



SURVIVING THEIR DEATH

Rachel Clevenger

“Believing that you are holding it all together is the biggest lie of all.”

Surviving their Death: An Introduction

People who care intensely for another through a terminal illness rarely notice how much they themselves are eroding, both physically and mentally.

Inside the hospitals and clinics, we find them sleepwalking and dazed; terrified to leave the bedside for even a moment should something change in their absence.

After it is over, feelings of failure slither into their already shattered soul.

For the caregiver, death of a loved one does not only bring hurt; but crushing amounts of paralyzing and undeserved guilt. Every past action and decision suddenly scrutinized, as we begin punishing ourselves for remaining alive and being unable to save our loved one.

For all who have experienced death, refilling your own cup begins with the knowledge that YOU are running on empty. For this to take place, you must admit that are both human and damaged.

“Surviving Their Death” is dedicated to any caregivers connected to a patient by blood, water, love, or scrubs; who themselves are lost when the purpose of their heart has been removed to the next life.

It is also written in honor of my late husband Michael “Gonzo”, and my father in law, John. Two amazing men that impacted my life so profoundly by their examples, that the lessons continue until this very day.



“Believing that you are holding it all together is the biggest lie of all.”

Rachel Clevenger

The author is a respiratory therapist residing in Houston, Texas with her beloved daughter and family.

40 Days

Day 1

Everyone wants to help you, but no one really knows how.

While we can share in each other's suffering, we cannot take it away from them.

Be kind to those who try for their intentions, rather than their actions.

Day 2

Strength is not shown by how you carry yourself.

You may be numb today and sobbing in the fetal position by lunchtime.

This is all a part of finding your path out of the haze.

Day 3

Navigating grief is like slipping on iron boots and attempting to walk your routine, without falling or showing your exhaustion.

Stumbling is to be expected.

Day 4

Faith can be your rock, or your stumbling block.

Choose wisely.

Day 5

Believing that you are holding it all together is the biggest lie of all.

Day 6

Guilt creeps in like the dark.

We start to accuse ourselves for why and how a person died, agonizing over what we could have done better. Do not fall into the trap. It was created by the father of lies.

Day 7

You may feel NOTHING for a very long time.

The shock of death can render us lost, and unable to cry or express pain.

Give it time and distance to resurface.

Day 8

You did NOT fail them.

Say this to yourself any time the doubt arises.

Day 9

Pain often shows up in the details, rather than the big anniversaries.

Feeling overwhelmed in those moments speaks to the depth of your love for them, not to your weakness or lack of composure.

Day 10

“Moving on” is little more than a sound bite.

The reality of starting over can take everything you can muster.

Day 11

After a long illness, the long suffering of someone may feel like agony.

When it comes, death itself can appear to be an act of mercy; even a blessing.

This does NOT mean you are happy that they are gone.

Day 12

You will be utterly changed by this loss, and in many ways.

But you will rise again, and one day be a witness to another that once stood in your shoes.

Day 13

Some religious sorts will make the arrogant claim that true healing comes only from having enough faith. THIS IS WRONG.

No one chooses their time, but the Lord. Anyone who speaks with such an ignorance is without the compassion of the Father.

Day 14

Eventually, you will be angry at them for leaving; and angry at yourself for being angry at them. Feeling this way is validated, and appropriate for your recovery.

Day 15

You may not want to change or move anything that they left behind.

Their bed may be made, clothes remaining in the closet, and papers still placed on their desk.

Other times, you may want to trash everything that reminds you of their presence.

Both feelings are justified, and you owe no explanation to anyone for doing so.

Day 16

Visiting the grave or monument may be mandatory, or very last thing on your mind.

Don't let others guilt you into changing your method of handling special days.

Day 17

If you were the person's caregiver, you may not know how to spend your time now that they are gone.

Resist the urge to fill your time with trivial activities. You will find a new routine.

Day 18

Living with a shrine can bring you enormous misery. Don't sacrifice your being on the altar of their death. Instead, live your life as a credit to them.

Day 19

Most likely, your children and relatives will not grieve the same way as you.
But the loss was indeed yours.
Do not let their feelings shame you, or your choices.

Day 20

Often, just getting through the day is a victory.
So be gentle with yourself.

Day 21

Part of you will be lost to the grave.
It can be found again when you help another person through the darkness.
Your compassion for their loss will be mirrored by your own experiences.

Day 22

You may have been told by others “not to make any big decisions” for a while.
Unfortunately, decisions must be made regardless of your want to make them.
Choose according to what you really desire, and not to appease the majority.

Day 23

Do not let remaining possessions separate relationships.
Items will never replace people. EVER.

Day 24

Sadness can seek to devour what remains of your self-worth.
and it can grab your heart in its cold hands.
You must live and strive and pray to keep away those thoughts.

Day 24

Church may become a waste of time, empty and false.

You may hate God for not healing your loved one.

Say these things to him when you pray.

Day 25

Don't try to do it all alone.

Let others help you and to be your eyes in the dark.

