THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF PARENT DEATH ON

ADULT CHILDREN IN MIDLIFE

by

Virginia M. Murauskas

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree
With a Major in

Marriage and Family Therapy

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

_____
Investigation Advisor

The Graduate College
University of Wisconsin-Stout
August 2000

The Graduate College
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751

ABSTRACT

Murauskas　　　　　　　　　**Virginia**　　　　　　　　**M.**
(Writer - Last Name)　　　　　　　　(First)　　　　　　　　(Initial)

The Long-Term Impact of Parent Death on Adult Children in Midlife
(Title)

Marriage and Family Therapy　　**John Williams**　　　**August, 2000**　　　　**72**
(Graduate Major)　　　　　　(Research Advisor)　　(Month/Year)　　　(Pages)

　　　　　　　　American Psychological Association Psychological Manual
　　　　　　　　(Name of Style Manual Used in this Study)

This qualitative study examines the long-term impact of parent death on adult children in midlife.

As such, all of the subjects have experienced the death(s) of one or both parents in adulthood.

The study is a partial replication of one conducted by Victoria Secunda (2000) and published in

her book Losing Your Parents, Finding Your Self in which the author sought to advance the

understanding of: (a) the long-term impact of parent death on adult children, (b) what it means to

be an "adult orphan", (c) how the sibling bond fares, (d) what it is like for only children, (e) how

marriages are impacted, (f) what happens if/when adult children step into the vacated parental

roles, (g) the developmental thrust that often occurs among adult children who experience parent

death in midlife (Secunda, 2000).

While several books and studies have examined the subject of parent death, most have focused on the processes of grief and/or mourning, or on the impact of parent death in childhood or adolescence. Little information exists about the long-term effects of parent death on adult children in midlife.

Ten subjects completed The Parental Loss Questionnaire (Secunda, 2000); four of these underwent clarifying interviews on the basis of their written responses. The data collected confirmed the experience of losing a parent in midlife as a pivotal event, and gave rise to several overarching themes. Some of these themes reiterate those identified by Secunda (2000): a sense of relief and liberation coupled with an urgency and desire to live life to the fullest; a changed relationship to the surviving parent; improved sibling relationships; changed intimate partnerships; reassessed/changed relationships with one's own children; a greater reliance upon/valuing of friendships; a greater sense of confidence/self; the pursuit of new career goals; a keener sense of one's own mortality coupled with a realignment of one's priorities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people. Without their support, I would not have found the courage to return to school in midlife, nor the energy, focus, determination, and self-love, to sustain the effort.

To my parents Milda and Vytoldas, who by way of their example, continue to teach me which paths to follow as well as those to avoid, and to my brothers Gediminas and Paul, who continue to accompany me through life, and to cherish me - despite my shortcomings, I extend my love and gratitude.

To my friends Delia and Linda, who picked me up and dusted me off when I stumbled, who nourished my spirit when I lost faith, and who never once doubted that I could do this, I can never fully express what your friendship means to me. You are the sisters I never had.

To my friend and supervisor Russell, and my colleagues at work, who graciously accommodated my decision to return to school, thank you.

To those men and women who chose to share their personal experiences regarding the death of their parents, I extend my deepest appreciation for your generosity of spirit and your willingness to be vulnerable. You have taught me much.

And last, but certainly not least, to John Williams, my spiritual guide and thesis advisor, who has freely shared his delightful sense of humor, his wisdom and patience, I extend my deep affection and gratitude. You have reminded me, when I have clutched tightly, that life is meant to be worn as a loose garment.

This study is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Mariona Mozuras Paulsen, who loved me as no one else has, and taught me what it means to lose someone you love. You are always with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

Appendix I

Appendix II

Appendix III

CHAPTER 1

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>

The Purpose of This Study

While several books and studies have examined the subject of parental death, most have focused on the processes of grief and/or mourning, or on the impact of parent death in childhood or adolescence. Little information exists about the long-term effects of parent death on adult children in midlife.

This gap in professional and popular literature alike is that much more surprising given that members of the Baby Boomer generation (76 million) have, as of 1994, begun to turn fifty and are losing parents in record numbers (average age of parental death being about seventy). Death, particularly parent death, is very much on this generation's mind. It is for these reasons that this author has chosen to focus her study on the long-term impact of parent death on adult children in midlife.

The death of parents in childhood is both cataclysmic and heartbreaking. How are young children to cope with such an untimely, relatively uncommon, and tragic loss? How are they to get on in life without that parent? Our attention and support immediately turns to their well being and survival.

Not so for the adult child. To lose one's parents in adulthood is generally accepted as both normal and commonplace. Adult children are regarded as somehow 'ready' for such an eventuality. Their survival no longer depends upon the nurturance of their parents.

In the immediate aftermath of parent death, adult children get by as best they can. At least in the short term, most are able to rely on the support of family and friends. Some may reach out for additional support through grief counseling. Over time the acute feelings of loss begin to lift. Their lives resume course - or do they?

> According to an unwritten social contract, when parents die their adult children are expected to honor them, forgive them, or - failing these - to be "over it" and get on with their lives.
>
> (Secunda, 2000, xxxiv)

How, when and in which ways adult children ultimately do "get on with their lives" would seem to be dependent upon: the kind of people the parents were and became; the kind of person the child was and became; the nature of the relationship between the child and parents as well as the nature of their relationship at the time of death; the presence or absence of siblings; the nature of the child's relationship to the surviving parent after the first parent's death; any adjustments and/or role shifts in the family after the first and/or second parent's death; the child's age at the time of parental death and their age now; the child's gender, marital, and child-rearing status; as well as the amount of time that has elapsed since the death(s).

By way of a qualitative study, chronicled in her book <u>Losing Your Parents, Finding Your Self</u>, Victoria Secunda (2000) set out to explore the following issues: (a) the long-term impact of parent death on adult children, (b) what it means to be an "adult orphan", (c) how the sibling bond fares, (d) what it is like for only children, (e) how marriages are impacted, (f) what happens if/when adult children step into the vacated parental roles, and (g) the developmental thrust that often occurs for adult children who experience parent death in midlife (Secunda, 2000).

The purpose of the present study is to examine, clarify and advance the understanding of the long-term impact of parent death on adult children in midlife by partially replicating Secunda's (2000) qualitative study.

Objective of This Study

The objective of this qualitative study is to describe the long-term effects of parent death on adult children, who have experienced the deaths of one or both parents, in midlife, and report the results.

Overview of This Thesis

Chapter One is an introduction to the thesis. It provides the reader with the context, purpose and objective of this present study. The introduction also contains a definition of terms. In Chapter Two, the author reviews and critiques the literature currently available in the field of study. Also outlined are the limitations of the current body of research into the phenomena. Chapter Three offers the rationale for choosing a qualitative methodology and outlines in detail that methodology as it is used in the present study. While Chapter Four reports the results of this

study. Finally, Chapter Five attempts to summarize the study, discusses some of its limitations,

suggests opportunities for further research, and draws some conclusions which suggest

opportunities for therapeutic application. The Appendices include materials actually utilized in

the research process: a copy of <u>The Parental Loss Questionnaire</u>, a copy of the letter which

introduced the questionnaire and provided the prospective respondent with some basic

instructions governing the overall process, and a copy of the Human Subjects Consent Form.

Definition of Terms

The terms defined are those which hold a particular meaning to this and, since this is a

partial replication, Secunda's (2000) study.

Adult children. Children who are twenty years old or older.

Adult Orphans. Adult children who have experienced the death(s) of either or both of

their biological parents.

Marriage. A committed relationship recognized in law, and/or a matrimonial relationship

recognized by the religious affiliation of one or more of the partners, and/or a relationship

identified by the participant as a marriage.

Middleborns. Neither the first born child nor the last born child, but rather

 the child(ren) born in between the first and last born children.

Parent. The child's biological mother or father.

Singletons. Only children who have never had any siblings.

