

Forever After

helping children re-connect
with loved ones who die

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*“Unable are the loved to die.
For love is immortality.”*

—EMILY DICKINSON

the gradual dawning of death

Just shy of my fifth birthday, my beloved “Pappaw” —as we grandkids affectionately called him—suddenly died of a heart attack. I didn’t know then that I should be devastated by the loss. As a young child, I hadn’t yet grasped the gravity of death. Looking into my grandfather’s open casket, the magical thinking of early childhood had me believing that all I had to



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do was shake my grandpa awake. I leaned toward his face and whispered, “Wake up, Pappaw.” I wanted him to open his eyes and tell me what all the crying was about.

It took me years to fully understand that I would never see my grandfather in the flesh again. He would never again slip me a little cup of coffee behind my mother’s back, or rock me on the old rocking chair on his back porch, or read me stories. I would never watch him devour a whole jar of jam at the same breakfast or eat vegetables with him straight out of his garden. I would never again look into his beaming face—the personification of love for my almost five-year-old heart.

Although some young children can grasp the magnitude of a loved one’s death in part, most children don’t fully understand the finality and inevitability of death until around the age of nine. Fortunately, as children mature, they can carry their relationship with an intimate loved one who has died into each new age and stage of their development. Because children, youths, and young adults experience multiple developmental changes in the first 25 years of life, a young person may not become aware of the many ways a death affects them until days, months or even years afterward.

don’t fix what isn’t broken

Unfortunately, since Freud proposed his “detachment theory” of grief recovery in the early 1900s, many mental

health professionals have encouraged us to “let go” of our emotional and psychological attachments to loved ones who die. At the risk of being labeled as emotionally or mentally disturbed, we’re asked to “break our bonds” with those who die and to do it quickly. Particularly, parents have been encouraged to be unequivocally clear with children that their deceased loved one will not be returning. Such advice is well-founded. That’s what makes it so acceptable—at least on the surface.

Young children do need our assistance to understand when a loved one’s physical body has stopped working. They do need to hear from us that the body they’re viewing at the wake or funeral no longer contains the breath or heartbeat that once gave a body what it needed to walk, talk and move about in the world. When an intimate caregiver dies, a child needs demonstrative reassurance that others will help to provide physical and emotional nurture in the loved one’s absence. Daily rhythms and domestic rituals familiar to the child can provide a profound sense of comfort in the midst of the dramatic life changes that sometimes take place when a loved one dies.

But, the problem with much of the advice being doled out to parents and caregivers concerning death is that it fails to balance the finality of death with the fact that—in one way or another—our relationship with a loved one who dies *continues*

even *after* their death. Cultivating ongoing emotional, psychological and spiritual connections with a loved one who dies is exactly the prescription for health and well-being that the doctor ought to order.

making the connection

Intimate relationships are woven into our physical being. They reside in our thinking, memory and imagination. Intimate loved ones shape the emotional geography of our feeling life. As human beings we share more than physical interactions—we also experience energetic, emotional, mental and spiritual exchanges with one another.

Psychologist and university professor Marilyn McCabe affirms this phenomenon in her book, *The Paradox of Loss: Toward a Relational Theory of Grief*. McCabe demonstrates, through her personal journals after her mother's death and through other first-person accounts, how we humans search for our loved ones after their death and find them in myriad ways. McCabe debunks grief theories that encourage grievers to break their bond with a loved one who dies. She suggests that we can continue to bond with the loved one through emotional, imaginal, cognitive, sensory, and spiritual means.

Believing that a loved one is gone forever goes against every kind of understanding we humans can access—except reason. No wonder that young children, who are already prone to magical thinking, have such a difficult time imagining the annihilation of a person they love. Our loved ones are a part of us. At the very least, they live on *within* us. So, as we assist young people in “letting go” of a loved one's physical body, we do well to support and encourage children, teenagers, young adults *and ourselves* to continue to “know” our loved ones who die in ways that don't require the loved one's physical presence.

Since a young person's feelings, thoughts and experiences of loss after a loved one's death will be profoundly different at the age of four than at the age of 14 or 24, a young person may uncover new reasons to connect or reconnect with a loved one during each unfolding stage of life. Parents and caregivers can encourage a child, teenager or young adult to connect with a loved one who dies in ways that resonate with the young person's interests, temperament and stage of development.

Consider the following possibilities for helping children and young adults reconnect with a loved one who dies. Let these ideas be inspiration to create approaches that are meaningful for you and the young people in your life.

simple remembrances

A young child may not have a strong sense of death's finality even after one explains to a child that a loved one who dies will not be able to play with the child, enjoy a hug, or help the child to get dressed or brush their teeth. Older children and young adults who do understand, may not have the mental or verbal capacities to translate their complex feelings of grief into words. Simply remembering with a child or young adult their fondest moments with the loved one can be a way of memorializing the friend or relative who died. Such reminiscing allows a young person to express what will be missed as they meet life in light of the loved one's physical absence. Gifting the child with a physical possession of their loved one can bring cherished memories back into focus, especially if it's an object the young person and their loved one used together—a comforter, a cherished book, gardening tools, etc.

