

The Journey of Working Through Delayed Grief

By Gabby McGinty

First place: Narrative, Reflective, Expository, or Personal Writing

We were about four hours into the drive. My mom and I had left our small town in Virginia at around eight am, and we had a good five hours left until we would arrive in Charlotte, North Carolina where we would be spending the week with my father's brother, Steve, and his wife and sons. The car's silence was consumed by the quiet sound of the tires turning over the miles of road that we had covered. Thoughts of my father's death, spirituality, Christianity, and fear of what happens after death had consumed my mind for the entire car ride. These thoughts had been becoming increasingly more intense for the past few weeks as I had kept trying to push them aside. I broke the ongoing quiet hush of the road underneath us and proceeded to start the conversation with my mom that I had always been apprehensive to have with her.

"Mom," I said quietly.

"Have you ever felt Dad's presence after he passed away?" I asked her with anticipation in my voice.

"Oh yes, Gabby, I definitely have. I've told you the story about a few nights after his passing, haven't I?" she said.

"You have mentioned it to me vaguely one time, but I don't really know much about it, no," I replied.

"A few nights after Tom passed away he visited me," she began to tell me. "I woke up from my sleep and saw a bright light in front of me. Tom was looking at me. His eyes were bright blue, his hair was blonde again, and he was young and at peace. He was no longer in pain," she explained to me in detail. "I can't remember exactly what he said to me, but I remember him looking at me and comforting me by saying 'I am okay now. I am at peace' and with that he turned around, walked away, and the bright blue shirt that he was wearing turned to white," she finished telling me with a look of hope and comfort in her eyes.

At that moment I remember not many words came out of my mouth. A tough bubble developed in my throat, but I pushed it away, not allowing myself to cry. Many thoughts flooded my mind. I felt comfort and reassurance that my dad was in heaven and that he was safe.

I let myself feel this peace from what my mom had told me, and I tried to fully process the beautiful moment that she had experienced, but my worrisome thoughts seemed to fill my mind again only a few minutes after she had finished sharing her story with me.

Why didn't I get to experience a moment like this with my dad too? Was I not religious or Christian enough to be worthy of feeling his presence? Was I doing enough to be able to make it to heaven and to see him again when I die? The logical part of my mind knew that these thoughts that had been developing for the past few weeks were nonsense, but my mind couldn't seem to shake them. A part of me kept attaching so much fear and meaning to these thoughts.

I had always felt a lot of comfort in my own spiritual beliefs with God, and it had helped me to get through the death of my dad. But for the past few months, I began to feel like I wasn't doing enough. I thought that the lack of being able to feel my dad's presence and the inability to process his death was because I wasn't practicing Christianity. I tried to educate myself on Christianity because of this, but it only resulted in me feeling more lost and empty. Christianity in itself isn't what was making me feel this way, but rather certain people's personal take on what Christianity is and what a person needs to do in order to be a "good Christian." I began to think that I was not enough, and my mind was fixated on trying not to sin and the fear of hell. The comfort that I had always gotten from my personal relationship with God and prayer had slowly been slipping away from me.

At around four pm, we arrived at my uncle Steve's house. Steve grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina with my dad and their other four siblings. My grandfather, Steve, and my other uncle Jim had all continued to live in Charlotte after childhood so I had spent every summer and many holidays coming here to visit. In the past 10 years, my father passed away, my grandfather moved to Georgia to be taken care of by my Uncle John, and my Uncle Jim passed away as well. Naturally visits to Charlotte came less often, but, nevertheless, my mom and I always made an effort to go visit. Trips to Charlotte had always been one of the things I looked forward to. I'd always felt very connected to my dad's side of the family there, which isn't a feeling I had experienced very often.

During this trip I stayed with my Uncle Steve, my Aunt Jan, their son, Sean, and Sean's boyfriend, Austin. Sean and Austin's best friend Michelle was also with us for the majority of the time that we visited.

