

## Mourning vs. Not.

When my stepmother died unexpectedly, I cried a lot. I cried a lot despite her being physically and emotionally abusive to me for nearly two decades. Why did I cry for her?

When my father died almost seven years later, I was the only person with him in the hospital, and I held his head in my arms and stroked his hair, telling him it was okay to go if that's what he wanted to do. My father died in my arms, and I cried a bucket of tears. I did not know it was even possible to cry that much. It took me a long time to get over my father's death.

There have been other deaths since then- a climbing buddy fell to his death, and I was devastated! A half-sister died, a sister died, and a half-brother died. I cried for all of them despite the almost total dysfunctionality of our family. Yes, I remember happy times, but mostly, the times with my family were unhappy.

I mourned all those people, and I wished them happiness and contentment in the time after their deaths.

Finally, when I was older, I got a dog, and because he could run away from the girls trying to catch him, they named him Speedo. I decided to keep the name. Speedo was with me for more than 13 years and was my true friend and best friend ever. Speedo was my perfect companion; we loved and cared for each other deeply. Speedo didn't like seeing me upset, and he would often jump on my lap whenever I did get upset. We hiked together; he went to work with me daily and was my shadow, companion, and friend.

As I was driving him to the veterinarian to have him euthanized, a drive that took almost an hour, he sat on my lap with his head and neck in the crook of my left arm. Speedo was quite poorly and dying. As we drove, I told Speedo how much I loved him, and sometimes his little nub of a tail wagged. I told him I would not cry for him as I knew he wouldn't like that. Instead, I promised him that instead of crying for him, I would smile for him whenever I remembered him. I told him I loved him and that living with him for 13-plus years had brought me so much happiness, and I would let that happiness be what I remembered.

As we entered the vet's office, I became very emotional. This was my best friend, whom I was about to have euthanized. The nurses were SO kind and caring, and they and the doctor made Speedo's transition calm and peaceful. I managed to keep my promise to Speedo, and I did not cry. As he passed away, I held my buddy and petted his little head. Finally, I left the veterinarian's office and returned two weeks later to pick up his ashes.

I walked the walks we used to do and smiled as I remembered his antics. I smiled as I walked the half-acre trail around my property that I named Speedo's Memorial Trail, which is the path we made as I carried him on his daily walks the last few months of his life when he could no longer walk because of his blindness.

To this day, I have not cried for Speedo. I remember my best friend and buddy as a happy memory rather than a sad memory. Speedo truly always made me happy. He was a bright and happy dog, and our deep love for each other was evident for all to see.

In today's world, we hear the phrase Celebration of Life. The meaning of that phrase is: An event held to honor the life of a loved one, typically focused on positive aspects of their life. This event may be less formal and structured than a funeral or memorial service and is often

considered to be – as the name suggests – a joyful celebration rather than a ceremony dedicated to mourning.

I have been to some of those; some people can do it, and others cannot, probably because we weren't taught to smile, laugh, or celebrate death.

My question is, why do we cry? I understand mourning, I think, but I'm not sure I believe it's the best way to honor a loved one who has passed away any longer. Mourning is "the state of emotions of a person to whom something irreversible happened that leads to a feeling of sadness or regret." But I am not mourning, and I don't believe I ever mourn Speedo. After seven months, I still miss Speedo every day. I wish he weren't dead, but he is dead. He isn't here, and he isn't coming back. His memories, though, are as alive as they were when he was alive.

Did my family, my dysfunctional family, not leave behind enough happy memories to sustain me? Is that why I mourned them? The mourning was awful. Mourning was pain-filled and left me handicapped for weeks and months in some cases.

Where did we learn to mourn? We learned mourning from our family, of course. We learned mourning from watching television. We learned mourning from the tributes to veterans on their National Days of Mourning. Mourning is a learned behavior that we repeat throughout our lives; we teach it to our children and accept mourning as our public display to the world to show how much we loved the person, animal, etc., who passed away. We cry and howl, rage, sing, and display our emotions to show how much we love them.

Now I live alone, so it's easy for me to be what I want. I'm not around others who might be crying, thus causing me to cry, too. In other words, I control my environment. I still sing the songs to Speedo that I sang to him during his final months. I still shout out his name; I still shout

out loud, telling him that I miss him. And I always smile afterward because I loved that dog, and that dog loved me. Crying won't bring him back, but smiling keeps his memory alive.

I've told a few of my friends this story. Several looked at me quizzically and asked, "Why not just cry?" I answer, "Because it's too painful. I'd rather remain happy than sad."

So, is mourning the loss of life a learned behavior? And if it is a learned behavior, can we unlearn it? And if we unlearn mourning, will others know we still love the deceased with all our hearts? I tell people that my tribute to Speedo is not to cry for him because he would have SO disliked seeing me cry. Speedo seriously didn't like to see me upset. His antics trying to get me not to be upset still make me smile today! He would bring me his squeaky toy to play with or put his front paws on my chest and stare into my eyes. When I would move, he would jump down and run in circles, hoping I was taking him outside. Yes, he brought happiness into my life every chance he could, and when I remember that, which is always now, I smile and feel good. Speedo got old, as we all do and will. Speedo got ill, as we all do and will. And Speedo died as we all do or will.

So, there was nothing to mourn about his death. Speedo lived a good life and made life better, and those who knew him felt the same way- that he enriched their lives, too.

So, think about it. Think about Mourning vs. Not. Speedo was not human; I know that. But I am human; as a human, I get to decide how to honor the lives of those I have known. You get to do the same. It's not always easy to mourn the death of a loved one. It's not always easy not to mourn the death of a loved one. And it's not always easy to honor the death of a loved one by remembering the happiness they brought to you.

That I chose this path for the passing of my beloved friend, Speedo, was my choice. I am happy I made that choice. We both are grateful we can remain happy with the memory of the other.

This is what I wrote for Speedo on the Tribute Page I made for him:

Before I met you, Speedo, I never knew what it was like to be able to look at a dog and smile for no reason.

Now that you are gone, Speedo, I know what it is like to smile for no reason other than having known you.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © January 5th, 2022