

FEARLESS

The Surprising Gifts of Grief

How loss can reshape who we are and how we show up in practice.

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Most of us don't willingly welcome grief; it arrives unexpectedly and upends our lives in the most inopportune moments. As veterinarians, we feel best with clear plans, protocols, and guidance. Grief defies these structures. It is unpredictable, nonlinear, and deeply personal. After losing my mother in December to terminal glioblastoma — a disease that swiftly exposes how little control we have with neurodegenerative disease — I have come to see that grief, despite its accompanying unrelenting pain, can be a profound teacher.

Being my mother's caretaker during her illness changed me in ways I am still discovering. It stripped me down to what mattered and quietly reshaped how I show up as a daughter, a veterinarian, a leader, and a human. It's also heightened my empathy and grace for our veterinary client caregivers and for the journey they share with us.

These changes didn't arrive as grand revelations. They came as subtle shifts in perspective — gifts I never wanted yet now hold with gratitude.

Fearlessness: When the Worst Has Already Happened

Caring for someone with a terminal illness recalibrates fear. When you walk alongside someone you love through a diagnosis of glioblastoma, you confront the unthinkable every day. You learn to live in rooms filled with bad



news. You learn to function while your heart is breaking. And somewhere along the way, many of the things that once terrified you lose their power.

After my mom died, I observed a newfound calmness and courage. Difficult conversations and radical honesty no longer felt intimidating. Expressing my truth became easier and more

essential. Asking for my needs or refusing was not just acceptable but necessary. Having faced great loss, the fear of rejection, misunderstanding, or failure seemed less significant.

This isn't recklessness. It's clarity and a form of personal freedom. Grief made it clear that time is finite and emotional energy is precious. I've learned that fearlessness is not the absence of fear but the refusal to let fear dictate how you live.

Paying Forward the Legacy

A question I found myself asking after my mother's death was, "What now?"

The writer Jamie Anderson once described grief as love with nowhere to go. That was the closest description of my experience, but it wasn't enough. I needed action — something to do. Legacy gave me direction.

Although my mom wasn't a veterinarian, she embodied qualities that influenced my approach to medicine and leadership: kindness without expectation, compassion, empathy, curiosity, resilience, and a steadfast commitment to supporting others. As her caretaker, I observed these traits reflected in times when I needed to be strong for her, even when I felt far from it.

Paying forward her legacy has become my daily intentional act. It shows up in how I mentor younger veterinarians, how I advocate for compassion in our profession, and how I try to lead with empathy rather than urgency. It shows up in remembering that every colleague, client, and patient carries something invisible. And it gives me purpose to share with others who are losing family members of any kind and feel the deep void of loss and being lost.

Legacy isn't about achieving greatness in someone's name; it's about allowing who they were to influence who you become. In this way, grief transforms into a form of ongoing connection rather than an ending.

Being OK With Being Different

Grief changes you. Period. A surprising realization for me was understanding that I would never return to who I was before my mother got sick — and that I didn't want to. The experience fundamentally altered how I see the world, how I process joy and pain, and how I connect with others.

For several weeks, I fought this change. I worried about being “too emotional” or “not the same.” But grief rewires you, and resisting that transformation only deepens the exhaustion.

Being comfortable with being different has meant accepting a version of myself that is more introspective and vulnerable, and less focused on “powering through.” It has involved understanding that growth resulting from loss doesn't always appear as optimism or productivity. At times, it manifests as setting boundaries or choosing a different pace entirely.

In a profession that once embraced stoicism, allowing yourself to be visibly changed by loss can initially feel uncomfortable. But authenticity, I've learned, is far more sustaining, and in a profession where sustainability — or the lack thereof — is top of mind, I encourage others to rethink this strategy.

Embracing Silence

As veterinarians, our instinct is to fix problems. We explain and educate, filling the silence during exams, because silence can feel awkward, unproductive, or even like rejection. Caregiving and grief taught me otherwise.

There were moments during my mom's illness when no words could help — no reassurance, no plan, no explanation. Silence became the most honest response. Sitting with her, holding her hand, and simply being present mattered more than anything I could say.

After her death, silence continued to play an unexpected role. The quiet

STORY ARCHIVE

In the February/
March 2026 issue
of Today's Veterinary
Business, Fearless
columnist
Dr. Natalie Marks
wrote about her
mother's diagnosis
and difficult path
to choosing
palliative care.
Read “When ‘We
Can’ Doesn’t Mean
‘We Should’” at
[go.navc.com/
choosing-less](https://go.navc.com/choosing-less).



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immediately after she died was deafening, and human instinct is to rush past it. I had a habit of leaning into distraction during uncomfortable moments. But I learned that silence holds information. It gave my nervous system room to breathe and allowed emotions to surface without judgment.

This lesson followed me into my professional life. I'm trying to leave more space in conversations — with clients, colleagues, and myself. I'm intentionally not rushing to fill every pause. Sometimes the most supportive thing we can offer is permission to sit with what someone is feeling, unedited. Silence is not absence. It is presence without pressure.

Leaning Into Your People

Finally, caregiving is isolating, and grief can be even more so. One of the hardest lessons for me was realizing I could not do this alone, and that needing others was not a weakness. For someone fiercely independent and professionally competent, this was uncomfortable territory.

But grief has a way of revealing who your people are. Some show up quietly and consistently. Some don't know what to say but sit in the silence with you. Others fall away — not maliciously, but because loss exposes the limits of certain relationships.

Reaching out meant allowing myself to be seen even when I wasn't OK. It meant accepting help without apologizing for it. It meant learning that support doesn't always look like advice — it often looks like shared silence, dropped-off meals, and texts that say, “I'm thinking of you.”

In veterinary medicine, where burnout and compassion fatigue are widespread, this lesson feels particularly important. While we can't be each other's entire support system, we can offer genuine support to one another. Community doesn't eliminate grief, but it helps us endure it.

The Ongoing Gifts

At first, I wished for a moment when I wouldn't feel ever-present sadness. But grief is not a chapter you close. It's something you learn to carry. Some days it feels lighter. Some days it catches you off guard. Yet the gifts it brought me — fearlessness, legacy, authenticity, presence, and connection — are not temporary.

Losing my mother profoundly changed me. I wish I could undo that loss, but I honor her by recognizing that my identity has been shaped through loving, caring for, and grieving her.

For those in our profession walking through their own losses, you are not broken. You are human. Sometimes, the most surprising gifts arrive wrapped in experiences we would never choose. Grief doesn't make us weaker veterinarians or leaders. If we allow it, it can make us braver, more compassionate, and more deeply connected. **TVB**