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Now That I'm An Adult

BY CLAUDIA CRAEMER-MEIHSNER AS TOLD TO ERIC NESS

I'm not even sure how old I was when my mother was first diagnosed with cancer, but I was 8 when my parents gathered the younger siblings, gave us each a toy, and told us that the cancer had returned and couldn't be treated.

I remember taking it in just as you might expect a child would: some grief, but also letting myself enjoy my new doll.

My dad was loving, but he wasn't a hands-on caregiver, neither to us kids nor to my mother once she got sick. I was among the youngest of 10 siblings, so my older sisters, who were 27 and 25 at the time, took charge.

As far as the community embracing and supporting our family, I don't remember that happening. And my family didn't talk much about what was going on. The community approach to disease and dying was mostly hands-off, and no hospice services were available.

After my mother passed, there was the usual parade of food and relatives. Then after a month or so, that just stopped. The community at large seemed aware, along the lines of "Oh, those Craemer kids, they don't have a mother." But there was no formal support. I don't remember the teachers ever asking how any of us were doing or if we needed anything.

Over the years, the grief would surface in surprising places. There was the mundane—not having a mother to pack lunch or to shop for clothing. At 14, my Spanish class took a trip to Mexico and I took care of all the preparations myself. It wasn't a big deal until I realized all the other girls had their moms take care of everything. It was an incredible realization to me that I didn't have that. It was a very raw grief to start that trip with.

My siblings and I have reached the point where we can look at our mother as a full person, someone who had strengths and weaknesses, and we better understand the choices and decisions and reactions that took place at that time. We see our mother with compassion.

Years later at age 39, I'm still saddened to have no tangible record of my mother's love, so with my own kids I've already started memory-building projects with art and video.

I have found surrogate mothers my whole life, and I think that's really helped me. To just be open to the compassion and love that people have to give.

—*Claudia Craemer-Meihsner is a hospice social worker in Madison, Wisconsin.*

