

My Father Died – By Karen Bloomberg

My father died. Even though he had been ill for some time, it was still a shock. I was at work and my mother rang. She said they had taken my father to hospital in an ambulance. I told her that I would come and get her as soon as I could.

Finish seeing clients. Forget about reports until another day. The moment she dreaded had arrived and I had promised to be there for her. A cold gray Melbourne day. Driving to the hospital through the pouring rain.

Waiting in the hallway. Why can't we see him. Apparently he had a fall. He must have been disoriented and got out of bed. They found him on the floor. He'd hit his head and was unconscious. We had decided against anymore blood transfusions but we didn't have to make the decision. Suddenly, he was dead and I am in charge.

Ring the Chevra Kaddisha. Let my sister know. Spend some time with dad and say good-bye. I know he is no longer there. His spirit is gone and just his body is lying on the bed.

My father was an orthodox man. His faith was challenged when he had a child with a disability. But he regained his faith as his illness overtook him and his strength ebbed away. He was a quiet, stoic man - highly principled but not articulate. He did not know how to counter the oldest daughter who married out, or the middle daughter who became a lesbian. At least my younger sister did the expected thing - married a nice Jewish boy from a good Jewish family.

As his illness progressed, he became a regular at the nearest orthodox synagogue. He became known by the rabbi and was often called to read from the torah. The week before he died he had been called up to the bimah. He had difficulty climbing the steps but he made it. It would have been such a mitzvah for him. He really believed that he was going to something better. I just wish I had some of that faith.

What now? Make the phone calls. Ring all the family and friends. Dozens of phone calls. Ring interstate. Ring overseas - England, South Africa, Scotland. Jews migrate all over the world. My father's sister in Johannesburg. My mother's brothers in the UK. "I just wanted to let you know that my father passed away. Yes, it was sudden. He'd got up and eaten breakfast. He seemed OK. Then he felt ill and couldn't stop vomiting. They took him to hospital in an ambulance. He fell at the hospital. We think he had a brain hemorrhage. No, he wasn't in pain. It was quick. The funeral is not tomorrow - it's on Sunday. Relatives are coming from Sydney." How many times did I say the same thing - 10, 15, 20 times. "We're only sitting shiva one night. At mum's place, Sunday night." Stay with mum and make sure she's OK. I'm the daughter without responsibilities -the lesbian daughter.

It has been a journey trying to work out how to reconcile my Judaism with my lesbianism. When I first came out, it felt as though I had to leave my Jewishness behind me. I felt I could not find a place within the structured Jewish social life that my parents had so encouraged. I did not fit in. But even living as a lesbian I realised that I still surrounded myself with other Jewish lesbians. Part of my social network has always been with Jewish lesbians. Women that I did not have to explain my background too. Women who had a shared understanding and history. Friendships that have been nurtured over decades - my support. I cannot let go of my culture, my identity.

I have to take my father's tallis to the funeral home the next day. I finally get home to an empty house. It feels good to be on my own. I light a candle and wander around the house wearing dad's tallis. It feels like a connection to him. It brings back the sounds and the smells of the synagogue. The gentle murmur of the men davening. The mystery of the torah and a world I never felt that I belonged to.

Celia turns up at midnight. She's just heard and had to come and see me. Am I alright? What do I need? Have a cup of tea. Repeat the events of the day. She's been in my life over twenty years. I was around when her dad died. I even dated her cousin for a while. We came out together after meeting in a B'nai Brith youth group. I had fallen in love with a woman when I was travelling overseas. I was twenty when I came back to Australia trying to work out where I belonged. Celia and I learned about lesbian etiquette together and the mores of the lesbian community. People used to think we were sisters - the dark semitic looks.

I had never been to the Chevra Kaddisha even though I have worked next door for many years. Death is a business and there were a lot of formalities to take care of. Provide the details for the death certificate. Pick up the stools for sitting shiva. Collect the candles and the Book. It was like a guide book for death and mourning. Over the next few days, the Book became my reference point. With over 5000 years of experience under our belt, I think we Jews do death well.

I stay at my mother's place the night before the funeral. The day of the funeral is a mix of people and places. A convoy of cars out to the cemetery. Relatives arriving from interstate. Friends of the family. The non-jews standing around awkwardly trying to get their cues from the ones who know the routine. The chapel is sparse. Men to one side and women to the other. The Kohens behind a partition at the front. We know to wear something that can be torn. There is a bench at the front for the mourners. A sign behind tells others not to greet us - we are rapt in our mourning. Greetings or best wishes are platitudes. This is the time to grieve. If you are not crying before your clothes are torn, you certainly are after. Something in the ripping of the material, rips at your emotions. The coffin is a plain pine box covered with a black cloth. No flowers and no decorations. We pause seven times on the way to the grave. It gives me a chance to look around and see some of my friends amongst the crowd. The pall-bearers are, of

course, male. Women do not have a place in the proceedings. The rabbi speaks briefly at the grave-side and kaddish is said. The earth hits the coffin. I want to help but know this is not the time to make a feminist statement.

Many times throughout the day I had thought about what my father's reaction would have been to my behaviour. Would he have cared whether we covered all the mirrors? I didn't think so. Would he have cared that I had showered, put on deodorant, brushed my hair, or wore leather shoes. I didn't think so. Would he have cared if I had come forward to scoop a clod of earth onto his coffin. Yes, too public - this was his funeral and I put my politics aside.

We drove home for the ritual lunch. All the food has been prepared by friends and relatives. Enough food to feed double the number present. The meal included bread and hard-boiled eggs; life's staple and life's cycle. I learned that the egg is the only food that hardens the more it is cooked - steel yourself when death occurs.

Andrea came to help the day of the funeral. She and Seal prepared the lunch, cleaned up after, made copious cups of tea and coffee. Looked after my mother's friends and the rest of the family. They were there all day and well into night. Nice Jewish girls from good Jewish families who just happen to be lesbians.

The minyon was a blur. It was an alien experience sitting on low stools while the rabbi conducted the service. The women were in another part of the house. My sister, my mother and I were surrounded by men praying in a language I could not follow. Going through the traditional ritual that so excludes women. We were there but it was as though we were invisible. I could observe but not feel a part of it.

And then it is over. Friends and relatives leave. A few women from the Jewish Lesbian group sit around with me outside and we smoke cigarettes. I make sure my mother is OK. I am the child with no commitments. I stay at her place another night.

It seems morbid but it makes me wonder what will happen when I die. My father's wanted and was given a traditional Jewish burial. What do I want to keep from my culture. What do I want to let go of. What ritual will have meaning given the choices I have made. I should be planning my funeral - a woman-centred Jewish burial. No flowers, a simple coffin and the knowledge that my Jewish lesbian friends who have supported me in life will make sure my wishes are respected in death. Maybe I'll start tomorrow.

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