CHAPTER 2

<u>LITERATURE REVIEW</u>

While numerous studies have been conducted pertaining to the impact of parental death in childhood (Birtchnell, 1970; Bowlby, 1980; Bunch, 1971; Fristad, Jedel, Weller & Weller, 1993; Furman, 1974; Kendler, Neale, Prescott, Kessler, Heath, Corey & Eaves 1996; McLeod, 1991; Patten, 1991; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Worden, 1996) and to a lesser degree, in adolescence (Kuntz ,1991; LeGrand, 1986; Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryant & Rey, 1998), there remains a regrettable dearth of literature on the impact of the death of a parent on an adult child. In fact, a review of the literature reveals that the first study to investigate the psychodynamic reactions of non-clinical adult populations to the death of a parent was not published until 1979 (Malinak, Hoyt & Patterson).

When faced with the prospect of the death of her own parents, this author began to suspect that the impact of parental death on mature adults has more significance than it has been assumed to have. Upon reading the work of Secunda (2000), the author was able to explore some of the importance that such deaths have on the lives of those experiencing them. Secunda's (2000) interest in the long-term, relational impact of the phenomenon proved to be especially alluring given this author's chosen profession of marriage and family therapy. However, it was only upon reviewing the literature on the phenomenon that this author became aware: 1) that Secunda, a non-professional, had gingerly stepped forth to study a phenomenon that professionals in the field seemingly hesitated to address (Becker, 1973; McGoldrick & Walsh, 1983; Moss & Moss, 1983); 2) that the study picked-up where the pioneering work of Delahanty

Douglas (1990), and Scharlach and Fredriksen (1993) had left off; 3) that a study which focused primarily on the filial life of adult children after parental death, had not been previously undertaken, and, 4) that an opportunity existed to examine, clarify and advance the understanding of the long-term impact of parental death on adult children - a personally timely topic. It is for these reasons that the author undertook the partial replication of Secunda's (2000) study . The review of literature, which follows, is intended to prepare the reader for the study.

Parental Death and The Lifecycle: A Historical Perspective

Few would argue that the death of a parent has become a normative developmental task of midlife (Lofland, 1986; Marshall & Rosenthal, 1982; Osterweiss, Solomon, & Green, 1984). Demographic and research data reveals that between the ages of forty and sixty, more than 50 percent of American women will experience the death(s) of one or both parents (Watkins, Menken & Bongaarts, 1987). It was not always so: In the early 1900s, approximately 25 percent of children experienced a parent's death before the age of fifteen. By 1980, only about 5 percent did so (Uhlenberg, 1980). Whereas in 1920, the majority of women experienced the death of a mother before the age of fifty. The literature reveals that by 1970, 73 percent of fifty-year-old women had a living mother (Winsborough, 1980). It is estimated that more than 95 percent of forty-year-old women now have at least one surviving parent (Watkins et al., 1987). As these figures suggest, there is a trend for parent death to occur later in the lifespan, and over a more compressed period of years. As such, the phenomenon deserves increased attention as a midlife issue.

Theories of Midlife and The Impact of Death

So, what do we know of this time of life? According to Jung, middle adulthood, between the ages of thirty-five and forty, is the time of greatest growth for most people - a time spent integrating undeveloped dimensions of personality. He described the major task of the middle years as reassessment. The result is a giving up of the fantasy of immortality and omnipotence, which, up to this point, has made our own death incomprehensible. Jung notes that it is at this stage in life that we are most likely to confront the process of physical aging, the loss of loved ones, changes in marital supports, and the empty nest. He postulates that a conscious awareness of death and mortality is inescapable. However, if successfully resolved, the resulting transformation enhances the development of the individual (Jung, 1971).

Erikson's theory of ego development suggests that the central conflict of midlife is that of generativity, concern for the next generation, versus self-absorption and stagnation. Ultimately, it is depression and stagnation - the hallmarks of this internal struggle, which provide the individual with the impetus to change, to expand in new directions, to acknowledge mortality, and to consider new options beyond the self (Erikson, 1963).

Jacques also described the connection between midlife crisis, around the age of thirty-five, and death. He was taken with the irony of entering the prime of one's life but finding that fulfillment is limited by the approach of death. He proposed that it is this awareness - the reality of impending mortality, which precipitates midlife crisis.

He had lost his youth. And with both parents dead, nobody now stood

between himself and the grave.

(Jacques, 1965, 510)

If successfully resolved, this stage results in the integration of our strengths along with our more

destructive inclinations. Death becomes a part of living, and leads to a more enriching life

(Jacques, 1965).

Becker regards the fear of death as the mainspring of all human activity. The struggle for

self-esteem prompts the need to contribute something of lasting note and worth. What better way

to achieve this then through one's progeny. To this end, an illusion is created: if parents are

strong, the child is able to identify with their strength, and through this delegated power, triumph

over death. Unfortunately, this perpetuates a culture which denies death and rewards frenzied

activity which serves as the mechanism by which one remains protected against the awareness of

one's eventual death. The healthy adult transcends the self, giving up the defenses and illusions of

youth, and accepts the gains and losses of continuing transitions (Becker, 1973).

Riegel underscores the need to study long-term change over the life span by focusing on

the dialectics of relationships. He proposes studying the chronology of life events, which result in

conflicts and dissonance but ultimately lead to growth. It is a study of action and change: While

asynchrony may result in crisis, it is regarded as positive as it propels change and growth.

However, as synchrony is attained, new conflicts arise - a changing individual in a changing

world. Riegel emphasizes that development does not lie in the individual, nor in the social group,

but rather in the dialectical interactions between the two. It is only by studying both the inner and external dialectics of marker events that we might understand developmental change (Riegel, 1976).

Kastenbaum suggests that identity and the death/rebirth of the self are the issues of midlife. It is he, above all others, that underscores that parent death in particular may represent a highly significant event in the midlife of a surviving child, and as such, to warrant attention and further study (Kastenbaum, 1977).

It would appear then, that although we are learning more about midlife, we still seem to know relatively little about this phase of the lifecycle. However, what we do know suggests that it represents a pivotal phase of life (Chiriboga, 1981). It is also evident, that the loss of loved ones and the attending realization of one's own mortality, provides the impetus to change and grow. Finally, it would appear that parent death in particular hastens the developmental thrust.

Studies of Parent Death In Adulthood: A Brief History

Given the trend of parental death occurring later in the lifespan, and the growing appreciation for the place that death and mortality occupy in adult development, it would seem reasonable to expect a surfeit of research and literature on the impact of parental death on adult children. Not so. What follows is a brief chronology which is representative of the studies and publications on the phenomenon.

The first study to examine the impact of parent death on a non-clinical population of adult children was conducted by Malinak et al. (1979). Ten women and four men, with a mean age of a little over thirty-two years, were interviewed. The average time since the death of a parent was eleven months. While wide differences were noted, this study served to illuminate the significance of the event: The participants stressed the importance of the last meeting with their parent, they spoke of painful grief reactions and disturbances, they shared their feelings of anger and guilt, and noted the benefits of a social support system. Some identified positive benefits such as increased self-reliance and improved relationships, while others described a period of profound self-examination and crisis (Malinak, et al., 1979). While the authors offer valuable suggestions for future study, including gender comparisons, reactions to the death of a father or mother, and first or second parent death, their suggestions seemingly go unheeded for some time; namely 1997 (Moss, Resch & Moss).

Concurrently it seems, Miriam and Sydney Moss note a vacuum in the literature and undertake a paper to examine some of the generic aspects of the impact of parental death on middle-aged children. The quality of the bond between adult children and their parents is first examined, focusing on those aspects which tend to strengthen or weaken this tie. On the basis of this, the authors postulate that the reaction to the loss of a parent in adulthood involves two dialectic themes which need to be dealt with by the surviving child: the breaking and the persistence of the bond, and finitude and personal growth. Additionally, the paper suggests that a life long process of anticipatory orphanhood may help to prepare for, and perhaps mitigate, the impact of parental death (Moss & Moss, 1983).

