

Mourning: The Pain of Loss and its Relation to Trauma

A few months ago, my cat of almost 18 years died. After being told a few weeks prior he had advanced kidney disease, I knew he had very little time left. This was not my first loss as my experience with death is a long and painful one. From the loss of my mother at age nine to the death of Bijou, my sweet and adorable Himalayan flame point cat, many I have deeply cared for have departed. Yet there was something about this loss that made it unlike anything I had ever experienced. Here is why.

When I was seven my mother became sick but it was months later I found out she had cancer. My father never communicated this information to me - it was either my older brother or sister who shared the sad news. However, I recall very clearly someone telling me there *was* a risk she might die but it is no longer the case. As she deteriorated and her bad days more frequent than her good ones, I still had no thought she might pass away. Any child my age believes what he is told, particularly regarding such important matters, so I felt safe. Yet on one winter night, my siblings and I were told to go to the hospital where she was being treated. All three of us were ushered into a room, arriving as my dad was screaming into the phone at someone for not having been able to reach relatives who lived in a different country. I still didn't know what was happening. Interminable minutes passed until finally my sister Rim tells me: "don't you get it. Mama is dead."

Rim was six years older than me and committed suicide at age 30. She was a brilliant writer and poet and was super bright in multiple other ways. But her emotional world was in constant turmoil and she struggled to find happiness. We were very close, and I was one of the very few she trusted and confided in. But mental health was not a topic on anyone's mind in Lebanon, particularly in the 80's when our country was being ravaged by a civil war. It did not help my father would avoid emotional conversations at all costs so we passively accepted Rim is Rim and there is little we can do about it. While there were signals indicating she was at risk, no one knew what was about to happen that dreadful January morning. She leapt to her death and left us all in total shock.

My grandmother lived a long life and retained her intellectual and physical resources until she died at age 94. I remember her most for providing me with unforgettable memories of innocent and fun-filled childhood summers spent at her gorgeous mountain home. She loved me dearly. I believe her strong affection for me was partly because I reminded her so much of her daughter (my mother). She hadn't been sick when she died; she left earth peacefully, one night, when she never woke up from her sleep.

My father never recovered from the loss of my mother and sister but also never talked about it. To his credit, he was a man of principle and integrity doing his utmost to be a good father. My wife and I lived with him after we got married as I felt obligated not to leave him after the losses he had endured. These four years were probably the best he had in a long time and gave him a renewed sense of family. But cancer decided it needed another victim. His prognosis wasn't

great, but we still had hope. However, barely a month after he was diagnosed and still in the early days of treatment, he had a heart attack and died in minutes.

What the painful thread of all these family losses is that they occurred, in my mind and experience at least, very suddenly. No time to get ready, no time to process what is about to happen. We know that trauma is exactly what we can develop when we cannot prepare for the emotional disaster of a loved one leaving us. As a mental health expert, I know what myself and others in the field constantly remind our clients: trauma is harder when a loss is not processed. We know it needs to be addressed as soon as it happens (to reduce the risk of developing PTSD) but, just as importantly, we know it needs to be addressed *prior* to an actual death. This is because the emotional preparation of losing a precious being can critically contribute to a better psychological reaction after they die and a stronger ability to recover and move on.

Bijou gave me time to do that. Had I listened to our vet, however, he may also have gone suddenly. "Putting to sleep" is what we call it in this country, but this is not what happens. I completely understand the purpose of such action is to avoid more pain. Yet there is something deeply disturbing about deciding for a pet when they should die, as noble and well intentioned that decision may be. Had my wife, son and myself chosen to *kill* Bijou (no matter how you twist it, it is still killing) I would, for one, never had forgiven myself and, for two, had experienced another sudden loss.

But this cat fought hard, tried his best to stay alive. As he was slowly slipping away and became a shadow of who he once was, we were all next to him. While it was incredibly painful to see him change from a fluffy healthy cat to a skeleton-like figure, we were in awe Bijou never stopped trying to affectionately meow. We could read it in his eyes: his non-verbal language made it abundantly clear he felt gratitude we were by his side in his last moments. Seeing him die was the most powerful experience of loss I had ever gone through but also the healthiest. I was given time to process what was about to happen, time to accept it when it occurred, and time to give this cat one last farewell as he disappeared from our sight and departed to a different world.