

**E**ver notice how children speak about their departed parents with smiles on their faces? These are the same children who cried and mourned when their parents died. How do we account for this transformation? ... This book is a chronicle of sorts, of a journey from grief to gratitude. It is a journey that I took recently and share with you here. It is the story of my parents, and of the mourning toward appreciation that I experienced.

## Appreciating My Parents

**T**here was a palpable feeling of mutual appreciation between my parents. At mealtime, Mom would load up the table, Dad would be full of compliments about the food, and Mom would be aglow in the atmosphere of praise. My mother knew in advance that every *cholent* (hot stew) would be the object of the never-failing comment of my father, "This is your best cholent ever." No Sabbath at home went by without my father rendering this culinary verdict. This was a basic staple of the family folklore. The only surprise was in the timing. At times, Dad would "pull a fast one" and render the verdict even before the cholent came to the table. It was always expected, but always fun ...

My father suffered through incredible pain. His mental acuity never left him. Just a few months before he passed away, while we were talking, he chronicled all the things that were hurting him. This was unlike Dad, who hated being a burden and talking about himself. He suddenly stopped, realized what he was doing, and said, "Enough about me. Let me hear about you. How do *you* think I am doing?" I burst out in uncontrollable laughter, coupled with great delight that my father's sense of humor and precise timing for the unexpected had not left him.

## Caregivers' Guilt

**T**he cruel irony of the situation was that after the passing of my parents, all the anxiety was removed and there were no worries about having to drop everything to fly over. The mourning period was the quiet after the storm.

What is cruel about this is that from the perspective of those who look after people in need of critical care, death comes as a relief. This can play horrible mind games with the caregivers, who may begin to wonder if there is anything wrong with them that they feel this way. After all, should they not be wallowing in grief? And if they feel "better" after the passing, does this mean that they did not give their all to the caregiving, that deep down they really wanted all this to go away? These are scary thoughts to juggle at such a delicate time ...

For family, surely there is always more that one could have done; however, this need not translate into debilitating guilt. We do our best and hope for the best. In my own case, I surely would have liked to visit my folks more often, but I am continually buoyed by the memory of the great appreciation expressed by my parents every time I came.

The relief after death is not consciously effected. It comes automatically in the absence of all demands for care. It is a relief that, in a very defined way, reflects on the fullness of the dedication of the caregiver, who feels the relief mainly because of his or her total commitment to caregiving. Were the caregivers nonchalant about caregiving, the period after death would not feel so much less onerous.

## Call Me

**I**n the mourning visit, the most frequent parting comment is, "If you ever need anything, do not hesitate to call." My best advice after years of dealing with people in mourning is simply: do not use this phrase. It means nothing and it is unfair.

What it does is put the mourner in the position of having to ask. That is not a nice thing to do. No one really likes having to ask for anything, especially since one is not sure that the request will be fulfilled. One will then feel doubly upset at having been turned down and having made someone else feel uncomfortable. Added to this is the feeling of being shattered that a person you thought really cared really does not.

A person who really cares will not dump the obligation of reconnecting into the lap of anyone, least of all a mourner. The truly caring person will once again take the initiative after the visit and have a thought-out agenda of helping.

## Silence

**O**ften, when I share with an audience the complications posed by many of the mantra-like thoughtless phrases that are thrown at mourners, I am asked: if everything I say is potentially no good, what should I say?

Great question. And the answer is: say nothing! Say nothing? Is it not the obligation of the comforter to offer words of comfort? The answer, surprising as it may sound, is *no*. It is not the obligation of the visitor to offer words of comfort. The visitor's obligation is to comfort, plain and simple.

But how can one comfort without saying anything? Comfort is achieved simply by being there, with the mourner, even in silence.

Everyone would agree that coming and saying nothing is preferable to coming and saying something silly or unwelcome. Of course, the best result is attained by coming and sharing wise thoughts and reflections. But how can one know what is appropriate when every mourner thinks differently?

The answer: through silence, through coming with lips sealed and ears wide open. That is the Jewish protocol, an often-ignored protocol, for mourning visitation. Come there, sit, and listen. The mourner will start talking, and you will then know where the mourner is. You can then respond.

This is the safe, sensitive, and sensible way to be a comforter.

## On The Fly

**W**e are all busy. There are so many things we would like to do, but do not get around to doing. We know many people. So, it is difficult to go to every house of mourning to make condolence calls ...

What happens is that we resort to what I call "condolence on the fly." We chance upon the mourner at a gathering and rush over to offer a delayed condolence. Never mind that you may be doing a disservice to the mourner by dumping your words when the mourner may be in a different mind space.

Many a mourner has expressed real hurt at being pounced on in awkward places, such as the grocery store when in the midst of shopping, by a well-meaning but not necessarily well-thinking person ...

That person should have called, did not call, and now, seeing a convenient opportunity, blurts out a condolence formula to someone who was trying to shop, and instead is brought sharply back to the world of melancholy ... If you are serious about comforting, go out of your way a little, either by a visit, or a phone call, or a card, or an e-mail, to show some initiative.

A by-the-way, or on-the-fly gesture, rings hollow and often evokes angry feelings inside the mourner, feelings that most often go unexpressed ...

It is not fair to the mourner and not fair to whatever relationship you want to maintain with the mourner, hopefully a good one.

*If you find these excerpts insightful, you will find this book enlightening.*