Losing a Parent During College: Grief and the Role of Faith

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Abstract

Parental loss during college as a distinct form of grief that disrupts both emotional life and the practical and developmental conditions under which adulthood begins. Drawing on grief literature and anecdotal accounts from six Vietnamese American and Vietnamese Stanford students, it argues that parental bereavement often includes anticipatory loss, academic disruption, and ambivalent attachment to the parent. The paper also explores faith as an unstable but meaningful resource in this process. For some students, grief renewed the significance of inherited rituals and texts; for others, continuity took nonreligious forms. Parental loss during college reshapes identity, belonging, and the choices through which students move forward.

Introduction

Death of a parent during college often produces a distinct kind of grief because students lose a beloved person who was a central source of emotional, practical, and often financial support. In cases marked by prolonged illness, grief begins before death itself, through anticipatory loss, caregiving strain, fear, and academic disruption. Faith can play different roles in this experience. For some students, including those who were only marginally religious before the loss, it can become newly important as they search for meaning, ritual, continuity, and a way to live with sorrow. For others, faith remains uncertain, fragile, or difficult to trust. The literature demonstrates that like the death of a parent, other forms of family loss also have their own dynamics. We draw on that literature to clarify what we and other Stanford students have witnessed: that parental loss during college changes a student's relation to time, work, hope, and often faith itself.

We write as first-generation Vietnamese American students at Stanford from culturally Buddhist but largely non-practicing households. The paper also draws on anecdotal interviews with six students in our Vietnamese American and Vietnamese student cohort at Stanford; these accounts are presented as illustrative rather than generalizable experiences that help bring the existing literature into conversation with student life. Before losing a parent, none of us would have described faith as stable or central in our daily lives. Yet bereavement made spiritual questions harder to avoid. Ritual, inherited practice, and the memory of traditions carried across generations began to matter in new ways, even when belief itself remained fragile or incomplete. Engaging the words, rituals, and texts that had meant so much to our ancestors could feel newly meaningful even when their exact content or form still seemed remote. We discovered renewed meaning in participating in a practice that had long served as a way of affirming

identity and continuity before we were born. We argue that parental loss during college often reopens questions of continuity and belonging that secular campus language alone fails to fully address.

Literature Review

To clarify the role of faith in parental loss during college, this review proceeds in four steps. It first considers grandparent and sibling loss in order to show why those forms of bereavement, while often profound, may not unsettle student life in the same structural way as the death of a parent. It then turns to medical, psychological, and educational research on parental bereavement, with particular attention to support, development, and academic disruption during the college years. Next, it examines literature on religious coping to ask how grief may intensify belief, complicate it, or make spiritual questions newly urgent. Finally, it places that scholarship alongside Stanford student experiences to show how prolonged illness, unequal support structures, and uncertain prior religiosity shape grief after parental loss.

Many college students experience profound bereavement through the death of a grandparent. Grandparents are often revered figures who carry family memory, moral example, cultural continuity, and sometimes religious devotion. Manoogian et al. (2017) write that “when the death of a grandparent occurs, it reverberates across generations and is often the first death of a family member experienced by adolescents and emerging adults” (p. 352). They also note that grandparent death may prompt “a reevaluation of self and relationships” and may “increase the burden of family responsibilities during grandparents’ dying process and aftermath” (p. 353). That description fits much of what students see in college life. A grandparent’s death is often the first time a student witnesses both loss itself and also the grief of parents, the practical burdens of death, and the unsettling realization that family life can change permanently. Some grandparents also embody religious or cultural devotion in ways that outlast their deaths. For some students, especially those who saw a grandparent as wise or faithful, such a loss may make inherited religious practice feel more urgent or newly meaningful.

Sibling loss is also enormously heartbreaking, though different. Herberman Mash et al. (2013), studying 107 young adults ages 17 to 29, found that grief in this age group can “produce academic difficulties, and interfere with the developmental, occupational, and social tasks associated with young adulthood” (p. 1203). More specifically, participants who lost a sibling were more likely than those who lost a close friend to experience complicated grief and depression, and they reported greater damage to meaning, self-worth, and physical well-being. A sibling often shares intimacy and family history as well as a sense of the future: they know one’s hopes and witness one’s development. For some students, this kind of loss surfaces painful questions about fairness, survival, and meaning. It may also provoke religious conflict (Christian, 2007). Students who are already uncertain or

secular may feel both grief and anger that faith offers no satisfying consolation. Others may turn more urgently toward religious ideas in search of meaning.

While grandparent and sibling loss are life-altering, for the purposes of this paper, we describe parental loss as often different in a structural sense. Unless a grandparent or sibling had taken on a parental role by providing daily care, financial support, or steady guidance toward adulthood, their death rarely removes the same central support figure. A parent's death more often combines grief with the collapse of emotional, practical, and financial stability. At Stanford, we have known students for whom a grandparent or sibling did occupy that parental role, especially in the absence of a parent, and in those cases the distinction narrows sharply. For one of us, the parent who died remains a conflicted figure who never provided much support in life, the loss still impacted student life here at Stanford. In many cases, parental loss often removes the person who was helping hold together the student's everyday world.

