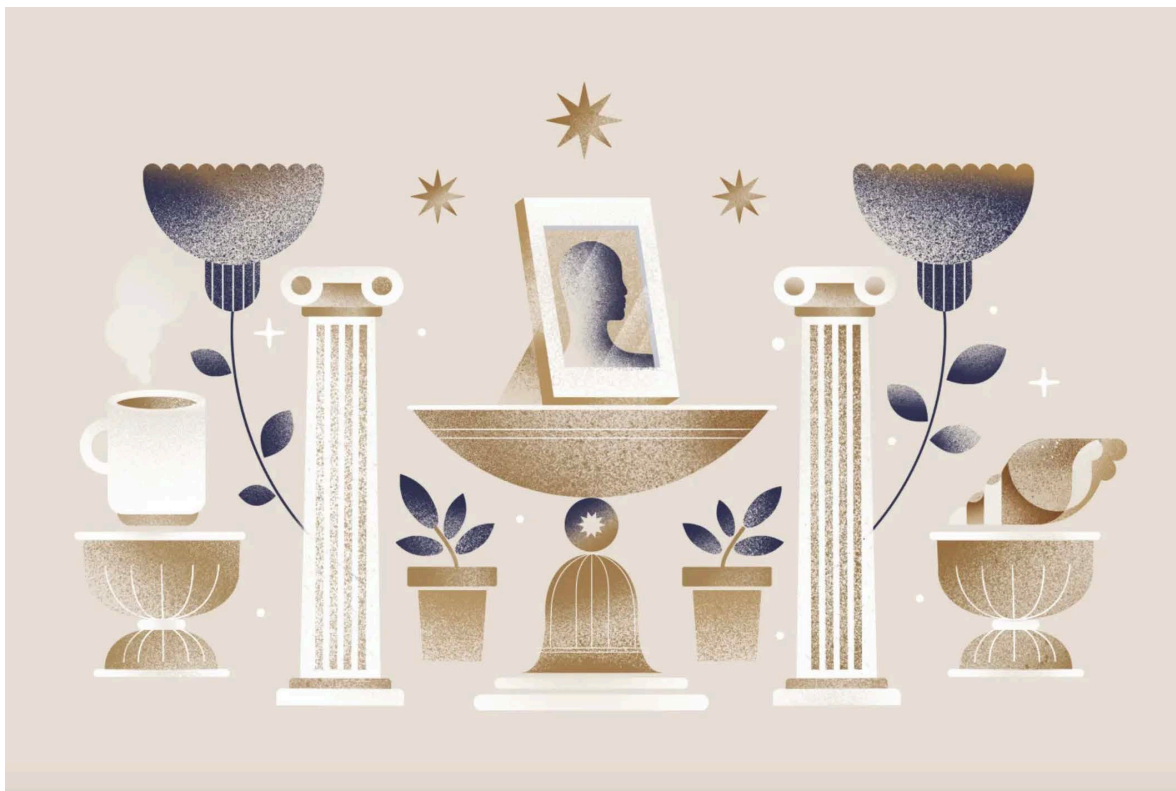




Why Grief Should Have a Place in Our Homes

by BRITTANY ANAS



(Image Credit: Bárbara Malagoli)

In the last photo my dad and I took together, we're at our annual bash celebrating both Father's Day and my birthday (I was born on the June holiday, which was solid foreshadowing for how close we would become). Our heads are touching and my dad's got a handful of candles he just plucked from our shared cake. It's one of my favorite photos because it shows our matching chubby cheeks that ball up on our faces with wide grins—which was one of my dad's signature trademarks that remained even as he rapidly lost weight during chemo and radiation treatments for brain cancer.



After he passed, my mom gave me a large canvas with the photo printed on it. Thinking it would hurt to look at it every day, I placed it out of sight, along with a box I'd neatly packed with many of his belongings.

As time went on, I missed him more. Whenever I was overwhelmed and needed advice, or excited to share a career accomplishment and needed a cheerleader, I had the reflex to text him (each one he sent—no matter how brief—he'd sign "love, dad.") After remembering I couldn't, the grief would hit me fresh. It was so painful that I'd push those feelings down and bottle them up. Only after I'd feel my chest tighten and my eyes start burning would I allow myself to pull out the canvas and give myself permission to grieve. I would take comfort in remembering how we played H-O-R-S-E at the gym earlier that day and how he revealed that he was doing lots of calisthenics so he could be able to dunk again once he retired, and, thus, end my winning streak on the court.

“I’d feel as though I was popping open the tab on a bottle of Coke that had been shaken up.”

(Image Credit: Apartment Therapy)

It was a happy memory, and when I interacted with my feelings and grief for him, I’d feel as though I was popping open the tab on a bottle of Coke that had been shaken up. It was such a sweet release. But when I felt I had enough, the objects went back into hiding. Between these rare occurrences where I gave myself to permission to grieve, I continued feeling like I was just one shake away from bursting.

