

Filling the Void

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How to move on from the loss of a loved one. We all do it differently. Is there a right or wrong way?



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Death creates a vacuum, in both the big picture, and on a more fundamental, individual basis.

In the abstract, larger view, death is replaced somewhere in the world with a birth. It may not occur on a one-to-one basis, the numbers may not even out exactly, but whoever is pulling the strings is filling that void, as the ever-increasing population of the world continues, unabated.

Compensating on a personal level is much more complicated, as it is an affair of the heart, not a numbers-crunching exercise in keeping man relevant.

Void, vacuum: these are decidedly unsentimental and unromantic terms. A hole in the heart should not have any other moniker or analogy. And that is exactly the end result of a loved one's death. A hole in the heart.

I have a friend who recently lost his wife of 42 years to cancer. That, of course, means the end of her life was painful, ugly and mostly without grace. Cancer does not settle for stealing your life, it often hooks your dignity as well. This man needed his wife as much as he loved her. And both need and love had dissipated not at all over their 42 years together, in itself a herculean feat.

Though he had about a year-and-a-half to prepare for her absence as he watched her die, this thoughtful, reflective, intellectual man nonetheless has not healed, almost two years after her death.

He recounted the following to me recently, which brought tears to my eyes and a dagger to my heart.

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"There is still her voice that greets callers on my answering machine. Someone asked me why I keep it on there. I want to hear her voice. I sometimes call my own phone from my mother's just to hear it."

The hell with psychology, and 'moving on'...I can see myself doing the exact same thing. And 'move on' to what? Finding another 42 year love affair? Good fucking luck.

The lightning of love probably only strikes once and the luck of having been struck is tragically balanced by the searing pain that accompanies the dousing of the lightning rod.

Life is a tradeoff. Fairness is elusive. Moving on is complex.

The loss of the love of your life should not automatically be accompanied by the incredibly poignant tasks of emptying the closet of her clothes, or giving her talismans and favorite knick knacks to distant aunts, uncles or cousins. Or worse yet, holding a garage or estate sale and watching as strangers wander off with a sentimental object thinking only one thing: What a deal!

Death is enough of an emotional separation process to go through. Why is it assumed that the physical evidence of a loving relationship must also be erased from the canvas?

Keep the closet full of clothes. Keep the furniture the way it was. Don't throw out some of the favorite items of the lost love. It's not necessarily the classic embrace of closure. But it *is* a continuing acknowledgment of the love you shared. And I see nothing wrong with that.

Keep her voice on the machine.

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