



2025 Ben Strauss
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

Jackson Stuetz

Learning from Guilt After Life And Death

Honorable Mention

14 years ago, when I was four years old, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had no clue what this meant and how this would shape the rest of my youth years. I started attending Gilda's kids support group. This helped me understand what cancer was and what was happening. Through cancer support at Gilda's, I learned about cancer through my own eyes, ears, and understanding. All that cancer knowledge I acquired there, never felt forced upon me, which I feel would've probably killed young me emotionally. While there, I was surrounded by kids and families going through something I related to. The last week of August 2016, my mother was admitted to the hospital. During her second week, we learned that she was not going to make it out of the hospital. She died on September 6th, 2016. I was only 10 years old. I never really understood all that happened until I was a little older. My mother was the first person close to me who died. One of my most difficult struggles is realizing that I'll never see her again. I'll never get to know her.

My emotions after my mom's death were complicated. When I found out that she was going to die, I remember being in a dim room, the weather was rainy. I remember a very

depressing mood. My dad told all our family, who were assembled at the hospital, she was going to die soon. I cried the entire time. I remember angrily throwing my tissue at the ground, and my family followed by throwing their tissues down too. I think it was the last day I really cried about my mom dying.

The next few days, my sister and I spent the day with our grandparents, in the evenings, we'd go to the hospital to see our mom. My eight-year-old sister and I would say goodbye to her every night when we left the hospital, just in case she would pass away that night. We understood she was very sick, and each night could be her last. Her liver was failing. Her skin turned more yellow and her glow slightly dimmed each day. Then, one night, our mom gave us an extra-long goodbye.

My vivid memory of that next day always makes my heart sink and my body feel a shock from head to toe. In the morning, my dad asked if my sister and I wanted to see our mom in the hospital that day. My sister and I said no. A little later, my grandma said "Your dad's here." I remember thinking it seemed odd because our dad usually wouldn't return from the hospital until night. When my sister and I looked outside the window, we saw our dad slowly walk up the driveway. The second he walked through the door, he grabbed both of us. With tears in his eyes, he held us as close as he could as he told us our mom passed away. When he told us, I didn't cry, which felt wrong. I was heartbroken, yet I couldn't seem to cry. I think I cried so much, earlier in the week, when my dad told us mom was going to die, that I could not cry anymore. Even though we said our goodbyes each night and were prepared for her to die, I still feel a little haunted by that day.



Before my mom passed away, we spent the 5 years, she lived with cancer, making some amazing memories. We did stuff some people don't get to experience. We went to Disney and Universal, Great Wolf Lodge, sports games, tons of vacations. My mom wanted to make as many memories with us as possible, while she was still here. I have some vague memories of those experiences, now so long ago. Great Wolf Lodge was so much fun. I remember we had wands that would do different things. My favorite part was the zip-line area. It was like a big jungle gym stretching up, high into the air. We had so much fun moving through all the different obstacles. I can also remember some pieces of our Disney trip. I remember how I was going to go on the Tower of Terror, which was the scariest rides there, but, at the last second, I wimped out.

For Pete's Sake, a cancer charity, helped us make many of those memories. They gave us the opportunity to go to Disney and Universal, and they gave us Phillies tickets. Through CSCGP, we got an arena tour and near court-side seats for the Brooklyn Nets. I clearly remember going into Jay-Z and Beyonce's Suit, and standing court-side for their warmup. A trip to New Hampshire, and ice skating on a frozen pond in Maine.

Back then I didn't really understand why we were traveling so much. Now, I realize my mom and dad were trying to create as many good memories, with our mom, for my sister and I as possible before she was gone. Sometimes, honestly, it's upsetting to think I did not understand or appreciate this until after she died. And as much as those experiences were fun, sometimes, I feel like it never happened. I feel can hardly remember some of those memories, and those I can remember I only remember from stories I hear, and photos we took.

Those fading and distant memories have been difficult to deal as I've grown without my mom. Often, I wonder if I even know who my mom was or are my memories just other people's stories. Do I remember what she looks like or is it all from photos. I try hard to remember, but I was young and 8, 9, 10 years have passed. I question whether losing my memory of her is wrong or normal. My life keeps moving, while my mom is a collection of continually fading pictures. Sometimes, I feel keeping her memory alive as it dims is harder than coping with her death. I hear my family tell stories about her and I laugh while wishing hearing her tell her funny stories. I wish I could know about the good and bad things she did in her life. I wish I knew all the funny things she did. I wish I knew about all her successes and failures. However, I realize knowing everything I wish to know about her is impossible.

Losing my mother to cancer has taught me some valuable lessons. I learned to never take time for granted, and to cherish every moment we have on this planet. Someday everyone's time will expire, and you'll never know when. Life changes in a heartbeat, so, if we don't use our time wisely then we will regret it. I also learned to empathize with anyone, even people who seem rude, because they may be suffering inside. I also grew from dealing with guilt I felt from the past. Whether I sometimes felt I treated my mom poorly back then or I felt I did not appreciate what I had then. I am forever changed by moments I cannot change, and it honestly helped shape how I act towards my dad as I've grown. My entire experience motivates me to treat people better and pushes me to do my best in life. I want to feel I'd make my mom proud while doing everything from academics to sports.

From my experience, I learned one of the hardest jobs is having the love of your life die at a young age, breaking the news to your young children that their mother died, and raising your

kids to be fine young adults alone, like my dad. Moving on with only one parent and two kids is difficult. A little over a year later, my dad suffered multiple massive strokes. His surgeon said “he was pulled from the jaws of death.” Many times, I wondered if those strokes were caused by the stress of trying to raise two kids on his own after my mom died. Almost losing my dad, so soon after my mom, has increased my appreciation for my dad as I have grown older. My relationship has become stronger. My dad is like my friend, who is also my guardian, watching out for me. He does so much for me and my sister. He attends all of our sports games as our number one fan. He has done a great job trying to help fill the void my mother was forced to leave. My dad did his best to always give us the life, he and my mom intended us to have.

Losing someone so close and hearing all the people say “I am sorry for your loss” is incredibly difficult. Hearing it repeated every day, felt more painful than it helped. My grief has never left, but my grief has changed. My thoughts moved on from the pain of being reminded your mom died to struggling through thoughts like how my life would be different if she were still here. Thoughts without conclusions, questions without answers. I’ll never know the answer, stories I’ll never hear, sights I’ll never see. Though I still struggle, I’ve accepted a past cannot change, and try to remember she is still a part of who I am. Though sometimes, I feel guilty for her memory slipping from me, I know it’s not my fault, and I appreciate family and friends who tell her stories. Finally, the greatest lesson I’ve learned is to live life how she would want me to...happy and to the fullest.