Jo Tucker, a coach, Reiki master, and teacher specializing in grief and trauma resolution, went through similar emotions after her father passed away when she was 21.

“In losing my father, it felt like we weren’t supposed to speak about him because it was too painful,” she recalls.

But when her mother passed away a decade and a half later, she found that something needed to change. Avoiding memories for fear that they would cause pain didn’t allow her to cope—it just made her numb and anxious (an unintended consequence that I relate to as well).

Her solution? Find more opportunities to interact with her mother’s memory in her everyday life. In her case, she scattered her mother’s belongings around her house.

“I drink coffee from her mug every day, I eat off of my childhood plates, and I have some of her tchotchkes and art around the house,” Tucker says. “Sometimes I put on their records and dance around the house. I find it comforting.”

She calls these seen objects “a call to feel”: a visceral reminder of love and loss.

**“The most dangerous thing
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is to lock it up inside.”**

(Image Credit: Apartment Therapy)

According to Tucker, the most dangerous thing we can do with grief is to lock it up inside. I felt this in my own life, as my emotional bursts were becoming more and more frequent the longer I tried to control them. If there's one thing universal about grief, it's that it's unpredictable. It can't be boxed up and tucked in a closet. So, like Tucker, I decided that something needed to change in the way I handled it.

A year after my father passed, I moved into a newly-bought home where I'd be living alone. Growing up, my family had an informal rule: No one sat alone at the dinner table. And because I had late-night basketball practices and my dad worked overtime at the General Motors plant, it'd often be my dad and I together, at least one of us eating reheated dinner. We'd crack jokes, talk hoops, and share the highlight reels of our days. This “nobody eats alone” decorum followed me throughout life, as my college roommates in Boulder, Colorado can attest, but living alone for the first time meant there was no one to eat at the table with on most days.

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(Image Credit: Apartment Therapy)

It was a problem—until I realized I could solve this issue with a “call to feel” of my own. All it would take was a slightly unconventional design choice: instead of putting the canvas in the closet with the box of my dad’s things, I decided to hang it on my kitchen wall, facing my dining table. That way, it’d feel like he was eating dinner with me. With no one else around, I could even talk to him out loud, telling him everything I wanted to text him during the day.

I suspect we all have these emotional relics in our homes, even if the photos or hand-me-downs don’t always seem to fit in with the room. These out-of-place heirlooms in our homes have a higher purpose: They serve as kinds of altars. Yes, sometimes they break conventional design rules or don’t necessarily conform with our style aesthetics, but according to Phillip Thomas, a New York City-based interior designer, it’s actually better this way. When a special item contrasts with the interior, it draws more attention to it and elevates it to a work of art rather than a random accessory.


For example, Thomas would tease his Chilean grandmother for storing things in countless small white plastic bags. He was helping her with housekeeping one day and discovered lightbulbs to a Citroën—a vehicle she owned two decades prior. The two laughed about it. When his grandmother passed away, he took the lightbulb from the Citroën, which she held onto after they discovered it. The bulb is now in his living room, immersed in a cube of resin.

Rather than filling up a whole room with loved ones’ belongings, Thomas recommends to display a few items that evoke strong memories of an individual.

“In my edited approach, you come to really appreciate and remember that person even more,” he says.

Sometimes, it’s not so much about the objects, either, as it is about the ideas and associations they inspire. For example, John Linden, an interior and furniture designer from Los Angeles, had a client re-design their home after they lost a loved one who was an avid reader. Linden’s client couldn’t bring herself to throw his books away—so they didn’t. Instead, they dedicated a portion of the bookshelf to feature the books.

“Book collections are deeply personal. They tell us a lot about what people are interested in and how they think,” Linden says. Plus, a lot of people take notes and underline while they read, and it can be comforting to crack open a book and look through the notes they wrote to themselves or see what they were underlining as a way of reading along with them.



“Our relatives and friends who have passed from our lives have to be part of the interiors in which we live.”

(Image Credit: Apartment Therapy)

Grieving, of course, is unique to individuals. And Tucker explains that for some may be better to have an at-home altar or shrine that isn't in view at all times, but accessible when they want to visit it. What *is* important, however, is that we allow space to grieve—both in our lives and our homes. Mementos from our relatives and friends who have passed from our lives have to be part of the interiors in which we live, says Thomas, because, after all, their previous owners are why and how we live the way we do.

Though it may be unorthodox to have a canvas photo in the kitchen, it's where my dad belongs. The photo serves up a daily reminder that, even though he's gone, he's still with me, in my home, my chubby cheeks, and my inability to ever hide a smile.