

Prison Guards, Administrators, and convicts all feel the hurt, emotional pain and heart aches with death of loved ones and friends. I would like to explore in this work the grieving process through my thoughts about the emotionally charged human condition along with my personal grief. How I felt. How I was treated. The strangeness. The out of place. The actual heart pain knowing the finality...of some one not being with us any longer. And the internal emotional distress that is left.

With so many double cells and dorms now the ability to isolate oneself for alone time becomes more and more difficult while serving a prison sentence. Every person grieves in what is unique for them. And, as in the free world, the honestly proffered condolences from staff and fellow convicts states more than the words themselves.

During the 1998 November exodus of half the inmate population at the then Southeastern Correctional Center at the Bridgewater, Massachusetts Prison Complex for upgrades, to the new Souza-Baranowski level seven supermax in Shirley Massachusetts my ticket was also punched for the ride. While waiting the twenty months to be returned to the Southeastern Medium facility in October of 1999, my mother along with her best friend visited to tell me in person that my father had died and was buried two weeks prior. The news hit me very hard. Twenty seven years into this life sentence and now I was being confronted with the realization of one of my biggest fears. I had a multitude

of arguments and confrontations for years with my dad. And the last twenty years or so we were finally having a real relationship. It was real comforting to me that the last thing my dad had said to me on the phone was " I love you son. " Something he couldn't say to me when I was a youngster. I am so grateful that he left me with the power of those particular words concerning dad and myself.

My dad was a purple heart World War II Veteran that parachuted into the Black Forest of Germany. He never talked about the war. He worked two and three jobs most of his younger life to support his family. My mother was explaining to me that he was going down the cellar stairs of his home when he just fell brain dead from an aneurism. He was cremated and buried in the Veterans area of the Hull, Massachusetts Cemetery.

I sat there in this maximum security visiting room still under medium security status weeping with mom trying to comfort me. For a guy pretty much able to control and hide my feelings , all part of my survival instincts, I was emotionally raw and broken. That was it. I couldn't call him anymore. He was just gone! It hurt and I didn't have the strength to hide the pain.

I was angry that I hadn't been able to go to the funeral. My mother was sorry that she didn't think I would be able to go. I loved my mom also and no way would I blame her for any mistakes.

Mom and dad had been divorced for a couple of decades and there was a lot of animosity between them. In fact, family members came down on one side or the other. I refused to take sides and was punished for it by being snubbed. Something I attribute more at them being angry with me for not being there for them as their older brother and the embarrassment of my arrest and life sentence at 22 in 1972. When a family member goes to jail they're not the only one punished.

On the way back to my cell block I was surprised by the sergeant whom was normally brusque. He spoke to me politely saying "I'm sorry about your father Paul". Then he told me if I needed anything or should I feel the need to speak with someone or any kind of help to ask for him and he would make himself available. I was struck by his humanity and told him thank you. I'll be alright. I leaned hard on my faith that day and night. For me it is the hope that is my faith that sustains me and allows me to cope when my strength wains. And this course is true for many things. Grieving being probably the most dynamically profound.

Many of the men in my block at the time signed a condolence card. I still have it as it means much to me.

Since my father's death in 1999, I've lost my mother in 2013. My sister Cyndi in 2015. My sister Donna in 2016. And my brother Joseph in 2018.

When Ma Ruth (my mom) passed, I learned what happened and when from a phone call I'd made to my brother Joe. Ma was eighty two and had been ill for a while. Her memory had been misfiring for a number of years. The last time I spoke with her she was home and my sisters Cathy and Cyndi were looking after her along with my brother Joe. They gave her the phone and she was laughing saying ;

'Hello! Who's this?"

"Paul!" I answered.

"Your one of my kids?"

"Yes." I'm your oldest son.

"Oh Paul" , my first born. " I'm sorry honey. My mind plays tricks in me."

We talked for a short while. She tired easily. I think we both knew this could be our last talk in the back of our minds.

I learned some time in the eighties that my mother had waited three days at a bus station for me when I was sixteen. She had never told me. I had been staying in Wisconsin and was supposed to take the bus to Boston. I cashed the ticket in at Chicago and survived the streets for several months. I had no idea the pain and worry I caused mom. I just had to tell her again how sorry I am still.

My mom swam across the Charles river when she was a teenager and used to ride her bike off the pier at Columbia Point in South Boston.

When she was seventeen she came home to find her cancer ridden father had hung himself. She married and had me shortly after. Mom aquired an LPN license along the way and waitressed at times later to be be a caregiver with her long time friend Barabara.