Seemingly on the heels of this paper Owen, Fulton, and Markusen undertake a study of thirty-nine, low income, adults - two-thirds of whom are over the age of fifty. Interestingly, the investigation reveals that, for these adults, the death of elderly parents, appears less disruptive to established patterns of stability than for persons who have lost a spouse or a child. That is, they report experiencing less grief, less depression and sadness, fewer adjustment problems, and fewer physical complaints compared to those adults who have lost a spouse or a child. A greater anticipation of parental death is identified as the mitigating factor. Also of interest is the finding that the termination of older, same-gender parent-child bonds is less likely to produce a bereavement reaction than that of younger, cross-gender bonds (Owen, et al., 1982)

Within a few years, three books (Angel, 1987; Donnelly, 1987; Myers, 1986) are published on the impact of parental death on adult children. These prove to be practical guides which intertwine personal experiences and case studies with useful information pertaining to the stages of death and mourning. Readers are provided with reference lists, as well as names and addresses of organizations that help the bereaved deal with grief. Each of these books emphasizes the importance of the event. While helpful and informative to the bereaved, the authors do little to move the field of study forward. Still, the fact that the books are published at all speaks to a growing interest and need.

In 1990, Delahanty Douglas published a seminal study: the first to study long-term patterns of change following parent death in midlife adults. Individual, structured interviews are conducted with forty adults between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five who experienced the death of a parent as adults. The average age of the twenty-two women and eighteen men, at the

time of the interview, is a little over forty-seven years. The average age of the adult children at the time of parent death is not quite thirty-seven years. Thirty-six father deaths and eleven mother deaths are represented. Seven of the adult children have lost both parents. At the time of death, the mean age of the parents is about seventy years. At the time of the interview, 83 percent of the sample are married. The study examines the themes of loss and reattachment. The event of parent death has wide-ranging consequences for a significant proportion of the sample. Both the adult children and, depending on the quality of the bond, their relationships with others, are affected. The study suggests that for many the integration of the loss of a parent involves confronting the loss of parental power and the reality of their own mortality as part of the developmental process. The tension created by the need to both sever and maintain the parent/child bond, and face their own death, without giving way to despair, has forced many of the participants to move to a new perspective and integration. This study demonstrates the importance of studying the impact of parent death on the life history of the individual and examining long-term changes following the loss of this critical relationship (Delahanty Douglas, 1990).

Scharlach and Fredriksen are also interested in the long-term impact of parent death on adult children. In 1993, they publish a study that focuses on the reactions to the death of a parent during midlife. In depth, structured interviews are conducted with eighty-three adults, between the ages of thirty-five and sixty, who lost a parent between one and five years prior to the date of the study. Of the eighty-three participants, sixty-three experienced a mother's death and fifty-one experienced a father's death. Twenty of the participants lost a father only, thirty-two lost a mother only, and thirty-one lost both parents. The median age of the participants is forty-nine; 77 percent are women; 47 percent are married; 84 percent are Caucasian; and 57 percent are college

graduates. This study suggests that the death of a parent can be a significant life event with consequences for one's sense of self, for one's life perspective, and for various social relationships. The majority of the respondents report that their experience of parental death has impacted their sense of maturity, personal priorities, career plans, feelings about their own mortality, and the importance and nature of various social relationships. These impacts generally correspond to the developmentally significant midlife themes of autonomy, personal freedom, and responsibility in one's personal and family life. While this represents the largest and most comprehensive study to date of the long-term impact of the phenomenon, the authors are quick to recognize that they have just scratched the surface: They suggest the need for a longitudinal study with a more representative sample of adults and note that the following issues warrant investigation: 1) the prevalence of specific grief reactions following a parent's death, including the extent to which work, social, and marital roles are disrupted; 2) changes in roles and relationships in the adult child's family of origin following a parent's death, particularly with regard to the transmission of family roles occupied by the deceased parent; 3) the impact of the death on the adult child's personal values, priorities, and lifestyle; and, 4) the impact of the death on the adult's child's sense of mortality, ability to assume increased family responsibility, and other developmental tasks of midlife (Scharlach & Fredriksen, 1993).

While additional studies of the phenomenon continue to trickle forth (Moss et al., 1997; Umberson, 1995; Umberson & Chen, 1994), it is at this stage in the chronology that Secunda experiences the death of her mother and initiates her own review of the literature. She finds what this author has found to be true:

Scant information is available about the long-term effects of parental death

upon the lives and outlooks of adult daughters and sons.

(Secunda, 2000, xxxiii)

It is therefore not surprising that she chooses, to take-up the gauntlet set down by Scharlach and

Fredriksen (1993).

Secunda's Search

While Secunda (2000) does not undertake a longitudinal study as proposed by Scharlach

and Fredriksen (1993), she sets out to chronicle and study the long-term impact of parental death

on adult children.

The Sample

In all, detailed information is gathered from 110 men and women whose parents died

between one and fifty-seven years ago. Ninety-four men and women, ranging in age from twenty-

one to eighty-three represent the initial sample of volunteers. All of these respondents

experienced the deaths of one or both parents after the age of twenty. The median age of the

respondents at the time of father death is thirty-eight; while their median age at the time of

mother death is forty-five. The average length of time between the deaths for the 52 percent of

the respondents who lost both parents, is seven years. While it has been at least one year since

parent death, Secunda (2000) notes the "the vast majority" of the respondents experienced parent

death five or more years prior to the onset of the study. While the exact breakdown is not

reported Secunda (2000) notes that the respondents are "from across the country and of various

ethnic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds". Upon submitting for computation those

questionnaires belonging to the initial sample, an additional sixteen participants respond, four of

whom Secunda chooses to interview. (Secunda 2000).

The Methodology

With the help of Dennis P. Gehr, president of Dennis and Company, Secunda develops,

designs and administers an eight-page questionnaire entitled The Parental Loss Questionnaire

(Appendix I). Fifty-six of the ninety-four original respondents undergo clarifying interviews, on

the basis of their answers, which last up to two hours. Four of the additional sixteen late

responders are also interviewed. The resulting qualitative data is analyzed for themes.

The Instrument

The Parental Loss Questionnaire (Appendix I) is made up of a section devoted to the

collection of demographic data. The main body consists of a series of open-ended questions. In

large part, these focus specifically on eliciting responses regarding salient issues about which

Secunda discovered, "nearly nothing" is written:

.   The long-term impact of parental loss on this enormous audience of

          adult children.

.   What it means to be *existentially* "alone", without a parental home

          base, a mother or father to take you in or bail you out (if only in fantasy),

          no matter what.

.   How the sibling bond fares in the absence of the parental "mortar" or

alternatively, what it's like for only children to have no immediate family

left.

.   How marriages are tested when a husband or wife of a parentless partner

is called upon, however subtly, to provide unconditional (read "parental")

support for the partner, and, should the spouse be unable to give it, what

happens when one or more children are solicited instead.

.   The "developmental push" that often occurs among offspring in the aftermath

of parental death, when the maturational "buck" abruptly stops with oneself.

(Secunda, 2000, xxxiii)

Several of the issues which Secunda surfaces stem from those Scharlach and Fredriksen (1993)

earmarked as warranting investigation.

The Results

        While Secunda (2000) sets out to study the long-term impact of parental death on adult

children, the end result is a sufficient data base on the phenomenon to warrant a book on the filial

life of adult children after parental death. A number of key themes emerge, among them: a sense

of relief and freedom; a changed relationship to the surviving parent; the importance of surrogate

parents; significant shifts in sibling ties; a final accounting through wills and estates; unearthing

family secrets; reassessed intimate partnerships; setting new career goals; altered friendships; a

different legacy for one's children (Secunda, 2000). Based primarily on the results of her study,

the author concludes that:

Parental death is a defining event for adult offspring that, with regard to its

impact on one's sense of self, often eclipses the variables of marital stutus,

career achievement, being a parent oneself, or the cause and manner of

parental death. To lose one's parents in adulthood is to find oneself at a unique

crossroads: a juncture that inspires a reevaluation of one's life, relationships,

and choices in ways that simply were not possible before. Far from being an

insignificant event, parental death is *the* milestone - provides *the* indelible line

of demarcation - that enables adult offspring to begin to determine whether or

not they are, or still must learn how to be, truly grown up.

(Secunda, 2000, xxxix)

To Replicate or Not to Replicate

As noted in the introduction, upon reviewing the literature this author became aware: 1) that Secunda, a non-professional, had gingerly stepped forth to study a phenomenon that professionals in the field seemingly hesitated to address (Becker, 1973; McGoldrick & Walsh, 1983; Moss & Moss, 1983); 2) that the study picked-up where the pioneering work of Delahanty Douglas (1990), and Scharlach & Fredriksen (1993) had left off; 3) that a study which focused primarily on the filial life of adult children after parental death had not been previously undertaken, and, 4) that an opportunity existed to examine, clarify and advance the understanding of the long-term impact of parental death on adult children - a personally timely topic. It is for these reasons that this author undertook a partial replication of Secunda's study.

