

LEGACY OF LOSS

By Rev. Barbara McDowall

My world as I knew it changed forever when my father transitioned last May. He was 82 and typical of his generation. A man of words and many opinions, great wit and charm, he was also a very private man. He could also be a difficult man to get really close to.

He died suddenly and most unexpectedly at home in the middle of the night. My parents lived in their own home outside of Toronto. For quite some time, he had been quietly looking after my 81-year-old mother who has Alzheimer's disease. And, he was doing it without asking for or accepting any help, of course.

To get a clearer sense of the extent of my mother's true situation, my partner and I then moved in with my mother. We could then start to make plans for her gradual transition to a retirement residence.

That same month, I lead a celebration of life in our family home that included family and friends from the community sharing personal reminiscences of my father. Creating that service with the help of my siblings was a profound experience for me. The many stories shared gave us all a deeper reflection of who my father was. I felt buoyed and uplifted by the many prayers of family, friends and colleagues.

For almost three months, I looked after my mother 24/7. We hadn't spent much one on one time together for a number of years. Now, I was able to lovingly care for her and to provide some stability as she also dealt with my father's very sudden leaving and the challenges she was experiencing with her Alzheimer's disease. Now the rest of the family would come to know what had until then been a well kept secret.

My siblings (5) rallied around us and we all did what we could on an ongoing basis to provide care and support over the summer months.

It became obvious that my mother would require more care than we could provide at home. In July we moved her to a retirement resident closer to Toronto where she receives excellent care. Our family continues to visit on a weekly basis – something that most residents do not enjoy.

In September, we gathered as a family at two very moving ceremonies. One was a service of Remembrance at the Guelph Arboretum where a tree had been dedicated in memory of my father. The other was the internment ceremony for my father's ashes. This was a service, which I prepared along with contributions from my family. It was a great privilege for me to honour my father in this way. Here to, I found great strength from family and friends and also through the prayers of others who could not be there.

Losing my father has provided me with many wonderful gifts.

I have 5 brothers and sisters all of whom are actively involved in my mother's care.

As a family, we are more actively engaged in each other's lives and we have in turn become more connected to our extended family of cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles.

Over the months following my father's death, I was able to process his loss individually and with the help of my family. We spoke often about him in terms of loving him for who he was not who we wanted him to be and finally being able to forgive him and to accept he was doing the best he could with what he had been given. He continues to be in our conversations, lovingly remembered with humour and compassion.

I gained a greater awareness of the deep love my mother and father had for each other. As my mother's Alzheimer's disease progressed, he began to assume more and more of the daily routine of life, something he hadn't done before. He was able to take care of my mother when she really couldn't take care of herself and he constantly reassured her.

As I took on the responsibility of my mother's daily care, I came to a new level of understanding of what looking after my mother must have been for him, how lonely it must have been and how depression was probably his companion for some time.

My love, respect and acceptance of who he was, as he was, grew. I felt profound compassion. And I feel immense gratitude for his life. How he lived it has allowed me to more clearly define who I am.

Most of all, I am grateful for all of LIFE and the sense of a marvelous new beginning for my father – for all of us. The only things that matter are love and the quality of the relationships we have with each other.

I have a great sense of peace knowing that my father's transition was really a marvelous homecoming that provided him with a richer understanding of his life here. All his cares and worries are laid to rest and I see him in everything around me.