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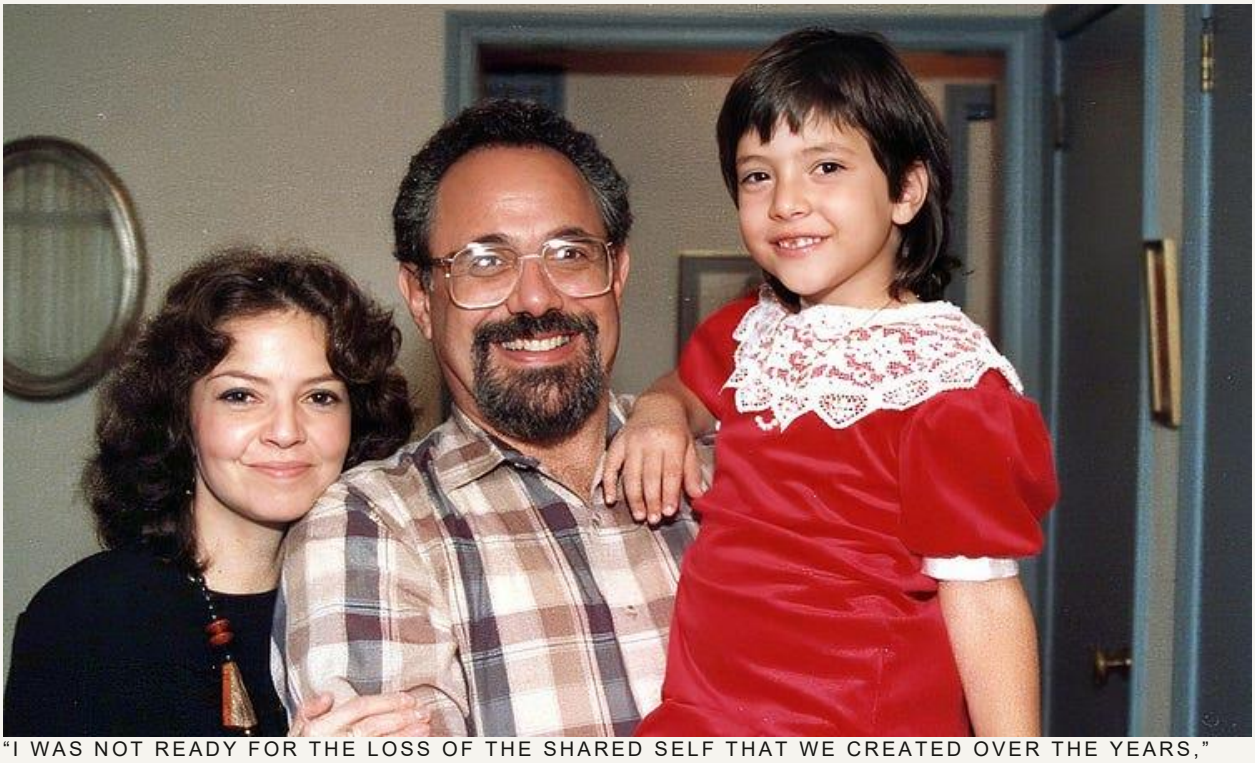
My Wife Accepted Her Death. Why Can’t I?



“I WAS NOT READY FOR THE LOSS OF THE SHARED SELF THAT WE CREATED OVER THE YEARS,” WRITES MICHAEL FRIEDMAN ABOUT HIS WIFE, HARRIET (FAR LEFT). (COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR)

I do the things they tell you to do to mitigate grief. It helps, but it doesn’t erase the loss of a connection that had been transformed over time from sexual passion to something much deeper.

By Michael Friedman

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My wife of nearly 49 years died from pancreatic cancer six months ago. I held her as she took her last labored breaths. She was 81 years old.

Harriet had had a long life and, as she said repeatedly while she was dying, a happier life than she ever expected. She accepted the inevitability of her death gracefully, and dare I say, optimistically.

