

# Bereavement: A personal journey, an unfinished symphony

By Emily Morrison

Bereavement, as I've learned during an extended sojourn into uncharted terrain, is an affliction I won't in all likelihood die of. After more than seven years, however, I'm quite certain that the wide cleft my father's death has riven in my heart will never entirely heal over.

On a rainy Tuesday in late March of 1978, Paul Guerrant Morrison Jr. died in Strong Memorial Hospital after a prolonged battle with chronic leukemia. He lived with this invariably terminal illness for eight years, a remarkable fact in itself. His hematologist, a dedicated and compassionate physician named Paul Griner who undoubtedly had the misfortune of having to watch almost all of his patients die, eventually became director of the hospital. During his still-active tenure, Constance L. Mindell, DSW, was hired at some point during the past year as chief social worker at the Strong Cancer Center.

Whether someone like Connie Mindell was on staff during my father's final three-month hospitalization, I can't remember this many years later — and, as I told Connie when I met her at the bereavement seminar held Oct. 5 at St. Mary's Hospital, I didn't, in any event, take advantage of such a service even in the off-chance it was offered. I was probably in some stage of denial or despair or resignation, and nothing any social worker could have said would have made a great deal of difference at the time.

In retrospect, it was my misfortune that I didn't encounter or respond to someone like Connie, either during my father's lengthy illness or my equally arduous period of prolonged aftershock. But such is the nature of the survivors' affliction, as perhaps 50 to 100 participants learned during the day-long seminar entitled "Bereavement: A Normal Journey," sponsored by St. Mary's Hospital, the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association.

The unanticipated range of emotions and behaviors exhibited by adults beset with grief over a loved one's death, or the anticipation of it in the case of prolonged illness, can encompass everything from rage to relief to

melancholy to chronic and even suicidal depression, as respected experts in the fields of social work, religious studies, and thanatology told a rapt yet somber seminar audience.

"Grief and bereavement are frequent companions in adulthood," said Vivian Cunningham, director of employee health at St. Mary's and chairman of the service and rehabilitation committee of the American Cancer Society. "Many times our grieving is muted, however, by the unacceptability of expressing our emotions."

Dr. Nathan Kollar, professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College, concurred. "We don't want to talk about death because, in American society, we don't want to talk about loss or intimacy or other things that aren't discussed socially," said Dr. Kollar. "Not everyone responds — or *should* respond — the same way when they lose someone through death," he added, "but certain patterns do emerge."

What, I wondered, might I have in common with a roomful of strangers, some of whom I would soon come to know on a somewhat more intimate level than I do many acquaintances, once we formed small discussion groups later that afternoon? I had never seemed to have any difficulty talking about my father's illness or death — although I had experienced years earlier a certain degree of discomfort over knowing when and where to stop talking about it. Still, society had given me unspoken messages, somehow and somewhere along this "normal journey," that the proper period of mourning was long since over, and that it was in poor taste, at any rate, to belabor the point when one's middle-aged forbear had succumbed to a disease no one wants to spend an inordinate amount of time even thinking about.

Eager as usual to please, I had dutifully resigned myself to putting active expressions of grief behind me, to behaving with restraint and decorum, to, in point of fact, rarely thinking about my father consciously at all — except on those sporadic occasions when my five-year-old son would say something precocious and uncannily familiar, or I'd walk through the downstairs hallway to find that the cat had strewn my grandfather's hand-lettered books and my father's gold-tasseled mortarboard indecorously on the floor, or I would be driving alone down I-490 in a spring rain and suddenly burst into tears to the familiar strains of an aria from Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte."

These things have added up, as it occurred to me during the seminar, to a sense of personal history irrevocably altered by a break in the lineage, an interruption that goes beyond genealogy. My grandfather was the scribe, the family record-keeper, tracing our heritage through the Scottish Clan Morrison — from poor but industrious Southern farmers to the American Revolution to an Irish land grant by the English king, and even further back to the Isle of Lewis in the Hebrides, the scene of a Viking shipwreck 900 years ago. My father continued the tradition with an oral rendition of every event of any consequence that had transpired within our far-flung tribe since the turn of the century.

Yet those events have little more to do with what I am than my father had to do with what my son, who never knew him, will become. Untimely death deprived me of a father these past seven years, and my son of a grandfather, and the only remaining repository of the family history is my faulty memory and an armful of yellowing books inscribed with fragile calligraphy. And somehow, I didn't have the foresight (or perhaps, as I perceived it at the time, the inherent

ghouliness) to question my father endlessly on his gradual deathbed about our common past. This in itself seemed sufficient cause for a certain type of slow-simmering anger I have felt toward myself for the past seven years.

A complex of emotions, I think I hear Dr. Kollar saying through my preoccupation. A welter of complex emotions, in my inevitable paraphrase. "Often, when we lose someone through death, we're faced with remembering them," he actually said, quite simply and eloquently. It's the individual method of recall that leads to the more specialized forms of psychic torture, as well as occasional flights of joy.

