

Mary Schmich

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3 sad words that virtually all face: My father died

Everyday everywhere our fathers are dying. This has been true, of course, as long as there have been fathers.

But the people I know best are in their 30s and 40s, and it's our fathers who, one by one, at what feels like an alarming rate, are slipping out of the familiar world of flesh and sun and soil, on their way to who knows what. To the eternal summer picnic in the sky? Into the great nowhere?

Every few weeks now I get the news from someone else, in a phone call or a letter, in an e-mail or a chance encounter in the street.

"My father died."

A voice breaks. Eyes flash and burn and look away. The air hums with a choked, electric silence.

"My father died."

There is no easy way to say it. No original way either. Details can be given—the disease, the accident, the love, the regrets, the doctors, the ambulance, the hour—but for each of us it all boils down to three small words as raw as the wound they leave.

"My father died."

Mothers die, too, but I say fathers because it's typically the fathers who go first. Theirs are the death announcements that come to

me lately like weekly war bulletins.

It's only a function of age, mine and my peers', that these deaths seem like an epidemic, that the loss of one father one week, another father the next week,

another one this

week, seems like an ominous exodus the likes of which the world has never seen.

Why are all these fathers dying now? Shouldn't the Centers for Disease Control

be contacted? Can't somebody do something?

If it's a plague, it's the world's most ancient. One day when we weren't looking, we got older and our parents got old. It's the ordinary itinerary of life. When the child reaches the middle of the trip, the parent crosses the finish line.

We all know that this is how it works—if you're lucky and you don't die first—but the knowledge hardly helps. Losing our parents is a rite of passage all of us know is coming and none of us ever quite expects. The normal manages to feel abnormal when a parent's death strikes your life.

"He was the buffer zone," says a friend who just lost her father. "He was the space between me and death. Now I'm it. I'm the front line, and I feel completely unprotected."

Our father's death is the first realization many of us have that eventually, at 30 or 50 or 70, we will be orphaned, and alone in the way unique to orphans.

As long as your parents are alive, you are still a child. Even if you're 65, if you still have your parents, you still have your youth. It's not just your father you lose when he dies, it's part of your childhood. When he dies, you come eyeball to eyeball not only with his mortality, but with your own.

My father died early, when he was 62 and I was 31, and like many people who lose their father before it seems quite fair, I receive the news of my friends' fathers' deaths with mixed emotions.

Selfishly, I think, "Welcome to the club."

Jealously, I think, "You were lucky to have him that long."

But I also feel on their behalf the grief, the disorientation, the instant hole that will never fill. Watching my friends deal with the sudden deprivation, I realize that it hardly matters whether you lose your father at 31 or 41 or 51. The essence of the loss remains the same.

Your father, this man who gave you life and shape, has slipped out of your grasp and view. Now you'll never get to say all the things you meant to say, hear all the things you hoped to hear, do all the things you meant to do to seal that bond the right way.

But once your father's been gone for a while you realize something it's hard to believe when the grief is wet and new. In the quiet of his absence, you get to know him in a different way. You notice he's a permanent tenant in your heart, available for analysis, conversation, argument, reconciliation.

You come to understand that his death is a natural marker in your life, that the same thing happens to everyone. But the inevitable is still not easy, and there's only scant consolation in the company.

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