

**Sermon** “When She Died” (Martha Hodges, Aug. 10, 2008)

When a parent dies, the world becomes an alien and unreliable place. The world shifts out of balance, the earth slides beneath your feet. As when you fall in love, the familiar becomes suddenly strange. You struggle to locate yourself within this new and foreign world. Whatever your relationship with your parent has been, no matter what conflicts came between you, the mere knowledge that your mother or father shares this world, no matter how removed from you – this knowledge is a kind of gravitational force, keeping your feet firmly connected to the earth. When you lose this, the tectonic plates of your reality buckle and shift and you are left sprawling – for a time – grabbing for a handhold, anxiously searching for familiar landmarks. Your location on the map of your life changes. For a time, life is out of balance. And then, little by little, you regain your sense of where you are in relation to the world. The earth has shifted, and you have survived.

My own father died when I was twenty-one. The world changed. It became unbalanced and I temporarily lost my sense of being firmly fastened to reality. It was my first loss of someone I loved and needed; my first awakening to the finality of death; my first encounter with the knowledge that I would never – truly never -- see someone again. It took me a couple of days after his death for me to realize this – to really get it. I remember I was lying on my parents’ bed when I did. I remember the tears running into my ears when that great realization finally hit me – the realization that changes everything.

You may be estranged from a father or mother, but as long as they live, there is always the chance, no matter how remote, that you will be reconciled, that all wounds will be healed, that you will be made whole. As long as a parent lives, there is all the time in the world to ask the questions you need to ask and to say the things you need to say. Death changes that, forever. This was the lesson of my father’s death.

For me, the death of my mother was something quite different. I don’t know if this is true for others. I hesitate to generalize from my experience because surely there is nothing more idiosyncratic and irrefutable than the way a person accepts the reality of death. For this reason, I’ve always resented the descriptions of the stages of dying – you know, the denial, bargaining, acceptance, etc. It feels to me like I’m being told how I’m supposed to feel. That’s not what I want to do today. I don’t want to tell you what it was like for you or what it will be like for you when a mother or father dies. Only you can tell that story.

Nevertheless, here I am, talking about the death of parents. Because this is one of the few universal human experiences, and as such, it cries out to be talked about. It’s something we need to talk about.

There is a marvelous poem by Diana Der-Hovanessian called “Shifting the Sun.” It’s about how your place in the world changes when a father or mother dies. It begins:

*When your father dies, say the Irish,  
you lose your umbrella against bad weather.  
May his sun be your light, say the Armenians.*

Even though I had, long before my mother died, become her protector, even in her deteriorated state, her very existence worked for me like a kind of talisman. Knowing that she lived, helpless as she had become, made me feel safe. How strange this is... To draw moral support from someone who hasn't a clue what's going on around her. And yet it's true. Maybe you know this for yourselves. The five year-old child innocently believes that his mother can protect him from all bad things; can comfort every hurt, fix every problem, answer every question. And some little bit of this faith – naïve and irrational as it is – persists in us even when we have come to know better. Even after we have learned that our mother or our father is fallible, is afraid just as we are, capable of being wrong, just as we are, is helpless to protect us against life's great storms – even so, even then, the Irish are right.

When a parent dies, you lose your umbrella against bad weather. What survives, however deep and hidden, even when we know ourselves to be fully competent and capable adults, even when we ourselves are parents -- what survives in us is a wistful desire for that lost state of innocent faith, that unconditional trust that we can no longer give to the world. This kind of trust – this blind faith in the powers or another to keep us safe -- can only be granted to a parent. When that parent is gone, it can never be given to another. And yet we wish for it, long for it. And so, we turn to other talismans: addictions, possessions, lovers, achievements, in a desperate attempt to recapture this feeling of safety, of being protected from the bad weather of life. We turn to philosophy. We turn to God.

*When your father dies, say the Welsh,  
you sink a foot deeper into the earth.  
May you inherit his light, say the Armenians.*

To sink a foot deeper into the earth... To become less capable of flight, of freedom, of risk and experiment and silliness. To become more responsible, more grounded in the things of this world, more tied to earthly realities... more adult.