"There is a difference in pattern," Dr. Kollar goes on. "We have a physical reaction ... — but how that physicality is expressed depends on the person's conditioning, upbringing, age, social class, even ethnic or religious background — as well as who it is

vigorous, and domineering, as he had been during my teens, when I had perceived, as most teenagers do, that I hated this apparently irredeemable tyrant. This, then, was the object of my search — to reconcile the terrible anger I'd buried for many years as the adult daughter of a terminally ill parent who had somehow been magically gentled by the ravages of disease, as well as by the simple fact that my troublesome adolescence had long since evaporated into the uneasy truce occasioned by some measure of maturity.

"Throughout this process, there are very significant symbols," Dr. Kollar is saying. "One woman would put on her husband's bathrobe, sit and rock. It made her feel very close to him."

*Memento mori*, I recall from somewhere in the spotty and disjointed education to which I have always felt ashamed to confess, after the example of my scholarly father and

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St. John Fisher College

who's died, how old the person is, whether it was expected, how old we are at the time. Admittedly, for the first time in the world's history, most of the people who are born are dying when they're old," Dr. Kollar points out.

Back on the Isle of Lewis 900 years ago, I realize, my father would have been considered venerable at 58, the age at which his life was cut so cruelly short in 1978. At 35, I would have been considered a tribal matriarch. But this is 1985, and in the latter part of the 20th century, I'm expected to carry on in *ad infinitum* in the proper Anglo-Saxon tradition, preferably with a stiff upper lip.

My upper lip quivers as Dr. Kollar talks about the initial shock and panic, when it seems as if the world will stop, as if the whole world is distant, the period when you are driving to work, watching the cars surge through the Can of Worms, and you want to scream out, "STOP! My father's dead —" but you realize that would be patently absurd, and not well-received by fellow motorists.

Next come protest, search, denial. "Inside, you still feel the person is alive," Dr. Kollar explains. "You look for him in crowds, you keep seeing him in all kinds of ways, alive." Or think you do, or dream you do. My search was a subconscious one, a series of nightly dreams so vivid, I would wake in a cold sweat and find myself shaking.

At first, I would dream my father was dead, but talking to me in a pallid whisper, trying once more to convey to me whatever it was he had attempted to say after his final surgery, five days before he died, when he came to after a 13-hour operation, nearly comatose, but intent on getting *something* across to me. An artificial airway prevented speech, and he shook his head weakly back and forth in response to every question I could think of. Was he thirsty? Hungry? In pain? Did he want the airway out? Did he want my mother? Did he want his Greek version of Hans Christian Andersen? I had finally, in hopeful exasperation, handed him a pad and pencil, after the only affirmative response he had given me — but he was so sedated, he could only write in an indecipherable scribble, and the final message was lost.

So I tried on some level to dream it back, but to no avail. In subsequent dreams he was still alive, but gravely ill, unable to eat or be fed intravenously because of recurrent infections. Then he was feeling chipper between operations, studying Greek, holding court for University of Rochester medical students enrolled in "death and dying" courses, or talking with me for hours in the evenings about my upcoming oboe performances or Hegel or marine biology.

After that, I dreamed him back home in remission, and finally well, before the fateful diagnosis. In the last segment of these searching dreams, my father was healthy,

grandfather, both holders of Ph.D.s, college professors, and self-taught linguists. I resolve to look up the half-remembered term in my father's unabridged Webster's Second "New International Dictionary," a wedding present my mother gave him in 1947 and a cherished memento I have virtually enshrined in an exalted place on my bookshelf.

