# Sudden Death Grief and Anticipated Grief: Two different journeys

**(Experience) The stern lights of a ship, which illumine only the track it has passed. Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

Having experienced grief previously, I assumed I would be able to move on through life after the death of my mother in November 2010. I thought myself well prepared since I had spent the last ten years creating my new life after my son passed from injuries he sustained in an automobile accident. While caring for my mother, I convinced myself that becoming knowledgeable about Alzheimer’s disease, its progress, symptoms and behaviors would arm me with the necessities to flow through the process with her. Talking with caregivers, professionals and attending seminars also provided me with information to recognize what I was observing and what she might be experiencing as she walked through the course of her disease. The internet was also helpful in accessing immediate gratification when questions arose about difficult and different behaviors or an illness or symptom developed or when I was attempting to validate what I thought I was experiencing with her in regards to our changing and deteriorating relationship. All this was helpful, but only for the time that I needed it prior to her actual passing.

My son Zac passed in a hospital when we told the staff to remove the life support apparatus. I was prepared, in theory (which is located in the mind not the heart!) for his body to cease to be. I was not prepared for the immeasurable pain that I was to experience after that moment. But time produced a past for me; I chose to create a new life for myself and life transcended into a new reality. With my mother’s passing, a different set of skills were necessary to guide me through this new view of death.

Grief is different from person to person and from relationship to relationship. I did not have a Pollyanna idea about what would occur during the caretaking process and I was prepared to allow my mother to travel in her new world while I attempted to observe and understand her journey and care for this new spirit who was now my mother. I did not deny the anticipated grief to come. I just did not prepare myself for the differences in the grief and the issues to be faced after her death.

The pain and grief after Zac’s death was intense, overpowering and overwhelming. I was shattered and my destroyed world required re-creation. But my parental grief compelled me to recognize and confront loss in different forms and on a variety of fronts. The grief after my mother’s death was unique and the following were just a few of the components that have defined my process:

* Our family history died with my mother. Besides my personal relationship with her being severed, family dynamics changed, no more memories will be made that include the entire biological family and family history is permanently altered from the entire life’s previous experience. No more family lore can or will be communicated, shared or verified. The challenge is now to accept and rewrite the new history for our generation and the grandchildren.
* Roles changed from adult child to mature adult caretaker. (roles changed during the caretaking period of her disease but a decision-maker role was established after the parental death)
* Regardless of her diminishing state the last few years, I had to accept the physical death. Forewarning of impending death due to the disease is immaterial at this point and separate from the actual death. Secondary to this, when memories of the pre-illness mother returned, the loss of my “real” mother immerged and I had to transform that loss into memories of our “historical” mother.
* Although I have a solid belief in the afterlife and was relieved and happy for her to have shed this broken body, I also had to break the physical bonds that were created between us so that I could accept and transform my continuing life.
* I was relieved of my caretaker role which not only absorbed much of my energy but affected other areas of my life. Her death: 1). Extinguished friendships I developed with her facility and Hospice caregivers (she was in Hospice three times) 2). I had to recognize and let go of the rituals I developed in the caretaking role like purchasing toiletries, clothes, etc, visits on a scheduled and unscheduled basis 3). Seeking and maintaining ongoing stimulation activities (puzzles, flowers, helium balloons, chocolate, talking toys, etc)
* Additionally to above: Elimination of the role necessitated a change in focus to who am I now and who will I continue to be without the relationship with my mother.

I had a preconceived notion that I would experience the loss of self after her death but involvement in this process has proven much different from that experienced after Zac’s death.

It is a horrific challenge to observe a parent’s slow decline and ultimate death but rewards can be gained through the grief journey if the choice is made to recognize them. I am so thankful that I was able to care for my mother and that I was a part of her life story. The learning in this chapter of my soul would not have been possible and I am so grateful that she helped write this one for me. My story would have concluded with different gifts. The pain has been worth the benefits of this relationship.

One must be willing to experience the pain, open and search their heart and re-create the new you. I am so thankful that I had the rich opportunity to learn from two great teachers in my life. I was blessed for the two of them enabled my ship to illumine two tracks and I am so grateful to both of them. Their lights will forever guide me as I choose to revisit their positive memories over and over again…