We sink deeper into the earth as we feel ourselves coming closer to our own deaths. Our parents no longer stand as the advance guard between us and death.

Our mother, our father, no longer provides the solid earthwork on which we stand. We find ourselves with only the supports we ourselves construct – or discover -- in each other or within ourselves or in our faith. The Welsh have it right. When your parent dies, you sink a foot deeper into the earth. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is largely up to us. Whether we see being firmly rooted in the world as a curb to our freedom or as a foundation on which to build a life – this is a theological question, as are so many of the questions that we must ask when a parent dies.

*When your father dies, say the Canadians,  
you run out of excuses.  
May you inherit his sun, say the Armenians.*

When a parent dies, you are suddenly responsible for yourself. Oh, we can, and do, continue to blame a mother or father for our failings and failures. But sooner or later, our excuses start to sound absurd to our adult ears. Our pride demands that we own up to our weaknesses. After all, we no longer have anyone to make excuses to... The great and omniscient judges of our behavior, our parents, are gone. We become our own judges, and often those voices of judgment in our heads echo the voices of our parents. In this way, we grant them immortality. Often, we project these voices onto our religious beliefs, our image of God, whether we conceive of this God as the angry white-bearded father in the sky or as the inner voice of conscience.

The Canadians say, when your parent dies, you run out of excuses. And it's usually a good thing we do. But that parental voice in our heads may also be that of the mother or father who requires no excuses. Who loves us no matter what. This, too, is part of our parental legacy – This part, the accepting and understanding side of our parent's love for us, is much harder to keep alive within us than the harshly critical voice, at least so I have found. And yet, it is a disservice to our parents to remember them only as judge and critic, as arbiter of excuses and evasions. Memory can be a harsh teacher. Let us not forget the comforting power of memory.

*When your father dies, say the French,  
you become your own father.  
May you stand up in his light, say the Armenians.*

When I was doing my hospital chaplaincy training, I was called to the bedside of a woman suffering from the effects of alcoholism. She told me that she knew that she had to stop drinking if she wanted to live, but she felt so alone since the death of her mother, she didn't know if she could. She knew it was immature, she said. She knew she had to grow up and stop being such a baby, straighten up, sober up, get over it. I told her that she didn't have to get over it.

I think we all need our mothers, though it's not often that we admit it. To try to banish that needy child within, to deny her, to be ashamed of her, is to be unnecessarily cruel to ourselves. And it won't work. It will only make us turn to more "adult" sources of love and comfort. Alcohol is only one of them, and alcohol makes a poor mother. Instead, we can try to become our own mothers. This is what I suggested to this woman, and the relief was visible on her face. Instead of punishing ourselves for needing the comfort and security of a mother, we can learn to give ourselves the comfort, the soothing, the unconditional love of a mother for her child.

We project the qualities of our parents onto our image of God. I think we also project our own qualities. The Canadians say, when your parent dies, you become your own parent. Let us be gentle and loving parents to ourselves.

*When your father dies, say the Indians,  
he comes back as the thunder.  
May you inherit his light, say the Armenians.*

Does your father come back as thunder; your mother as lightning or wind or storm? Or maybe they come back as sunlight and breeze and flower and gentle rain. Do your parents, when they die, mysteriously assume the power of natural forces? In a sense, I think they do. Quite literally, our parents return to us, or at least persist on this physical plane, in altered form, as water, as earth. We share the air they breathed. The Web is not broken – it is unbreakable.

And we are reminded of them – at first daily, then less often – as we move through the world, revisiting a place they loved or lived or worked, smelling a scent our mother wore, laughing at a kind of joke our father might have told. A gesture, a phrase, will startle us with its familiarity. When a parent dies, we hear them in the thunder. When I hear thunder, I remember my mother coming to my crib when it would storm. Thinking I was afraid of the thunder, she'd shake her fist at the sky and we'd yell back at the thunder. In fact, I don't think I was afraid of the thunder – I was afraid of train whistles, and of the witch that my sister told me lived in the toilet -- but I enjoyed her coming to me and what it told me about her love for me, so I never let her know.