A loyal friend can be better than therapy.

Day 26

Putting your efforts into a new project or purpose can brighten the path like a lamp.

Day 27

Seek help if you feel yourself losing your grip,

And do not feel ashamed.

Professional help is designed for precarious moments like these.

Day 28

If you have a gift of music or for the arts, continue to exercise it.

These talents lift the heart and remain a mystery for their magical properties of healing.

Day 29

Bills and responsibilities will come in like an avalanche.

Seek advice of a trusted friend or advisor that can assist you with making sound financial choices.

Day 30

You are stronger than you know. Believe in yourself, and your ability to continue forward.

Day 31

The hurt you feel changes, and later attaches itself to your private thoughts.

It may someday catch you by surprise, because you will have not thought of it for some time.

Day 32

Your life is valuable. Never doubt your worth or listen to someone who would disagree with this fact.

Day 33

Reason with yourself and speak aloud your concerns. Scream and rage if you want.

Write down your frustrations and save them for the future.

These acts will help you to make sense of your confusion.

Day 34

Understanding will come when you have the capacity to absorb it.

Day 35

Refilling your cup begins with the acceptance that you are running on empty.

Day 36

Certain songs from your past will now hurt worse than you can possibly imagine.

Fortunately, you will discover different music that will help you to heal your grief.

Day 37

Closing yourself off from the pain may seem a good method of coping.

But like most deep wounds; it must be exposed, cleaned, and stitched to properly heal.

Day 38

You may feel lost in the dark, even in the middle of a Texas summer.

The blinders on your eyes were fashioned from your mind's need to protect itself from pain.

You can discard them as soon as you recognize they exist.

Day 39

Resist the urge to surround yourself with the past every day.

Create a new space that is free of haunting, where you can create new memories.

Day 40

You may not know how to pray, or perhaps you never really knew.

Just speak your aches aloud, as if venting to a friend.

Because that is what He is.

13 Hard Questions

Question 1

Why do I feel guilty for all the things I never got to say?

My father always said that real guilt and false guilt will drive you; and they both feel the same.

No one is perfect, and death always leaves us wanting answers that cannot be given.

So instead, we try to blame ourselves for what we SHOULD have done. In truth, no one is responsible for tragedy.

Instead, accept that you did all everything that you could.

Question 2

Why can I not stand to hear sympathy from others?

When someone feels sorry for us, it reaffirms that we are human. For many, it makes us feel pitied.

Feeling pitied goes against our idea of being strong, so we dislike it. Remember to just accept the person's intention to help. It is NOT weakness on your part.

Question 3

How do I live my life without seeming disrespectful to their death?

The simple answer is, you cannot.

Someone will always try to judge you for your intentions by your actions (Not wearing your wedding ring, moving, changing your job, going on a date, or not attending family functions.) Remember that you do not owe anyone an explanation for your striving. The loss was yours, and the way you handle it is also your decision.

Question 4

Some days, I want to stay motionless in bed because I am paralyzed with depression. It hurts to breathe.

Other times I want to change everything in my home and go on a trip. What is happening to me?

Cycles of sadness can leave you baffled and confused as to your mental state. But rest assured: you are NOT losing it.

Give yourself time to even out your waves of emotion, unless you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others.

Most likely reason for the turmoil is that you have just been through hell. Your body and mind respond to stress by either shutting you down or speeding you up. It is a human coping mechanism, not insanity.

Question 5

I just want the pain to stop. Help me.

NOTHING prepares you for how much you hurt. This is ugly truth for an ugly time.

There is no drug, drink, or potion that can take away the bone crushing ache of loss. It is so easy to get caught up in a bottle, or to start indulging in self-medication to obtain relief. But these are all the hairy hand in the dark. You can wind up addicted to these vices, and then your pain will only be masked by these agents; not removed.

Addiction destroys lives. Fight the urge to drink and drug. Seek a friend and or professional help if you absolutely cannot cope, but use your resolve to strive forward. No one said this would be easy, but you can survive your own temptation.

Question 6

My family is looking to me as their rock, when I am truly falling apart. How can I be strong for them when I can barely function?

You can only do the best that you can.

Try to surround yourself and your family with the support of others who can help bear the burden, because there will be times you simply cannot do it alone. Seek out others who have experienced a huge loss, and ask them for advice. Anyone who has been through this gauntlet will have real wisdom for you.

Question 7

Maybe if I just take myself out of the picture, things will be better for everyone.

You are NOT expendable, and you are VITAL to your family. Thoughts of ending it all may swirl in your thoughts, but just remember they are stemming from a broken soul. The despair that plays with our thoughts can make us believe that suicide is an easier way out.

DO NOT BELIEVE IT.

Your life is valuable, and you will make it through this time.

Question 8

Why am I relived and angry at the same time? I feel relieved that the suffering is finally over. Why does this seem wrong?

It is not wrong to hope that a person's agony will be lifted. Agony can be unbearable to watch when we can do nothing to relieve it. This does not mean you are happy the person has died.