As I talked with Joe he had a hard time keeping his composure as did I while we spoke. Joe told me that my mother didn't want to be waked. She didn't want people gawking at her. But he would do so for me to be able to see her. I much always expected to place my hand on my mothers coffin and have a moment when she passed. I wasn't sure if I would be allowed out but believe I would have been approved to go. I did not want to be denied and at the same time I suffer real bad motion sickness. The only right choice for me was to grieve in my cell. My biggest regret is that my mother never got to see me return to society and be the citizen that I want to be. She did know of the changes I made in my life and was proud of much of what I've become. The politics of change prevented my opportunity for commutation in the mid nineties. With Ma gone I went to work as usual to keep myself busy. Every so often I'd start to break up inside and fight through it. I noticed the kitchen lieutenant looking at me in "a way" so I told him what happened and he told me to take a few days. I told him I'd rather work and keep busy. He told me if I changed my mind to let him know. Having something

to do helped me.

I received a lot of support from a few close friends and a lot of lifers. As word traveled a number of staff that have known me over the years also offered their condolences.

The kind words offered landed on ears most welcomed. When my sister Cyndi passed in 2015 I was reeling with grief and remorse. Losing my little sister that had grown into this really great person, a mom, business woman who took care of the family business and ran the home while feeding her chickens and two horses along with a couple of dogs she loved. And during any family crisis Cyndi was there helping out.

Cyndi was in her early fifties. My brother Robert also living in Maine about a half hour drive from her suffered a broken upper back from a fall off a ladder. Don't you know, there's Cyndi, checking on him. Cutting his grass and shoveling snow when winter came the year before she passed.

For several years I had lost touch with Cyndi. Her and her husband ran their business out of their home. I mistakenly called on Sundays. I never got an answer so I eventually gave up. This was yet another case of me shooting myself in the foot so to speak. I was thinking she didn't want to hear from me for some reason. Like maybe her husband didn't care for me... I just ~~reason~~. I didn't know. I wasn't mad. I thought it was about my being in jail for armed robbery and murder. As I grew older and began

to understand what my younger six siblings must have had to go through because of my arrest and conviction, on top of their being left without their older brother growing up. So I excepted no answer in a painful way and tried to not think about it. One week day I wanted to speak to her. I tried the number and she answered. She was so happy to hear from me. I was a little confused. She told me to call when ever I wanted. Where in a future call Cyndi happened to tell me that Sunday was her and her husband's day. In summer they took off on motorcycles and in the winter they went out for the day on their snowmobiles. all over Maine. For over three years we were speaking on the phone and she would help me out with a few dollars here and there.

My strongest memory of Cyndi as a child is at seventeen I was released from a thirty day jail sentence for drunken and disorderly behavior. When I got home this little seven year old girl just hugged me and hugged me telling me she loved her big brother and wanted me to stay home.

Cyndi was suffering with headaches and her doctor said she was fine. My brother Joe convinced her to come to Boston and have the doctors at the Mass. General look at her. She was diagnosed with a brain tumor and tumors on her lungs. I was able to have a few short calls with her for a couple of weeks. She went into the hospital and a few days later she was transfered

to a hospice.

Speaking with Joe he told me that Cyndi was not going to live much longer and he was headed to Maine right away.

Joe held Cyndi's hand telling her that it was okay. The family were all there. And " Paul said to hug you for him and he loves you very much." And as Joe did this she squeezed his hand from her sleeping state, sighed, and passed away. even as I write these memories my profound sense of loss has teared my face. I still feel that Cyndi was too young and it should have been me. Not her. I'm the oldest but it makes no difference. What ever God's plan for me, like it or not, that's the way it is.

Just about a year later as I was connected on the phone with my brother Joe he told me he was just about to call the institution for me to call him. He started with a cracked and breaking voice to tell me that our sister Donna had died. I didn't know what to say. I just kind of sat there on the floor which I never do and rubbed my head and wiped my eyes. Joe was hurting too and I wanted to comfort him. He told me what he knew and we talked about our younger sister.

She had recently had a number of strokes and we all expected her to fully recover. When the call ended we both needed some alone time to figure out what had just happened. Donna was two years older than Cyndi. They were both young. When I was housed at the Baystate Correctional facility in Norfolk Massachusetts I was close enough that Donna could visit me.

We sat and talked and had a lot of laughs and sifted through some of the family infighting that I was more of an observer than a participant. I really wasn't happy about any of it. With Irish-Polish family members emotions run hard and strong.

Donna Donna's second child Kevin died at birth June 11, 1984. She was devastated. And was plagued with issues that she came out on top of after long battles. She had a good life with a great guy that still loves her so much and misses her terribly deep rooted in his being.

My fondest memory with Donna goes back to when I was fourteen living in Malden Mass. This boy her age hit her in the face. So, I smacked him. His brother a foot taller than me showed up and before he swung on me I broke his nose with a frozen fudgeicle. Then I turned and ran as fast as I could. It took this kid about thirty steps to catch me where we fought a bit and and I ended up with a broken pair of glasses. I was proud as anyone could be of protecting my little sister.

Donna was planing a trip around the world with her husband. I'm sad that she never got to do that .

