

Engineering for Grief

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Ten months after my mother's funeral, I returned to my childhood home for the first time. I had no idea what to expect. Though Dad had made a few trips to see me and my family and I talked with him frequently on the phone, I was worried about him and eager to see for myself how he was doing at home without my mother.

The house looked just as Mom had left it. The walls were covered with the same photographs and artwork. The pictures cluttering the refrigerator door were nearly all the same, though a photo of our toddler and one of Mom in her "chemo wig" were new. Across from the fridge on the side of a cabinet, yellowed Scotch tape still held the tattered strip of paper that documented the growth of my sister, my brother, and me in smeared pencil marks. In the living room, a music stand stood in the corner with an open sheaf of music waiting for Mom and her flute. Every object in the house had a story, and I knew almost all of them. But one new addition stood out. Taped to the wall by the phone was a small piece of paper with six letters, arranged in a triangle.

L
D T
A A T

Over the next few days, I noticed several others just like it. There was one taped to the back of the front door, another on the mirror in Dad's bathroom, one on the door to the carport.

My father was a human pro-

cess engineer. He trained people to work effectively in the sprawling manufacturing plant that dominated my home town. Intensely curious, with an engineer's knack for analysis and tinkering and a therapist's intuition about people, he was well suited for the work. He was always looking for new ways to understand how humans could communicate and collaborate more effectively. In this one regard, there was little separation between his work and home lives. My siblings and I were the only kids on the playground who could discuss their Myers-Briggs type or work through a spat using transactional analysis. Dinner-table conversations at our house blended typical child and adolescent dramas with process improvement and organizational psychology, often distilled into a brief acronym or clever mnemonic.

Yet for all his insight, creativity, and empathy, Dad had always relied on Mom to keep him grounded.

A few years before Mom got sick, we lost my brother in a plane crash. While the rest of us were grieving, Dad was on a parallel track. At first, he was focused on the punch list of details a death leaves behind: notifying friends and family, making funeral arrangements, coordinating travel plans, resolving my brother's estate. . . . When that was done, he went to work on the crash itself, talking to everyone he could to understand what had happened and what the Air Force might be doing to make sure it

didn't happen again. A year passed before he was finally able to sit down with the rest of us and dangle his feet into the gaping sinkhole that my brother's death had opened up under our family. Throughout it all, my mother waited patiently, honoring his need to do what he had to do and then comforting him when the tears finally came.

We watched him do the same when Mom got sick. He took charge of her appointments for radiation and chemo. He noted every little detail and developed theories for patterns he saw. What made for a good night versus a restless one? What provoked her nausea and what seemed easy to eat?

In the end, her death came quickly. A little cough on a Friday night became shaking chills by breakfast and desperate breathlessness by lunch. The sound of his voice over the phone that evening told me everything I needed to know. Between anguished gasps, he choked out the details. By the next day, he had moved on to the punch list. That worried me. I had no idea how Dad could process Mom's death without her.

Ten months later, it seemed my fears might be unfounded. Though his footsteps through the house at night told me he wasn't sleeping well, during the day he was his old self — fully present and engaged. He drew out the details of our lives and doted on my young son. He was far from the distant, distracted man he had been after my brother's death.

One morning in the car with him, I noticed the slip of paper taped to his dash.

L
D T
A A T

“Tell me about that,” I said.

“That,” he replied, “is my formula for living these days.”

“Listen.

Don’t talk.

Ask about them.”

He lifted his eyebrows and shrugged. “It seems to be working pretty well for me. I just need a lot of reminders.”

Dad would survive my mother by 14 years. Those paper reminders were my first glimpse of the nature and enormity of his loss and the effort required to live

without her. He worked hard to regain the appearance of normal. After several months, the slips of paper disappeared. He filled his schedule with appointments and activities and did his best to minimize the number of meals he ate alone. Eventually, to most observers, Dad would seem to be his old self, moving through the world with his usual generosity and good humor. But as with an amputee mastering a prosthesis, moving normally required effort and intentionality.

Over the years that followed, Dad talked with me about his lifelong tendency toward rumination and the despair that he constantly fought but that was always so near at hand. Among

his fears, the greatest by far was that he would end up in a life where he took more than he could give. In those conversations in which he gave voice to his anxieties, there was always a point when he would pause and take a long breath. For a brief moment he would look away, and then he would turn . . . and ask about me.

Disclosure forms provided by the author are available at NEJM.org.

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Double Take Video: A Sense of Belonging



In this documentary video, retired University of Chicago Associate Dean for Graduate Medical Education Anita Blanchard, M.D., reflects on the importance of diversity and mentorship. As a Black woman training in a field that was (and remains) predominantly White, she found a sense of belonging thanks to the unconditional support and encouragement she received from Black senior professor James Bowman, M.D., Ph.D.