Unmentionables
by Kenneth J. Doka

One of my aunts was so very prim and proper. Even as a child, I would get amused by the fact that she referred to certain clothes such as underwear, bras, and girdles as “unmentionables”—things that could never be mentioned in polite discourse. Her laundry, if she described it, would consist of “shirts, blouses, and various unmentionables.”

Yet as I study grief, I realize that we too have our unmentionables; certain reactions that are barely, if at all, ever discussed even in our most important works. Perhaps we wish to sanitize these feelings or ignore them. Yet, much as we like, the unmentionables may be very much part of our grief.

One of the most prominent unmentionables is jealousy. Rarely do we see it listed as a possible reaction to a significant loss. Yet it is both common and natural to feel jealous. We may wonder why we lost someone we loved when others are spared. Years ago, I spoke with a man who wondered why his non-smoking wife died of lung cancer while a neighbor’s wife smoked regularly. As he watched her smoke outside the house, he plaintively asked: “I cannot understand why my wife died of that horrible disease—and yet Harry’s wife is never sick. Why does he still have his wife when I no longer have mine?” In another case, a bereaved mother admitted feeling jealous of other parents. “I am so jealous of other parents. They complain of such minor things—poor grades, arguments over bedtime and the like, I want to tell them to be thankful they have a child.”

Another unmentionable is the feeling of emancipation—of being freed by the death. This is more than relief. It is common to feel relief, for example, after a long period of illness where we feel both someone we loved suffered as well as that we, as caregivers, were pushed beyond our level of endurance.

Emancipation is far deeper. It often arises in situations where someone feels they are in a repressed relationship. Richard felt that. Despite the fact that he had received good grades, finished college and held a prestigious job, he could never seem to please his father no matter how much he tried. When his dad died, he felt liberated from unclear expectations that he could never seem to fill.

It is common, too, in spousal relationships. These relations do not have to be abusive but they often are oppressive. For Marion, her husband was a decent, kind man. But he never liked her to be out of his site, even forbidding her to attend a grandson’s wedding since it would require them to fly—something that frightened him. When he died, Marion became what we call a “blooming widow”—spreading her wings as she flew to see grandchildren and even relatives in Europe.

We would tease my aunt that even though they were “unmentionables,” she flew them weekly from her clothesline. We also need not hide our unmentionables; for as we share them, we realize that they are shared. After all, we all have those unmentionables at one time or another.

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