

Harriet Is Home

Harriet, my wife of nearly 49 years, died a year ago. She donated her body to science. 2 weeks ago, I received a letter that she had been cremated. A few days ago, my daughter and I picked up her ashes.

My first reaction when I read the letter was tearfulness. It was as if I was re-experiencing the grief I felt while she was dying and when she died. The year since her death had been very hard for me, but I felt I was recovering. Then the letter.

My daughter and I talked about what to do with her ashes. A first thought was to take them to Barcelona, a trip we had had to cancel when she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. A second thought was to take them to Paris, a city she and I both loved. But as my daughter and I were talking, I realized that I wanted her near me, perhaps in the harbor we lived next to, a harbor she loved. Then I realized that I wanted her with me.

I wanted to love her again and be loved again.

I wanted to hold her and be held again. I wanted to be able to talk with her again. To tell her about my day. About what I was writing. I wanted to play music for her again. Show her my photographs. Irrational, of course. I couldn't love ashes. I couldn't hold them as I had held her. But I felt that we would be together again. It was palpable.

So, the experience of getting her ashes was inherently contradictory. On the one hand I felt grief all over again. On the other hand, I felt that we were going to be reunited. That we would be together again. That we would love each other again.

And then I had memories I must have pushed away during the first period of grief, which had been dominated by vivid images of her dying. Now, I began to remember moments of love

between us, and I began to remember her when she was alive and healthy. Vital! She had been a beautiful woman, even in old age. She had been a caring woman. I remembered her loving me. I remembered loving her.

Because I wanted to know whether my experiences were typical or unique to me, I turned to three different AIs to tell me what the research literature said. All of them pointed to what is called “double bereavement.” “Families grieve at the time of death and again when the ashes are returned months later. This second moment can reopen grief or create a new emotional wave.”

The AIs also reported that some spouses experience the return of ashes as a kind of homecoming. While noting that there is very little research regarding receiving ashes after gift of the body to science, Microsoft Co-Pilot, nevertheless, says, “Some spouses describe the return of ashes as a **reunion, homecoming, or restoration of presence**, especially after the long period during which the body is away for scientific use.”

That is certainly what I have felt. Harriet has been gone for what sometimes seems like a lifetime and sometimes feels like an overnight. But now she is back. I have put her in a lovely urn, with a picture of her next to it along with a picture of the two of us. A small shrine. I talk to her. I feel a response.

Harriet is home and I’m happy to have her back.

