

Moving Past Grief's Painful Grip This Mother's Day

My first Mother's Day was almost unbearable. My mom hid behind her smiles and fell apart at home; I did the same. Over the years, the hardest part has become watching my mom struggle with denial. But how can we fully live when part of us has died?

We were supposed to celebrate this holiday together, tiny tots in tow. I can picture her little children, hand in hand with mine, sitting at the brunch table. I see braids and bows and baby doll dresses. She was supposed to be Auntie Kimmy to my girls and lavish them with meaningful hugs and thoughtful presents. She wasn't supposed to leave us two months after her wedding and two weeks before my delivery. She was supposed to live her life alongside mine, as sisters do.

After becoming a mother myself, I accepted a fear-based cycle in which I was determined to have at least six children to cushion the potential loss of a child. I wanted to protect myself against the pain my mom experienced, but the truth is we are all unique, hand-crafted and irreplaceable. It does not matter how many children I have; I will never replace my sister.

For now, she lives on in pictures and cards stuffed into one small box. I was 35.5 weeks pregnant with my twins when my sister passed, and I was concerned about going into labor early. I packed everything I had of her and put it out of sight. I needed to focus on my girls and what was best for them. This box lay sealed for almost two years, until I brought it into therapy, and it remained there for months before I could bare to open it.

I was close to delivering my second child when I walked into

my therapist's office one day and said, "It has to be today. Let's do it now before I lose my nerve." I took out each item, one by one, and I told its story. I cried for what was, what wasn't and what would never be, and this allowed me to process and begin to move on.

What once felt like a bomb in my house has become one of my most prized possessions. This box contains all of the tangible remnants of my sister. Although I tend to throw out all cards and unnecessary knickknacks immediately, somehow, a few of her items survived. I find them tucked in purses or drawers, and her handwriting will stop me. I will run my hand over the letters on the front of the envelope and remember how she was the only family member who called me Jacqueline instead of Jac. I can see her slender, ringed fingers handing me the card with a big smile on her face, and I miss her. Oh, how I miss her.

I find these unexpected and tender moments incredibly jarring. Finding fragments of her always takes me by surprise and almost always ends in tears. Not the silent, beautiful tears, but the kind that leave you breathless, gasping for air, and folded over on the floor. As little as a card can reduce me to a sobbing mess for a moment; holidays tend to take a toll on me for days.

As Mother's Day approaches, I wonder how this year will go. As time passes, I find I spend less energy on being angry she left us and more on being thankful she blessed my life. I hope I can embrace the approaching festivities with a spirit of gratitude for everyone present, instead of everyone missing. I hope I can see my sister's beauty in my daughters' faces and begin to tell them about her.

This is an area where I struggle the most. How can I tell my daughters about my sister when I can barely speak her name without crying? I have learned to start small. I wear my sister's engagement stone on a necklace, and my girls always

play with it. I've learned to squeak out, "That's Auntie Kimmy's necklace," even though my voice is so tight it often comes out as a whisper. One day when they ask me, "Mama, who's Auntie Kimmy?" I pray I will have the right answer, because I can't tell them about her without introducing the concept of death. How do I bring up death without inciting fear?

It seems the more answers I find, the more questions I have. And on the days when I feel like I only have questions, I remember He has all of the answers. When I worry about finding the right time, I remember His timing is perfect. In my darkest moments, I will rest and find peace in Him. {eo}

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