Nonetheless, and despite the fact that Secunda's (2000) book was not intended as a scholarly work, this author was left with several concerns and criticizms:

1). Secunda (2000) might have done a better job of providing the exact demographic data governing her sample and describing how it was elicited. This author was not satisfied with simply being told that the sample included individuals from "across the country and of various ethnic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds" (Secunda, 2000, xxxvii).

2). Likewise, the focus of, and the population for this study might have been more stringently defined. On the one hand, the author purports an interest in studying the long-term impact of parent death on adult children. Yet Secunda (2000) does not seem to adhere to a consistent definition of time elapsed since the death of a parent in order to evaluate the data in terms of its 'recent' versus 'long-term' implications. In one paragraph the author notes that the respondents' parents died anywhere between one and fifty-seven years ago, while in the next, stresses that the "vast majority died five or more years ago" (Secunda, 2000, xxxviii). Similarly, the author wavers on the stage of adulthood being studied. On the one hand, demographic data is provided which suggests both an urgency for, as well as an interest in, targeting the Baby Boom generation – adults in midlife. Yet, the sample includes individuals who experienced the death(s) of one or both parents "after the age of twenty" (Secunda, 2000, xxxvii).

3). Very little information is provided regarding the exact methods employed to analyze the data.

4). The Parental Loss Questionnaire and survey results are presented in a very inconsistent manner. There appears little rhyme or reason as to why the author chooses to identify and break out responses under themes in certain instances, while in others to seemingly force them into 'yes' and 'no' categories. Thus author also wonders why Secunda did not see fit to spell out

when respondents identified a given question as 'not applicable'. All in all, despite that fact that this is a qualitative study, the data might have been analyzed in a more systematic and rigorous manner to facilitate both replication and comparison.

5).   Given Secunda's interest in the long-term impact of parent death on sibling, marital and other filial relationships, there seems little thought given to eliciting responses which might reveal these others' perspectives. This need not necessarily imply that the author ought to have interviewed siblings, spouses or others. Rather, Secunda might have addressed this dilemma by simply incorporating some circular questions in the questionnaire and interviews.

CHAPTER 3

<u>METHODOLOGY</u>

Qualitative Research Design

Methodology for research is determined by the research question, the amount of previous research of the phenomena and the degree of control the investigator has over the phenomenon being studied. Given that the present study is a partial replication of a qualitative study originally conducted by Secunda (2000), this researcher's choice of methodology is self-evident. What follows is a review of the rationale for selecting a qualitative versus a quantitative design for the study of this phenomenon.

Qualitative analysts ask such questions as: What kinds of things are going

on here? What are the forms of this phenomenon? What variations do we

find in this phenomenon? That is, qualitative analysis is addressed to the task

of delineating forms, kinds and types of social phenomena; of documenting

in loving detail the things that exist.

(Loflund, 1971, 13)

Qualitative methodology was selected over quantitative based on the following four factors (Yin, 1984).

The exploratory nature of the research question: The research question is: What is the experience of adult children who have experienced the death of one or both parents? Being a

'what' question, it calls for exploration of the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1995). Is does not call for responses in terms of 'how many' or 'how much'. Rather it seeks to qualify, describe, illustrate, and reveal the phenomenon. As such, qualitative rather than quantitative methodology is called for.

The desire to learn the perspective of those who have experienced the phenomenon being studied: It is hoped that the rich data yielded by this small qualitative study will add to the information already gathered by a previous study. This study adds to the pool of adult children who have been willing to share their experience of parental death.

The lack of control that the investigator has over behavioral events within the area of study: Unlike the high degree of control over behavioral events that is a hallmark of qualitative research, this author had no control over the variables involved in this phenomenon.

Lack of prior research in this area from which to build a theory: As was evident in the review of literature, little research exists in this area of study. Qualitative, or narrative, research emphasizes theory building rather than hypothesis testing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). It is a process of exploration from which a theory is developed. As such, it is important that a theory not be developed a priori to the investigation. This investigation does not offer a theory nor does it seek to test a particular hypothesis. Rather, it seeks to contribute to a pool of data.

In qualitative research, reality is viewed as dynamic. It is seen as a process which is made up of seemingly divergent events that are interrelated. Given this, there are no simple or easily

identifiable cause and effect relationships in the phenomenon being studied (Loflund & Loflund, 1984). However, qualitative methodology does presume that there will come a time when the sample size will be deemed large enough, and/or the cumulation of data in the particular field of study will be deemed substantial enough, for generalization: the data being generated will become repetitive, patterns will clearly emerge, no new information, categories, or themes will be revealed (Morse, 1986). As previously noted, this study seeks to add to the limited pool of data currently available. For this reason alone, it marks an important contribution to the field.

In qualitative research, subjectivity, is not regarded as a contributor to bias but rather is seen as a means to access more in-depth information. The investigator and participant enter into an interactional process. Statements of truth: describing similarities, differences, patterns and themes, which are revealed by the data, make up the conclusions arrived at by the investigator. As such, universal truth statements are not sought (Morse, 1986; Loflund & Loflund, 1984).

These assumptions serve to illuminate the qualitative researcher's stance and functions: 1) to formulate research questions which involve the perspective of the participants; 2) to search for the differences in meaning among participant responses; 3) whenever possible, to utilize the exact words of the participants to describe their personal experiences rather than rely on the 'translation' of these words into numerical categories (Depner, Wethington & Ingersoll-Dayton, 1984; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The process by which these functions are fulfilled is through a series of sequential steps.

Survey and Interview Design

Given that this research represents a partial replication of an earlier study, this investigator had all of the participants complete the <u>The Parental Loss Questionnaire</u> (Appendix I) developed, designed and published by Secunda (2000), and then, on the basis of their written responses, followed-up with an open ended clarifying interview with a subset of the sample. Dennis P. Gehr, president of Dennis and Company, a consumer research organization in Stamford Connecticut, helped formulate the questionnaire. It is made up of open ended questions. This framework creates a minimum of restraint on the participant, and when combined with an interview, allows for clarification of the written responses and probing for greater detail regarding the phenomenon being studied. Participants can communicate details of their experience, including 'shades' of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Kidder & Judd, 1986; Miles & Hubberman, 1984). If skillfully facilitated by the researcher, the interview becomes a guided conversation. While maintaining a professional stance, the researcher shares enough of themselves to create a trusting, interactive environment. Together, researcher and participant share and gather data about the phenomenon, and in doing so, come to a better appreciation of it.

Each prospective participant was provided with a packet which contained: a letter which introduced the questionnaire and provided the prospective respondent with some basic instructions governing the overall process (see Appendix II); a consent form, which was prepared in accordance with the guidelines of the University sponsoring this study (see Appendix III); a copy of <u>The Parental Loss Questionnaire</u> (see Appendix I); and, a stamped, addressed envelope within which to return the consent form and survey. These documents were submitted for

approval to supervisors to ensure their clarity, appropriateness, and that they met the guidelines established by the University for ethical research practices.

Selection of Participants

Per Secunda's (2000) study, there were four basic criteria for selecting the participants: Firstly, they needed to have personally experienced the phenomenon being studied: parental death. Secondly, they had to have been twenty years of age or older when the phenomenon first occurred. Thirdly, a minimum of one year had to have elapsed since the occurrence of the phenomenon. Fourthly, they had to be willing to participate in the research project through sharing their experience with the investigator (Osborne, 1990). When prospective participants were identified, the investigator assessed them according to this criteria.

Prospective participants were self identified through snowball contact. The search was advertised by word of mouth in the community by the investigator, and the investigator's friends and colleagues. Each of the identified prospective participants, or the friend of that prospective participant, received the home and work telephone number of the investigator. When the prospective participant, or the friend of that prospective participant let the investigator know that they were interested in participating in the project, they were provided with the packet previously described. They were asked to review the documents and decide whether they wanted to take part in the research project.