The literature on parental loss argues that it can alter a child's sense of security, self, and future. Lawrence et al. (2006) write that parental death "is considered to be one of the most stressful life events that a child or adolescent can experience" and note that it can increase the risk of "depression, anxiety, hopelessness and suicidal ideation" (p. 323). Liu et al. (2022) similarly describe parental death as a major developmental and health-related disruption, associating it with long-term ill health and with outcomes including complicated grief, posttraumatic stress, long-lasting depressive symptoms, and a sense of meaninglessness. When this loss occurs during the college years, its longer-term effects remain insufficiently understood. Lord and Gramling (2014) underscore the importance of this gap, arguing that bereavement is "a paramount issue in college populations" (p. 157), even though college students have historically been underrepresented in grief research. These studies help explain why parental loss during college cannot be treated as one more example of ordinary student hardship. It threatens not only emotional well-being but also the student's sense of direction, support, and ability to keep moving toward adulthood.

One element largely missing from the parental-loss literature discussed here is ambivalence toward the parent. College students are old enough to remember love, sacrifice, and care, as well as the parent's failures, absences, harms, and mistakes. That complexity makes grief harder to narrate. Bereavement studies more broadly recognize that loss can be especially difficult when the relationship with the deceased was mixed rather than simple. Herberman Mash et al. (2013), for example, describe a "troubled, ambivalent significant relationship" as one marked by both "strong attachment and anger," and note that grief may include "anger toward the deceased for abandoning them" as well as "guilt, self-reproach, and persistent negative feelings about past experiences" (p. 1203). Students who lose a parent during college may feel deep love and gratitude alongside unresolved hurt, and cultural pressure to honor the dead can make those mixed

memories difficult to speak aloud. This difficulty in speaking honestly about the dead parent helps explain why faith enters the experience of parental loss in such complicated ways. Religious traditions may provide rituals and interpretive frameworks for grief, but they remain unable to erase the tension between love and injury. Instead, they may either help students live with that tension or make it harder to acknowledge.

Religion can respond to that ambivalence in more than one way. At its best, it offers practices of mourning that do not require the dead parent to have been flawless: prayer, ritual, confession, and traditions of forgiveness can help students honor the parent without falsifying the relationship. But religion can also intensify the problem when it pressures mourners to forgive too quickly, suppress anger, or idealize the dead. Lord and Gramling (2014) note that bereavement may produce a "spiritual conflict" or "crisis" in which mourners "question their religious beliefs while simultaneously drawing on them for support" (p. 170). Faith, then, is not best understood as a solution to ambivalence. It is one of the places where ambivalence may become newly visible. Snively (2024) also complicates the picture by suggesting that overall religiosity offers no straightforward reduction of complicated grief in college students, and that some beliefs, such as belief in an afterlife, may even intensify grief in certain ways. Walker et al. (2012), writing about bereavement in a Christian university, further suggest that religious settings can provide support but may also create estrangement when grieving students no longer find inherited beliefs emotionally available.

The literature on parental bereavement tends to emphasize what happens after a parent dies, but the damage begins earlier, during illness, as dread, divided attention, and practical strain slowly reshape daily life. Liu et al. (2022) describe parental death as associated with "long-lasting depressive symptoms" and "a sense of meaninglessness," language that helps show why parental loss is not a brief emotional event but a process with enduring consequences. Lawrence et al. (2006) similarly note that some bereaved children and adolescents continue to have "difficulty adjusting to the loss," including "complicated bereavement" (p. 323). These descriptions only partly fit our experiences and those of people we interviewed because in each case the crisis was already underway long before formal bereavement began. The parent's illness was the condition under which the student was already trying, and often failing, to keep college life intact.

The Stanford interviews reveal all the stresses of that experience. For one of us, his mother, the only close family member, was dying of cancer while he struggled to stay afloat academically. Another student was dealing with her father's decline but with work, school, and first-generation financial pressure. A third student battled depression as his mother went in and out of lung cancer and remained at stage four throughout his undergraduate and graduate degrees. Another student faced the prolonged illness of his mother while still retaining more surviving family structure in

the form of his father and brother. In all cases, grief began with diagnosis, uncertainty, caregiving, travel, dread, and the gradual realization that the future would not look as it once had. In these cases, grief was a prolonged crisis in which illness itself disrupted learning, concentration, and emotional stability before formal bereavement began.

Parental loss during college also raises institutional questions, because universities often treat bereavement as a short-term hardship when it may instead involve prolonged disruption to coursework, finances, and mental health. Liu et al. (2022) found that “childhood parental death was associated with lower school grades,” and concluded that children who lost a parent “may benefit from additional educational support.” Even though that study focuses on earlier stages of development, it helps frame the college problem: grief has educational effects, not just emotional ones. Levkovich and Elyoseph (2023) show how poorly institutions are often prepared to respond. Teachers in their study felt “helpless, confused, overloaded emotionally and anxious” (p. 945) and were “inadequately trained to deal with grief or to talk with surviving parental caregivers” (p. 960). They also note that school can serve as a “stable and safe place for grieving children” (p. 948), but only if support is actually present. Walker et al. (2012) complicate this analysis further by showing that students with more severe loss-related difficulties often still “did not access more resources.”

