

A Parental Loss Agenda

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“Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor’s mind toward some final resolution, some clear meaning...”

Robert Anderson
I Never Sang for My Father

The loss of a parent, regardless of the closeness or distance involved, is typically a challenging life task for the surviving children (Harris, 1995). Even though the deceased is no longer available, there often remains an inner dialogue in their minds about who this attachment figure was and what he or she meant to them (Marks, Jun, & Song, 2007).

The culturally prescribed rituals for bringing this inner dialogue into the open are typically funerals and memorials; however, for various reasons these rituals are often insufficient and do not complete the job. Moreover, sometimes the pain and the unresolved feelings about the loss have shut down this dialogue. In these cases, the surviving children are left on their own to come to terms with the loss and to address any unfinished business that might linger on.

A deceptively straightforward approach to helping adult children jump start this meaning making is Donald Williamson’s (1987) parental loss agenda. This agenda involves first locating the deceased and then carrying out a set of planned conversations with the parent. Designating a suitable location, most often the gravesite or the urn containing the ashes, sets the stage for addressing the complicated set of thoughts and feelings the surviving children have for their deceased parent.

Here’s What You Do

The intent of this first step is more figurative than literal; that is, to find some special place that you associate with your deceased parent where you can have a needed conversation with this central figure in your life. So while it might be ideal to go to a gravesite or find the ashes, they are not prerequisites for re-connecting with your deceased parent; rather, the aim here is to find some special place, reminiscent of your parent, where you can pay the deceased a visit.

The Main Agenda Items

Once you have determined the place, the next step is to figure out the agenda for your meeting. To prepare for it, you should consider the following agenda items and sketch out your particular responses to them:

*This parental loss agenda is based on and edited from Donald Williamson’s (1991) *The Intimacy Paradox*, Guildford Press.

Hello. Start by saying hello and then explain the purpose of your visit. Having offered some explanation of purpose, solicit your deceased parent's agreement to "participate" in conversations to follow. In practical terms, this simply means listening to the sounds inside and outside of your head. Hearing or feeling no strong objection, take this as permission to proceed.

Update. Update your deceased parent about the major events that have taken place in your life since he or she died. Highlight the graduations, marriages, jobs, births, divorces and any experiences of success or achievement, crisis or trauma, that stand out in your mind as important. Now muse about the likely thoughts and feelings your deceased parent would have about these news items. Next talk about the relationship between you and your deceased parent as you currently conceive of it, candidly highlighting both the positives and the negatives.

Unfiltered Emotions. Updating your deceased parent sets the stage for a soliloquy where you get to express all of the unfiltered emotions that have been a significant source of distress for you in this relationship. Whatever sadness, guilt, resentment, or anger you feel can now be freely expressed to your parent.

Question Time. Next comes "question time." This is an opportunity for you to ask everything and anything—however appropriate or inappropriate—that have ever come to your mind about your deceased parent. Ask each question and then remain quiet and thoughtful, listening with an open mind for a period of time. After observing your own free associations and whatever else comes to mind, then continue with follow-up questions. This is the time to ask about whatever remains in your heart and mind.

Personal Differences. Now present a prepared statement of "personal differences." This is a simple delineation of all of the ways in which you experience being different from your deceased parent. Be careful not to pass judgment or express self-righteousness in your explanations. You are just noting the unique ways in which you are different from your deceased parent.

Admirations. Now present a prepared "statement of admiration." This should be done slowly, pausing after each statement, waiting for an inner acknowledgment of everything that was good about your deceased parent and then for an inner awareness of your deceased parent's most likely responses.

Good-Bye. On one hand, if you feel unfinished, as is sometimes the case, explain that you will return in due course for a closing good-bye. In this circumstance, use the subsequent weeks to assimilate your experience and prepare for a return visit and final good-bye. On the other hand, if you feel finished, reflect about how you can now say good-bye to the unresolved thoughts and feelings you have with this parent and how you can now take back and restore any lost sense of self that might have been buried with the deceased.

Reference

- Harris, M. (1995). *The loss that is forever: the lifelong impact of the early death of a mother or father*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Marks, N., Jun, H., & Song, J. (2007). Death of parents and adult psychological and physical well-being: A prospective U.S. national study. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(12), 1611-1638.
- Williamson, D. J. (1978, January). New life at the graveyard: A method of therapy for individuation of a dead "former parent." *Journal of Marriage and Family Counseling*, 93-101.