

After the death of my mother

Robin Shohet



My mother died on the 21st March 2007, the day before my sixtieth birthday. As I write it is now eight months on. The hospice have been very sweet and offered me counselling sessions, but they have only scratched the surface of the bewildering array of emotions I have experienced.

I do not think anything could have prepared me for this. My father's death was very different. Then I was only twenty-three, and I lacked compassion. I was scornful of the way I saw him capitulating to his cancer of the liver, full of as what I saw as self pity. A wasted life I thought, unfulfilled. I would do better, take risks so I would have no regrets like him. This gave me the courage to go to India on some kind of search for Truth. There I contracted hepatitis and went as yellow as he was, and found myself full of self pity. I found a different truth to the one I was expecting. I was more like him than I realised. I wished and wish I had been able to tell him and say I was sorry for rejecting him. Unfinished business for a dead parent asks for a lot of self forgiveness.

I thought I might deal with my mother's death better. I am not sure what I meant by better. It has been different and in fact

despite, or maybe because of, all the wisdom supposedly acquired in the intervening thirty-seven years, this death has been far more harrowing.

Watching this proud independent woman decline was difficult. She fell and broke her hip when she was eighty. The hospital messed up and she was in for six weeks, and I think never recovered fully. She gradually lost her sight and I think had an undiagnosed stroke as her speech became slurred and sometimes incomprehensible. She had to be fed and changed. I wiped her bottom often, but once I did not manage sitting her on the toilet well and the shit went everywhere. I lost my temper as the carer had just left five minutes earlier. I felt my mother had unnecessarily given me an extra job. I asked for her forgiveness and cried for a long time after that I should have attacked her in her helplessness.

Mostly I could tell her I loved her. I am sitting in her flat as I write this. A space of my own to write. How I have longed for this and I feel so grateful. But the overwhelming feeling is one of sadness. In a very different way to my father she did not die at peace. I am surrounded by her belongings and her photographs. In her wedding photograph she looked so beautiful and innocent. Could she have known her life would be so hard to be married to a man who did not love her and then left her a widow for thirty-seven years?

It was not until my forties and many hours of therapy that I felt I stopped being angry with her. From then onwards I felt free to love her as she was. But one of the most surprising things about her death was that so many childhood feelings that I thought I had resolved, emerged. The feelings of rejection experienced by the baby who was not wanted, the wish to die which I nearly did when I was one, rage, longing to be held and a rejection of anyone who tried. However, a couple of years ago after finishing a course in Manchester on impulse I knocked on the door of my childhood home. After her initial surprise, the woman who owned it let me look round and many

lovely memories came back. Because so many of my early memories had been negative, I was glad I could share the happy ones with my mother before she died and thank her for them.

The carers were magnificent. Cooking her meals, feeding her, changing her, lifting her, lovingly cajoling her to walk to the dining room table. Paid a pittance - I don't know how many people they saw in this state each day. Their schedules were very demanding. Sometimes we would have a few minutes to chat and I treasured those as I could express my gratitude.

It is still too early to talk about lessons. There is still too much I do not understand. Perhaps I never will. Someone once said that understanding was the booby prize anyway. I have spoken to many people and they all say death of an elderly parent is quite shocking, particularly watching the decline in their faculties. I have been glad that I had the language of therapy to give me some context. If I had any words of advice they would be make sure you have lots of support, and accept that death will impact on you in ways you might not expect or control.

What we describe as birth is no more than incipient change from a previous state, while dying is merely to quit it (Ovid)

Robin Shohet worked as a therapist, supervisor and trainer and now is devoting himself as much as he can to writing and to facilitating others' writing. He can be contacted by email on shohet@findhorn.org.