Interview Procedures

As previously noted, the investigator chose to interview a subset of the original sample of questionnaire respondents. Since these participants had already signed the consent form and had completed the questionnaire, the purpose for the interview was explained: to further expand upon and/or clarify some of their written responses, and the issues of risk and confidentiality were verbally reviewed. Individual interview times and places were then arranged. Prior to initiating each interview, the investigator spent time joining with each of these participants to enhance their level of comfort and trust thereby enhancing the richness and depth of the data.

Each interview proceeded with the questionnaire (see Appendix I) serving only as a guide. The investigator asked probing questions, as appropriate, to elicit detailed information about the previously provided response and/or the participant's experience of parental death. The probing questions were, as far as possible, kept open ended in keeping with the nature of qualitative research described previously in this chapter. The open ended questions were used only when it appeared that the participant needed some guidance and direction to help them continue on with the telling of their experience.

Overcoming Possible Bias

It was necessary to review the interview process with attention to possible bias introduced by the interaction of the investigator and participant. In this regard three 'techniques' were employed: credibility and fittingness, auditability, and confirmability (Morse, 1986).

The credibility and fittingness of research procedure are said to have been addressed when the participant (the individual who supplied the data) is able to make sense of the analysis of the data. Results have a high degree of credibility if they are understandable and realistic to both the investigator and the participant who are part of the dynamic, divergent reality being investigated. In the interest of achieving credibility and fittingness, each participant was asked to review the analysis/summary of the data they had provided. Did they understand the analysis/summary? Was it a realistic and accurate reflection of their experience of the phenomenon?

Research procedure is said to be auditable when is can be replicated using the description of the research process. The description of this research process was submitted to other researchers who were asked to indicate the extent to which it clearly and explicitly described the research procedure.

Research procedure is confirmable when the results either confirm, or are consistent with, the findings of other researchers. When results are confirmed through the research of other investigators in the same or similar fields, they are non-idiosyncratic to the biases of the current researcher. It is with this in mind that the results were reviewed in the light of the previous research that studies the same phenomenon.

Sample

Qualitative research is often criticized on the basis of its samples and sample size. Since this particular study is simply aimed at adding to the pool of data available regarding the long-

term impact of parent death on adult children, and not at offering generalizations or theoretical

constructs for the phenomenon, a small sample size is sufficient (Morse, 1986). As such, a total

of ten participants completed the questionnaire; four of these underwent a clarifying interview

regarding one or more of their written responses.

Ethics

The confidentiality of the participants was respected throughout the research process. The

investigator did not initiate contact with the prospective participants until they, or the friend of

that prospective participant, requested it. All written correspondence with prospective

participants was kept in a file accessible only to the investigator. The completed questionnaires

did not bear the respondent's name but rather identified the respondent by a preassigned number.

Only the investigator knew, or possessed a written record - kept in safekeeping, of the name of

the corresponding participant. The questionnaires and other identifying data were locked in a file

drawer to which only the investigator has access. This study was conducted in accordance with

the ethics guidelines provided by the University of Wisconsin - Stout.

Analysis

Content analysis is an assembly of the data under categories. These same categories are

applied to the data provided by each respondent, as well as the overall data generated by the

study. Loflund and Loflund (1984) offer eleven categories that they found useful in qualitative

research design. These are meanings, practices, episodes, encounters, roles, relationships, groups,

organizations, settlements, worlds and lifestyles. These categories were kep in mind during the

review of the data as a whole.

So that a prior bias in categorization be minimized, the specific identification of the appropriate categories was left until after the data had been reviewed as a whole. This involved reading through the data collected by way of questionnaire, and as relevant, by supplemental clarifying interview. Only then were each of the participants' responses scrutinized for common categories and themes. When these obviously fit those identified and provided by Secunda (2000), the data was analyzed and organized accordingly. As new themes emerged, they were identified and transcribed in the participants' own language. The total number of respondents who fit the various categories and/or who voiced identified themes were represented in percentages.

CHAPTER 4

<u>RESULTS</u>

Survey Results: <u>The Parental Loss Questionnaire</u>

So as to maintain significance, percentages were represented in whole numbers only. As such, the totals do not always add up to 100 percent. Unlike Secunda's (2000) study, this author chose to indicate as 'not applicable' (N/A) when the respondent indicated it as such. Finally, the reader is reminded, when reviewing the results, that the sample consisted of ten people.

New themes, that is, those not present in Secunda's (2000) analysis of her results, have been typed in italics and, whenever possible, reflect the participants' own words.

Demographics

1.   Current age:

20's	----
30's	----
40's	40%
50's	50%
60's or older	10%

2.   Gender:

Male	20%
Female	80%

3.   Education Level: (check off highest level completed)

Grade 8 or less	----
Some high school	----
High school graduate (or G.E.D.)	----
Some college	30%
College graduate	20%

Specify undergraduate degree:

B.A.   2
B.S.   -
Other: -

Some graduate school	20%
Graduate school	20%

Specify graduate degree:

M.A.   1
M.S.   1
Other: -

Some post graduate school	----
Post-graduate school	10%

Specify post-graduate degree:

Ph.D. -
M.D.   -
LL.D. -
Other: 1

4.   Occupational Status:

Employed	70%
Unemployed	----
Homemaker	10%
Retired	----
Student	20%

5.   Marital Status:

Married	60%
Divorced	30%
Widowed	----
Never married	10%

6.   Childrearing Status:

  Have children   90%
  Do not have children 10%

7.   Sibling Status:

  Have siblings:

    Yes   90%
    No   10%

  If 'yes', specify your birth order:

    Youngest   20%
    Middle   30%
    Eldest   10%
    Other   30%

      2nd of 4 1
      2nd of 6 1
      5th of 9 1

Answers to Questions

8.   How old were you when your mother died?

  N/A   30%
  20's   ----
  30's   30%
  40's   30%
  50's   10%
  60's or older   ----
  Median age   43.1

9.   In what ways did your relationship change in the last years of her life?

  N/A   30%
  Very close/became friends 5%

Improved, mellowed	5%
Warm but roles reversed	10%
Warm but lived at distance	----
Increasingly distant emotionally	----
Estranged	----
Roles Reversed	40%
I became more confident	10%

10.   How old were you when your father died?

N/A	----
20's	10%
30's	40%
40's	20%
50's	30%
60's or older	----
Median age	42.3

11.   In what ways did your relationship change in the last years of his life?

Closer	10%
Mellowed	----
No change	30%
More distant emotionally	----
Role reversal	20%
Estranged	10%
Became more assertive	10%
Developed a new level of expressed intimacy	10%
I became more tolerant of his behavior	10%

12.   At the time of your parent(s) death, what was their marital status?

At mother's death:

N/A	30%
Married	20%
Widowed	30%
Separated	10%
Divorced	----
Remarried	10%

At father's death:

N/A	----
Married	50%
Widowed	----
Separated	10%
Divorced	----
Reconciliated/not remarried	10%
Remarried	30%

13.   If one of your parents is still alive, how has your relationship to him or her changed since the death of your other parent?

N/A	70%
Improved	10%
Deteriorated	----
No change	10%
Spend more time together	10%

14.   Did your surviving parent remarry?

N/A	60%
Yes	20%
No	20%

15.   Which sibling(s) were you closest to in childhood?

N/A		10%
Brothers		45%
older brother	3	
younger brother	1.5	
Sisters		25%
older sister	1	
younger sister	1.5	
Only have one sibling		
and we weren't close		20%

16.   Why were you close?

N/A	30%
Parents encouraged closeness	----

Closest in age	5%
Similar values and dispositions	15%
I was parent figure	20%
I looked up to him/her	10%
Affectionate but not close	----
Shared a common bond/ to protect one another	10%
Because of our age difference we were each confident in our 'only child' status	10%

17.   If your relationship was distant, why was it distant?

N/A	80%
Parents created rivalry, favoritism	----
Large age difference	5%
Little or nothing in common	5%
Brother a bully, troublemaker	----
Dysfunctional family	----
My brother was abusive toward me	10%

18.   Was one of you a "favorite" of either of your parents?

N/A		10%
Yes		45%
I was Dad's favorite	1.5	
Brother was Mom's favorite	1	
Sister was Mom's favorite	.5	
I was Mom's favorite	.5	
Brother was Dad's favorite	-	
Sister was Dad's favorite	.5	
I was perceived by sibs as favorite	-	
Both my older brother and I were Mom's favorites	1	
We each perceived the other(s) to be "favorites"	1	
No		45%
Parents made sure there were no favorites	-	
We each perceived the other(s) to be "favorites"	1	

19.   In what ways has your relationship to your siblings changed since your parent(s) died – are you closer, more distant, or is the relationship unchanged? Please explain.

