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### Grief And Gratitude

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PETER ARKLE



COMMUNITY VOICES

# GRIEF AND GRATITUDE

Despite our losses, we should never lose sight of one another

**A**S YOU MAY know, the end of 2015 wasn't easy for the Swarthmore community. We had a difficult few months where three of our beloved members died unexpectedly—Professor Alan Berkowitz in July, Cornell Science Librarian Meg Spencer in September, and sophomore Anthony Chiarenza '18 in October. Even now, with time to reflect, so much loss so quickly has me, perhaps like you, wondering what we should make of it all.

I am no stranger to loss. My mom died when I was only 24. And yet when I think of her now, I focus less on my own loss, and much more on my children's in never knowing her. It is inconceivable to me that the two most important women in my life—my mother and my daughter—have never met and never will. I often wonder, too, how my mother's unique perspectives and wisdom would have influenced my son.

But what I realize now is that my children are really quite lucky. Because of my mom's death, my children have

four women who play the role of grandmother rather than the two they would otherwise have had. These women—my maternal aunt, my mother's best friend, my stepmother, and my mother-in-law—have all carved unique places in the space my mother left behind.

None of them has tried to fill her shoes—they are too enormous to fill, despite the fact that she stood only 5 feet 3 inches. Rather, these women have quietly and lovingly provided my children—and us all—with pieces of themselves and pieces of my mother in countless ways. In the wake of grief, I find myself incredibly grateful for their

presence.

It may seem strange to talk about gratitude in the face of grief, but I think we should.

Cicero once said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues but the parent of all others." And in arguing that "[We] cannot be mindful without being grateful," Brother David Steindl-Rast associates gratitude with the very attitude toward others and toward learning and life that we here at

Swarthmore hope to foster.

Gratitude and grief can be closely linked. Professors Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte termed the phrase "post-traumatic growth" to refer to "the positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances." They find that individuals often appreciate their good fortunes not in spite of but because of their trauma and loss.

My hope is that our community can do the same. As difficult as it is to be grateful in the face of so many tragedies, I urge us all to focus on the many ways, small and large, where we can respond to our grief with compassion and generosity. After all, even those who have suffered most attain more post-traumatic growth if they have strong networks and supports—a lesson for any community, family, nation, or campus.

Ultimately, it is up to us as a community to find ways to honor those whom we have lost. Maybe we can follow the example of the wise, warm women in my life and try to lovingly occupy the spaces Alan, Meg, and Anthony left behind. Although we can never fill their shoes—their shoes, like my mom's, are unique and theirs alone—we can be grateful for them and good to one another. 📍

LYNNE STEUERLE SCHOFIELD '99 is an associate professor of statistics.

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