There is a lot about Donna's life that I know little of. She visited me a couple of times with her husband years ago so I got to know him a bit. He has visited since Donna's passing and we keep in touch. Donna would write out of the blue once in quite awhile like it was yesterday. I was always happy to hear from her. I would usually hear how she was from Joe.

I tried to call him at least every other week. He spoke with everyone else in the family and Donna usually called some one different every few months and how she was doing would be passed along. I knew she drove a school bus and liked the job a number of years ago. She really liked going to one of the casinos on the weekends. My brother Joe told me that she loved the experience. She had two beautiful cats she thought the world of. In February of 2018 I called my brother Joe and my niece told me that Joe was in the hospital. He had a heart attack. Joe was very ill the past five years struggling with liver failure and a knee that needed to be replaced. His kidney's and other organs were beginning to give him more problems. He would start to improve and then crash again. Still he was there for us when we needed him. I look back now and find it hard to believe the inner strength of this man. He stepped up in time of family crisis and filled the roll I wasn't able to of family patriarch. And he was my lifeline to the outside world. Joe made it home for the Patriots AFC Championship game. I spoke with him on the phone that week. The last thing he said to me was " good bye Paul " as the call ended. I felt weird and fidgety by his choice of good bye and almost called him right back but felt unsure. He wouldn't have told me and I believe he was aware that his health was slipping further than he wanted to let on. I know I had this sinking feeling with a certain degree of worry which becomes normal as part of my prison life to carry alongside the daily activities mostly suffered and survived to forces outside my control.

The day before Valentine's Day I called my brother. My niece Allison answered the phone to tell me that she was just about to call the prison to have me call. Allison told me that she was very sorry. My brother passed away. I knew this was a possibility. I had so hoped that he was going to fully recover. She began giving me the details through tears. I did my best to try and comfort her offering sincere words of just how good a man her father was. And for her to hold onto the great memories of times she shared with her dad. This was a real difficult call for me. I was devastated myself. My brother Joe was executor of my Last Will and Testament as well as my health care proxy. And pretty much my guardian. We were brothers and friends. My brother Joe came to know me better than anyone. And he believed I didn't get a fair trial after he read my transcripts on his own volition. And he believed the State wrong not to let me out of prison.

When the call ended I returned to my cell. The fellow I shared the cell with was playing cards in the day room. I got on my bunk facing the wall and sobbed like a small lost child. The next morning I told the CO in charge of my floor that my brother had died and I needed to see a lifer close friend on a block down stairs. He told me he was sorry to hear about my brother and to go ahead down stairs. I followed the procedures and went to the bubble where the CO there also expressed his condolences. My friend was there with his Christian celly and they prayed over me while I sobbed uncontrollably. Being able to have this interaction of prayer and Christian conversation

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ESSAY ON INCARCERATED GRIEVING
BY PAUL HENRY JOSEPH KOSTKA PAGE TWELVE

in a spiritual way was beneficial to my wellbeing and ability to get through the pain.

Joseph Kostka served in the United States Air Force during the Vietnam War. He served as an MP guarding military bases in Thailand and also was Special Forces that went into Cambodia that he was finally allowed to talk about. He contracted malaria in Southeast Asia and almost died. The malaria caused him numerous health issues and he died still waiting for assistance from the VA. He served in the Federal Marshals areas of law enforcement and was a highly trained individual that had also trained others prior to 911. I have the highest respect for our Military and all our hero's. And like my dad my brother Joe is a hero.

For several years I worked for a guard in the prison kitchen here at NCCI Gardner. Unexpectedly he passed on leaving a wife and three children after a freak accident. Being incarcerated for close to half a century, when calamity strikes those around me, I am also affected. Just because I am imprisoned does not mean there is no humanity in me. To the contrary. I've seen so many young personnel of diverse personality in different capacities enter into the system to retirement. When tragedy strikes out of the blue being so long in medium custody I express this with others because its true and right. What's a sad fact is this. In a higher security setting my peers would shun or beat the crap out of me possibly should I express any feelings for " the other side " because of the barriers they have erected in their lives. I understand this and I have no answers.

Another guard that I want to make particular mention of left a wife and three small children after a really gruesome car accident. This man was sorely missed by many of us fellows that had avocations in the program he had charge of. His children loved to find shells and small shiny items at the beach and donate them to guys like myself. They would get to see these trinkets as part of lighthouse lamps and such at the Titicut Gift Shop out in front of the main gate. There was not any way for me to offer condolences or anything through a card etc...The guards name is Robert Phillips and he passed away in the 1980's while employed at the now closed Southeastern Correctional Center in West Bridgewater Massachusetts. He was a good man that did his job fairly and had the respect of inmates and staff alike.

I have never been to anyones funeral. Therefore I wanted to write about a tough subject that's probably given little thought.

With so many men and woman locked up for numerous years losing loved ones and friends as well as jailor's is quite frankly facts of life. I chose this forum as an opportunity to try and honor those I have lost and cared about.

PAUL HENRY JOSEPH KOSTKA