

## Anticipating Orphanhood

by [Ellie Kahn](#)

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Over coffee at Panera, my friend Ellen and I discussed our children's school, her career options and my recent dating adventures. And we laughed about the policeman who didn't give Ellen a ticket because he liked her "Beat Bush" sticker. We laughed a lot, as we usually do.

Then we started to talk about our aging parents.

"There's so much I still want to share with them," Ellen said. "What I really wish is that my kids would have meaningful conversations with my parents someday -- when they don't find my mom and dad so boring! I just hope they're around long enough for that to happen. I really can't picture my life without them. I don't want to."

I know how she feels. I started to imagine being an orphan after visiting my 87-year-old father in Ohio.

Maybe it's like sneaking a look at the ending of a scary or painful novel to see what's coming. (Yes, I've done that.)

In the case of a parent's mortality, however, we do know what's coming.

Many people with aging parents don't want to face their eventual death, said Rachelle Elias, a licensed marriage and family therapist and grief specialist in Santa Monica. "We believe that, since they've been here all of my life, they're a fixture. They'll always be here.

"Also, the small child part of us sees our parents as a buffer between us and anything bad that might happen. They're sort of a place of refuge, even if it's just in our mind."

There is probably no one who will ever love me as much as my parents do. In spite of my arguing as a teenager, and the disappointments or criticisms, I never believed that my mother or father would leave me, or stop loving me because of some flaw in my personality, or some irritating way I do things. If I really, really consider not having that reliable, unconditional love anymore, it makes me gasp for air. If I imagine the void it will leave not seeing my mother's face, not hearing my father's greeting when I call -- "Hey, sweet love!" -- I start to cry.

So, if it's that painful to imagine, why do it?

Elias said it's an important part of the relationship: "Old age should be treated like a terminal illness. If you find out someone you love has cancer, you don't ignore it. You try to have meaningful time with that person, while you still can. We should do the same thing with aging parents."

Years ago, while working in a psychiatric setting, I noticed how many people were filled with regrets over what they had or hadn't said to someone who died.

All that unfinished business over harsh words left hanging and kind words never said, seemed like such a burden -- one that I wanted to prevent in my own life.

This means really noticing the last words I've said to my parents or loved ones -- in case one of us gets hit by a toilet seat falling from the Mir space station (a reference to my favorite TV shows, "Dead Like Me.") -- because then it's too late.

I guess it's like not going to bed angry.

"When a parent dies," Elias said, "it gives people comfort if the last thing they ever said to their mother was, 'I love you, Mom.' It's also important to ask yourself what your parent would want to hear -- things like: 'I'll never forget you,' or 'I'll never let my kids forget you. I'm going to tell them your stories.' This gives them a sense that they will live on."

A woman once hired me to do an oral history with her father. But she asked me to pretend I was doing the interviews for my dissertation (my nonexistent dissertation) to protect her father from guessing that she considered him not long for this world. At 96, I imagine this wasn't news to him.

My father sometimes jokes about aging and death. He also expresses sadness at what he won't be able to do... like take my son, Ben, skiing.

I know how much he would want to shout instructions at my son as he did with my sister and me. His words force me to imagine his absence, but his sharing also adds to our closeness.

I asked my friend Ellen what she would miss when her parents are gone.

"My mom's my biggest fan," she said. "It's really nice that she thinks whatever I do is great! She laughs at all my jokes. She's just part of the fabric of my life. And my dad is always there ... like a rock."

My mother just had her 87th birthday. My son, Ben, and I arrived at her board and care with flowers and chocolate cake, singing "Happy Birthday." Mom started to cry when she saw us:

"Oh! I'm so glad you're here!"

As always, she seems to think I've traveled from the moon to see her, rather than the mile from my home. I put "South Pacific" into the VCR, and we sang together (much to Ben's horror) as I held her hand.

And when we said goodbye, I told her how much I love her.

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