The day after arriving in Charlotte, my mom and I had spent the majority of the morning and early afternoon resting from the long drive from the day before. Later in the day Sean invited me to go with him, Austin and Michelle to downtown Charlotte where we would be going to a crystal store and then out to eat. I remember having a wonderful time with them. I had laughed

and felt so happy to be able to spend time with them, but I still had the fear of death and not being Christian enough for God running in the back of my mind during our outing.

Later that night at around 11 pm, Sean, Austin, Michelle, Jan, my mom and I all went to the back room of the house. We spent the beginning of our evening doing tarot card readings and eating snacks. It felt like such a safe space with such genuine people surrounding me, and the environment that we had created had brought me a lot of joy. As the night progressed, we began to talk about spirituality and grieving the loss of loved ones. Austin had lost his mother not even a year ago so we were able to connect with each other since we had both lost a parent. He shared with us that he felt peace from his mother's passing by knowing that he is her son so he is naturally continuing her life for her by being her child and having many of the same characteristics as her.

While I found this mindset of his beautiful, I found it hard to relate to it. I had always struggled with feeling that my dad is still with me. I never processed or accepted my dad's death. I thought the only solution to this was by attaching religion to my grief journey. I thought that I was not doing something right in my life on a religious aspect. As I continued to sit on the couch and get lost in my continuous thoughts, I looked over to see my mom who also looked consumed by heavy thoughts.

"Is everything okay?" I asked my mom in a calm but concerned tone.

Tears began to form in her eyes as she began to break down. She missed her husband and she also felt that she had not done enough after his death. But it wasn't a religious aspect, it was that she thought that she hadn't talked about it enough with me. But she had only been trying to get through his death just as much as I was. I had expected nothing more from her than what she had already done for me, she had always tried her best.

"Gabby, there is something I have kept from you," she began to share as tears blocked her words. "You've been asking me recently about your dad and sharing that you don't understand why he didn't leave you anything behind or say goodbye," she continued. "I never told you this because I felt so bad, and I didn't want it to make you sad, but as your dad was reaching the end he wanted to do something for you. He told me to go to the store and to buy a card for each one of your birthdays. He wanted to write cards for each of your birthdays so that you would have something from him each year," she said with tears still rushing down her face. "But as he reached the end the cancer got too strong. I never got the chance to make it to the store, and he grew too weak to be able to write the cards. I'm so sorry, but I wanted you to know that he wanted to leave you something. He cared so much about you," she said.

I sat there in silence. Another intense ball of tears forming in the middle of my throat, I tried so hard to push down the tears that I could feel the pressure of the tears rising above. My eyes began to fill, but I didn't let the tears fall. Michelle and my mom came to me and hugged me so tight. I felt pain for my father but so much love for the people surrounding me.

I didn't say much in response to what my mom told me. I simply told her that it was okay, and that it was not her fault.

If I'm being honest, I'm not sure what this discovery fully meant to me or did for me in my grief journey. But I know that I can think of this night and feel warmth. I know that I can think of this night and take myself back into the hospital with my dad and be capable of thinking about him and imagining him asking my mom to buy him birthday cards for me. I know that I can think of this night and tell myself that my dad did care about me, and that he did want to leave me something behind. It is possible that I am making this night into something more than what it actually was, and that I'm enhancing the amount of meaning that I attach to this night. That is okay. I know that this night helped me. It was one of the things that has helped me to let go of the guilt that I attached to religion and God. In my mind, I have made this night into one of the experiences that has helped me to get back on track with my spirituality and personal relationship with God, to let go of how other people say I need to live religiously and to know that my dad loves and cares about me regardless. I will continue to work on my personal relationship with God and believe that he is watching over me and that I will see him again. I have this night to partially thank for that.

Gabby McGinty wrote “The Journey of Working Through Delayed Grief” as a first-year student in Professor Larry Williams’ UNIV 111 class in the fall of 2022. She plans on majoring in interdisciplinary studies with concentrations in psychology and biology in hopes to become a physical therapist.