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### Interrelated: The Impact of a Death on a Nuclear Family

Until a few weeks ago, I was not aware of the existence of family systems theory. Now I realize how profoundly applicable this theory is to my family's dynamics. Family systems theory makes the claim that if one individual in a familial unit changes, then everyone in that familial system will change as a consequence of that change. Family systems theory helps justify the perpetual change and continuity of families. This theory explains the changes in my family, specifically, my brother, mother, and me, after the death of my father.

In the April of 2010, when I was twelve, my father was diagnosed with stage three non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, an extraordinarily treatable and curable type of cancer. He underwent months of chemotherapy and, in June, was declared to be in remission. However, he had to complete more chemotherapy to fully eliminate the cancer. My father experienced serious complications from the chemotherapy. Throughout the summer of 2010, my father was in a cycle of being admitted to and discharged from the hospital, to treat side effects of the chemotherapy. By August, the cancer treatment had taken a severe toll on my father's body systems. The chemotherapy was toxic to my father's body and resulted in dangerous respiratory issues. On August 10th my father was hospitalized. After being in the the hospital for a few days, his lungs had deteriorated, requiring admittance into the Mayo Clinic Intensive Care Unit. He was undergoing multisystem failure in his heart, lungs, and kidneys. My nuclear family lived in the

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hospital alongside my dad for the two weeks he was in the hospital. My dad was in the ICU for a week and passed away on August 23rd, surrounded by his entire family. The passing of my dad drastically changed each member of my family and our relationships.

My brother, David, experienced many changes at the time of my father's death. My brother is eleven years older than me; at the time of the death he was twenty-three. He was a very self-confident and self-reliant twenty year old with a stable job in sales for General Mills. The day my dad was admitted into the ICU, my brother was about to board a plane and move to Michigan for work. My brother stayed in town for the time that my dad was in the hospital, but two weeks after the death he had to move to Detroit, where he knew no one. David was experiencing severe changes to every aspect of his life: the stress of a new location, the recent loss of our father, moving away from his entire support system, and a long distance relationship with his long term girlfriend. All of this change occurring at the same time spawned extreme emotions. He suffered from some post traumatic stress due to all the time at the hospital. The previously jock-like adult that displayed minimal negative emotion, realized that he couldn't undergo this amount of stress single-handedly. David started to become more emotionally vulnerable and would exhibit emotions such as sadness, need for human support, and distress more voluntarily. With people outside of our family, my brother modeled positive behavior despite tremendous grief. He stayed positive and worked hard to excel in his career to honor our dad. He became very involved in athletics, in particular, the alpine skiing community. He coached for a ski team in Detroit; this had a ripple effect on the rest of us as we joined that team for several ski training trips. My brother had the realization that he needed to rely on family members, so my mother was gracious and would allow him to return home frequently, at her

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expense. She offered endless support for the two of us, while still going through her own grieving process.

My mother was the most impacted by the death of my father. My parents had been married for twenty nine years and had a very healthy relationship. My mother was now the sole form of income; she had one child that was an adult and had one adolescent to continue to raise. As a result of her spouse's death and her son moving away, I became her primary support system. Consequently, we formed a very cohesive relationship. While I largely supported my mom, we also got a puppy soon after the death of my father. The new puppy helped my mom in many ways. Friday nights when I was out, my mom wasn't alone. My mom trained the dog to become a therapy dog, because of the therapy dogs that had helped relieve her stress when my dad was in the hospital. The dog provided comfort and humor and helped alleviate the grief we were all experiencing. The dog made it easier for my brother to come home because the house had young life. The dog became a part of our family. As expected, my mother experienced emotional grief and many times the major trigger for her would be small challenges. Challenges that would not have normally been a big deal intensified and had the power to create emotional affliction. These minor road bumps were escalated due to the constant underlying stress and grief she beared; they caused menial tasks to be considerably more challenging. These trials caused my family to grow because we had a positive outlook, used each challenge as a learning experience, and supported each other.

Additionally, I experienced emotional trauma from the passing of my father. Unlike my brother, instead of opening up, I held my emotions captive and would grieve in solitude. I felt as though I needed to stay strong and I did not want to cause added stress, but this did not work out

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well. I fell into a state of depression. After a while, I learned that inhibiting my emotions would not work. So after a few months, I opened up to my support system of family, friends, and my church. Upon opening up, relationships with my family members grew stronger because I depended on them for advice and emotional support. Similar to my mom, I struggled with minor issues. Kids being inconsiderate, doing poorly on an assignment, or having a petty argument with a family member would all have heightened emotional responses. My mom helped me deal with those issues, just as I did for her. Due to the vast age difference, my brother became like a father figure in some ways which had positive and negative repercussions. He offered a male perspective on how to deal with numerous situations, but he also could act too similar to a father in some instances. In some cases, it felt as though he was trying to tell me on how I had to handle situations rather than listening and giving advice. Overall, my family offered outstanding support. We all witnessed each other's strength in grieving, which inspired each other to be strong and find purpose.

Although my father's passing did create many problems and deep sadness, it resulted in a more cohesive nuclear family. The family systems theory is an effective aid to understand the interrelated effects of each of our individual changes subsequent to my father's death. The theory explains my brother's emotional vulnerability, my mother's reactions to small challenges, my emotional solitude, and, as a result, the changes in each of our relationships. Since my family has been through such loss and grief, we have created a well developed support system and helped each other to thrive. This support system could change if in the future one individual in our family undergoes significant change.