

"Grief During a Pandemic"

By: Carol Frazier Maxwell

Thank God for the pandemic! Not really, but sort of. Here is my story.

My husband of over 41 years, Tim, had recently been diagnosed with colon cancer. It was late stage, but the doctors gave us hope that treatment would help. No one ever said "good chance of dying." He had had two rounds of chemo, both of which he seemed to tolerate pretty well. The workaholic that I am went to work as usual on the Monday following his second chemo treatment the previous Thursday, and I was facilitating an evening staff meeting when I got a text from Tim saying, "having trouble breathing." I saw it, but stupidly continued on with the meeting thinking we'd be done shortly, and I would be headed home. A short few minutes later came the text, "come home."

Of course, I abruptly left the meeting, and as soon as I was out of the meeting room and headed to my car I called Tim. He was able to answer the phone, but was clearly short of breath. I asked him if he could call 911, and he said he didn't think he could let them in. I said I would call them and I could open the garage door remotely (thanks to my alarm system with remote garage door opener that everyone should have for just such emergencies!). I told him I was on my way and hung up. I immediately dialed 911, gave them the pertinent facts, and by this time I was at my car.

As I began to drive, I called our oldest son who lives in the same town as we do and asked where he was, hoping he had stayed in the same area of town as his job and our home so that he was close by. He was actually already at home, about 15 minutes away where traffic isn't bad. I calmly told him that dad seemed to be having trouble breathing and asked could he get there faster than me. He said he would go immediately. (A little back story here: our son had spent about an hour with Tim after he got off work that day which was from about 4:15-5:15 p.m. At the time he left our house Tim seemed perfectly fine, just tired from the chemo treatment.) I then called our next-door neighbor to see if she would go over to the house as Tim was having trouble breathing, and I knew he was scared and asked if she could be with him until I or our son got there. She of course agreed.

I raced home, and as soon as I hit our street the ambulance was there with other cars on the street. I parked on the street and ran into the house to find the paramedics doing CPR on Tim. The neighbor was there, as was our son. I was shocked that in 15 minutes such a drastic turn of events could happen. As soon as I saw Tim's eyes just staring off I knew he was gone even though they were trying to bring him back. What I was able to gather from the neighbor and my son was that the paramedics were there before either one of them. The paramedics told me that Tim had been sitting in the chair when they got there, and he was able to tell them he couldn't breathe and then just "went out." They moved him to the floor to start CPR, but it was really futile.

Here is another lesson I learned: get a living will and have it ready when you are young and hopefully won't need it. We didn't have fully executed living wills. Just the day before I had worked on them, they were signed, but needed a notary's signature. We hadn't obtained that yet so the paramedics could not honor Tim's wishes regarding resuscitation efforts. So for 45 "painful to watch" minutes they had to keep performing CPR until the supervising physician could be contacted to give the ok to stop.



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Another important element to my story is that my older brother, Tom, is a physician. I called him as soon as I had my wits about me while they were doing CPR and asked him to come. He made it in record time (thankfully without a speeding ticket). He was able to gather enough information to surmise that Tim had experienced a pulmonary embolism, which is why it all happened so fast. We didn't see the need for an autopsy to determine that, but it seems to be the likely cause of his sudden breathing difficulties. Tom was patient and sat by me while I held Tim's hand while CPR continued. He was able to do "doctor speak" with the physician over the paramedics, and this helped them finally end attempting CPR. Basically, Tim was dead as soon as he quit breathing and CPR wasn't going to bring him back. But if Tom hadn't been there all of this would have been so much more difficult and unsure, so I'm forever thankful for his presence that night.

I feel terribly guilty about not being home at the time he needed me, and I guess I'll have that regret the rest of my life even though my brother and others have reassured me that, even if I had been home, that you rarely recover from a pulmonary embolism like that unless you are actually in a hospital with immediate resources available. I take some comfort in that, but not enough to assuage all my guilt.