actions speak louder than words

Many times, we think of grieving and remembering our loved ones who die as something we need to “talk about.” However, some people, especially young children—who experience the world primarily through their physical bodies and senses—are prone to “act out” their grief and remembrance. If the child is willing, physically participating in activities they once enjoyed with a friend or relative who dies can help to process pain and grief in a more holistic way. It can also offer the child tangible means to connect with the loved one who is no longer bodily present. Taking a hike or participating in a “fun run,” playing at a favorite park, singing, reading, gardening, cooking, playing catch, honoring a daily ritual at mealtime or bedtime—or whatever activity the child and their loved one enjoyed together—can speak to a young person's heart and mind in ways that words may not communicate.

front + center

Children and young adults can create symbols or artistic expressions, or make practical contributions to honor a loved one at a funeral, memorial service, or remembrance celebration. A woodcarver I know drowned while rescuing his children from the undertow in Lake Michigan. In the days following his death, his young son carved a cross to place on the casket during the funeral ceremony. The boy was proud to offer such a brilliant symbol of love for his father, and what better way to engage the memory of his dad in the days following the tragedy? Helping

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to prepare the loved one's favorite foods for a visitation, funeral, memorial or family gathering can also help a young person to engage purposefully in loving remembrance.

bridging the beyond

A young person may need help to find new ways to "talk" to an intimate friend or relative who dies. Letter-writing, journaling or drawing pictures to the loved one who died, or speaking with a loved one aloud before bedtime can offer a sense of ongoing connection and bondedness. In several traditions, singing or reading to a loved one who dies is a gift that is offered as a gesture of spiritual care. Choosing a favorite photograph of a friend or relative who dies, setting it in a prominent place, and expressing love and gratitude to the spirit of the loved one can also be a bonding gesture.

seeing the signs

Those of all ages find comfort and inspiration in imagining ways our loved ones who die continue to communicate with us. Guiding a child or young adult to choose a meaningful metaphor as a symbol for their relationship with a loved one who dies can inspire a sense of reconnection within the cycles and rhythms of everyday life. A favorite bird or insect, a song shared, the wind or rain, an aroma, or an oft-used phrase of speech that shows up at just the right moment can be a reminder of a loved one's affection that continues to nurture and encourage us.

messages from beyond

A child may experience waking visions, intensely real memories or imaginations, or particularly potent dreams of a loved

one who dies days, months or even years after the death. Such experiences are common—for children and adults, alike—and are markedly different than debilitating hallucinations experienced by those struggling with mental illness. If a young person has such an experience, affirm it as normal, and listen attentively to anything the young person cares to relate to you about it. You may want to share examples of others' similar experiences. Becoming familiar with such encounters can help to dispel spooky childhood images of our loved ones roaming the earth as "ghosts" after death. Family members can jot on a calendar or write entries in a collective journal about the signs, messages or remembrances that come. This can help a child or young adult know that their tendencies to communicate with a loved one after death are not childish or "crazy."

inspiring presence

Each time we encounter an experience for the first time after a loved one dies, we often revisit the depths of grief and become keenly aware of the loved one's absence—the empty seat at the table, the phone that doesn't ring. Finding ways to help a child incorporate the loved one who died into the ongoing cycles of life can be a great source of joy and comfort. Celebrating the loved one's birthday with a birthday cake, their favorite foods, stories about their life, or artistic gifts created in the loved one's honor can help a young person feel the loved one's presence again. A simple gesture to invite a loved one to be present in spirit is to choose a special memorial candle that can be lit in honor of the loved one. Light it as a daily remembrance, when a young person is struggling, on holidays, or for life

passage events such as losing a tooth, learning to ride a bike, attending the first day of school, graduation, leaving home, getting married or giving birth.

reconnecting forever after

The death of my grandfather 47 years ago was the first death of an intimate friend or relative I can remember. Now, I have several loved ones who have crossed the threshold of death. Fortunately, all of my relationships with these loved ones continue to develop over time as I do. It all began with my beloved grandfather whose presence was larger than life to me. Pappaw guided me and helped me discover ways to connect and reconnect with him through my childhood, teenage years and young adulthood. He inspires me to write stories about the humor, wisdom and love he bestows on my life. I plant gardens in his memory. Once, Pappaw even showed up in a dream, years after he died, to impart upon me and my family a blessing of protection. His photograph still sits on a shelf where I see it every day, so I can remember the presence of his unconditional love.

Reconnecting with a loved one who dies is the journey of a lifetime. Guiding children, teenagers and young adults to reconnect with friends and relatives who die can bring meaning, comfort and hope to the daily round and to all of life's changes. Day in and day out, we can discover and rediscover with our children that our loved ones are a part of us—forever after. 📖

SHEA DARIAN is a spiritual director and family educator. She is also the author of *Seven Times the Sun: Guiding Your Child Through the Rhythms of the Day and Sanctuaries of Childhood: Nurturing a Child's Spiritual Life* (2nd edition, Oct, 2011). Her parenting book, *Living Passages for the Whole Family: Celebrating Rites of Passage from Birth to Adulthood* (www.gileadpress.net) is a Nautilus Book Awards and Next Generation Indie Book Awards winner.