

# Bereavement: Long Term

Milton Crum, February 2015

My late wife Käthe and I experienced bereavement many times over many years before the coroner's declaration of her death on October 20, 2014.

Bereavement means "the condition of having been deprived of something or someone valued, esp. through death."<sup>1</sup> The "someone" refers to a person known by "the composite of characteristics that make up" that person.<sup>2</sup> The "something" refers to possessions or activities. Over time, by Käthe's several ailments and by my age-related decline (I am 14 years her senior) we were bereaved of personal characteristics, possessions, and activities. We valued them, but they died, and we sorrowed. As the dying-of-cancer author Kara Tippett describes it, we were dying "by degrees."<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, some degrees of dying stand out.

On a beautiful summer's day, in 1996, walking with family members, Käthe fell. Contrary to what we assumed, it was not a twisted ankle. It was the first of many hemorrhagic strokes that for the rest of her life nibbled Käthe's brain away and by degrees killed her mentally and physically. Just this one stroke killed her wildflower photography activity.

The first stroke happened about half way through our retirement years on Alpine Lake in the West Virginia mountains. We had had nine years of good health in which we traveled the United States and Scandinavia, hiked Snaggy Mountain on which we lived, did volunteer work, and enjoyed activities. But things began to change. Käthe's strokes and my age-related decline slowed us down. I became too unsteady to climb a ladder to clean our wood stove chimney. Fewer and shorter walks replaced hikes. Fewer times in our canoe: too difficult to get in and out. We became bereaved of so many personal characteristics that the glory days of retirement came to an end. Much of what we had valued had died. In 2007, we moved into a retirement home (a.k.a. old folks home) in Helena, MT. I described this move as "Autumn Housecleaning," online as in the footnote.<sup>4</sup>



Käthe's dying speeded up in 2011. Other ailments were diagnosed: diabetes and congestive heart failure. The Käthe who could handle her finances and medications died. The Käthe who could dial a telephone or write a letter or read a letter died. A brain MRI showed large areas of

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1. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/bereavement>.

2. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/person>.

3. <http://www.mundanefairfulness.com/home/2014/12/29/by-degrees-living-and-dying>.

4. The website of the Association of Hospice & Palliative Care Chaplains in the UK. <http://www.ahpcc.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/autumn.pdf>.

her brain dead. Her competence for personal care died. We were bereaved of many of the characteristics that once comprised Käthe. I was still without ailments, but much of my physical ability had died. Both of us had been bereaved of people, activities, and possessions. I described these losses in two pieces: "Downsizing" and "I'm Old," both online as in the footnote.<sup>5</sup>

The Käthe who was still living remained a lovely and lovable person. But it was inevitable that more of those characteristics would die in the near-term. I and Käthe (to the extent her brain allowed) anticipated further bereavement. It came with a major stroke for Käthe and more age-related decrepitude for me. These moved us into the frail stage and into an assisted living facility. I described this in "I'm Frail," online as in the footnote.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, by 2012, we had been deprived of most of the people, possessions, activities, and personal characteristics that had made life enjoyable. At best, an assisted living facility can make a resident's last days only a little more comfortable. Käthe was nearing the end, and I was hoping that I would follow after her. Seizures were added to her ailments. August 2014 began her final weeks. A seizure at breakfast, a "full-blown" stroke one night in bed, and the beginning of hospice care. There was some bounce back, but not enough.

For Käthe, it had been quite a trip: from her birth at 4 lbs, 3 oz in Denmark to a cigarette smoking mother, to being a child terrified by the German occupation in World War II and canings by her father, to immigrating to the USA with her parents at age twelve with no knowledge of the English language, to becoming her high school class president for two years and earning seven medals, to some college before marriage and three daughters, to being divorced with no preparation for going it alone, to meeting me in 1977, to becoming my friend, and in 1987 my wife for in many aspects the best years of our lives, even until the end.

Reflecting on Käthe's final death, I'm thankful. It's not that I don't miss her. From our good morning kiss to the good night, I miss her. Käthe was physically and mentally impaired by the years of bleeding strokes. But she was still a beautiful-in-every-way person who faced our situation with realism. Being frail and in assisted living, we knew death was next.

When we reminisced about happier times and sang, "those were the days, my friend; we thought they'd never end," Käthe added, "but they did."

We knew those days were gone forever and that frailty only gets worse. After I read Käthe my essay "I'm Frail," she responded, "it's sad, but true."

We talked about death. "Would we rather be dead or like residents whose frail existence was being cleaned up, fed, and bedded?" We chose death.

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5. "Downsizing" online at <http://www.ahpcc.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/downsizing.pdf> and "I'm Old" online at <http://www.ahpcc.org.uk/includes/articles/old.pdf>.

6. "I'm Frail" online at <http://www.ahpcc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/imfrail.pdf>.

It was the dying *process* that engendered anxiety. Would it be like the bedridden man who told his wife he hated it?

I am thankful that until the end, Käthe described her days as “great.” We were finishing supper when Käthe went into a three-day coma and died.

Käthe had adapted a prayer for the two of us:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, I hope we die together.

I pray that her prayer will soon be answered.

Pascal wrote, “the last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is; at the last a little earth is thrown upon our head, and that is the end forever.”<sup>7</sup> Every “end,” every degree of death, every death of a person’s characteristics, every death of a person’s abilities, is a bereavement. It is the “last act” for that which died. The more valued the loss, the greater the tragedy. In fact, a death is “the end forever.” In faith, one might believe there is more. For my faith, see “Abiding Significance,” online as in the footnote.<sup>8</sup>

When Käthe and I lived in Alpine Lake, Doris and Bob were good friends. Bob died in a car wreck when they were both still active. I felt sad because they were bereaved of good years together. When, after she became too decrepit to remain in Alpine Lake, Doris told me that in a way she was glad that Bob had died without going through the misery she was experiencing, I felt sad because of Doris’ loss of joy. But, when I learned that Doris had died, I felt envy. There comes a time when the party’s over, it’s not fun anymore, it’s time to go home. The central question is what kind of dying process will precede going home. That’s why my envy. Doris had completed doing what I still must do.

If I am blessed to die the way Käthe died, I hope that those who miss me will be thankful.

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7. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Sec III, Part 3 (Dutton, 1958), 210.

8. "Enduring Significance" online at <http://www.ahpcc.org.uk/includes/articles/enduring.pdf>.