

Travels with my grief

Many will have an opinion on what is and isn't appropriate after the death of a loved one, but the reality is different for everyone

It probably made a picturesque scene. A snowy mountain in Japan, the dark-blue sky contrasting sharply with the white, powdery layer under a tourist's skis as she stopped and raised her pale face to the dying rays of the sun. And, in truth, it was scenic. But it was also complicated. Unseen was a heavy heart and anxious thoughts. My heart and my thoughts as I spent time on holiday in late November 2018, only two months after the sudden death of my dad.

Doubts had been voiced as to whether the trip was a wise move. So, as I took in those rays, my head was full of questions. Should I be here, trying new experiences during such a dark time in my life? Should I be on holiday so soon after such a loss? Should I be venturing out while my grief is still so raw? Am I allowed, is it appropriate, disrespectful even?

The trip, a long-awaited and much-needed get-together with my husband's Australian family, had been booked a few months before my dad's death. But as the departure date drew closer, I grew nervous. I didn't want to cancel it, as I suspected a change of scenery might do me good, but at the same time I couldn't imagine myself happily and breezily skiing down the slopes during the day and joining the rest of the party for drinks in the evening.

Friends and family in my hometown of Austria gave voice to my doubts: 'Isn't it too early to go on a trip?' and 'How will you fake a straight face among happy tourists?' I didn't know the answers. I'd craved solitude in the first weeks after my dad's passing and wasn't sure how I would cope in non-stop company.

On top of all of this was guilt. Guilt that I was in a position to head off on new experiences while my dad's life had been cut so abruptly short. He was only four days from his 60th birthday and two weeks away from retirement and starting a new



chapter in his life, one that involved travelling the world with his partner and spending warm winters on Spain's southern coast rather than his chillier (if equally lovely) home in south-east Austria. A heart attack ended those dreams of new places, different faces, fresh experiences. He had loved travel and it was a passion we shared. I'd left Austria in 2002, studying and working in various countries, including Spain, Denmark and the Netherlands, before settling in Portugal.

So far, being on the road had mostly been a carefree time, a chance for my husband and I to escape our responsibilities for a short while and get away from everyday annoyances. This time was different. I wouldn't be able to separate my holiday self from my grieving self. It wouldn't be possible to leave it at home like a sad jacket that was weighing me down. This jacket would take up most of the space in my suitcase and I would be wearing it throughout the holiday.

Eventually, the date came and we flew to Tokyo. On arrival, I yearned to be in a bed for a week, which might have been jet-lag, grief or a combination of the two. Instead, we did some light sightseeing, strolled around, noticed the litter-free streets and the silent cars, and then we came across a shop that sold nothing but chopsticks, hundreds of them and I felt a murmur of excitement. Then there was the virtual reality game in a multistorey gaming arcade that left me giddy.

But that jacket was still on and it remained heavy. In the local supermarket, the sight of a few beer bottles reduced me to tears as Dad had loved and praised the first sip of a cold beer as one of life's simple pleasures. And when the family group later raised toasts to the overnight snowfall and enjoyed a teppanyaki dinner, doubts and questions resurfaced: had I been right to come? Was the holiday appropriate? Was I venturing out too

soon? After all, my dad and I shared this passion for travel and every time I saw, smelled or tasted something new, I'd think of him and become a wild mix of happy and sad.

When exhaustion took hold, I allowed myself as much alone-time as needed, especially in the 10 days we spent in the Japanese mountains with my husband's family. They understood the situation, but didn't treat me like a patient, which I appreciated. On and off the slopes we'd enjoy each other's company, but whenever things became too much, they'd respect and not question my need to be alone.

There was always the option for me to stay in bed instead of joining them. I kept it open to give myself permission to just be without having to do anything. If I needed to, I could sit in my room all day, reading, thinking, looking out into the quiet snowy landscape and crying.

It brought to mind family skiing holidays. My dad was a quick, elegant skier and he'd practise with my brother and me when we were little. He loved to recall one story in particular when he took me skiing for a day near our hometown. I was three or four years old and he'd tuck me between his legs going up the hill by button lift. It worked well until the one time we arrived at the top and, somehow, I slipped out and went downhill. Fast.

Even scarier, I hadn't learned how to stop, let alone manoeuvre. He quickly skied down after me, but I had already come to a halt and landed headfirst in a mound of powdery snow. My dad recalled that I screamed so loudly when he pulled me out – the snow spilling out of my nose – that he felt sure people on the neighbouring mountain could hear me. He found it hilarious at the time and it continued to amuse him for the rest of his life. To be honest, I had no memory of the incident,

but it made me smile every time he told the story because I saw how much joy the recollection brought him. And one night, when I was playing cards with my husband's family, I found myself recounting the tale and realised how good it felt to share this special memory of me that my dad had so enjoyed. In this moment, sitting around a table sharing stories, there was a feeling of genuine joy. I felt light again, after carrying around my heavy, grieving self for weeks.

The trip allowed me to see grieving has many layers and will be experienced differently by each person. A holiday in its early stages might not be the right thing for everyone, but for me, it triggered that sense of curiosity that served as a reminder of all the beauty in the world. It also helped me to see that I had to be patient with myself and practise self-kindness. When a gloomy moment enveloped me one day while I was queuing for the ski lift, I let myself feel it instead of trying to be strong. And when something funny happened, I allowed myself to laugh.

The death of a loved one is deeply personal. There is no appropriate or inappropriate time to travel, to experience new things, to cry, to laugh. Loss becomes part of living. My dad always appreciated the funny situations in life and we would have a great giggle about them – it's okay to do that, at any time.

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