sister's hair was always so beautiful." Valerie also sensed that after Jenifer died, the sickness withdrew from both Jenifer and her space. "In my mind she was free. I could have my time with her and cry."

"We clung to that bed after she died," Meredith proclaims. "A lot of wonderful stuff happened there." Valerie and Meredith, their husbands and their combined five children would gather every weekend at Jenifer's apartment when she was ill and have foodfests. "I think about Jenifer all the time," Meredith says. "It's devastating still, but it helps me to think about her. She is the one I would talk to about everything." Meredith and Jenifer conversed for hours by phone the night before Jenifer died. "I think she knew," Meredith recalls. "She wanted to be sure that we'd be okay. Jenifer always wanted to provide. And she continues to do that. Despite the silence from her loss, her heart and soul are inside me."

GRIEF IN VIRGINIA: "The winds were April cruel in Blacksburg on Monday… too strong for candles that night. The vigils would have to wait; the students grieved in the privacy of their dorms." —*Nancy Gibbs,* Time, *April 30, 2007*

GRIEF FOR THE COUNTRY: "As people begin to realize how many young men and women have been killed or horribly injured in Iraq, you've got a lot of questions being asked. That's the community grieving." —*The Very Rev. James Kowalski, dean of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, NYC*

Eulogy for Moo

His wife's little cat taught him a big lesson about life and love. BY RICK MOODY

THERE'S AN apocryphal story I read recently about a major poet who turned down a request for a public reading by remarking that the hour of the event conflicted with his nightly obligation to pet his cat. Facetious? I would have thought so when younger. Until I made the acquaintance of my wife's two cats.

One was a big, affectionate charcoal shorthair named simply Cat. Cat was well into his dotage when my wife brought him east from Chicago. He survived for a few years and then succumbed to blindness, deafness, arthritis and other afflictions of advancing years. We had an on-call veterinarian administer the lethal injection. Up on the roof. Cat was very fond of our roof. This made the occasion even more sad. In fact, I was completely upended by it, unable to lend a hand because I was sobbing so hard.

To recover from missing Cat, I threw myself into life with the remaining cat, Moo. The problem cat. This is my eulogy for her. Moo was a classic runt. She was tiny. She had elephantine ears, and she was colored almost exactly like a Holstein. She was shy. If there was even a strange voice in the apartment, she wouldn't come out of the closet for hours. And when she did emerge, she had to let you know about her sacrifices at great length. At the top of her lungs. *What about me? Did you think about me?*

For a runt, though, she was constitutionally robust. Moo sailed past the years when other cats begin to have problems. Though her eyes got cloudy at about sixteen, she still chased a laser pointer like a kitten. Evenings, when we were ensconced in the living room, Moo liked to curl up in the crook of my arm or sprawl in front of my wife and present her belly to be petted. I might easily have canceled a career's worth of readings to be part of this kind of domesticity.

In January 2006 my wife and I were scheduled to make a weeklong trip to London. We left Moo with a friend and thought nothing of the slight cold she seemed to have when I fetched her home eight or nine days later. But the cold quickly escalated into a series of much more harrowing complaints, which at first seemed like bronchitis or pneumonia and then at various times like renal failure, liver trouble and various kinds of cancer. She lost more and more weight, she began bleeding from the nose, and she stopped eating entirely and sat wailing in front of her water bowl as though an enormous canyon separated her from it.

Despite an increasingly desperate regimen of treatments, Moo died before our eyes over the course of two very distressing months. At first she was at the vet every couple of weeks, then every week, then every day, always with a new diagnosis or with some fresh precinct of her giving out. She was still able to purr when we kept her company, but she was suffering, and everyone knew it.

I'd lost my sister in my thirties, but my sister had never been ill. My sister just died. Of a cardiological defect. I knew, therefore, more than enough about the acute woe you feel with sudden death. What I didn't know was how with prolonged illness you get to have the grief *beforehand*. What I didn't know was how my wife and I would some days weep in different rooms, because it was so hard to try to comfort each other *and* feed Moo the pills that she had no intention of swallowing and rarely did. What I didn't know was that the grief I felt for the little runt of a cat while she was still alive would be nearly as intense as the grief I had felt about my sister. What I didn't know was that grief seems to pool in some reservoir of your heart, and while you may wish to drive some distance away from it, to a more genteel address, that doesn't mean this reservoir ever empties out while it awaits your next visit.

At the end of March we decided Moo had had enough. She sat quietly in our laps, wheezing faintly, unable to raise her head. When we took her back to the vet, she didn't even yelp when the needle went in. The doctor looked at us sadly and said, "Everyone here was pulling for this cat." But even that was not enough.

Now it seems that what animals have always taught me about is innocence. They teach you what it means by example, and they teach you how to be benevolent and protective of innocence, instead of callous about the openheartedness of that simple grace. It's terribly hard to get used to the absence of these innocents whose scurrying forms you hallucinate everywhere after they are gone. Well, the good thing about pets is that there are a lot of them that need you. If Moo will never be replaced or forgotten, that doesn't mean that what she taught me about love couldn't be brought to bear on some new little ball of chaos.

Or maybe even *two* of them. Named Radish and Minnow. They turn one year old in another month.