N/A	10%
Closer to some or all	60%
Drifted away or estranged	----
Little or no change	30%

20.   If you are an only child, how has your relationship to extended family been affected?

N/A	90%
Not affected	----
Little or no family	----
Closer to aunt or uncle	10%
Virtually no relationship	----

21.   Did one sibling inherit more than another?

N/A	10%
No; equally divided	40%
Yes	10%
Nothing to inherit	10%
All went to Mom	20%
Stepmother/stepfather still alive	10%

22.   In what way, if at all, did the terms of your deceased parent's will, or disposition of his or her belongings, cause problems for you?

No major problems	85%
Significant problems	15%

23.   How, if at all, did the terms of the will and disposition of belongings cause problems for your siblings?

No problems	85%
Caused problems	15%

24.   If one or both of your parents are deceased, what are your overriding feelings about being an "adult orphan"?

Positive feelings	15%
Ambivalent feelings	----
Negative feelings (anger or ongoing sadness)	10%
I miss my dad but I don't feel	
like an "adult orphan"	20%
I don't like the term "adult orphan"	5%
I don't like being existentially alone - no	
home place/no longer a "safe haven"	20%
I don't like it - I guess I'll have to	

grow-up now and take care of myself   10%
There seems to be an element of
lonesomeness to "being orphaned"   10%

I felt more like an "adult orphan" when
my parents divorced   10%

25. Who in your family of origin - including grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, as well as siblings - are you closest to now?

Sibling(s)	63%
Aunt or uncle	6%
Not close to any	----
Cousins	22%
Surviving parent	5%
Own children	3%

26. Why are you close?

Always close	5%
Shared history, familiarity	10%
The relative appreciates me, is supportive	25%
We have alot in common aside from our shared history/shared values	45%
Sharing the stress of our mother's illness and the pain and responsibility of decisions affecting her	10%
She makes me laugh	5%

27. How has your marriage or romantic attachment - or the absence of a partner - been affected by your parent(s)'s death?

N/A	10%
Improved	45%
Deteriorated	20%
Not affected	20%
I have hung on to this relationship partly out of the need to be part of a family	5%

28. Since your parent's death, have you made any career changes?

Yes	50%
No	50%

29. If so, is this a direct result of the death?

N/A   50%
Yes   20%
No   30%

30. If you have children, how has your relationship to them changed since the death of your parent?

N/A   10%
Changed   60%
No change   30%

31. If you have no children, how do you feel about being the last of your line at this stage of your life?

N/A   80%
Okay or resigned or childless by choice   10%
Unsettled, horrible   ----
Still plan to have or adopt   ----
Our daughter is adopted and on some
level I like the notion that my genetic
line is severed   10%

32. In what ways, if any, have your friendships changed since the deaths of your parents?

Changed   50%
No change   50%

33. Looking back on your parent's deaths, what if anything, was left unsaid between you and the parent?

Nothing   40%
Wish I'd thanked them, shown appreciation   10%
Wish we'd talked more, had better relationship   15%
Everything; parent didn't express love or was neglectful   20%
Would have liked to tell my dad I forgive him for the
bad things he did, and how much I appreciated his
encouragement, sense of adventure, and his values   10%
Lots, I was so young I don't feel that we knew each
other   5%

34.   When your parents died did you seek help from a therapist, support group, pastoral counselor, other?

       Yes   45%
       No   55%

35.   Did this help you to come to terms with unfinished business with your parents and if so, how?

N/A	55%
Helped me be more objective, insights about parent	10%
Helped me redefine myself	----
Helped me give up anger	5%
Still working on it	----
Helped me work through grief	----
Helped me to let go of the power they had over me/have choices around my behaviors	20%
Able to address issues of abuse and neglect suffered as a child	10%

36.   What if anything, positive came out of your loss?

Discovered my strengths, wiser, can concentrate on self,	10%
I'm a better parent, set me free	----
I understand them better, greater sympathy, less angry at	----
I rose above family strife, I'm a good person despite their low opinion	----
Nothing; part of life	
Left with a renewed sense of appreciation and awe regarding the influence of the family	10%
I got out of a dysfunctional marriage, developed a very successful career; I began to live life	10%
I relaxed/felt relief	20%
I do not fear my own death	10%
Sparked a desire to live life to the fullest, prompted my decision to attend graduate school; provided me with a growing sense of self as competent woman	10%
It just feels like loss	10%
Closer relationship to siblings, relief at seeing the devastation of alcoholism and abuse come to an end; a sense of peace	10%

Reinforced how short and precious life is   10%

37.   In what ways have you and/or your siblings "stepped into the shoes" of your deceased parent - for example, by giving advice, or maintaining family ties, or keeping traditions such as specific holiday meals?

Have	90%
Have not	10%

38.   Do you now think of your mortality in a new way?

Yes	90%
No	10%

CHAPTER 5

<u>DISCUSSION</u>

This chapter summarizes what this study set out to find as well as the findings themselves. Suggestions are also made regarding future research on this topic. The author also presents some conclusions.

Summary

This study set out to examine, clarify and advance the understanding of the long-term impact of parent death on adult children in midlife by partially replicating Secunda's (2000) qualitative research.

Ten participants completed <u>The Parental Loss Questionnaire</u>; four of these underwent clarifying interviews on the basis of their written responses. The data collected confirmed the experience of losing a parent in midlife as a pivotal event, and gave rise to several overarching themes. Some of these themes reiterate those identified by Secunda (2000): a sense of relief and liberation coupled with an urgency and desire to live life to the fullest; a changed relationship to the surviving parent; improved sibling relationships; changed intimate partnerships; reassessed/changed relationships with one's own children; a greater reliance upon/valuing of friendships; a greater sense of confidence/self; the pursuit of new career goals; a keener sense of one's own mortality coupled with a realignment of one's priorities.

Limitations of This Research

One of the limitations of this study is that it relies upon retrospective data. Some of the data was recalled from many years ago. Perceptions and feelings about past events and circumstances often change.

Another obvious limitation is sample size. This is noted despite that fact that this author makes no attempt to make any generalizations from the results. The intent of the study was to add to the currently limited pool of available data on the phenomenon, and that is exactly what was achieved.

Finally, given that this study is a partial replication of another study, the author felt bound, perhaps unnecessarily so, to some of the definitions and parameters set out by the original researcher and, as such, replicated some of what had been criticized and found wanting in the original study. Were this author to repeat this study, this lapse in judgment would be corrected.

Future Research

A more systemic approach to studying the phenomenon certainly seems to be warranted. Research which takes into greater account family history, family of origin issues, and includes genograms would be of value to clinicians. At minimum, The Parental Loss Questionnaire ought to be modified to include circular questioning. Ideally, collateral data ought to be solicited from the surviving parent, siblings, spouses, as well as the participants' own children.

In this same vein, more meaningful data would likely be collected if The Parental Loss
Questionnaire were coupled with a structured interview process.

Studies that compare and contrast either same or different gender sibling experiences of
the phenomenon might shed some light as to the relevance of both gender and birth order. Much
may also be learned through the use of a more diverse sample in terms of gender, sexual
orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, and religious background or affiliation.
The research sample is Caucasian, middle class, highly educated, and grew-up in a traditionally
structured family.

Finally, there is a need to address those limitations identified previously: a true
longitudinal approach to the study of the phenomenon might be undertaken to counteract some of
the confounding variables introduced by the inclusion of retrospective data; The sample size
could be increased; and, those criticisms leveled by this author against Secunda's (2000) study,
and partially replicated in this one, need not be repeated.