Being angry at someone for leaving you here may seem irrational. It is not. It is extremely frustrating to know that you tried so hard to keep them alive, but they still went home. Be angry if you want, but remember it was not their choice.

Question 9

How can I go forward when everything I knew has just been obliterated?

You go forward regardless, and you do it on faith. Understanding will come when you have the capacity to absorb it.

When your life changes and you don't know which direction to go, remember that you are indeed still living. You are a beautiful human who has needs and desires, even though all of your energy may have been previously directed towards the deceased. We forget about ourselves during these times, but you can start to remember what was important to you.

A death can be a motivator for change in ourselves that we never believed was possible.

Question 10

Why do people say I am handling this so well? I am dying on the inside.

For some odd reason, certain people see signs of strength or a person seeming "stoic" as being well adjusted to the tragedy. Simply go about your business. Remember that everyone wants to help, but no one really knows how. This is a prime example.

Question 11

What if I am doing this all wrong?

Highly unlikely. This talk comes from your fear of the unknown. While mistakes may happen, you are still a reasonable person with good judgement. You may not believe it, but this death did not take away your conscience or your instincts. Trust yourself to be right.

Question 12

Maybe I deserve this misery. I have made so many mistakes, and perhaps God is punishing me?

No one deserves to suffer in this manner, but death is part of our reality.

And while God is perfect, our bodies are human and imperfect; which eventually break down.

Question 13

If God is so caring and loving, why didn't He heal them like I asked?

This question cannot be answered to anyone's immediate satisfaction.

We may never know why someone was taken from our life, or be given a reason that can be accepted by our soul.

But I believe that sometimes the loss of one person can lead to the growth of another.

The truth may be that there is something you are destined to accomplish, that will be understood only by dealing with another's passing.

A note from the author with her personal story.

Saturday; May 21, 2011.

Apnea without a pulse. A siren blaring ride with paramedics to nearest full trauma hospital, followed by forty-five minutes of violent resuscitation in the mad house ER. The chest compressions and epinephrine were non-stop until the resident called for the time of death. The room grew silent as I stood weakly in the doorway, twisted with shock and exhaustion.

He was gone, and the tubes and lines were still attached. Acute respiratory failure from advanced renal cancer had turned this mountain of a man into a cold corpse, ready now to be transferred to the basement morgue. My husband would soon be on the cold slab. I was now a 33-year-old widow.

Panic begin to buzz in my brain. How would I tell his parents? What would I say to my kids? What in the world did I do now?

I felt like hiding in the empty hospital room and pretending this was not happening to me; closing my eyes against the florescent lights.

I pondered all the brutal rounds of chemo, the fearful surgeries, the months of fluid retention, trips to the Cath lab, sleep deprivation, and all the horrible nauseating side effects from his treatment.

All for nothing. Nothing. He was dead. We have been to hell and back for nothing.

The hours fled as people shuttled in and out, until a hand led me down an overly bright hallway to the parking lot. I barely remember making it home. Through the fury of next week, I immersed myself with the notification calls, legal signoffs, the official viewing, and the cobbled together funeral. I felt like a puppet of my circumstances. Vacant of emotions I somehow stood firm; even as family members sobbed and fell apart all around me. I didn't hurt, but I wanted so badly to escape the good intention sympathy everyone so heartily gave to me in every conversation. I just could not stand to hear it.

My pastor attempted to give me comfort, explaining that there was no manual to tell a grieving person how they should feel about loss; or even what they could truly expect from themselves. The gold standard "5 stages of grief" were offered as assistance from a friend, but my situation did not seem to correlate with those stages. And the grief support groups felt like retirement homes, without anyone close to my age.

As I attempted to grasp hold of my tattered life, I muddled through work, school, and my young daughter's care; lost in confusion without a guide. As I fought for my own sanity minute by minute, I began to wonder why there was not a manual about the emotions of death for the survivor. Everything in print seemed so sanitized, unrelatable, and unhelpful. Why hadn't someone written down true situations with obvious questions that allow a person to make sense of their surroundings? For example: Why am I upset when people express their sympathy? Why am I relieved and angry at the same time? How can I go forward when everything I knew has just been obliterated?

As I questioned these cycling thoughts, I began to use my phone's memo app to jot down phrases that aided me in describing my world, exactly as they came to my mind. I directed them as notes to another person, sort of a sounding board for my own confusion. This was helpful because I felt as though I was trudging through a swamp. I decided if I did not have a map to follow, I would create one from my own navigation. Stumbling, rising, and pushing with every step gave me the resolve to move forward; although I circled back more than a few times. Moments of crazy later became clarity.

It took until 2017 for me to acknowledge that a book did indeed to be written. A map with the help that I once so desperately needed has been compiled with all the information into one place. It is a brutally honest work that could only have been created by someone who has lived through the gauntlet of loss. While this book is based on my opinions, they come from the pen of a survivor who only wished to understand how to regain control of her life after everything had changed.

To help others through tragedy, this is:

Surviving Their Death



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