Palliative and Supportive Care

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We missed losing him

Beatriz Moreno Milán, ASSISTANT & PROFESSOR, PH.D.[1,2]

[1]Palliative Care Department, Hospital Fuenfría, Madrid, Spain and [2]Clinical Psychology Department, Faculty of Psychology, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Essay/Personal Reflection

Cite this article: Milán BM (2020). We missed losing him. *Palliative and Supportive Care* **18**, 623–624. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951520000565

Received: 10 June 2020
Revised: 24 June 2020
Accepted: 1 July 2020

Author for correspondence: Beatriz Moreno Milán, Palliative Care Department, Hospital Fuenfría, Madrid, Spain; Clinical Psychology Department, Faculty of Psychology, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain. E-mail: beamor06@ucm.es

To my father: you live within me.
To my mother, a farewell widow
To my siblings, farewell orphans
To all the families of those killed by COVID-19.

In March 2020, we lost my father, a victim of this pandemic. He died a few days after spring began, in absurd contradiction with the blossoming of life. His death is almost unmanageable for my family and myself. I do not stop questioning the mourning process and its phases, at the same time as I despair about how the scandalous death toll becomes simple numbers on a list.

We know that the death of loved ones is always a difficult experience. However, the grief generated by COVID-19 has some very particular aspects. One of these has been the speed of events, that is, the impossibility of anticipating, assimilating, and preparing for what is to come. This has negated the possibility of regulating the emotional impact for widowers, siblings, parents, and orphans.

In our case, everything moved so fast that we were unable to even register the significance of each stage. My mother last saw my father a week before he died. He left the house to go to emergency on his own feet, escorted by two ambulance workers. My mother was not given the option to accompany him that night. Neither was she allowed to see him in the following days. Even though she could never have imagined it, she was already a "farewell widow." She would never kiss him or be able to show him any affection again. For the record, I understand health workers' preventive responsibilities, but a whole lifetime lived together deserved a fairer, sweeter, and more gentle ending. If she had had a chance to see him, even for just an instant, we believe that it might have had a great impact on her grieving process. To whom did that decision correspond?

I feel absurd, seeking futile moral comfort when it seems that "the planet is falling apart.". I'm scared about my questions and the answers. I don't know what to think, what to feel, or how to behave. I don't feel comfortable inside my body. I don't know where to go.

We missed losing my father. We were deprived of the opportunity to listen to him, to hug him, and to watch over him. Having no say at all in such an intimate moment has been so devastating that it can lead us to despair.

One month after leaving us, we were able to bury his ashes. There was no funeral, no music, and nobody in attendance. Nothing more, nothing less. I was always very skeptical about funeral rites, but I could never imagine how much we would miss the multitude of family and friends arriving at the ceremony, the color of the flowers, and the words of respect and affection spoken aloud, from all those who loved him. Trapped in our respective houses and without the warmth of the hugs, we feel frozen in time. It is impossible for our tears to flow.

As I write these lines, in Spain the famous "curve" is flattening and we can go outside. Despite this, the real scenario remains bleak and uncertain. Two months have passed since the Spanish state of emergency was decreed and we have seen nearly 30,000 deaths. There have been over 300,000 across the world. I don't want to be pessimistic, but the pace of progress is too slow. We remain defenseless against the contagion, while waiting for infallible treatment and an effective vaccine. Inexorably, illness and death continue in solitude and isolation these days. Perhaps, the most difficult thing to take on board is that we still have a long way to go.

Some experts have suggested that "we can say goodbye to the dead when this is over" or have even recommended "living this process as a parenthesis." Although we know that the lockdown is temporary, I am afraid that such recommendations may be clinically contraindicated. I repeat the above: we still have a long way to go. What we do know is that psychiatrists and psychologists are starting to have consultations full of farewell widows and farewell orphans, with symptoms that fit all the criteria of *Prolonged Grief Disorder*.

We couldn't take care of my father, or kiss him, or say goodbye. We haven't even properly mourned his loss. We continue to imagine another ending, while we try to find meaning in this enormous pain. We try to get that "farewell," which never really happened, out of our

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heads, and we look for a little peace, by holding on to the memory of his smile, and his voice. It would be unforgivable to lose, also, the perspective of a lifetime relationship. We do what we can, even if we feel that whatever we do is insufficient. It continues to torment me — why not say it — to imagine his loneliness before that inhuman death. How is it possible, I ask myself, that we have gone from giving an 85-year-old man a bypass (and celebrating scientific advances in one of the best health systems in the world), to dismissing a human being who was capable of running a half marathon. Instead, he died isolated in a hospital bed, without the warmth of our embrace; and in those last moments of consciousness, his glance did not find us by his side.

I also feel (very much) disturbed by the emotional consequences of all those hugs that my family and I have lost, as we sit alone and isolated behind our windows. Weeping seems easy, but it is not. I know that blocked emotions can be released through crying with hugs, and by whispering intimate phrases that comfort, caress, and calm. We want our hugs. Everyone needs them. Although we also know that wanting the impossible does not help.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951520000565 Published online by Cambridge University Press