Conclusions

Based on the results, it would indeed appear that parent death has been a defining event
for these adult children. All of the participants in this study were inspired to reevaluate their
lives, relationships and priorities. Many made significant changes – 90 percent of the respondents
identified favorable outcomes that they attributed directly to the deaths of one or both of their
parents.

These men and women spoke eloquently and poignantly: of their love for the deceased parent(s); of the gifts they had been given; of both the painful and pleasant memories they held dear; of their longing to hear or express that which went unsaid; of the displacement they experienced now that they could no longer "go home"; of their growing appreciation for family and friends; of experiencing self as adult and competent; of seeking out more satisfying relationships; of leaving unsatisfying marriages; of returning to school; of redirecting and starting careers; of addressing unresolved family of origin issues/family secrets; of overcoming the fear of their own deaths; of living fully each day; of the legacies they wished to leave behind, and more.

As such, I am tempted to reiterate that which Secunda (2000) concluded:

> Parental death is a defining event for adult offspring that, with regard to its impact on one's sense of self, often eclipses the variables of marital status, career achievement, being a parent oneself, or the cause and manner of parental death.

> Far from being an insignificant event, parental death is *the* milestone – provides *the* indelible line of demarcation – that enables adult offspring to begin to determine whether or not they are, or still must learn how to be, truly grown up.

> (Secunda, 2000, xxxix)

The author wishes to make a comment in the first person. The study of this phenomenon was prompted by my own anticipatory grief. I entered graduate school, at the age of forty-six,

within one year of my mother's near fatal stroke. Some years prior, on the heels of my father's

bypass surgery, I had left behind a successful, well established business career in human

resources to work as a counselor. Never before have I considered the intersection of these events.

Truth be known, I am still unwilling to attribute these changes entirely to the life threatening

events in my parents' lives. However, I do link them to these, as well as other life events which

made me more keenly aware of my own mortality.

      While heartened and somewhat comforted by all that I have learned in this regard, I no

less dread the day when I will join the ranks of these men and women. The greatest gift they have

given me is the benefit of their acquired wisdom: I am cherishing the time left with both of my

parents, fostering my relationships with siblings and friends, and am living each day as fully as I

possibly can, all the while pausing to savor these experiences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ainsworth, M.D. (1985). Attachments across the life span. <u>Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine</u>, <u>61</u>(9), 792-812.

Angel, M. (1987) <u>Recovering from the loss of a parent</u>. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Angell, G.B., Dennis, B.G., & Dumain, L.E. (1998). Spirituality, resilience, and narrative: Coping with parental death. <u>Families in Society</u>, <u>79</u>(6), 615-630.

Becker, E. (1973) <u>The denial of death</u>. New York: The Free Press.

Birtchnell, J. (1970). Depression in relation to early and recent parent death. <u>British Journal of Psychiatry</u>, <u>116</u>, 299-306.

Bowlby, J. (1980) <u>Attachment and loss</u>. (Vol 3) NewYork: Basic Books.

Bunch, J. (1971). The influence of parental death anniversaries upon suicide dates. <u>British Journal of Psychiatry</u>, <u>118</u>, 621-626.

Carter, B., & McGoldrick, M. (1999) <u>The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives</u>. (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Chiriboga, D. (1981). The developmental psychology of middle age. In J. Howells (Ed.), <u>Modern perspectives in the psychiatry of middle age</u>. NewYork: Brunner/Mazel.

Delahanty Douglas, J. (1990). Patterns of change following parent death in midlife adults. <u>Omega</u>, <u>22</u>(2), 123-137.

Depner, C.E., Wethington, E., & Ingersoll-Dayton, B. (1984). Social support: Methodological issues in design and measurement. <u>Journal of social issues</u>, <u>40</u>(4), 37-54.

Doka, K.J. (1992). The monkey's paw: The role of inheritance in the resolution of grief. <u>Death Studies</u>, <u>16</u>, 45-58.

Donnelly, K. (1987) <u>Recovering from the loss of a parent</u>. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company.

Edelman, H. (1994) <u>Motherless daughters: The legacy of loss</u>. Reading, MA: Addison – Wesley.

Erikson, E. (1963) <u>Childhood and society</u>. New York: Norton.

Fristad, M.A., Jedel, R., Weller, R.A., & Weller, E.B. (1993). Psychosocial functioning in children after the death of a parent. <u>American Journal of Psychiatry</u>, <u>150</u>(3), 511-513.

Furman, E. (1974) <u>A child's parent dies</u>. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1981) <u>Effective evaluation: Improving the usefulness of evaluation results through responsive and naturalistic approaches</u>. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983) <u>Ethnography: Principles and practice</u>. New York: Tavistock.

Jacques, E. (1965). Death and the mid-life crisis. <u>International Journal of Psychoanalysis</u>, <u>46</u>, 502-514.

Jung, C. (1971). The stages of life. In J. Campbell (Ed.), <u>The portable Jung</u>. New York: Viking Press.

Kastenbaum, R. (1977). Death and development through the lifespan. In H. Feifel (Ed.), <u>New meanings of death</u>. New York: McGraw Hill.

Kendler, K.S., Neale, M.C., Prescott, C.A., Kessler, R.C., Heath, A.C., Corey, L.A., & Eaves, L.J. (1996). Childhood parental loss and alcoholism in women: A causal analysis using a twin-family design. <u>Psychology and Medicine</u>, <u>26</u>(1), 79-95.

Kidder, L.H., & Judd, C.M. (1986) <u>Research methods in social relations</u>. (5th ed.) New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston.

Kunz, B. (1991). Exploring the grief of adolescents after the death of a parent. <u>Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health Nursing</u>, <u>4</u>(3), 105-109.

LeGrand, L.E. (1986) <u>Coping with seperation and loss as a young adult</u>. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

Levy, A. (1999) <u>The orphaned adult</u>. Reading, MA: Perseus.

Loflund, J. (1971) <u>Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis</u>. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Loflund, J., & Loflund, L.H. (1984) <u>Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis</u>. (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Loflund, L.H. (1986). When others die. <u>Generations</u>, <u>10</u>, 59-61.

Malinak, D.P., Hoyt, M.F., & Patterson, V. (1979). Adult's reactions to the death of a parent: A preliminary study. American Hournal of Psychiatry, 136, 1152-1156.

Marshall, V.W., & Rosenthal, C.J. (1982). Parental death: A life course maker. Generations, 7, 30-39.

McGoldrick, M., & Walsh, F. (1983). A systemic view of family history and loss. In M. Aronson & L. Wolberg (Eds.), Group and family therapy. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

McLeod, J.D. (1991). Childhood parental loss and adult depression. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 32(3), 205-220.

Miles, M., & Hubberman, A.M. (1984) Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

Morse, J.M. (1986). Quantitative and qualitative research: Issues in sampling. In P.I. Chin (Ed.), Nursing research methodology. Rockville, MD: Aspen.

Moss, M.S., & Moss, S.Z. (1983). The impact of parental death on middle aged children. Omega, 14(1), 65-75.

Moss, M.S., Resch, N., & Moss, S.Z. (1997). The role of gender in middle-age children's responses to parent death. Omega, 35(1), 43-65.

Myers, E. (1986) When parents die. New York: Viking Press.

Osborne, J.W. (1990) How to do a phenomenological research project. Unpublished manuscript. Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Osborne, J.W. (1990). Some basic existential – phenomenological research methodology for counselors. Canadian Journal of Counselling, April, 79-91.

Osterweiss, M., Solomon, R., & Green, M. (1984) Bereavement: Reactions, consequences, and care. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Owen, G., Fulton, R., & Markusen, E. (1982). Death at a distance: A study of family survivors. Omega, 13, 191-225.

Parkes, C.M. (1972) Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life. New York: International Universities Press.

Patten, S.B. (1991). The loss of a parent during childhood as a risk factor for depression. Canadian Journal of Psuchiatry, 36(10), 706-711.

Perkins, H.W., & Harris, L.B. (1990). Familial bereavement and health in adult life course perspective. <u>Journal of Marriage and the Family</u>, <u>52</u>, 233-241.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. <u>Qualitative Studies</u>, <u>8</u>(1), 5-23.

Riegel, K. (1976). The dialectics of human development. <u>American Psychologist</u>, <u>31</u>, 689-699.

