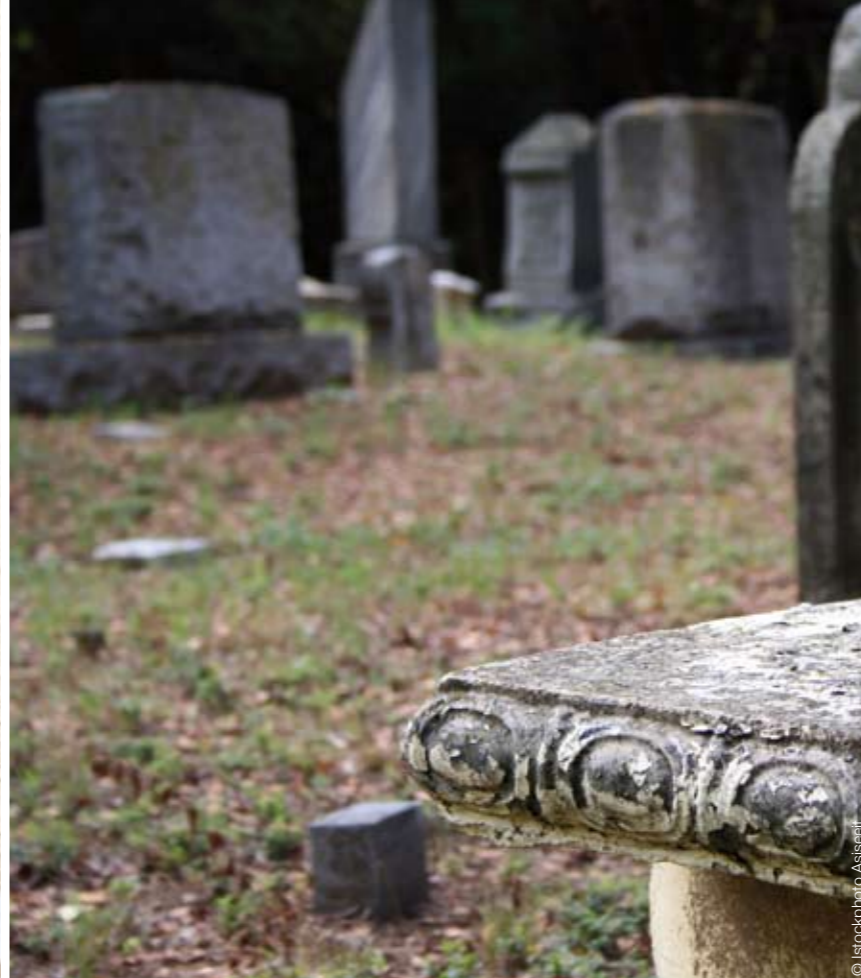


# Come sit with me on my mourning bench



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## Finding order in the chaos

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*, Scribner, 1997) famously described seven stages of grief and bereavement which, she argues, are common to most human experience of death and dying.

1. **Shock:** Paralysis on hearing the bad news
2. **Denial:** Spending time trying to avoid the inevitable
3. **Anger:** An outpouring of bottled-up emotion
4. **Bargaining:** Seeking in vain for a way out
5. **Depression:** Realisation of the inevitable
6. **Testing:** Coming up with realistic solutions
7. **Acceptance:** Finally finding the way forward.

Grief will touch us all sooner or later. For one half of our life (if we are lucky), our parents will offer us some protection from this deep and dark pain. For the other half, we will surely mourn their passing. So when that time comes, pull out your 'bench', surround yourself with friends, be kind to yourself, talk, talk and talk some more and, most of all, do not be afraid of the tears. By David Willows

Modern parenting is an all-consuming business. No sooner have we finished with the 'dummy and diaper' thing, than it seems we are magically transformed into general manager of a complex transport service, ferrying our children here, there and everywhere.

We do it because we love our children. Our children need us and we are there for them. It is what we do, just as our parents were there for us.

### In another room

And there's the thing – it happened almost without us noticing, when our attention was taken up with getting the children up, dressed and off to school. Our parents slowed down, grew old and, in some cases, even died.

*The taxi drops us at the hospital. My grandmother, now 97, lies unrecognisable, more like a small child, in an oversized bed. I am aware of how uncomfortable my own children*

*feel, sitting beside me. Recognition comes in her voice. Distinct and distinctly belonging to the person I call 'Nanny'. One word from her and I am immediately recalling Sunday dinners and silly games around the house. I take the hand of my eldest son. For him, this is an important, albeit sombre, lesson in what happens at the limits of the human tale.*

### The protective layer above our heads

Life may be complicated, but most of us apply a simple logic to the important bits. Take dying, for example. In our minds, it is like waiting at a bus stop. Those who are first in line – who have been around the longest – get on the bus first. Normally that is how it works.

And this logic brings security. If I still have both grandparents and parents, then somehow I feel that there is still 'money in the bank'. If, on the other hand, my parents and grandparents have died, that protective layer is gone and there can be a terrifying feeling of *I'm next*.

But, of course, life is not always logical. People, for no apparent reason, will jump the queue. The death of a child is perhaps the most devastating disruption of the rule and can quickly lead us to the conclusion that there never was a queue.

*A year ago, it was my wife's mum, aged only 49. Then, it was her 'second mum' and grandma. As I took her hand and desperately sought the right words to say, I saw the fear in her eyes. 'Who is going to look after me now?' 'Who will be there for me when I fall?' It was all too much, too soon. The rules of the game had been broken and the once strong protective layer had vanished.*

### On being there

There are several things that define an expatriate family, like the inevitable distance between us and our extended family. True, we enjoy the many benefits of life as members of the 'global village', but when the phone call comes, the sense of 'not being there' can fill us with overwhelming guilt.

But what is 'being there' all about? Do we believe that somehow we might be able to rescue our loved one from the inevitable? Is it about words left unspoken, which can only be said as life finally slips away? Or is it simply a need to witness the event for ourselves?

How often do we hear our friends describe the same story: "I landed, turned on my phone and there was a message saying I had not made it on time".

*I will always feel guilt over the fact that her mother died during my brother's wedding. We had an impossible choice: celebrate with one family or mourn with another. I thought we might have the chance to do both. I was wrong. And from that day something happened inside my head. I know I won't be there when my grandmother leaves this earth. Perhaps, not for my parents, either. But one thing I can do is to make sure that every time we speak, every moment we spend together is good enough to be the last.*

### Room for one more on my bench

There is perhaps a lesson that is hard for us all, as a wise man once said:

**"If you have something to say, say it today. If you have the opportunity to share a moment of love, never leave it for tomorrow."**

The son of Nicholas Wolterstorff died in a climbing accident, aged 25. Following this tragic episode, Wolterstorff wrote about his grief and terrible sense of loss, even addressing the subject of how other people should approach his grief. Don't try and explain it, he suggests. Don't tell me it will be okay. Don't avoid me. Don't act as if it never happened. Just "come and sit beside me on my mourning bench".

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