To my surprise, I wasn't ready to accept it. *We had prepared*, I thought. She and I had had all the conversations you should have about what we wanted to happen to our bodies and what kind of service we wanted. We had done our advance directives—wills, beneficiary designees, healthcare proxies, and all the rest of it. Our affairs were in order. We were ready.

Except: Our expectation had always been that I would die first, as men usually do, especially men like me with multiple chronic health conditions. Harriet had settled into the idea that she would be a widow, and so had I. She was close to her family and had many friends who would be there for her. We were both sure that her life after I died would continue to be fulfilling, and we were both comforted by that.

It turned out, when she was the one who died first, and I was the widower, I was not so ready after all. I was not ready to find myself crying with little provocation. I was not ready to be alone in our bed. I was not ready for her not to be there to talk to. As I said in my eulogy for her, when I finished writing it, I got up from my desk to go show it to her. I sat back down, stunned, when I realized she wasn't there.

For nearly 50 years, she had always been there. Even when we were apart—when, for instance, she visited her family in Montreal without me—she was with me. A presence always because we had built a life together; we had built a single self that we shared.

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We had met in 1975 in social work school in New York. Both of us had made the decision to devote our lives to helping troubled people—disturbed adolescents for her, people with serious mental illness for me.

We shared political values. We believed that society has a responsibility to its troubled people, and we believed in a democratic process in which we both participated as social advocates. We also shared a view about death. Neither of us wanted our lives to be prolonged just for the sake of living longer. Both of us wanted our organs to be used to help people. So she donated her body to science, as will I.

There were other shared values that bonded us throughout the years: our love for our daughter and our two grandchildren, our pleasure in art and music and travel and our friends and more.

These values were an important part of what made our marriage work, but what was most important was our affection for each other and our shared commitment to our marriage.

Here's something else I was not ready for: the anger that I still feel.

I was not ready for the loss of the shared self we created over the years—and for the loneliness I now feel with her no longer here.

I do all the things they tell you to do to mitigate your grief. I keep very busy. I spend lots of time with people. It all helps, but it doesn't touch the loss of the core connection that she and I had—a connection that had been transformed

over time from sexual passion to, as I've said, something deeper, a single life for the two of us.

At the most mundane level, there's simply no one I share every day with and no one with our shared history.

Here's something else I was not ready for: the anger that I still feel. Yes, anger. Anger at the universe for taking her and leaving me alone. Anger at her for abandoning me. Anger at the healthcare system for not saving her—irrational, I know—but more because I felt abandoned by the healthcare system when she was dying. No one I encountered in the system seemed to understand that I was already in grief—they didn't seem to know how to help me—an old man about to become a widower.

There's no one I share every day with and no one with our shared history. (Courtesy of the author)

Even as I write this, I am crying. And I am not a person who cries.

Of course, I had lost other people I cared about, including my grandparents, my mother and father, an aunt and uncle I had been very close with, and some dear friends; but I did not face the harsh reality of death until my wife died.

Dylan Thomas, in a beautiful but very cruel poem, famously urges his dying father, "Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

I beg to differ. People like my wife, who die well, accept the inevitable. In fact, acceptance of death is supposed to be the final so-called "stage" of dying—after denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. Not that everyone achieves that, of course. My wife did, a model for all of us who were with her as she reached the end.

I certainly hope that when I die I will be at peace with the life I have lived and that my daughter, unlike Thomas, will not urge me to fight the inevitable and will allow me to go gentle into death. Before that, save getting all of the wills and directives in order, it's important to prepare for the fraught emotional journey ahead. I think that the healthcare system ought to be able to help you, especially at the point of a fatal diagnosis. They can at least warn you about it, and connect you with support.

But it may very well be the case that you cannot ever be ready for the shattering of self and relationships that is the essence of death.

My wife was a model for all of us who were with her as she reached the end.(Courtesy of the author)

Are you ready? For your own death? For the death of your life partner? Maybe you are at peace with the life that you've led and can say, as my wife did, "I've lived a long and happy life. I am okay with death."

Maybe you can accept your partner's death with equanimity. As I've said, I've yet to make peace with my wife's death. I hated it. I still hate it. I still, in Thomas's words, rage against the dying of her, of our, light. That, I think, is the essence of grief.