Rothenberg, R.E. (1983). The orphan archetype. <u>Psychological Perspectives</u>, <u>14</u>, 181-194.

Scharlach, A.E. (1991). Factors associated with filial grief following the death of an elderly parent. <u>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</u>, <u>61</u>(2), 307-313.

Scharlach, A.E., & Fredriksen, K.I. (1993). Reactions to the death of a parent during midlife. <u>Omega</u>, <u>27</u>(4), 307-319.

Secunda, V. (2000) <u>Losing your parents, finding your self</u>. New York: Hyperion.

Silverman, P.R., & Worden, J.W. (1992). Children's reactions in the early months after the death of a parent. <u>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</u>, <u>62</u>(1), 93-104.

Staudacher, C. (1987) <u>Beyond grief: A guide for recovering from the death of a loved one</u>. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Staudacher, C. (1991) <u>Men and grief: A guide for men surviving the death of a loved one</u>. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Thompson, M.P., Kaslow, N.J., Kingree, J.B., King, M., Bryant, L. Jr., & Tey, M. (1998). Psychological symptomology following parental death in a predominantly minority sample of children and adolescents. <u>Journal of Clinical Child Psychology</u>, <u>27</u>(4), 434-441.

Uhlenberg, P. (1980). Death and the family. <u>Journal of Family History</u>, <u>5</u>, 313-320.

Umberson, D. (1992). Relationships between adult children and their parents: Psychological consequences for both generations. <u>Journal of Marriage and the Family</u>, <u>54</u>, 664-674.

Umberson, D. (1995). Marriage as support or strain? Marital quality following the death of a parent. <u>Journal of Marriage and the Family</u>, <u>57</u>, 709-723.

Umberson, D., & Chen, M.D. (1994). Effects of a parent's death on adult children: Relationship salience and reaction to loss. <u>American Sociological Review</u>, <u>59</u>, 152-168.

Umberson, D., & Terling, T. (1997). The symbolic meaning of relationships: Implications for psychological distress following relationship loss. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 14(6), 723-744.

Viorst, J. (1986) Necessary losses. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Walsh, F., & McGoldrick, M. (1991) Living beyond loss: Death in the family. New York: Norton.

Watkins, S.C., Menken, J.A., & Bongaarts, J. (1987). Demographic foundations of family change. American Sociological Review, 52, 346-358.

Weiss, R.S. (1988). Loss and recovery. Journal of Social Issues, 44(3), 37-52.

Winsborough, H.H. (1980). A demographic approach to the life cycle. In K.W. Back (Ed.), Life course: Integrative theories and exemplary populations. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Worden, W.J. (1996) Children and grief. New York: Guilford Press.

Yin, R.K. (1984) Case study research: Design and methods. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

APPENDIX I

<u>THE PARENTAL LOSS QUESTIONNAIRE</u>

1.   Current Age:

2.   Gender:

        Male   _____
        Female   _____

3.   Education Level: (check off highest level completed)

        Grade 8 or less   _____
        Some high school   _____
        High school graduate (or G.E.D.)   _____
        Some college   _____
        College graduate   _____

            Specify undergraduate degree:

                B.A.   _____
                B.S.   _____
                Other: _____   Specify: _____

        Some graduate school   _____
        Graduate school   _____

            Specify graduate degree:

                M.A.   _____
                M.S.   _____
                Other: _____   Specify: _____

        Some post-graduate school   _____
        Post-graduate school   _____

            Specify post-graduate degree:

                Ph.D. _____
                M.D.   _____
                LL.D. _____
                Other: _____   Specify: _____

4.   Occupational Status:

      Employed   _____
      Unemployed   _____
      Homemaker   _____
      Retired   _____
      Student   _____

5.   Marital Status:

      Married   _____
      Divorced   _____
      Widowed   _____
      Never married   _____

6.   Childrearing Status:

      Have children   _____
      Do not have children _____

7.   Sibling Status:
      Have siblings:

          Yes   _____
          No   _____

      If 'yes', specify your birth order:

          Youngest   _____
          Middle   _____
          Eldest   _____
          Other   _____   Specify: _____

8.   How old were you when your mother died?   _____

9.   In what ways did your relationship change in the last years of her life?

10.   How old were you when your father died?   _____

11.   In what ways did your relationship change in the last years of his life?

12.   At the time of your parent(s) death, what was their marital status?

13.   If one of your parents is still alive, how has your relationship to him or her changed since the death of your other parent?

14.   Did your surviving parent remarry?

15.   Which sibling(s) were you closest to in childhood?

16.   Why were you close?

17.   If your relationship was distant, why was it distant?

18.   Was one of you a "favorite" of either of your parents?

19.   In what ways has your relationship to your siblings changed since your parent(s) died – are you closer, more distant, or is the relationship unchanged? Please explain.

20.   If you are an only child, has your relationship to extended family been affected?

21.   Did one sibling inherit more than another?

22.   In what way, if at all, did the terms of your deceased parent's will, or disposition of his or her belongings, cause problems for you?

23. How, if at all, did the terms of the will and disposition of belongings cause problems for your siblings?

24. If one or both of your parents are deceased, what are your overriding feelings about being an "adult orphan"?

25. Who in your family of origin – including grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, as well as siblings – are you closest to now?

26.   Why are you close?

27.   How has your marriage or romantic attachment – or the absence of a partner – been affected by you parent(s)'s death?

28.   Since your parent's death, have you made any career changes?

29.   If so, is this a direct result of the death?

30.   If you have children, how has your relationship to them changed since the death of your parent?

31.   If you have no children, how do you feel about being the last of your line at this stage of your life?

32. In what ways, if any, have your friendships changed since the death(s) of your parent(s)?

33. Looking back on your parent(s)'s death(s), what if anything, was left unsaid between you and the parent?

34. When your parent(s) died, did you seek help from a therapist, support group, pastoral counselor, other?

35.   Did this help you to come to term with unfinished business with your parents, and if so, how?

36.   What if anything, positive came out of your loss?

37.   In what ways have you and/or your siblings "stepped into the shoes" of your deceased parent – for example, by giving advice, or maintaining family ties, or keeping traditions such as specific holiday meals?

38.   Do you think of your mortality in a new way?

APPENDIX II

<u>LETTER TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS</u>

Dear Participant,

I know your time is precious to you. So, I am especially appreciative of the fact that you have volunteered to complete the enclosed questionnaire.

Unlike some surveys, this one will take you more than 20 minutes to complete. Ultimately, the amount of time you spend is dependent upon: how thoughtful you are with your answers, how open you are willing to be, and how much time you are willing to devote to it. I trust you will give it the consideration you feel it deserves so we can both benefit from the process.

Before you begin, please read and sign the enclosed Human Subjects Consent Form.

There is no right or wrong answer. I am asking you to share your personal experience. Nor is there a correct way to complete this questionnaire: complete it in one sitting or over a period of several days, consult with those who are close to you or not (provided that in the end, your answers reflect <u>your</u> experience), and/or answer the questions out of sequence or in the order they are presented.

Please return the completed questionnaire, along with your signed Human Subjects Consent Form, by no later than _____. Use the stamped and addressed envelope I have provided.

Finally, regardless of the quality of the 'data' I am able to collect, my hope is that you will find some measure of meaning in this process.

Sincerely,

Virginia Murauskas

APPENDIX III

<u>HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSENT FORM</u>

I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time, without prejudice.

I further understand that the purpose of this study is to examine, clarify and advance the understanding of the long-term impact of parent death on adult children in midlife.

I also understand that, as a subject, I will be asked to complete <u>The Parental Loss Questionnaire</u>.

I am aware that this study involves little risk to me and may help me to identify and/or process some of my feelings, as well as examine some of the events, prompted by my parent(s)'s death.

I understand that any information about me that is collected during this study will be held in the strictest confidence. At the conclusion of this study, all records that identify individual participants will be destroyed.

Participant's Signature:_____ Date:_____

Questions or concerns about participation in this research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher (Virginia Murauskas (651) 213-4608) or research advisor (Dr. John Williams, U.W. Stout) and second to Dr. Ted Knaus, Chair, U.W. Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11HH, U.W. Stout, Menomonie, WI 54751. Phone (715) 232-1126.