For one of us, grieving his only parent, he found himself structurally alone. Another student had more surviving family support and therefore experienced grief in a less isolating institutional position, but she had many more work obligations on campus that she neglected while navigating her father’s end. Another was balancing work, visas, and medical school applications while his mother was dying. These differences show that the severity of parental loss depends partly on whether any support survives the death. Universities tend to imagine bereavement can be handled through brief flexibility. But when illness is prolonged, money is scarce, and the parent has been central to everyday support, the disruption is larger and longer than most campus systems are designed to recognize. What appears as poor academic performance may in fact be the unraveling of the conditions that made academic performance possible. The severity of parental loss depends on whether the grieving student has institutional flexibility, family support, and enough remaining structure to keep college life intact.

Literature on faith and grieving reports it functions as a mixed and often unstable framework through which bereaved students seek meaning, support, ritual, and explanation. Lord and Gramling (2014) argue that grief researchers must “move away from global assessments toward specifics” in order to understand “what it is that is being coped with” (p. 171). They describe bereavement as a “uniquely existentially challenging stressor” (p. 170) and suggest that it can produce a “spiritual conflict” or “crisis” in which a person may “question their religious beliefs while simultaneously drawing on them for

support" (p. 170). They also found that some forms of so-called negative religious coping "may not be maladaptive at all" if the bereaved person experiences them as useful (p. 165), while maladaptive religious coping was associated with more severe grief. If a parent's death destabilizes support, future orientation, and self-understanding, then faith may become one of the places where those losses are interpreted. For some students, prayer, ritual, or inherited belief offer continuity with the parent and with a tradition larger than the self. For others, grief may provoke anger, disappointment, or a sense that inherited religion fails when it is most needed. Bereavement often pushes students into a struggle over meaning. That struggle may take the form of renewed faith, deeper doubt, ritual without certainty, or longing for a consolation one cannot fully accept.

The literature often treats religiosity as a preexisting trait, but the Stanford accounts suggest a more dynamic pattern: parental loss can make faith newly significant even for students who were only marginally religious before bereavement. Snively (2024) complicates the standard protective-faith model by showing that "different aspects of religiosity may influence complicated grief symptoms" differently, and that stronger belief in an afterlife was associated with "greater symptoms of complicated grief." The same study found no overall support for the idea that more religious students necessarily grieve less. Walker et al. (2012) similarly suggest that students at religious institutions may experience "social estrangement" when grief raises questions that no longer fit the surrounding religious culture. Faith after loss, then, often depends on what forms of belief, ritual, and community remain available and usable when grief changes the meaning of all three.

Not all forms of continuity after parental loss are explicitly religious. For one student, whose father had been a complicated figure in her life, his death intensified ambivalence. In her case, in addition to participating in Buddhist practice, another way of remaining connected to a difficult parent was through their shared love of popular and folk music. Joining an a cappella group became, in part, a way of inhabiting that shared inheritance. None of the students whose experiences shape this paper had been deeply observant before the death of a parent. Yet grief made spiritual questions more pressing. One student's involvement in Christian a cappella had been largely social before his mother's death but became part of a more serious Christian commitment afterward. Others, raised in culturally Buddhist households, found themselves newly drawn to ritual, continuity, and inherited forms of practice even without a strong prior sense of belief. Cultural inheritance, however, is not the same thing as usable spiritual support. A student may come from a tradition without having ready access to the rituals, communities, or convictions that grief suddenly makes urgent. Bereavement can make even uncertain or previously marginal spiritual traditions newly meaningful. One student, for example, said that before the death they had never chanted at funerals, but now when the monk calls, they go, even for people they do not know. What had once felt

distant or optional became a sense of duty, continuity, and presence after loss.

The comparison between secular Stanford and religious institutions is useful precisely because neither setting guarantees meaningful support for grieving students. Walker et al. (2012) found that "during close losses, students experienced more mental health problems and negative social outcomes, but they did not access more resources." They also report that first-year undergraduates were more likely than seniors to rely on personal resources such as family and religion, and they suggest that grieving students may question belief and experience "social estrangement" when their doubts clash with campus culture. These findings resist any easy claim that a religious institution solves the problem simply by making faith more visible. But the reverse is also true: at a secular elite university, grief may intensify spiritual questions in an environment whose dominant languages of support are counseling, accommodation, and wellness rather than ritual, meaning, or transcendence. Stanford matters here not because it is uniquely deficient, but because it makes visible how thin secular institutional language can become when students confront existential loss.

Parental loss during college shapes the conditions under which adulthood begins. A student whose parent is dying or has just died is still expected to study, compete, plan, and perform as though the future were stable. Yet the death of a parent often strips away the structure that made such forward motion possible. The accounts discussed here also show that grief is often mixed: students may mourn a parent they deeply loved while carrying unresolved anger, disappointment, or memories of harm. Faith may become one of the few places where love and injury, gratitude and protest, ritual and doubt collide at once. Parental death can make faith newly consequential as a way of reorienting a life, shaping the commitments, relationships, and choices through which adulthood moves forward after loss.

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