


# the legacy of parentless parents

By Kara Benken Garrod



When you're a parent, the loss of your father or mother while you're raising young children can be devastating. Keep cherished family stories alive and find the extra support you need if your parents are no longer with you.

**I**n desperation, I handed my keys to a "nice enough" looking stranger, accompanied by a brief explanation before I cut through traffic on foot. I could not believe I abandoned my car on the side of the road, but as I saw it, I had no choice.

It was Memorial Day and a beautiful morning for a parade. As the daughter of a firefighter, I have always loved parades, but this particular morning my father lay dying in a private room at Hospice. The parade route blocked my access to him, so crossing through I barely noticed everyone's smiling faces. I cannot recall ever feeling so hindered.

I had been with Dad all night as he worsened and was transferred from my parents' home to Hospice. By 5 a.m. I knew my infant would be waking soon and that I needed to go home. While the stress of the past month had dwindled my milk supply, both in terms of my output and freezer storage, I was determined to keep breastfeeding and wanted to be home when she woke. Struggling with the expectations of my role as a daughter, versus my role as a mother, when I left my dad in the wee hours I knew in my heart it could be the last time I ever saw him alive, though he barely knew it as my sister and I whispered our tearful good-byes to him.

## In Grief, With Children

Many months after Dad died — after the restless nights, the vivid dreams featuring him alive and smiling, and after beating myself up for not taking a more proactive role in battling his cancer — I could contemplate my loss and sometimes control my tears. But the day my daughter turned 3, and the moment my 1-year-old started pointing her index finger to meet a loved one's — just like her big sister did with my

*(please turn the page)*



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Dad at that age — those were the times I was unable to move beyond missing him. My tears flowed freely, and my toddler asked if I was sad because I missed Granddad. What she doesn't realize is that I miss him for her and for her sister. It is my children's loss I mourn the most.

I understand parents should predecease their children, but this knowledge does not make it any easier. If your parent dies while your own children are still young (or yet to be), the loss is multiplied; for then you are no longer "simply" suffering your own loss, you are mindfully mourning the loss of a grandparent for your children, as well. At 2-and-a-half and 6 months, my girls were too young to know him; they will not have memories of him, except for those I help create. I selfishly yearn for ten extra years so they could know him for all his faults, quirky jokes and honor.

## A Changing Demographic

The unfortunate truth is our children no longer have their lifetimes to establish a relationship with their grandparents. Many of us will parent our children without one, or both, of our own parents. Allison Gilbert explains in her book *Parentless Parents: How the Loss of Our Mothers and Fathers Impacts the Way We Raise Our Children* that while our life-expectancy is increasing, it is not keeping pace with the rising number of babies born to women age 35 and over.

"For the first time in U.S. history, millions of children (and their parents) are actually vulnerable to having less time with their grandparents than more," writes Gilbert.

This is a true loss: not only in terms of trustworthy childcare for double-income families, but also in sharing knowledge, from family genealogy to skills like quilting, sailing or fishing. For those of us without a parent or parents, we must take on the responsibility of actively communicating aspects of that person's life with our children. We begin by sharing photos and stories, but when our kids' eyes gloss over, we need to take a new approach.

"If you have some tangible things that were special to you from or because of your parents, sit with your child and tell them about it," says "parentless parent" Hildi Cornwell, whose mother died when she was 14, and father when she was 26. "I told [my son] about my homemade pound puppies and we played with my purple pinewood derby car together a lot."

Gilbert also suggests taking "Grandparent Field Trips" to Grandpa's workplace, or Grandma's hometown, so your children can actually experience them. Or, layering photos so your children can see what physical attributes they take from their grandparents. Another suggestion is writing letters to your child from his grandparent.

As Gilbert points out, no matter how many parenting books you read, they can't supply the answers to a parent's eternal question, "Was I like that?" We might take for granted the grandparent's story beginning with, "When your Mom was your age ..." but for parents without parents, these stories are gold. Gilbert suggests maintaining communication with your parents' friends, neighbors, coworkers, and other family members — anyone who can relate stories to your kids, as your parents would have.

Those stories are as much for you, as they are for your children. "I still desperately need to be parented, too," says Jessica Minor, who was 21 when her mother died. "My mother would search my eyes and know just what to say to point me in the right direction. She had a gift for drawing out the best in people, and I feel like I need her more than ever at this stage in my life." A mother to two young daughters, Minor adds, "I grieve daily that I am not able

to navigate these early years of parenthood with her; all the ins and outs, ups and downs."

## Becoming Your Own Parent

With your own parents gone, you can't expect your spouse or your in-laws to take on the role of parenting you, because their roles are already defined. "I must do the things I think my parents would have urged me to do for myself," writes Gilbert, citing working out, spending time with friends, or going for a walk. "No one is saying that my kids don't need things and that my husband isn't rightfully in need of whatever his needs are at that particular time. But my job alone — one no one else can take care of — is making sure that the voice that takes care of me, is equally loud."

Just as there is no time frame for grief, there is also no way to predict when it will strike the hardest. I knew all of "the firsts" would be difficult, but my mood would plummet when I could not predict a certain memory would surface. That's when it's most helpful to have a network of friends.

If you prefer cyber support, you can join the Parentless Parents group on Facebook, which Gilbert helps moderate. Also, in response to her book, Gilbert has helped establish chapters of Parentless Parents support groups across the United States. If you'd like help organizing a chapter, you can email her at [allison@allisongilbert.com](mailto:allison@allisongilbert.com).

Parents don't get bereavement time. But we do get a sisterhood: a beloved cousin who holds your screaming baby through the final salute at a funeral, or a new friend of your daughter's, whose mother becomes one too, having recognized a common loss, or all the people who come out of the woodwork to tell you they are there for you. It is not just a saying; they are. When we are suffering, they are there to hold our hands, or our car keys, at precisely the right moment. And for that act of kindness, we appreciate them, always.

*Kara Benken Garrod is a local writer and mom of two.*

## Where Can I Find Help?

The death of a parent's parent, whether unanticipated or long expected, elicits grief. Locally, people can find help through The Goldstein Family Hospice of Cincinnati and Fernside Grief Center ([fernside.org](http://fernside.org)). Though the administrative offices are housed in Blue Ash, support groups meet at five different locations throughout the city. All of Fernside's services are free of charge.

"It can be very helpful to share your experiences with your peers, and that's true for both children and adults," says Vicky Ott, executive director at Fernside.

When explaining death to your children, Ott urges the use of specific language. Say things like, "the body stopped working and he died," rather than, "they are sleeping and they won't ever wake up," which can yield sleep issues for young children. "To pretend it did not happen, or it is not going to happen, is not helpful," Ott adds.

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