Our parents return to us again and again, for better or worse. They live on in us and in the world that we see through their eyes.

*When your father dies, say the Russians,  
he takes your childhood with him.  
May you inherit his light, say the Armenians.*

When your last living parent dies, he or she takes your childhood with them. Yes, and often before that. An aging parent, one who is ill, disabled, confused or unable to care for herself, makes you grow up fast, especially when you are her caregiver. No matter how willingly you accept this responsibility, this is a hard thing. No matter how loving you are, resentment and guilt are bound to be part of this package that is caring for a dying parent. When you, the child, become the parent, managing the finances, soothing the fears, assuaging the loneliness, making decisions for your father, feeding or diapering your mother... These are responsibilities that we, in our society, are usually not expecting to take on. Even if we know intellectually that, as parents live longer, the chances of becoming a caregiver become greater, emotionally, we cannot prepare for this. Emotionally, we remain the child. We **want** to remain the child. We don't **want** to be the strong one, the capable one. Like the children we are, we stamp our feet, throw inner tantrums, and, like the children we are, our anger has no effect on reality.

And, perhaps even more poignantly, we don't want to accept that our father, our mother, is no longer the able adult who raised us, guided us, supported and corrected and loved us. A parent suffering from dementia, especially, looks to us to make sense of

what is happening to them, to fix it. And we are helpless, just as they once were helpless to protect us from every injury, every playground hurt and teenage trauma. When a mother dies, say the Russians, she takes your childhood with her. Whether she dies suddenly or a little at a time, the innocent belief that you are safe, that you are the one who can rely on others for care, is forever shattered. Childhood ends, but the child inside lives on... and therein lies the pain.

*When your father dies, say the English,  
you join his club you vowed you wouldn't.  
May you inherit his sun, say the Armenians.*

As we get older, we're likely to see our parent in the mirror. I look more and more like my father every day. It's really quite shocking. What am I doing with my father's face – the face of a sixty year-old man? Stopped at a red light, I see my hands on the steering wheel and I see his hands. How did that happen? And it's a truism that we find ourselves expressing attitudes we never thought we would hold, saying things to our children that we swore we would never say. We join our parent's club in more ways than one. There is the unconscious imitation of language and behaviors that catch us up short when we notice them. And there is also a greater understanding of how they came to make the choices they did; perhaps a greater compassion for them, for the mistakes they made, their regrets and hopes and denials. We see the same in ourselves. We join the club. The English have it right.

And the Armenians? This is what the Armenians say:  
*When your father dies, may his sun be your light.  
When your mother dies, may you inherit her light.  
When your father dies, may you inherit his sun.  
When your mother dies, may you stand up in her light.  
When your father dies, say the Armenians, your sun shifts forever.  
And you walk in his light.*

To walk in his light... The night before my mother died, I was flying home to Ithaca from a visit with my sister in Sacramento. I knew my mother didn't have long to live but I had no idea she would die the next day. Looking out at the darkness from the airplane window, I thought about how I could honor her; how I could make her life matter after she was gone; really, about how I could keep her alive.

I realized that the most loving thing I could do for her was to assimilate her best and most beloved qualities -- to take them into myself. The way she could be fully present in the moment; her childlike qualities, her playfulness; her courage – she was fearless and didn't care what anyone thought of her... If I could be more like her in these ways, I would be a better person and she would always live on in me. That's what it means to me to inherit her light... to walk in her light.

When your parent dies, sometime after your parent dies, you discover... You have survived the tilting of the planet, the shifting of the sun itself. You find your

balance. A new balance, but balance, nonetheless, has been restored. And in that new light, the light of that shifted sun, the light of your new wisdom and new vision, you stand. You are safe and always have been. And you walk in the light.