

The reality of death and love

This column was written by Claire Mitchel's son Jeff after the death of his father, Arnold Mitchel, on Nov. 25, 2002.

When dad had a heart attack and bypass operation seven years ago, I came flying in from afar. Still addicted to cigarettes back then, I would stand at the hospital entrance, puffing and talking with two or three strangers who were about my age: ``My sister seems to think I'm having a good time here."

``Mine's leaving Tuesday."

``At least she came. And my brother's not coming till Friday. Says he can't get away -- as if I'm retired."

A common language among strangers, Second Thiders, flying in from New Jersey, from Seattle, from Israel, all for the bedside vigil. We're a community of grown children, meeting at the crossroads of our parents' lives in South Florida. We come running. But when we get here, what can we do?

I got the phone call Saturday night. I dropped everything and flew in. Even though I knew dad was dying, I had doubts about coming. It would be so much easier to mourn at home, surrounded by my wife, children, friends.

A COMFORT -- BUT?

I come for a couple of weeks, and then I'm gone. I am so acutely aware of mom's age, her physical limitations, the burdens of home ownership. And of this horrifying, inconsolable loss. I can pull the bridge chairs down from the high hook in the garage. I can play the host and I can give her a hug. She says I'm a comfort, and I guess it's true. But how deep does that go? Her life partner was just buried.

What can I say to change the fact that she is, for all intents and purposes, alone? That I'll call *twice* a week? That I'll visit *twice* a year? I have no words of consolation.

At the funeral, my sister Madie spoke eloquently. She was dad's favorite, and she loved him purely and sweetly and selflessly. I find myself in the strange position of not really wanting to share my feelings. Even if I could, would they help mom?

It has been so hectic that you'd think there was no time to mourn. You'd be wrong. Sitting with mom's wonderful friends, laughing at a joke, and then -- there it is. In slow motion, a silent movie, and feeling the unmitigable reality of dad's death. The guests all express genuine sympathy. But it doesn't touch the deepest place. They're strangers. My wife, and my kids, and my grandchildren -- I very much wish they could have come. But they, too, would be strangers here. This mourning period is about a different time and place.

COMMON MEMORIES

Madie and I have spent maybe 20 days together in the past 30 years. And still, there's this whole world that only she and I share, like the make-believe house underneath our grandparents' dining room table. We may disagree about the meaning of something said half a century ago, but we never dispute the facts. They're in our blood, our common heritage. We were there, the two of us, the sole witnesses to the Mitchel saga. "Look at this," she says, showing me a picture of dad sitting next to a coffee pot, wearing a certain expression. And we look at each other, not a word spoken, and it touches a very deep place for both of us, a place that not a single person knows other than the two of us.

It's a historical anomaly, mom and Madie and I together, 35 years after we left home, a convention of dinosaurs. But we speak a private language. And our being together is the only thing that can touch and balm the grief I feel -- the Mitchels, come together, to mourn dad's departure.

Claire Mitchel welcomes letters. Write to her in care of The Herald, PMB 80, 8209 N. Pine Island Rd., Tamarac, FL 33321.