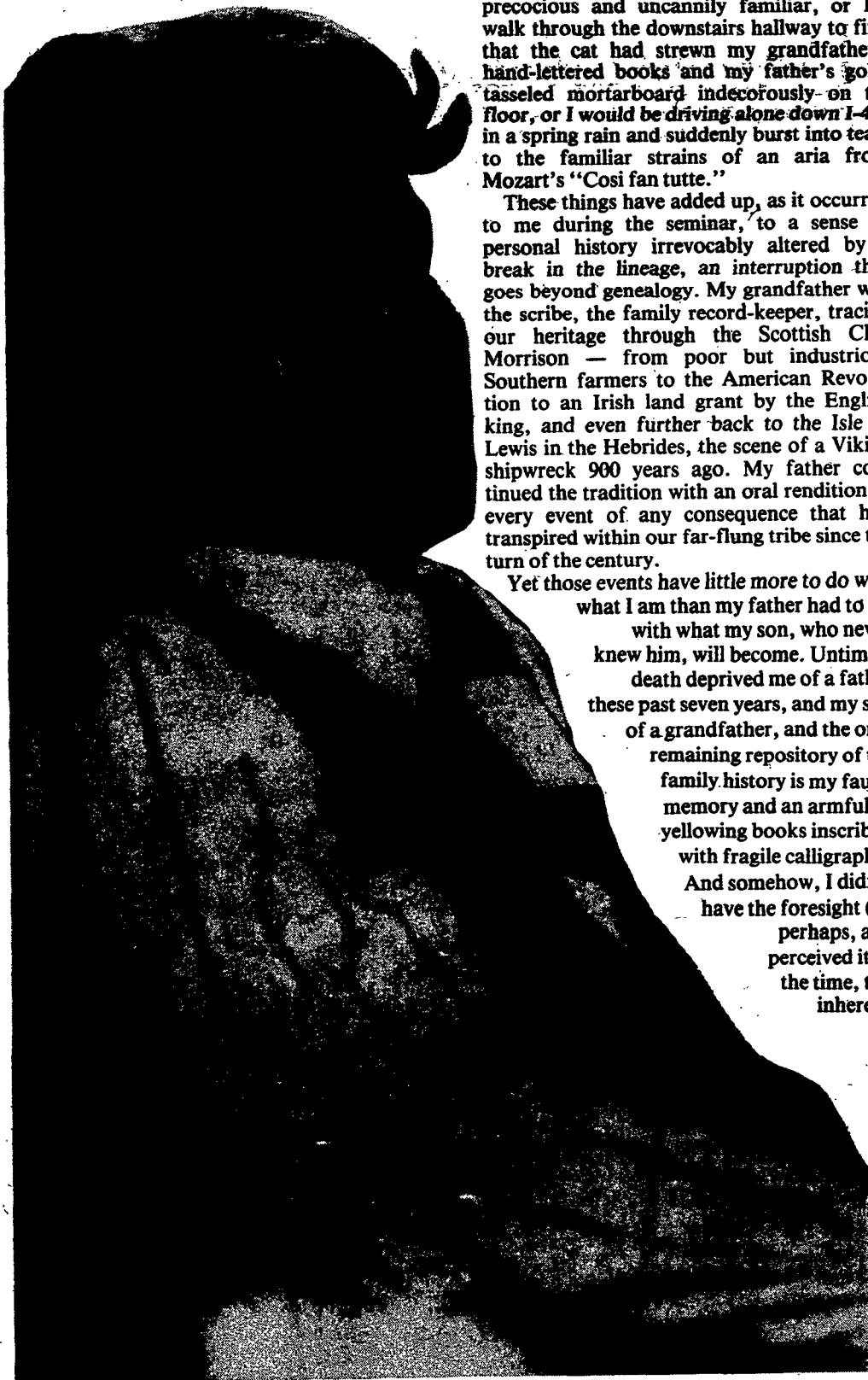
I go back over my own mental catalogue of symbols, the snippets of my father's legacy that, for some reason, have survived in my personal inventory of cherished objects that belonged to him. There is the voluminous dictionary with its tissue-covered color plates; the mortarboard he always wore with his blue-mantled gown to commencement exercises at Tulane University or Florida State or SUNY College at Brockport; his flute; a logic class binder he kept his students' grades in one semester (and which now holds, along with symbolic logic graffiti and test papers, my aborted attempt at a novel); his doctoral dissertation entitled "Evolution, Revolution and the Cosmos"; photographs of him as a child and as a soldier; and a notebook containing the libretto of Rimsky-Korsakov's little-known opera, "Snegurochka (The Snow Maiden)," which Daddy and I checked out of the New Orleans Public Library when I was nine and sang together for weeks on end. This version, unhappily, was transcribed by him in the Cyrillic alphabet, which I haven't the slightest notion how to read.

And yes — there is a bathrobe, a blue cotton one my mother had bought for him to wear in the hospital during those final weeks, and which he probably wore only one time. It hangs in my closet and will no doubt always hang there among the garments I actually wear — the only unworn article of clothing that has yet to make its way to the ignominy of the attic or the future goodwill pile.

Mentally surveying these totemic objects, I wonder what it was of him that I'm trying to hold onto. My father, I conclude, was a number of things to a number of people, not many of whom, I'm sure, care to remember him as slavishly as I do. He was a devoted husband and often overwhelmed father of four children (three adult and one adolescent at the time of his death); a professor of symbolic logic and the philosophy of science, and a disciple of the Vienna Circle; a lover of Mozart symphonies and operas, Brahms and Beethoven piano concertos, Schubert string quartets, and almost any oratorio (much to the chagrin of many a next-door neighbor in summertime, with all the windows open); an avid reader of mysteries and science fiction; a better than passable baritone; a virtuoso whistler; an accomplished storyteller; true eccentric; and erstwhile flautist.

Once an Episcopalian choirboy and the son of a professor of comparative religion, he was no longer a religious man, yet he believed passionately in essentially Christian

continued on Page 8



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A welter of emotions is mirrored in the face of Bonnie Haller, a participant in the Oct. 5 bereavement seminar's small group discussion on loss of a child.