And then there is our youngest son who was actually out of the country when this happened. Tim and I had encouraged him to proceed on with his planned trip out of the country since we thought we had time and were optimistic about treatment. He, too, felt guilty about being away when this all happened. What is interesting about all our feelings of guilt and all the "what ifs" is that, as a clinical social worker, I have spent years supporting people in grief situations so I know/knew all the reasons for why we felt so guilty and knew it was not realistic, yet it was how we felt. All the knowledge and understanding in the world sometimes can't stop emotions, intrusive thoughts and feelings of guilt.

This all occurred about 10 days before the world began shutting down with the COVID 19 pandemic. We were the lucky ones who got to have a memorial service, both at our church and at Hendrix College where Tim worked for 30 years. Those ceremonial events are so important to the healing process. At those services were probably the last time I actually saw many friends in person. And while we didn't know then that the pandemic would be as bad and as long as it has been, we weren't focused on COVID or really even knew what it meant at the time. We were just lost in our own feelings of loss and disbelief.

So what has grief been like during a pandemic? Good and bad.

For me, the pandemic has given me permission (cover?) to not be social. I could easily say "no" to getting together socially with others even if masked and even if outside. I could easily avoid allowing anyone to come over to support me by saying "I'm being careful," which was only partially true. Because I am now the only parent my children have and because I'm in my 60's, I wanted to be careful to not get COVID and die even though I am very healthy. Early on we just didn't know who was vulnerable to the virus and who might not survive. My kids' (adult boys, but still my kids) grief could not be compounded by losing both parents.



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My younger son (the one who had been out of the country when Tim died) ended up staying with me for a few months after Tim's death since he was in-between jobs after having lived abroad for several years. He had planned to get a job when he returned, but of course the pandemic resulted in the shutdown of the economy, and it was difficult to find a job. His staying with me, though, allowed us to support each other through the initial months of loss, which I think was good for both of us. But it also prolonged my acceptance of really being alone without my life partner. I encouraged my son to find his path and did not want him to worry about me and feel an obligation to continue to live in a city where he didn't want to live and not have a career path. He eventually was able to find a job in a city a few hours away and get on with that part of his life. Thankfully he is close enough for quick weekends together, and then there are cell phones, that make it easy to be in touch in all sorts of ways!

Fortunately for me I have always been a pretty independent person. While being married for 2/3 of my life, I was my own person. I had my own career, effectively managed our finances, and wasn't really afraid of being alone in my house. But, as many single people know, being alone is different than being lonely. You miss coming home to someone (other than your cat) who cares that you are home and wants to know how your day was. You miss that there isn't anyone to worry about what time you will get home, where you are going, do you want any company on your outing, whatever. You resented that when you were a kid and your parents wanted to know all of that. But it's nice when someone really looks out for you and wants to be sure you are safe, but not in a controlling way.

The pandemic isolated me enough that I wasn't going out or interested in get-togethers, but it often left me alone with too many sad thoughts and memories. But that's ok. I don't allow myself to really cry and grieve in front of others, so being alone has allowed me to do that. Or to yell or curse at the one who is gone for being stupid and not getting health check-ups and not paying attention to warning symptoms that could have caught a cancer early. The pandemic also allowed me to choose the limited things I wanted to do that would bring me some comfort or distraction without hurting other people's feelings. I needed to protect myself from having to be "on" or "upbeat" when I really didn't feel like it, and still don't 18 months after Tim's death. I assume one day I will, but I'm not pushing it and the pandemic is still giving me permission to avoid social gatherings.

But has social isolation been emotionally healthy? For some, it probably would not be. For me, I think so, or at least I hope so. My small circle of support keeps me from being isolated. I go to work every day and am surrounded by lots of people and activities where I feel energized and supported. But I get to come home after work and let myself feel whatever I need to feel, and I think that is healthy and ok. I have a few friends who will challenge me if they think I need to share what I'm feeling or just listen if I need to talk and that seems to be enough for now. I have my boys and we talk about their dad and share stories and that seems to be enough for now. I have my alone time to grieve, talk with Tim as if he were there, or just "be" and that is enough for now. So am I thankful for the pandemic? Not really because of the horrible impact it has had on so many lives. But "if" it was going to happen whether Tim died or not, I guess in the end I'm glad I could go through my initial period of grief using the pandemic as a shield. I'll let my fellow social workers and mental health clinicians decide if that was good for me or not!

